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Pan-Canadian Approach to Harmonized Aboriginal Data Collection

Information sheet
December 2013

Why does Canada need a harmonized approach to Aboriginal data collection?

High-quality data on Aboriginal students will help to support policy and program development that is based on evidence of their achievements and challenges. Access to these data may also enable increased levels of accountability for the educational outcomes of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) students.

The implementation of a pan-Canadian harmonized approach to Aboriginal self-identification will produce comparable data across the country. Although the situation for Aboriginal students is different in different regions, comparable data will allow ministers of education to learn from each other and to identify and share effective practices. Once the data meet the necessary standards of quality and consistency, they will be made public, allowing other groups, such as national or regional Aboriginal organizations, to use them to better understand how students are doing and how to work with governments and Aboriginal communities to foster improvement.

What is Canada's current situation with regard to Aboriginal data collection?

Most provinces and territories collect data about their Aboriginal students, but those data-collection systems have been developed independently and use different definitions and collection approaches. This means that information about Aboriginal students in one jurisdiction cannot be compared with information from another jurisdiction, and no pan-Canadian picture can be presented.

At the moment, the only data that allow comparable information to be reported for all provinces and territories are from Statistics Canada surveys. These data provide some information relating to education, such as educational attainment, but do not cover a range of important educational indicators such as elementary-secondary and postsecondary enrolment, graduation rates, or academic achievement. Attainment data, which cover the adult population, also tell us more about how Aboriginal students have fared in the past than how their needs are being served today.

What is the proposed approach?

In order to have pan-Canadian data about Aboriginal students, provinces and territories have agreed to adopt a harmonized approach to Aboriginal self-identification. The objective is to ensure that each jurisdiction can collect and report data that are:

- comprehensive (i.e., every student in a public education institution is given the option to self-identify as Aboriginal);
- comparable: Aboriginal students are identified in a standardized way.

The self-identification question that will be used is set out below:

Are you an Aboriginal person, that is, First Nations (North American Indian), Métis, or Inuk (Inuit)?

Note: First Nations (North American Indian) include Status and Non-Status Indians.

If "Yes", mark the circle(s) that best describe(s) you now.

Yes, First Nations (North American Indian)

Yes, Métis

Yes, Inuk (Inuit)

This question was developed by Statistics Canada after extensive engagement with Aboriginal groups across Canada, and thus respects the importance of adopting an approach that is acceptable to Aboriginal communities (each individual jurisdiction will make its own determination with respect to the process for consultations with Aboriginal groups at the provincial/territorial level regarding the integration of this definition into education data collection). Using this question, which is now common across Statistics Canada's surveys, will also increase the value of the education data by making them comparable to other Statistics Canada data, including data collected by the National Household Survey.

Initially, data collection will focus on public schools, as these are the schools that are the responsibility of ministries/departments of education. Once harmonized collection is well-established, there may be interest on the part of First Nations in extending the same approach to on-reserve schools; this would be a matter for discussion between ministries/departments of education and regional Aboriginal organizations and is not part of the pan-Canadian plan at this time.

Information about postsecondary students is also important and will be collected through Statistics Canada's Postsecondary Student Information System (PSIS). At the moment, public postsecondary institutions are not required to provide information about students who self-identify as Aboriginal, but as the work on the implementation of PSIS continues, this will be included in regular PSIS reporting, using the standard Statistics Canada question. The ability to generate elementary-secondary data that would be comparable with the postsecondary data that will be collected through PSIS was a key deciding factor in the harmonized approach.

With regard to the definition and decision to self-identify, CMEC takes the view that individuals know best as to whether and how they self-identify. The work on Aboriginal self-identification is not intended to enable jurisdictions to seek evidence or proof of FNMI identity within their populations. While the question about FNMI identity needs to be mandated throughout the system in order to guarantee that all who wish to self-identify are given that opportunity, answering that question must not be made mandatory. This means that only those who wish to self-identify should do so.

Provinces and territories will be free to continue asking additional questions (e.g., registered or treaty Indian status, non-status, band membership, language, ancestry, etc.) to reflect each jurisdiction's unique needs.

What are the next steps?

All provinces and territories, except Quebec, have agreed to move forward on the inclusion of the harmonized self-identification question in their student-data systems at the elementary-secondary levels, recognizing that implementation will require consultations within each jurisdiction, including consultations with Aboriginal organizations, school boards, and institutions. In New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador, self-identification processes are being considered but are not currently in place. Due to agreements with First Nations in Quebec, that province has indicated that it is not currently in a position to begin collecting data on Aboriginal students. The lack of data for Quebec will be footnoted in any data released for Canada.

The decision to work toward a harmonized approach should not be seen as a unilateral decision by ministries/departments, but as a step forward in working with Aboriginal communities to improve evidence about Aboriginal students. The commitment to moving forward on the harmonized approach is founded on an understanding that any changes to the existing provincial or territorial processes, approaches, and mechanisms to data collection on Aboriginal students will require consultation with regional Aboriginal organizations.

In introducing these changes, time will be needed for consultations with Aboriginal organizations within each

province and territory, and for the administrative and technical work involved in revising collection templates and mechanisms. The implications in terms of time and resources will differ from one jurisdiction to another and will need to be identified internally. Similarly, the timelines for moving to the harmonized definition will be different across the country.

Once collection of comparable data begins, the experience of jurisdictions with well-established FNMI data collection indicates that it will still take several years to ensure that the data are technically sound and appear to accurately reflect Aboriginal student populations in each province and territory, and for users to begin to see trends in the data. Based on the experiences of some jurisdictions, it may also take several years for FNMI people to build a certain level of trust before they actually start self-identifying in jurisdictions that are only beginning to implement Aboriginal data collection.

Given the concerns outlined above, it is anticipated that it will take at least five to seven years for a sufficient number of jurisdictions to reach a point where pan-Canadian tables can be prepared for public release.