

# Growing indigenous population seen as advantage

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MANITOBA could be an economic powerhouse in Canada if it can get more of its younger population, particularly indigenous young people, engaged in the workforce, the Conference Board of Canada says.

In a report titled *Maximizing Manitoba's Potential*, the board identifies a number of trends that could help position Manitoba's economy for a high-growth future, including its younger population and the growing number of young indigenous people.

It notes that proportionally, Manitoba has the largest indigenous population of any province. It also notes that by 2036, the province's indigenous population is expected to reach between 273,000 and 335,000 people, which

would represent between 17.6 per cent and 21.3 per cent of its total population.

"Manitoba's indigenous population represents a unique demographic advantage for the province," said Marie-Christine Bernard, the board's associate director for provincial forecasts. "Indigenous peoples are traditionally younger than the average population. A younger population, with appropriate public policy in place to promote labour-force participation, could result in stronger economic growth for Manitoba relative to the other provinces in the long term."

The report notes the labour-force participation rate for indigenous Manitobans is currently 65.5 per cent. That's nearly three percentage points lower than the participation rate for the province's total population.

"So mobilizing them in the labour

force will be critical to sustaining economic growth for the province," it adds.

The report doesn't say what steps the province should be taking to get more indigenous young people into the labour force. Sabrina Bond, an economist with the board and co-author of the report, said its recommendations focus more on skills training and the need to align training with the needs of businesses.

"But that is an area of research we would really like to undertake," Bond added. "Hopefully, we'll be getting the funding to do that research."

Marilee Bartlett, executive director of Winnipeg's Centre for Aboriginal Human Resource Development, said it's important the education and training indigenous students receive prepares them for the jobs of the future, not just the jobs of today.

She noted a lot of the funding the centre receives is contingent on its students having a job lined up when they graduate.

"But that's not always the case because the economy is changing so fast," she said. "So we need to look more into the future... to ensure they have transferable skills," or skills that can be upgraded.

The conference board report said another important demographic trend that is shaping Manitoba's economy is the influx of international immigrants into the province. It notes that between 2005 and 2015, Manitoba attracted 142,000 net new international immigrants, or an average of 12,900 per year.

Bond said not only are these new immigrants providing the province with more workers, many of them are skilled

workers.

The president and CEO of the Business Council of Manitoba agreed the combination of more young people, more young indigenous people and more international immigrants gives Manitoba a competitive advantage.

"We have a significant mass there, and if we can... get them participating in education as young people, we will have a successful future," Don Leitch said.

"We've got no doubt about that."

Leitch also emphasized the importance of aligning education and training with market needs.

"What the private sector needs is (students) coming out with the appropriate skills they need," he said.

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