



Project Insights Report

# Entrepreneurial Skills in the North: Insights from Aurora College



**PARTNERS**

Aurora College



**LOCATIONS**

Northwest Territories



**INVESTMENT**

\$285,000



**PUBLISHED**

July 2024



**CONTRIBUTORS**

Katie McLaren  
(She/Her),  
*Research and  
Evaluation Associate*

## Executive Summary

Indigenous entrepreneurship helps to build resilience in the face of labour market instability, and to create opportunities for culturally relevant and economically self-reliant livelihoods in the North, with lasting impact that is owned by communities themselves. It is also vital for Canada’s economic growth, particularly in the North, where it plays a critical role in supporting economic diversification, job creation and community development. However, Indigenous entrepreneurs face significant challenges, including limited access to education, business expertise and financial capital.

To address these challenges, Aurora College conducted a feasibility study to assess the viability of establishing an Indigenous Business Centre of Excellence (IBCE) at Aurora College. The IBCE concept explores how to promote entrepreneurship as a viable career option for Indigenous individuals by providing essential resources, such as business skills training, education, mentorship and guidance tailored to the needs of Indigenous entrepreneurs.

Key objectives of the feasibility study included assessing needs and gaps, exploring opportunities, evaluating business centre models, engaging stakeholders and assessing next steps.

From these activities, partners found that while the IBCE is viable operationally, it would need to pivot its intent if implemented, centre Indigenous voices, and adopt culturally relevant and community-driven strategies to better meet the needs of the Indigenous communities it hopes to engage. Furthermore, meaningfully engaging with Indigenous communities and incorporating Indigenous perspectives would be essential for the success of an IBCE. This project highlights the importance of taking time to build relationships with Indigenous communities and understanding the existing network of support before designing and implementing a solution.

### KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 Duplicating services that are already provided by other organizations may not address gaps and could create competition for funding and participants.
- 2 Meaningful engagement with Indigenous communities, cultural relevance and differentiation are crucial to the success of efforts to support Indigenous entrepreneurs.
- 3 Relationship building with Indigenous communities is a precondition to understanding their opportunities and needs.

## The Issue

There are many reasons people in the North may choose to pursue a livelihood through entrepreneurship: for example, to address an unfulfilled need in their community; to pursue opportunities outside the dominant sources of employment that are available in their local economy (e.g., in the natural resources or public sectors); or to make a living in a way that also supports them to practice and preserve their cultures and values in a changing Northern society.

small- and medium-sized enterprises also provide procurement opportunities for larger industries and, at the same time, skill building to keep the wealth in the North, lessening the dependence on southern-led industries that come and go.

Indigenous businesses are a key component to regional, provincial and territorial economies from coast to coast to coast and are continuing to grow. According to the [Canadian Chamber of Commerce](#), the number of Indigenous business owners grew at five times the rate of self-employed people in Canada in 2020. Indigenous entrepreneurship and businesses play an especially pivotal role in supporting the economy and are crucial for economic diversification, job creation and community development in the North. As a result, there is a growing need to enhance the skills and capacity of Indigenous entrepreneurs in the North.

However, Indigenous entrepreneurs continue to face significant challenges starting and running successful businesses. Indigenous entrepreneurs often encounter difficulties securing financial capital due to systemic barriers. For those in the North, these challenges are more prevalent, as northerners have limited access to networks or resources that are essential in overcoming challenges and fostering sustainable business growth. These issues put Indigenous entrepreneurs at a significant disadvantage.

Addressing challenges Indigenous entrepreneurs and businesses face requires a multi-faceted approach that helps improve access to financing, provides tailored business support and networks, and centres meaningful partnerships with Indigenous communities. There is a need to increase the resources and support available for Indigenous entrepreneurship, especially for those in the North. To best address this gap, approaches must be designed for and by Indigenous peoples and recognize the distinct social and cultural landscapes.



## What We Investigated

Project administrators conducted a feasibility study to assess the viability of establishing an Indigenous Business Centre of Excellence (IBCE) at Aurora College. Aurora College is aiming to use the feasibility study to explore the need for an IBCE by developing a viable model for a two-year pilot of the IBCE. The goal of the IBCE was focused on promoting entrepreneurship as a career option for Indigenous people across the Territories. Partners wanted the centre to provide business skills training, education, mentorship and guidance for Indigenous entrepreneurs. Partners also anticipated that the centre could help create connections and contribute to best practices for Indigenous entrepreneurs in the Northwest Territories and the broader North.

The feasibility study sought to examine the need for Indigenous business development and assess the available continuing education opportunities for Indigenous communities in both the Northwest Territories and broader Northern region.

The feasibility study focused on the following key objectives:

1. Assessing next steps: Evaluating the feasibility of moving forward with the IBCE as part of the transformation of Aurora College to a polytechnic university. Exploring possible next steps and considering a proof-of-concept model for a two-year pilot IBCE, including scoping out potential third-party funding sources.
2. Assessing the needs and gaps: Understanding the needs of Indigenous entrepreneurs and businesses, understanding the landscape of current programs and resources in the NT, and identifying what gaps the IBCE could address.

3. Exploring opportunities: Engaging with partners in the NT, and researching Nunavut and Yukon to identify potential opportunities for an IBCE. This involved assessing the demand and interest in supporting an IBCE across the three territories within the landscape of existing providers and identifying opportunities for partnerships.

4. Evaluating business centre models: Examining existing Indigenous business centres and entrepreneurship support models that align with the needs and opportunities in the NT and the broader North. This included financial analysis to assess capital startup and operational costs, and to identify potential funding.

5. Engaging stakeholders: Engaging with community through focus groups, surveys, letters of support and key informant interviews to gather input and inform the project deliverable. Also, an advisory committee primarily comprising Indigenous representation provided direction and recommendation on engagement with community and stakeholders.

## What We're Learning

### **The IBCE would be operationally viable, but would need to pivot**

Based on the research and engagement activities conducted, the study found that the IBCE would be operationally viable. The study recommended a hybrid model with a central office within Aurora College. Further considerations are needed about governance, power structures and decision-making authority to ensure Indigenous voices are centred. From a funding perspective, \$350,000 in startup capital and \$2.3 million in operational funding for the two-year pilot would be required. However, the scope of the IBCE would need to pivot significantly from its original proposal to better serve the needs of Indigenous businesses and entrepreneurs.

### **The IBCE must not duplicate resources**

The study identified that there are many existing programs, training opportunities, and resources available to Indigenous businesses and entrepreneurs in the Northwest Territories. As a result, there is low demand for new supports or programs. Duplicating services that are already provided by other organizations may not increase accessibility and could potentially harm the viability of existing programs. Adding the IBCE to the market could create increased competition to secure funding and participants. However, there remains a gap in the ability for Indigenous entrepreneurs to access these existing supports. The IBCE needs ways to collaborate with other partners, add value to existing programs and pivot to a more strategic role as a connector. This would allow the IBCE to address the gaps without directly competing with established programs.

## **Further meaningful engagement with Indigenous communities is needed**

While Aurora College engaged Indigenous communities throughout the process, there was a need for further engagement with Indigenous communities and centring of Indigenous voices. The partner outlined key elements to ensure Indigenous voices were present. They developed an advisory committee composed of primarily Indigenous knowledge holders and subject matter experts to guide the study. They also developed an engagement strategy to gather information on needs and wants for the IBCE with Indigenous communities. However, the partner outlined that there were challenges during the engagement. For instance, the partner outlined difficulties when collecting survey responses from Indigenous communities, as survey response rates were low. Of the survey respondents, 45% self-identified as Indigenous and only 21% were entrepreneurs and business owners. The partners noted that relationship building takes time and recognized that further work is needed to better engage with Indigenous communities. They also highlighted the need to better engage with Indigenous governments and organizations.

## **Indigenous businesses and entrepreneurs need Indigenous business and entrepreneurial training**

The needs of Indigenous entrepreneurs are unique. To ensure the success of the IBCE, the design and delivery need to be culturally relevant and community driven. Indigenous entrepreneurs place a greater emphasis on social impact and community well-being with their work. Indigenous entrepreneurs not only aim to generate personal wealth but support their communities through how their businesses function. Much of the time, government-delivered resources modify their existing entrepreneurship programs to attempt to fit the needs of Indigenous entrepreneurs. These programs often use colonial approaches to program design and delivery. As a result, these programs are not grounded in Indigenous approaches and have limited success in meeting the needs of Indigenous entrepreneurs. It is critical for the IBCE to take a more holistic approach to skill and capacity building by recognizing the value of Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices, and supporting mental health and social well-being.

## **★ Why It Matters**

In an effort to support Reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and respond to the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission's](#) Calls to Action, Canada needs to continue to support Indigenous entrepreneurship and business development. Business skills training, education, mentorship and guidance for Indigenous entrepreneurs strengthen economic development for Indigenous peoples.

This project showcases the importance of not oversaturating a market with more programs and resources. In an effort to address gaps and respond to the needs of key populations—such as Indigenous entrepreneurs—many funders, policy-makers and organizations leap to developing a new program or service. However, this approach can create unintended harm such as a duplication and fragmentation of services. Upon completing scans of the current programming available, it is clear that the amount of resources available is not necessarily the core problem. Rather, there are challenges with access or awareness to existing resources.



### **State of Skills: Enhancing Career Prospects and Well-Being for Canadian Youth**

Focus on early career guidance programs to introduce youth to a range of career paths, empowering them to make informed decisions with a strong emphasis on inclusivity and accessibility.

This is an important lesson when seeking to develop solutions to address workforce and economic gaps. This project demonstrates that it is critical to first understand the landscape of programming and service options. Organizations and funders need to be able to pivot new programming in response to what is already available and consider innovative solutions. For instance, an organization may take on a more strategic role where it acts as one-stop-shop to convene current services and programs, or collaborate with partners to expand their current programming.

This project highlights for policy-makers and administrators the importance of having sufficient time to meaningfully engage with Indigenous communities. Organizations have recognized the need to consult with Indigenous communities and centre Indigenous perspectives in program design and delivery. However, further work is still needed to ensure these engagements are meaningful and grounded in Reconciliation. Relationship and trust building take time; it is critical to build this time into project timelines. Using colonial frameworks for data collection approaches, like surveys, does not yield valid data from Indigenous communities. Indigenous communities are rightfully wary of attempts to collect data where no personal relationship exists. Institutions seeking input from Indigenous communities should look to Indigenous research and evaluation frameworks for guidance on principles and practice, such as the [First Nations principles of ownership, control, access and possession](#); the [Utility, self-voicing, access and inter-relationality research framework](#) from the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres; and other frameworks relevant to the provincial/territorial context and the First Nations, Inuit or Métis groups with which the project administrators are seeking to engage.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact [communications@fsc-ccf.ca](mailto:communications@fsc-ccf.ca).

### How to Cite This Report

McLaren, K. (2024). Project insights report: Indigenous Business Centre of Excellence feasibility study (phase I). Aurora College. Toronto: Future Skills Centre. <https://fsc-ccf.ca/projects/ibce/>

Funded by the  
Government of Canada's  
Future Skills Program



Entrepreneurial Skills in the North: Insights from Aurora College is funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program. The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

