ABORIGINAL CONTROLLED POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS IN CANADA: 
THE STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION

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Introduction

For many years, the voices of Aboriginal\textsuperscript{1} people have been silenced due to an educational system that was thrust upon them by Euro-centric proponents in their zeal to assimilate the Indigenous people of North America. This silence was the result of many factors such as government policies and Indian agents; residential schools and missionaries; community reserve schools and non-Native teachers; and Native teachers educated in the Euro-western system with a specific mandate for education. Aboriginal peoples were marginalized and disenfranchised while exposed to education under the auspices of the *Indian Act* where the federal government assumed complete control of Aboriginal children and their schooling (Antone, 2000; Curwen-Doige, 2003).

In this paper, I address the topic of Aboriginal-controlled post-secondary institutions by beginning with a review of the history of Aboriginal people and education, including the oppression of Euro-centrism, the residential school system, assimilationism, related to the loss of Indigenous knowledge, cultural traditions and languages. The concept of decolonization of education or an unravelling of the long history of racism and oppressive colonial policies is discussed as a process for recovery and renewal, as are the events leading up to the call for Aboriginal control of education – the jurisdictional debate, a growing Aboriginal population and a widening gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educational outcomes. Next, I discuss the rise of Aboriginal post-secondary institutions, their unique strengths, and the challenges they face, particularly in the areas of recognition, accreditation and funding. A number of organizational and accreditation bodies for Indigenous post-secondary institutions are discussed, followed by the summary and conclusions.

\textsuperscript{1} For purposes of this paper, Aboriginal refers to the indigenous people of North America. Aboriginal is used interchangeably with First Nations, Native and Indigenous. The term Indian is legitimate terminology used in legislation such as the *Indian Act*, which governs the First Nations people of Canada (Antone, 2000).
Methodology

For this paper, I have conducted an integrated research review designed to present relevant and timely research on the issues pertaining to the struggle for recognition among Aboriginal controlled post-secondary institutions in Canada. Electronic database searches were completed with Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC), JSTOR and Google Scholar. Reviews of scholarly research in widely-recognized peer-reviewed journals were undertaken in Canada and the U.S. I also consulted research reports and policy papers from leading research organizations, government offices, and non-governmental organizations. Several website searches were conducted, and a number of publications unavailable at the University of Manitoba (UM) Libraries were accessed through the Document Delivery service.

Indigenous Knowledge and Euro-centrism

Marie Battiste (1998, 2005), a noted Mi’kmaq scholar in the field of Indigenous knowledge described the Euro-centric educational system in which Indigenous knowledge became invisible to Euro-centric knowledge and consequently, it was not captured and stored in a systematic way. In some cases, there has been a concerted push to erase it. Battiste (2002, 2005) describes how cognitive imperialism, a form of cognitive manipulation, was used to discredit Indigenous languages and knowledge bases to maintain only one language, one culture, and one frame of reference.

Under the residential school system, the government removed children from parents and communities where they received a traditional Indian education with the goal of replacing the language, culture, values, worldview, institutions, and economies of First Nations with those of the dominant culture (Hampton and Roy, 2002). The residential schools were oppressive, notable for high mortality rates, deadly diseases and true devastation of physical, mental and sexual abuse suffered by many students (Kirkness, 1999; Jenkins, 2007).
Having generations of Indian children removed from their parents, denying them a normal childhood and the teachings of their people, resulted in the loss of their cultural traditions, including their native languages. Thus, the residential school abuse was the culmination of the prevailing assimilationist ideas that integration into the dominant culture could only occur through the forced abandonment of native cultures of which Indigenous languages remained the strongest symbol (Roy and Morgan, 2008).

Decolonization of Education

It is through the process of decolonization, or “an unravelling of the long history of colonization, oppression, and prejudice, and returning the well-being to our people that we can begin to rebuild, heal, recover and restore healthy relationships” (Battiste, 1998, p. 4). While decolonizing and revisiting colonial paradigms offers a strategy for empowerment of individuals and communities (Cadwallader, Quiqley and Yazzie-Mintz, 2012), it is a complex and daunting task. According to Battiste (1998), a post-colonial framework cannot be constructed without Indigenous peoples’ renewing and reconstructing the principles underlying their own world view, environment, languages and how these construct our humanity.

Education is one of the critical sites for decolonizing work because the modern structures of the economic and education system have been so often crafted out of the colonial borrowings of European systems (Battiste, Bell, Findlay, Findlay, & Youngblood Henderson, 2005). The task of decolonizing education requires multilateral processes of understanding and unpacking the central assumptions of domination, patriarchy, racism, enthno-centrism and the institutional and system-wide centring of the Indigenous renaissance and its empowerment (Battiste, Bell, & Findlay, 2002).
As Battiste (2002) further noted, teachers will need to decolonize education through a process that includes "raising the collective voice of Indigenous peoples, exposing the injustices in our colonial history, deconstructing the past by critically examining the social, political, economic and emotional reasons for silencing of Indigenous voices in Canadian history, legitimating the voices and experiences of Indigenous people in the curriculum, recognizing it as a dynamic context of knowledge, and communicating the emotional journey that such explorations will generate" (p. 20). Thus, decolonizing education offers a process through which Indigenous peoples can heal from the devastating impacts of Euro-centrism and colonialism, and chart a pathway towards recovery and renewal.

**Historical Developments in Aboriginal Education**

In 1876, under the *Indian Act*, the federal government assumed complete control of education for all Aboriginal children living on reserves. The goal of the government was to assimilate Aboriginal peoples into mainstream society through the education system. This created not only an inability to integrate into the mainstream culture and a feeling of disconnect from their own community, but also a deep sense of identity loss.

By the 1960’s, Canadian government policy had changed so that the goal was redirected toward providing quality Aboriginal education rather than assimilation. The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (INAC) provided funding to approximately 200 status Indian students that were enrolled in post-secondary education. In 1968, federal policy was passed introducing the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP), which resulted in financial assistance for status Indian students pursing post-secondary studies.

While federal support for post-secondary education was beginning to take shape, a major step backward occurred with the release of the 1969 *White Paper Policy* (Department of
Indian and Northern Affairs, 1969). The While Paper Policy was a federal government proposal that sought to transfer responsibility for First Nations education to the provincial governments. The policy served to rally Aboriginal peoples across Canada, who viewed this as yet another step towards the government’s goal of eliminating Aboriginal peoples as identifiable nations (Aboriginal Institutes’ Consortium, 2005; Orr, Roberts, & Ross, 2008).

In opposition to this policy, what was then the National Indian Brotherhood, (now Assembly of First Nations (AFN)) issued the Red Paper Policy document, *Indian Control of Indian Education (ICIE)* in 1972. This document reaffirmed that education for Aboriginal persons was the ‘right’ of Indian peoples, guaranteed through treaties with the Crown and the federal government, and served notice that Aboriginal peoples would be resuming control over education. Further, ICIE called for a shift to local Aboriginal control of an education system which would “provide the setting in which our children can develop the fundamental attitudes and values which have an honoured place in Indian tradition and culture” (p. 2). In 1973, the government adopted ICIE and began to transfer administrative control of education programs to Aboriginal peoples.

These were the many early developments that triggered the beginnings of the Aboriginal post-secondary movement that was integrally connected with the broader decolonization efforts in Indigenous communities across Canada, and contributed to the reclamation of Aboriginal peoples' rights as sovereign peoples, particularly regarding ownership over the education of Aboriginal persons.

**Demographics, Post-Secondary Education and Labour Market Outcomes**

Coinciding with these early events was the rapid increase in the numbers of Aboriginal people accessing post-secondary education. As Aboriginal people continue to be the fastest growing segment in Canada, steps must be taken to ensure students have access to quality education programs.

Canada’s Aboriginal population had experienced considerable growth over the past several decades, and compared to the general Canadian population, has a very youthful age structure. In 2006, the median age of Aboriginal Canadians was 26.5 years, compared to 39.5 years for all Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2008). Given that the Canadian working population is aging, Aboriginal peoples are a key population to meet the labour shortages resulting from retiring baby boomers over the next few decades.

The relationship between higher education, better jobs, and improved income has been well documented. Aboriginal people, on average, have a lower educational attainment, (primarily university degree attainment) than non-Aboriginal Canadians. This relationship implies that improving Aboriginal success in post-secondary education will help close the gap, and allow for improved socioeconomic status, which in turn, contributes to greater equity in Canadian society and the economy. Improving Aboriginal educational and labour market outcomes can help improve social well-being.
A report by the Centre for the Study of Living Standards (2009) estimated the impact of improved educational attainment levels on the labour market in Canada and the resulting output to 2026. The study quantified the potential impact of eliminating education and social gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people on government spending and revenue over the same period. The report estimated the potential impact of improved educational levels of Aboriginal Canadians reaching the non-Aboriginal 2001 educational levels by 2026 as a cumulative output gain of $401 billion, cumulative increased tax revenues of $39 billion, and cumulative savings of $77 billion in the form of government expenditures.

Higher educational attainment is a means to counteract low socioeconomic status which means it is imperative that actions be taken to enable Aboriginal students to succeed in post-secondary education. Aboriginal post-secondary institutions can play an important role in closing the gap between Aboriginal education outcomes and non-Aboriginal outcomes.

The Jurisdictional Debate

The responsibility for post-secondary education of Aboriginal learners has long been a debate among the federal government, provincial government and Aboriginal people. INAC (now named Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada - AANDC), supports Aboriginal persons enrolling in post-secondary programs and provides limited funding support for the delivery of some post-secondary programs. At the same time, the federal government, through the Indian Act contends that it does not have primary legislative responsibility for post-secondary education (Stonechild, 2006). In fact, INAC has repeatedly taken the position that post-secondary education for Aboriginal persons is a matter of social policy rather than a right (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2010). INAC has also argued that post-secondary education of all people, including Aboriginal people is the responsibility of the provinces. The
AFN believes the federal government should provide sufficient jurisdiction over post-secondary education to control their own educational destiny (Hill, n.d.; Morgan, 2007).

This lack of agreement between INAC and AFN and its communities has prevented adequate funding and programming for Aboriginal students in post-secondary education, and is a constant struggle for the development and delivery of programs and services to address educational needs identified by Aboriginal peoples. As long as the jurisdictional debate over post-secondary education for Aboriginal persons continues to be unsettled, there will continue to be barriers, lack of policy support, and adequate resources for Aboriginal-controlled post-secondary institutions (Jenkins, 2007; Orr, et. al., 2008).

The Rise of Aboriginal Post-Secondary Institutions

Aboriginal communities began to develop their own institutions of higher learning in the early 1970’s as an alternative to established mainstream institutions. These Aboriginal institutions did not necessarily evolve in a well-planned or systematic way over time, nor did they initially receive support, recognition, or core funding for operations or services. Many began in substandard settings with limited or no resources (Waterfall, 2007).

More importantly, Aboriginal communities were concerned with appropriation of Indigenous knowledge and the maintenance of cultural traditions in education. To ensure culturally appropriate materials and courses, and to better serve the needs of their communities, Aboriginal institutions of higher learning were formed. As an Aboriginal institution, there would be control over the design and delivery of programs that were culturally relevant and appropriate for Aboriginal students attending. For approximately 40 years, Aboriginal institutions have been offering a variety of programs for their communities (Aboriginal Institutes’ Consortium, 2005; Armstrong, 2007; Jenkins, 2007). In addition to the need for greater cultural relevance,
Aboriginal institutions also emerged in response to local needs and community experiences (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2008; Indigenous Adult Higher Learning Association, 2009; 2010).

Among the first Aboriginal institutions to begin delivering courses in a unique socio-cultural and academic environment was Blue Quills First Nations College (BQFNC), established in Alberta in 1971. Another major development was the establishment of the former Saskatchewan Federated Indian College (SIFC) in 1976, now the First Nations University of Canada (FNUC), affiliated with the University of Regina, the only First Nations controlled university in Canada that receives federal core funding (Paquette and Fallon, 2010). In 1995, under the British Columbia (BC) College and Institute Act, two Aboriginal institutions, the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology and the Indigenous Institute of Governance were granted authority to offer degree programming. By the 1990’s, Aboriginal institutions had been established in almost all provinces to meet the demand for culturally appropriate programming.

Historically, Aboriginal learners were not achieving adequate success in mainstream and post-secondary settings as a result of low expectations, racial discrimination and culturally inappropriate settings. Few Aboriginal students were accessing post-secondary opportunities, and those who did attend universities or colleges often felt isolated, unprepared and marginalized causing them to leave before completing their studies (Stonechild, 2006). Aboriginal communities were experiencing high unemployment rates in regions that required training and employment strategies. Aboriginal nations were struggling to promote personal and community healing and a well-educated population was seen as an important component of individual and collective capacity development. As well, the community, family, personal and cultural displacement experienced by Aboriginal peoples meant that Aboriginal students had unique needs which could be best addressed in settings that were specifically designed for
them (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2008; Indigenous Adult Higher Learning Association, 2009).

**Unique Strengths**

Aboriginal institutions emerged to address specific cultural, linguistic, intellectual social and economic needs and conditions of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Aboriginal institutions are unique in what they do and in their approach to achieving their vision. This sets them apart from mainstream institutions that were created to address the needs of all people within the general population (Malatest, 2004).

BC Aboriginal educators, Pauline Waterfall (2007) and Jeanette Armstrong (2007) believe Aboriginal institutes offer services in holistic settings that encompass cultural, family and community values and ways. They work in partnership with community stakeholders to provide personally relevant and academically challenging education opportunities within a safe, caring and supportive environment. Aboriginal institutions work to reinforce self-identity, historical teachings and lifelong learning. They also serve public institutions in a unique way of carrying out the difficult tasks of remediation of study practices of high-risk students who have recently dropped out of secondary school systems.

An additional strength of Aboriginal post-secondary institutions is local control (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2008; Indigenous Adult Higher Learning Association, 2009). Authority for Aboriginal institutions generally rests with the founding nation or collection of nations, consistent with the principles of Aboriginal jurisdiction and self-determination. The institutions are generally governed by community-based independent boards or by Chief and Council, which means that the people responsible for the institutions’ operations are very familiar with student and community circumstances and needs. A study by Malatest (2002) on
best practices in increasing Aboriginal post-secondary enrolment rates found that Aboriginal control has successfully extended to development of curriculum and hiring of staff at post-secondary institutions. Best practices for Aboriginal post-secondary enrolment and retention strategies depend upon Aboriginal people exerting control over their own education.

Aboriginal institutes also play a critical role in assisting students in moving to mainstream public institutions by developing the skills and confidence of Aboriginal students enrolled in locally-offered programs. Aboriginal institutions are often at the forefront of efforts to retain and revitalize Aboriginal languages by offering quality language teacher education courses. Indigenous knowledge, culturally appropriate history and ways of knowing are incorporated into curriculum content of Aboriginal role models, Elders-in-Residence programs, traditional teachings and other support providers to ensure relevant and challenging educational opportunities within a safe, caring and supportive environment (Indigenous Adult Higher Learning Association, 2009; 2010).

**Challenges for Aboriginal-Controlled Institutions**

In spite of the many strengths described above, there are many significant challenges for Aboriginal post-secondary institutions.

**The Importance of Recognition**

Although Aboriginal institutions occupy a distinctive sector in the post-secondary system, the majority are not recognized by provincial education agencies as providing quality public education, and therefore, must partner with recognized public institutions with degree-granting status in order to offer programs that culminate in certificate, diplomas and degrees (Jenkins, 2007; Leighton, 2007). Credentials obtained by students attending Aboriginal institutions do not hold the same currency as credentials earned in mainstream institutions. Student credentials
are often not recognized by employers and are not necessarily portable within the mainstream system with respect to credit transfer (Aboriginal Institutes’ Consortium, 2005).

Aboriginal institutions may also hold affiliation or service agreements formally negotiated through contractual arrangements with affiliate mainstream public post-secondary institutions. Affiliated Aboriginal institutions offer their students the credibility and transferability that comes with public university education while also ensuring that students have access to culturally-appropriate programs and support services that are primarily designed, developed and controlled by Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal communities and institutes have often noted the frustrations experienced as a result of developing affiliation or partnership agreements (Leighton, 2007). Both public and Aboriginal institutions maintain very different philosophies. Aboriginal institutions play a critical role in the lives of Aboriginal students that is often not understood by the public institutions. Most partnerships involve Aboriginal institutions taking all of the risks and paying all of the fees, making it difficult to maintain when there is limited funding and costs to run programs. Further, it is difficult to maintain good working relationships when public institutions are seen as having power over Aboriginal institutions – a situation created and perpetuated by the fact that public institutions are recognized through provincial governments, and Aboriginal institutions often are not, due to lack of policy and legislative support, and more often than not, are barely surviving (Aboriginal Institutes’ Consortium, 2005).

An issue related to the lack of institutional recognition is intellectual property rights and the protection of Indigenous knowledge (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2008). Aboriginal institutions have been able to partner with mainstream institutions to jointly develop and deliver culturally relevant and accredited curriculum, however, the owning and sharing of
Indigenous history, language and cultural knowledge must be protected and preserved when establishing partnership agreements.

**Jurisdiction and Accreditation**

The struggle for Aboriginal-controlled institutions to achieve recognition is related to the lack of recognized jurisdiction, and a formal recognized accreditation system (Morgan, 2007). As discussed above, because Canada has exclusive jurisdiction over Indians, while the provinces have exclusive jurisdiction over education, it is difficult to determine conclusively which has jurisdiction over ‘Aboriginal education’. For example, in BC, many Aboriginal post-secondary institutions are established under provincial law as societies, under the Society Act. Some operate instead within a First Nations administration, as an arm or a branch of the First Nations itself. As a result, other governments’ laws currently determine the basic structural parameters of how Aboriginal communities establish and operate their education system and institutions.

Aboriginal communities may very well have constitutionally protected jurisdictions over education, but the main reason they are not exercising this jurisdiction is that Aboriginal post-secondary institutions require funding from other levels of government to operate. If an Aboriginal community were to go it on its own and pass its own laws establishing and governing its own post-secondary institutions it might very well lose some or all of its funding from other governments. This means that until an Aboriginal accreditation system is established that is recognized by governments providing funding, these institutions will likely continue to find it difficult to ensure the quality of their institutions and the programs they offer (Morgan, 2007; Morgan and Louie, 2006). Development of a quality assurance system will enhance the institutions’ accountability to Aboriginal communities and students, as well as to funding agencies and the general public (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2008).
Funding

Unlike public post-secondary institutions which receive stable ongoing core funding from provincial governments, most Aboriginal-controlled post-secondary institutions are largely dependent on their ability to secure grants. Compounding the lack of core funding is the absence of capital funding. Base funding to cover infrastructure, facilities and equipment costs to provide safe, healthy learning environments is generally unavailable. Many of the institutions that began operations over a decade ago are now in urgent need of repair (Indigenous Adult Higher Learning Association, 2009; 2010).

The Indian Studies Support Program (ISSP) is a federal program that funds Aboriginal institutions but that funding is on an annual basis only, is strictly controlled, and can only be used for instruction and support related to programs. ISSP funding is allocated to Aboriginal-controlled institutions or to First Nations communities upon approval by the federal government on proposals submitted outlining program and student needs. The one exception had been FNURC which received what amounted to core funding of about $7 million annually (Paquette and Fallon, 2010). No program or institution is assured of support, and each year the demand for ISSP funding is far greater than the available resources (Indigenous Adult Higher Learning Association, 2009, 2010; Orr et. al., 2008).

Alternate sources of revenue such as tuition and partnership arrangements are unstable. Tuition revenue is dependent on the institutions’ ability to attract students to their programs. That in turn, depends on the institutions’ ability to offer relevant and supportive programming. As well, the absence of provincial policy or legislative recognition to support the creation, growth and development of Aboriginal institutions means that they are not eligible to receive provincial operating grant money to address the costs of running these institutions (Aboriginal Institutes' Consortium, 2005).
The overall funding available to Aboriginal institutions falls far short of what is needed. These institutions generally do not have access to secure, long-term funding, and most are funded on a program-by-program basis, and funding requests from Aboriginal institutions greatly exceed the amount of funding available.

**Organizations and Accreditation Bodies for Aboriginal-Controlled Institutions**

Aboriginal people have found a number of ways to work within and around limitations concerning policy, legislation, accreditation, and funding of Aboriginal post-secondary institutions in Canada. One important method is the sharing, collaborating and lobbying facilitated through a number of consortia. The purpose for many of these organizations has, and continues to be to seek recognition and resourcing for Aboriginal institutions (Jenkins, 2007). These organizations are:

**First Nations Adult and Higher Education Consortium (FNAHEC)**

FNAHEC was incorporated as a non-profit organization in Alberta in 1997. Its basic functions are to nurture, foster and protect the Aboriginal rights of First Nations people to their own particular identity through institutions of higher learning. FNAHEC collaborates with and receives regional support from other First Nations institutions to create avenues and opportunities for students. Its 11 member institutions are located primarily in BC, Alberta and Manitoba (Yellowquill College). BQFNC is a founding member of the FNAHEC, established in 1971 ([http://www.fnahec.org/index.htm](http://www.fnahec.org/index.htm); [http://www.bluequills.ca/](http://www.bluequills.ca/)).

**Aboriginal Institutes’ Consortium (AIC)**

The AIC was established in 1994 to provide a collective voice that advocates and negotiates recognition and resources for the benefit of Aboriginal post-secondary education and training institutes in Ontario. As of 2009, the AIC consisted of seven member institutes
On March 31, 2009, the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities announced a new funding approach that would replace the province’s Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy and consolidate funds. This lead to the creation of multi-year funding available to Aboriginal post-secondary education and training institutions in the amount of $3.8 million per year for 2009-2012 (Hill, n.d.).

**Indigenous Adult and Higher Learning Association (IAHLA)**

The IAHLA was created in 2003 by the Aboriginal-controlled adult and post-secondary education institutes in BC. In 2010/11, the IAHLA had 39 community-based member institutes that include college and university programs leading to certificates, diplomas, degrees; Adult Basic Education leading to the Adult Dogwood Diploma for secondary school completion, language instruction, occupation-specific training and upgrading; and lifelong learning programs (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2008).

IAHLA’s mandate is to collect and disseminate relevant information to assist Indigenous adult and higher learning agencies in their provision of education services and to undertake research that will benefit Indigenous adult and higher learning agencies throughout BC. IAHLA also facilitates networking and information activities, supports collective professional development and training opportunities and undertakes other support activities.

Since 2006/07, IAHLA has been working with Aboriginal institutions in BC to collect and share information on student retention, course completion and graduation rates as part of the annual IAHLA Data Collection project. The information is intended both to promote transparency about programming and to identify areas for collective development to ensure that quality standards are maintained (Indigenous Adult Higher Learning Association, 2011).
First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC)

The FNESC provides administrative support to several First Nations-based educational organizations in BC including IAHLA. FNESC was founded in 1992 when participants at a provincial First Nations conference decided to form a provincial education body that would be directed by BC First Nations communities. FNESC works at the provincial level to provide services in areas of research, communications, information dissemination, advocacy, program administration and networking. FNESC also strives to build partnerships with federal and provincial government agencies and other relevant stakeholders in order to communicate the issues and concerns of BC First Nations and to ensure they are addressed (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2010).

In 2009/10, FNESC and IAHLA planned ways to move forward with the formal recognition of Aboriginal-controlled post-secondary institutions by the provincial Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development (now Ministry of Advanced Education).

National Association of Indigenous Institutes of Higher Learning (NAIIHL)

The NAIIHL is a national body created in 2001 to promote and support First Nations through promotion, research, coordination and resourcing in collaboration with associated First Nations institutions across Canada. The apparent need for a unified, national organization resulted in its creation. Ontario’s regional coordinating organization the AIC, was instrumental in the development of the national association and continues to play a supportive role (Hill n.d.).

First Nation Accreditation Board (FNAB)²

In 1997, the AFN passed a resolution to establish a FNAB that would examine Aboriginal institutions and provide guidelines for programs and courses (Aboriginal Institutes’ Consortium, 2002).

² The current status of this Board is unclear.
The Alberta government identified FNAB as a partner to establish criteria for the designation and/or recognition of independent First Nations, Métis and Inuit controlled institutions. In November 2000, BQFNC was accredited by the FNAB (Morgan, 2007).

FNAB’s primary goal is to assess community-based First Nations owned and controlled educational institutions or programs of study in terms of achievements, congruence to stated goals and objectives, and to confirm they are culturally relevant and accountable to the First Nations communities they serve. FNAB defines accreditation as a voluntary process by which a registered institution with the FNAB seeks recognition of its standards of integrity and educational competence (First Nation Accreditation Board, 2007).

**World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC)**

WINHEC was officially launched in Calgary during the World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education in August 2002. The founding state/country members present were Australia, the states of Alaska and Hawaii, Canada, the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, the Wänaga of Aotearoa of New Zealand, and Saamiland of North Norway (http://www.win-hec.org/?q=node/3).

WINHEC provides an international forum and support for Indigenous Peoples to pursue common goals through higher education. Among its goals is to create an accreditation body – the WINHEC Accreditation Authority Board of Affirmation – officially established in 2004, to oversee implementation of the accreditation process for Indigenous education initiatives. WINHEC supports the principles outlined in Articles (#12, 13, 14, 15) of the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of indigenous Peoples (World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium, 2006).
The WINHEC Accreditation Authority serves as a vehicle for strengthening and validating Indigenous higher education institutions and programs based on standards and procedures developed and implemented by WINHEC member institutions. Institutions seeking accreditation are provided copies of the WINHEC Accreditation Handbook (2010) to guide their application, self-study and other preparations for a site visit by an external review team. The WINHEC Accreditation Authority grants accreditation subject to renewal in ten years, or provisional accreditation. Interim reports are required at the five-year mark of the ten-year period of full accreditation (World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium, 2010).

**Summary and Conclusions**

A dark history of oppressive colonial policies, the residential school system, Eurocentrism, and assimilationism, led to the call for Aboriginal control of education and the gradual decolonization of education leading to a process of healing and renewal. Aboriginal post-secondary institutions emerged in response to the need to offer culturally relevant programs, and traditional teachings of Indigenous knowledge and languages. These institutions play a distinct role, offering academically challenging programs, within a supportive and caring learning environment.

In spite of these strengths however, Aboriginal post-secondary institutions have struggled to achieve recognition as accredited institutions providing quality programs. Most must enter partnerships or affiliation agreements with mainstream institutions in order to offer programs leading to certificates, diplomas, and degrees. The lack of stable funding from ISSP and other sources for operational and capital expenditures seriously impacts their ability to attract students and retain culturally relevant programming.
A number of organizations for Aboriginal-controlled institutions exist to provide support, advocacy, share information, conduct research, and offer professional development and networking opportunities. There are at least two accreditation bodies that offer a model for how Aboriginal post-secondary institutions can obtain recognition and validation as accredited places of higher learning.

In conclusion, Aboriginal communities and institutions have demonstrated their commitment to ensuring availability of locally based, appropriate post-secondary learning opportunities. In spite of limited funding, they have managed to provide quality, supportive learning opportunities through the dedication and contributions of staff, Elders, and community members. However, Aboriginal institutions should make efforts to obtain greater integration within the mainstream post-secondary education system through development of policy and legislation that recognizes their unique role, gain recognition and accreditation of courses and programs by establishing a quality assurance process, continue establishing partnerships with other organizations and institutions for implementation of programs and services, and engage the federal and provincial governments for provision of core funding and resources for capital development. Collectively, these efforts will contribute much toward increasing the number of Aboriginal students accessing post-secondary education and ultimately, closing the education gap with their non-Aboriginal counterparts.
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