

Native grads would soar if learning gap closed, activist says

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KINGSTON—Canada could be producing 4,200 more home-grown university grads a year and reap an estimated \$401 billion more in economic productivity over 25 years if it wiped out the “tragic” learning gap between natives and the rest of Canada, says a First Nations lawyer and activist.

“The aboriginal population is growing at three times the national average but only one in 33 earns a university degree, compared to one in five Canadians overall — a story of tragic missed opportunity,” Roberta Jamieson, president of the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation, said Monday at conference on natives and higher learning.

If that learning gap were wiped out, some 5,200 more native students would earn a degree each year than the current 1,500, she said.

While many, including Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty, are sweetening the financial pot for foreign students, native youth here still lack the funding to help fight “poverty and bullying, gangs and drugs, lack of confidence and a lack of motivation and the gap is getting worse,” she said at Queen’s University.

Most reserves have waiting lists of students hoping for federal funding for tuition, which has been capped at 2 per cent each year for more than a decade, while the population — and demand for higher learning — has grown.

National Chief Shawn Atleo of the Assembly of First Nations called on Canada to “smash the status quo — there is a funding gap of \$2,000 to \$7,000 per student that is completely unacceptable,” he said in a speech at the conference.

“In some parts of Ontario, only 28 per cent of aboriginal students finish high school . . . yet we need another 65,000 students in university in Canada to achieve parity with mainstream levels.

“This failure must not continue,” Atleo said, sparking applause from the audience of some 170 educators from across the country. “We cannot afford to lose another generation to poverty and despair.”

Atleo welcomed news Wednesday that Ottawa may support bilingual schools in the Inuit language — a far cry from the horror stories of a generation ago when “native children would have their tongues pricked with a needle if they were heard speaking their native tongue.”