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Formal Educational Attainment of Inuit in Canada, 1981–2006

Chris Penney

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Introduction

A good education is generally considered a cornerstone for getting a good job and building financial security. For many Inuit, however, the education system is another southern institution that has only recently taken hold in their lives. Inuit live in Canada's north, primarily in one of four regions: the Inuvialuit region of the Northwest Territories, the Territory of Nunavut, the Nunavik region of northern Quebec, and the Nunatsiavut region of northern Labrador. Collectively, these regions are known as Inuit Nunaat, or "the land where Inuit live." With land claim agreements signed in all regions of Inuit Nunaat, there are increasing opportunities for Inuit to take a role in the future of their communities and regions, but poorer educational attainment puts these possibilities out of reach for many. In this chapter we will use Census data from 1981 to 2006 to look at the educational attainment of Inuit over time. An analysis of Inuit educational attainment poses several problems, including the difficulty we have had identifying the Inuit population from Census to Census over the past 25 years. However, it is clear that no matter how one defines the Inuit population, Inuit educational attainment, particularly post-secondary education, has remained far below that of the rest of Canada.

Background

Inuit have lived in the northern region of what we now call Canada for over 5,000 years, living a traditional nomadic lifestyle of hunting and fishing. It has only been recently that Inuit have moved into permanent settlements, and have become engaged in southern Canadian (European-style) social structures, such as the wage-based economy and formal education. Indeed, there are Inuit alive today that were born on the land and lived a traditional nomadic lifestyle for the first part of their lives.

Traditionally, knowledge transmission in Inuit culture was based on shared experiences, where elders and parents would show young Inuit what they need to know in terms of life skills, such as living out on the land or domestic tasks.

Table 3.1: Residential School Attendance for the Inuit Identity Population aged 15 Years and Over, by age group, Canada, 2001

N=3,380	Total 15 and over	15-34	35-44	45-54	55 and over
Attended Residential School	13.0%	4.0%	15.5%	43.7%	29.7%

The Inuit identity population includes those people who reported identifying as Inuit (either as a single response or in combination with North American Indian and/or Métis). Data are for the non-reserve population only. They do not include the small number of Inuit who live on Indian reserves, nor those living in institutions.

Source: Statistics Canada, Aboriginal Peoples Survey, 2001

Teaching was done by demonstration, and learning came from practice. At the same time, Inuit youth would also learn about traditional Inuit culture, values, and traditions. This traditional Inuit knowledge is known as Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, or IQ. This is characterized by life-long learning through an individual's different life stages (i.e. child, youth, young adult, adult, and elder) and encompasses all aspects of learning, including people, culture, land, and environment (Canadian Council on Learning 2007).

It has only been two or three generations of Inuit who have experienced living in permanent settlements, and as a part of this European influence, the formal education system. For many of the first Inuit to go to western schools, the experience was far from a positive one. The residential schools legacy has directly affected many Inuit, as it has First Nations and Métis throughout Canada. The first federally regulated residential school in the north started in 1951, and through 1960, Inuit attendance at residential schools totalled almost 7,000 (King 2006).¹ From the point of view of the government, these were designed to prepare Inuit for the expansion of the southern economy into the North, by giving Inuit a southern education. While the experiences of Inuit attendees of residential schools vary between the positive and the abusive, all Inuit attending these schools suffered from a disconnection from their families, communities, and culture. Although Inuit residential school attendees were not strictly forbidden to speak Inuktitut in all schools, the federal government refused to allow Inuit elders to teach students traditional knowledge, further cementing the break from the traditional Inuit education methods of the past (King 2006). This legacy is believed to contribute to an entrenched mistrust of the education system, where Inuit parents do not fully support their children's education (Simon 2007).

Table 3.1 shows the proportion of Inuit who report having attended a federal residential school. The highest proportion is for the 45 to 54 year age group, where over 40% reported having attended residential school. Although regional statistics must be interpreted with caution, since the presence of residential schools varied by region, residential school attendance was highest in the Northwest Territories,

with over 25% of all Inuit attending. Labrador reported the lowest attendance, at just over 8%.²

Defining the Inuit Population in Census Data

The Census of Population has modified and adjusted how it measures the Aboriginal population of Canada from 1981 through to the most recent Census in 2006. In order to use all of these data, our analysis is divided into two parts, based on the changing definitions of the Inuit population. The first part of this analysis will look at the Inuit ancestry population in the Census from 1981 to 2001. The second part will look at the Inuit identity population from 1996 to 2006.

Since the 1996 Census, Statistics Canada has included a question on Aboriginal identity that has become the standard definition of the Aboriginal population used in most studies of Census data. The identity concept depends on respondents self-identifying with one or more of the three Aboriginal groups described in the Constitution: First Nations (referred to as North American Indians by Statistics Canada), Métis and Inuit. This personal perception of ones ethnic and cultural affiliation does not require any specific formal membership or registry with a recognized group (for example membership in one of the four recognized Inuit land claim organizations). The Aboriginal identity concept, however, was not asked on the Census prior to 1996, making it impossible to do any time-trend analysis before that year. In order to look at data from 1981 forward, the first part of this study will include all people who report at least some Inuit “ancestry,” as it is possible to have ancestors from multiple ethnic or cultural groups.

The Inuit ancestry population is based on a question which Statistics Canada has used for the entire period from 1981 to 2001, though the question has undergone changes over time. In 1981, multiple responses were not encouraged by the wording or the layout of the question on ethnic origins. In 1986, the question referred to ancestral groups in the plural, and instructed respondents to give as many responses as needed. This had the effect of drastically increasing the number of individuals who reported Inuit ancestry in combination with other ethnic groups, from 12,380 in 1981 to 18,270 in 1986. Including respondents with multiple reported ancestries also has the effect of changing the socio-economic characteristics of the study population—those with mixed Inuit and other ancestry are less likely than those reporting only Inuit ancestry to speak an Inuit language, and they are more likely to live in the south, be employed, and have better incomes (see INAC/ITK 2006a).

As seen in **Table 3.2**, the Inuit population captured by the Census has more than doubled from 1981 to 2001. While the Inuit population is one of the most fertile in Canada (Statistics Canada 2008a), these changes can be explained partly by non-demographic factors. For example, in 2001, 63% of the Inuit population in the Atlantic region were of mixed ancestry. Given that the 1981 questionnaire did not encourage multiple ethnicity answers, the doubling of the Inuit population of

Table 3.2: Inuit Ancestry Population, Canada and Regions, 1981–2001

Region	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001	% Change 1981–2001	% Change 1996–2001
Canada	24,290	36,045	48,890	49,630	56,190	131	13
Atlantic	2,005	4,620	7,655	8,220	9,220	360	12
Quebec	4,220	7,335	8,470	9,430	10,725	154	14
Nunavut	13,045	15,195	17,640	20,510	22,610	73	10
Northwest Territories	2,480	2,900	3,615	4,220	4,130	67	-2
Ontario/ Western Canada	2,450	5,930	11,345	7,140	9,300	280	30

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of population, 1981–2001 in INAC and ITK 2006b

the Atlantic region between 1981 and 1986 should therefore be considered largely an artifact of changing collection methodology. The Inuit ancestry population in Ontario/Western Canada in 1991 was over four and a half times the population in 1981. This is undoubtedly caused by people reporting Inuit ancestry in 1991 who didn't in the past, rather than actual demographic growth. The negative population growth in the Northwest Territories between 1996 and 2001 is due largely to the net under coverage in the territory in 2001.³

In order to include data from the 2006 Census, and to provide context for these data, the second part of this analysis will look at data from 1996 to 2006 using the Inuit single identity population. As stated above, the Census has collected information on an individual's self-reported Aboriginal identity since 1996. Although it is possible to look at all individuals who reported Inuit identity, this report will include only those Inuit who reported a single Aboriginal identity, and will exclude those that reported Inuit identity in combination with North American Indian (i.e. First Nations) or Métis identity. While this has the effect of slightly reducing the study population,⁴ this is the population that has been adopted by most researchers (see for example Statistics Canada 2008a). As noted above, using a wider definition of Inuit, such as one based on any Inuit ancestry, will lead to improved socio-economic traits in the study population. Looking at the Inuit single identity population will therefore likely lead to poorer education statistics relative to the 1981 to 2001 data from the first part of the analysis.

Education Variables and Definitions

For the years 1981 through 2001, education data from the Census was fairly consistently collected, with little change to the questionnaire content over this period. These questions were based on a respondents "highest level of schooling," which included cases of completed as well as incomplete schooling. The categories for highest level of schooling based on the Census content for the years 1981 through 2001 are:

- Less than grade 9
- Incomplete high school
- High school certificate
- Incomplete post-secondary
- Completed trades
- Completed college
- Completed university

(Statistics Canada 2002)

Although these indicators have been used over several Censuses, Statistics Canada has identified several weaknesses over time. These categories did not allow analysts to track respondents' different education paths, especially in cases of multiple instances of incomplete post-secondary education. In the Aboriginal populations we often see incomplete high school and then some form of post secondary training. Analytical categories often made several hierarchical assumptions, such as the idea that incomplete post-secondary was "higher" than a high school certificate, even though it is possible for individuals to receive some post-secondary education without having a high school certificate (Hull 2006).

Beginning with the 2006 Census, Statistics Canada changed the education module on the questionnaire to one primarily based on the attainment of credentials, which is considered more important when looking at how a person's education subsequently helps them in the labour market. The revised content is also expected to allow researchers to look at multiple post-secondary credentials in greater detail. There are, however, downsides to these changes. For example, it is no longer possible to study those that have completed their education without obtaining a credential (Hull 2006).⁵

In reviewing the 2006 Census data on education, we look at the following categories under "Highest degree, certificate, or diploma":

- No degree, certificate, or diploma
- High school diploma or equivalent only
- Trades/apprenticeship certificate or diploma only
- Other non university certificate or diploma
- University certificate below bachelor level
- University degree (including certificate above bachelor level)

(Statistics Canada 2007)

Although the data between the old and new Census content are similar, analysis and comparison between the two are ongoing. For the present study we will compare one variable that is identical for the two series: completed university degree (Statistics Canada 2008b).

Based on the differences both in defining the Inuit population (see above), and in the education content of the Census over time, this chapter will present data

Table 3.3: Highest level of Schooling, Inuit Ancestry and Reference Populations, Canada, 1981 to 2001

	Highest Level of Schooling	Percentage				
		1981	1986	1991	1996	2001
Total with Inuit Ancestry	Less than grade 9	60.5	49.8	33.3	28.8	23.5
	Incomplete high school	20.1	25.2	24.0	27.9	29.3
	High School certificate	3.2	5.1	6.9	6.5	7.3
	Incomplete post-secondary	6.3	8.6	13.8	14.8	15.6
	Completed post-secondary					
	Completed trades	6.0	6.2	11.5	11.1	11.4
	Completed college	2.2	3.7	6.9	8.5	9.7
	Completed university	1.6	1.3	3.6	2.4	3.3
	Total (n)	14,500	22,085	30,240	29,930	34,765
Reference Population	Less than grade 9	20.0	17.2	13.9	12.0	9.8
	Incomplete high school	27.9	27.1	24.3	22.7	21.4
	High School certificate	13.0	12.8	14.8	14.3	14.1
	Incomplete post-secondary	14.0	15.7	15.9	16.2	16.8
	Completed post-secondary					
	Completed trades	9.9	9.3	10.3	9.9	10.2
	Completed college	7.2	8.3	9.4	11.5	12.2
	Completed university	8.0	9.6	11.4	13.3	15.4
	Total (n)	18,594,785	19,612,015	21,274,455	22,598,995	23,866,595

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population 1981–2001, in INAC and ITK 2006c

in two different series. The first includes the total Inuit ancestry population from 1981 through 2001, and looks at a variety of education variables over this period. The second series is based on the Inuit single identity population, and will feature recent data from the 2006 Census. For each group, the reference population will be other Canadians. Specifically, this refers to those who did not report Inuit ancestry, or identity.⁶ In order to place this most recent year of data into context, we will look at those having completed a university degree from 1996 and 2001, the other two years which measured the Inuit identity population. Although these

two series can provide a picture of Inuit formal education over the last 25 years, they are not comparable in the traditional sense, due primarily to the changes in the study populations described above.

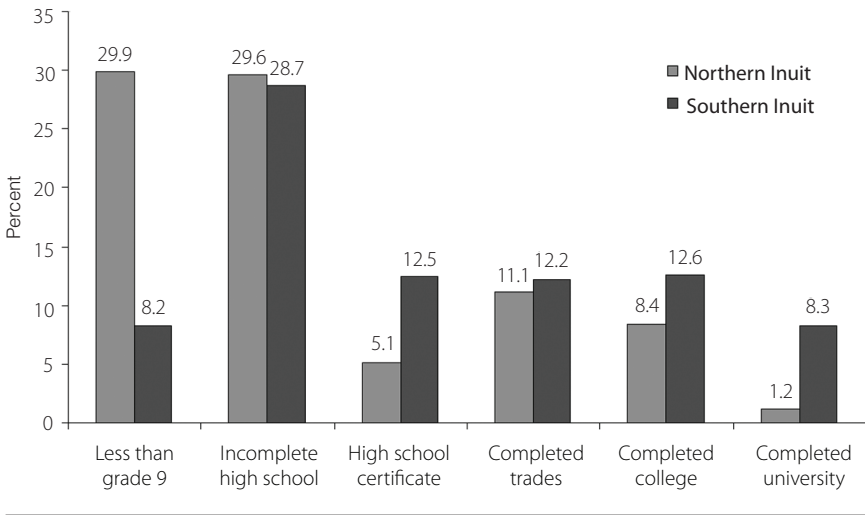
Educational Attainment of the Inuit Total Ancestry Population in Canada 1981–2001

Table 3.3 shows the results of educational attainment for the Inuit ancestry and reference populations from 1981 to 2001. During this time period, Inuit education levels improved, according to most indicators. The proportion of Inuit with less than a grade 9 education fell dramatically from over 60% in 1981 to less than 25% in 2001. Those with a high school diploma more than doubled (from 3% in 1981 to over 7% in 2001). Another considerable improvement occurred among those completing college: from just over 2% in 1981 to almost 10% in 2001. Completion of university also doubled from 1981 to 2001, although the actual increase was fairly small, from just over 1.5% to over 3%. The proportion of Inuit having completed university actually peaked at over 3.5% in 1991, though this is likely an artefact of how the Inuit population was identified, as we discussed above (see also INAC and ITK 2006a).

Although Inuit made gains in all indicators of educational attainment during this period, the reference population were making gains at the same time. In particular, the proportion of non-Inuit with less than a grade 9 education was just under 10% in 2001, less than half the proportion in 1981 of 20%. The proportion with a university education in 2001 was about 15%, up from less than 10% in 1981.

In comparison with other Canadians, gains made by the Inuit ancestry population give mixed messages. On one hand, the proportion of people with less than a grade 9 education shows steady improvement over the twenty year period of study, where the gap between Inuit and other Canadians has steadily narrowed. The proportion of the Inuit ancestry population reporting a high school education has also risen, more than doubling over that time period. On the other hand, while the gap has narrowed, the proportion is still fairly low, at around half that of the reference population, which has remained more or less constant. In terms of post-secondary schooling, the proportion of the Inuit ancestry population reporting a completed trades education, which had lagged behind that of other Canadians in 1981, was slightly above that of the reference population by 2001.

Statistics for other post-secondary indicators, which indicated improvement for the Inuit ancestry population, did not translate into a narrowing of the gap between them and the reference population. The proportion of Inuit ancestry population with a college education increased considerably, though the gap narrowed only modestly, due to gains among other Canadians. The proportion of the Inuit ancestry population completing a university education doubled between 1981 and 2001, although the absolute increase was quite small. In the reference population

Figure 3.1: Highest Level of Schooling, Total Inuit Ancestry Population, Northern and Southern Canada, 2001

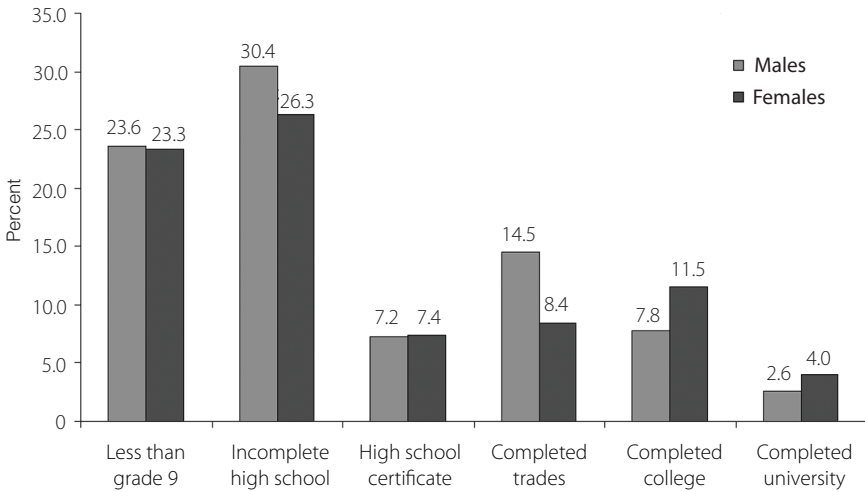
a steady increase occurred throughout the period of study, so that the absolute gap has actually increased since 1981.

We can also look at the educational attainment of Inuit living in Inuit Nunangat, compared to those living in the rest of Canada. Note, however, that Inuit regional land claim areas were not incorporated into Census geography before 2006, so the present analysis looks at the “North,” defined here as the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, the Nunavik region of northern Quebec, and Labrador. The “South” is defined as the rest of Canada. An examination of the differences in educational attainment between these two areas highlights some of the challenges facing Inuit in the North. Inuit in the North are much more likely to have less than grade 9, and are much less likely to have completed high school, college, or university (**Figure 3.1**).

There are several possible explanations for why Inuit education levels in the North are poorer than those in the South. Inuit living in the South enjoy greater access to post-secondary education that is simply not available in many northern communities. Not only does this mean that Inuit in the North do not have the same educational opportunities, there is the possibility that those in the North who do leave home to further their education may remain in the South in order to take advantage of greater economic opportunities.

Looking at differences in educational attainment between males and females, each were equally likely to have less than a grade 9 education, or to have a high school certificate. Males, however, were more likely to have an incomplete high school education, but were much more likely to have a completed trades certificate. Females were more likely to have completed college or university (**Figure 3.2**).

Figure 3.2: Highest Level of Schooling, Total Inuit Ancestry Population Aged 15 and Over, by Sex, Canada, 2001

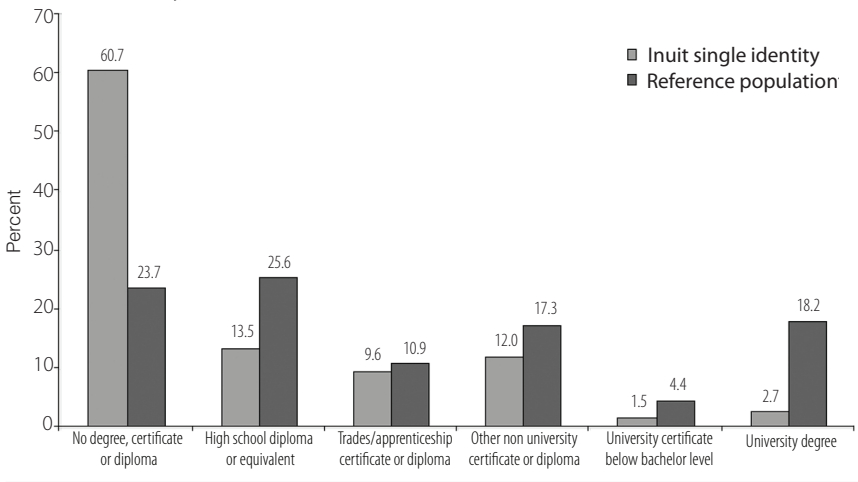


Educational Attainment of the Inuit Identity Population in Canada 1996–2006

As stated above, educational attainment on the 2006 Census is based on a respondent's highest completed degree or credential. Looking at **Figure 3.1**, the Inuit identity population lags behind the educational attainment of other Canadians⁷ for all levels of qualification, and is over two and a half times more likely to have no qualification at all. Moreover, the proportion of the Inuit identity population with a trades/apprenticeship certificate or diploma was slightly below the level of the reference population, which was a category for which the Inuit ancestry population reported a higher proportion than did other Canadians in 2001. As the gap between the two is still narrow, this difference is likely an artifact of the changes in data collection and concepts discussed above.

As we noted, it is not possible to present a direct comparison of 2006 data to that from 1981 to 2001. One variable that is constant over time is the proportion of respondents having completed a university degree. **Figure 3.4** looks at the percentage of the total Inuit ancestry population and the Inuit single identity population with a completed university degree. If the Inuit single identity population is considered the more reliable definition of the Inuit population, using the identity population from 1996 and 2001 can help us compare the two populations.

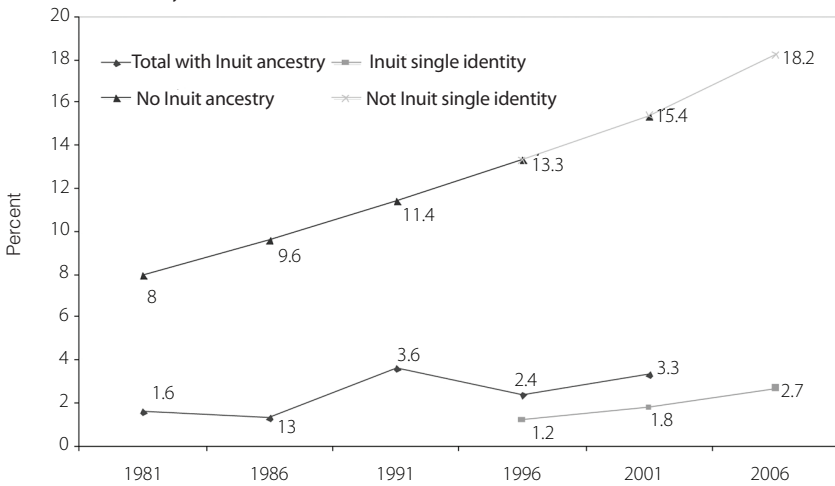
The data from the Inuit single identity population demonstrates the expected trend that the total Inuit ancestry population tends to overestimate the education attainment of Inuit. Although the numbers are too small to be included here, this gap between the two populations can be explained by regional variations on the Inuit identity and ancestry populations. As discussed earlier, there have

Figure 3.3: Highest Degree or Credential, Inuit and Reference Population Aged 15 and Over, Canada, 2006

historically been issues with the Aboriginal data collected in southern Canada, and in particular Ontario, where a large number of respondents in 1986 and 1991 reported all four Aboriginal ancestry categories (Inuit, North American Indian, Métis and non-Aboriginal). In addition, a regional comparison shows that the number of respondents who report Inuit ancestry but not Inuit identity is higher in Quebec and Newfoundland & Labrador, and much smaller in Nunavut and the Northwest Territories. Indeed, looking at the territories, Nunavut and the Northwest Territories show neither the “bump” in the 1991 data, nor the gap between the ancestry and identity series as seen in the national figures here. These inconsistencies indicate the value of using the Inuit single identity population as currently defined to study the Inuit population.

Discussion

It is clear from the data presented above that Inuit educational attainment has been improving since 1981, though gains in the reference population, particularly in terms of post-secondary education, mean that the overall gap between Inuit and the rest of Canada has remained large and even increased in some attainment categories. Data from 2006 confirm that there is still a considerable disparity between the Inuit identity population and other Canadians. Although the trades category is an exception, the increasing gap in university education indicates that Inuit are not fully participating in higher education, whether through a lack of preparation from secondary school, or simply the lack of availability in isolated northern communities. The decrease in the number of Inuit with less than a grade 9 education is encouraging, but this must translate into more Inuit continuing on to further study.

Figure 3.4: Completed University, Inuit and Reference Populations aged 15 and over, 1981 to 2006, Canada

If the switch to using the Inuit identity population as the population of analysis lowers the overall proportion of Inuit with a university degree, it is likely that other indicators are similarly overestimated. The difference in the percentage of Inuit with a completed university degree underlines the importance of using an appropriate study population. Nevertheless, the message is essentially the same for either population: modest increases in the proportion of Inuit with a university degree are being outstripped by the gains in university education in the rest of the Canadian population.

The low proportion of Inuit benefitting from a formal education has made it difficult for Inuit to fully participate in the new economic and cultural opportunities offered by the transition to a wage-based economy in the North, where Inuit increasingly have their own public and Aboriginal government institutions with which to help shape their destiny.

With land claims settled in the four Inuit regions of Canada, Inuit are pushing for more direct involvement in these government institutions, and mainstream Canadian society. The Government of Nunavut has stated a goal of hiring Beneficiaries of the Nunavut Land Claim Agreement (Inuit peoples) to match their proportion of the total Nunavut population. As of 2007, Inuit made up about 50% of the total public service, as opposed to around 85% of the total population, and this number was heavily weighted toward the administrative support section, where 92% of positions were filled by beneficiaries. Higher paying positions tended to be staffed with more non-Inuit than beneficiaries. Inuit were underrepresented in senior management positions (28%), middle management positions (24%) and professional positions (25%) (Government of Nunavut 2007). Although there are no similar statistics available for the other Inuit regions, based on the national

levels of schooling statistics, we can assume the situation is likely similar across the country. Education is the key to preparing Inuit for skilled positions in government, as well as the private sector.

In 2006, a landmark report by Thomas Berger looked at this issue of Public Service representation by Inuit in Nunavut, and the role education must play in allowing Inuit to compete for these jobs. Berger tackles the question “what has to be done to qualify the Inuit for employment in all occupational groupings and grade levels in their own government?” (Berger 2006).

At the heart of the issue, Berger contends, is the lack of high school graduates. The education system in Nunavut is designed to teach younger students in Inuktitut until around grade 3 or 4, after which instruction is exclusively in English. This is creating a situation where Inuit do not have strong enough English skills to make this transition, making progression in the middle and later grades ever more challenging. Inuktitut, the dominant language of Nunavut, is also not taught at an advanced level, so that neither aspect of the system is successful (Berger 2006). Another factor that comes into play here is that all Inuit do not speak the same dialect, and there are multiple writing systems, using either syllabic symbols or the Roman alphabet. This can make learning a new language even more difficult, and the variation across Inuit Nunaat means that Inuktitut reading materials have to be specifically produced for different groups. Whether or not the challenges of instituting a bilingual education program are key to improving the situation, as Berger contends, it is clear that high school graduation rates must increase, as this is the primary requirement for post-secondary schooling and access to employment.

Beyond secondary school, the gap in university education must ultimately be closed. Many agree that such education is required so that Inuit can participate in the higher levels of public and Aboriginal government, and ultimately occupy more positions of authority and decision making.

Gender equality is also an issue here. Men are underrepresented among those involved in college and university education. To allow all Inuit to compete for positions at the management level this needs to be addressed. Further research is necessary to determine how the education path of Inuit males tends to differ from that of females.

Conclusion

Inuit have been latecomers to the formal education system in Canada, and data from 1981 to the present indicates relatively low levels of Inuit education compared to other Canadians. Looking in particular at post-secondary education, the gap between Inuit—however defined—and non-Inuit is increasing, despite the absolute gains made by Inuit. These gaps might be explained in part by a history of residential schools, and a legacy that leaves many wary of the education system, but the changing economic environment in Inuit Nunaat underscores the need

for Inuit to succeed in their formal schooling endeavours if they are to assume a greater role in their economic and political future.

Endnotes

- 1 There were several boarding schools in Labrador, including at Northwest River and Nain, where past attendees have related stories of mistreatment and abuse, but as these were not federally regulated institutions, they are not officially considered federal residential schools (CBC 2008).
- 2 Statistics Canada asked whether respondents had attended a federal residential school. Although there were no federally run schools in Labrador, eight percent of Inuit in Labrador reported attendance, so it is possible that some respondents did not make the distinction between federally run schools and other residential schools.
- 3 The Census does not capture everyone in the population. Each Census they calculate the number of people that are missed by the census (undercoverage) as well as the percentage counted twice, or the overcoverage. The net undercoverage (undercoverage – overcoverage) is added to the census count to get a censal estimate for use in the population estimates program. The rate of undercoverage in the Northwest Territories is about 8%, compared to 3% for all of Canada in 2001.
- 4 Looking at the 2006 Census, the Inuit single identity population was 32,775, compared to the total Inuit identity population of 33,620, a difference of 845 individuals.
- 5 The Inuit Human Development Index project (Senécal, et al. 2007), as well as other similar studies used completion of grade 9 as a proxy for functional literacy, an indicator which is no longer collected in the Census.
- 6 For each definition of the Inuit population, therefore, the reference population will be slightly different, but these changes are not large enough to affect the statistics.
- 7 The reference population of “other Canadians” is slightly different here than for the total Inuit ancestry population, though there is no actual difference in data for either group.

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