

Investing in Polytechnic Education in the Northwest Territories

Benefits for the Territory and Its Residents



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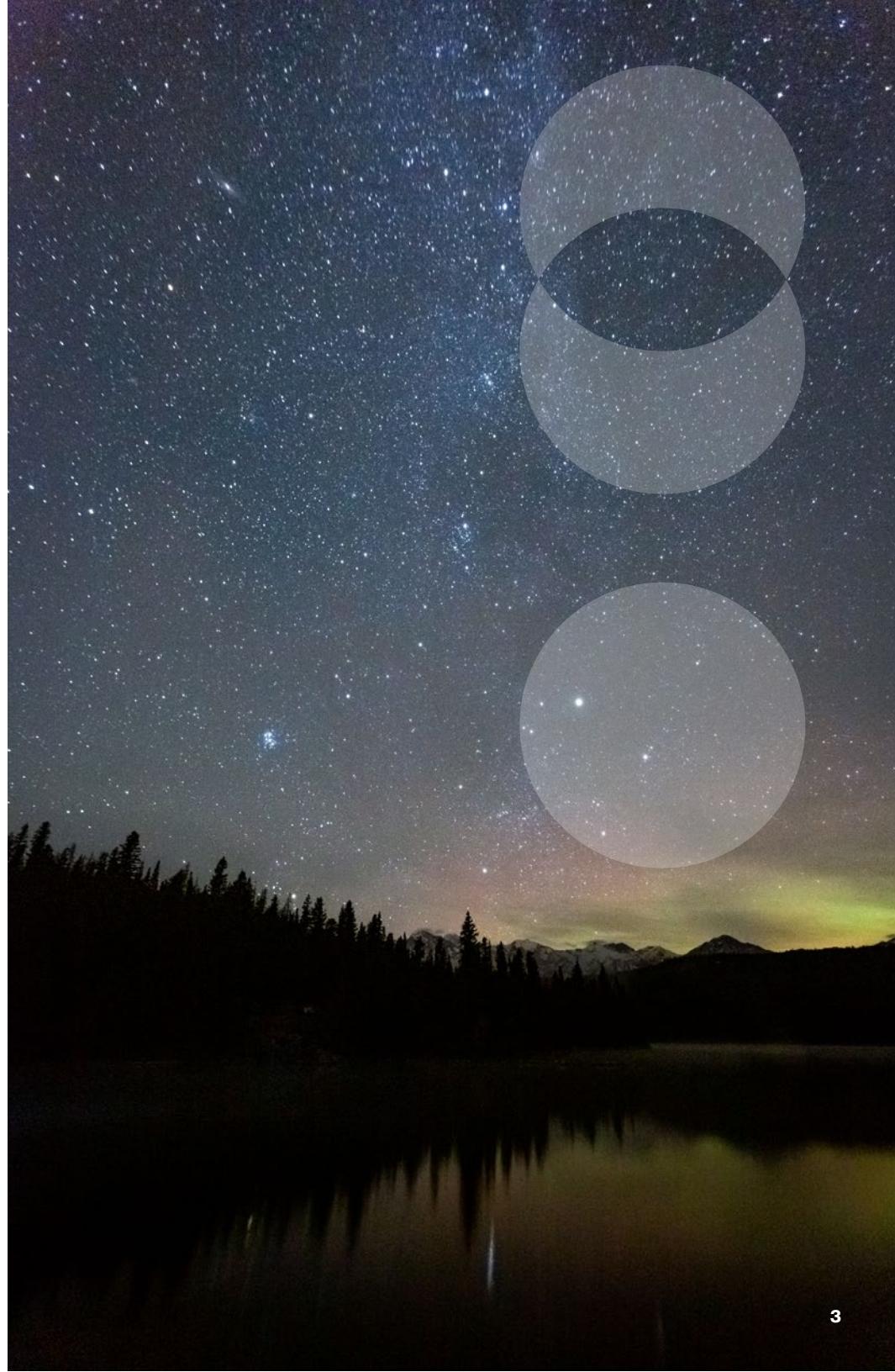
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Key Findings

- Aurora College in the Northwest Territories will transform into a polytechnic university by 2025. This transition will expand educational opportunities for residents and grow research activities in the territory. It will also build connections with industry and community partners and foster economic development.
- This transformation will advance priorities of the territorial government—namely, it will support progress on reconciliation with Indigenous peoples; reduce educational inequities; increase economic growth, innovation, and diversification; and attract and retain territorial residents.
- An enhanced post-secondary system in the territory will allow residents to succeed in JK–12 education, learn closer to home, participate in a new educational context that prioritizes reconciliation, and be prepared for life and work in the North.



Introduction

The Northwest Territories (NWT) has a small and diverse population: 44,800 residents dispersed across 33 communities, with 11 official languages and several Indigenous governments.

Aurora College is the only public post-secondary institution in the NWT. Therefore, it has a broad mandate to provide locally relevant programming for every community, operating through three regional campuses and a network of community learning centres. Most students are Indigenous, and many are mature learners and parents.

The Government of the NWT is working with Aurora College to prepare the institution to transition into a polytechnic university in 2025.¹ This change follows the recommendation of the 2018 Foundational Review of Aurora College.² The review also advised improvements in program quality, student access, and institutional management.

The first phase of the transition updated legislation, created foundational plans and strategies, and developed a program review framework. During the second phase, Aurora College is updating the governance model, introducing new quality assurance models, and changing the organizational structure.³

This report highlights foreseeable benefits of creating a high-quality polytechnic university in the NWT. It describes what a polytechnic does and examines how Aurora College can tailor these functions to contribute to the territory's economic and social goals. An aspirational document, this report uses academic research, other reports, publicly available data, and key informant conversations to propose the long-term benefits of investment in strengthening the institution and broadening its mandate.

What Is a Polytechnic?

Polytechnic institutions position themselves strategically between a college and a university. They offer an education that prepares graduates for work in their field and provide study and research depth like universities. Learning at a polytechnic is career-focused, technical, and hands-on. Polytechnics offer a range of educational programming, including degrees, diplomas, certificates, and apprenticeship training.⁴

¹ Government of the Northwest Territories, "Government Response to the Findings and Recommendations."

² MNP LLP, "Aurora College Foundational Review."

³ Government of the Northwest Territories, "Aurora College Completes First Phase of Transformation."

⁴ Polytechnics Canada, "Polytechnics Canada."

Other institutions in the Western and Northern regions of Canada have expanded their mandate beyond a college to become a polytechnic or a university in recent years. Some examples include:

- Yukon University (formerly Yukon College), 2020 (Yukon)
- Northwestern Polytechnic (formerly Grande Prairie Regional College), 2021 (Alberta)
- Red Deer Polytechnic (formerly Red Deer College), 2018 (Alberta)
- Saskatchewan Polytechnic (formerly Saskatchewan Institute of Technology), 2014 (Saskatchewan)
- Thomson Rivers University (formerly Cariboo College, then Cariboo University College), 2005 (British Columbia)
- Kwantlen Polytechnic University (formerly Kwantlen, then Kwantlen University College), 2008 (British Columbia)
- University of the Fraser Valley (formerly Fraser Valley College, then University College of the Fraser Valley), 2008 (British Columbia)

Some Northern jurisdictions are also pursuing university-level programming in other ways:

- In 2022, the Memorial University of Newfoundland announced its Labrador Institute in Happy Valley-Goose Bay would transition to a full academic campus, where it plans to be “a leading centre of research, education, policy, and outreach by and for the North.”⁵
- Instead of creating its own university, Nunavut Arctic College partnered with an existing university, signing an agreement in 2019 to offer joint credential degree programs with Memorial University.⁶
- Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) partnered with MasterCard Foundation in 2021 to support planning for a university for Inuit Nunangat, the Inuit homeland in Canada. Establishing a university was a long-standing goal for the organization as part of “creating a new reality of Inuit self-determination in education.”⁷



5 Memorial University of Newfoundland, “Home: Labrador Campus of Memorial University.”

6 Lochead, “Nunavut Arctic College Looks to Expand Management Program.”

7 Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, “ITK and the Mastercard Foundation Partner.”

Long-Term Benefits of Investment in Polytechnic Education

Increased Educational Opportunities and Supports

Transforming Aurora College into a polytechnic university will strengthen post-secondary options and quality in the territory.

More Learners Can Be Served Through a Broader Range of Academic Programs

By offering university programs in addition to vocational programming, polytechnics support lifelong learning. Within the same institution, students can “ladder” toward their long-term educational goals. For example, a learner could start by taking academic upgrading courses to qualify for the Practical Nursing program. Upon completion of this diploma, they could use a simplified admissions process and transfer some credits toward the Bachelor of Nursing program, earning a degree.⁸ Eventually, graduate-level programming could be available through Aurora College, allowing Northern residents to gain the qualifications for entrance into leadership and research roles without leaving the territory.

The introduction of degree options doesn’t mean that access to trades and vocational programming is reduced. For example, when it became a degree-granting institution, Kwantlen Polytechnic University in British Columbia introduced a Bachelor of Business Administration in Marketing Management while maintaining the diploma version of the program.⁹

Non-credential programs play a big role in Aurora College’s mandate. It regularly responds to individual training requests from communities and offers programs for small numbers of students. Nearly a quarter of Aurora College’s students are enrolled in the Adult Literacy and Basic Education Program, and another 19 per cent are enrolled in access programs that prepare students for entrance into post-secondary programs.¹⁰ NWT residents are less likely to graduate from high school or to earn a post-secondary credential than the Canadian average. This is particularly true for Indigenous populations living outside of the regional centres. Of the Indigenous population in the NWT, 40 per cent haven’t graduated from high school, compared with 5 per cent of non-Indigenous residents (see Chart 1).¹¹

⁸ Aurora College already offers this part of the pathway but offers university-level programming through a degree-granting partnership with the University of Victoria.

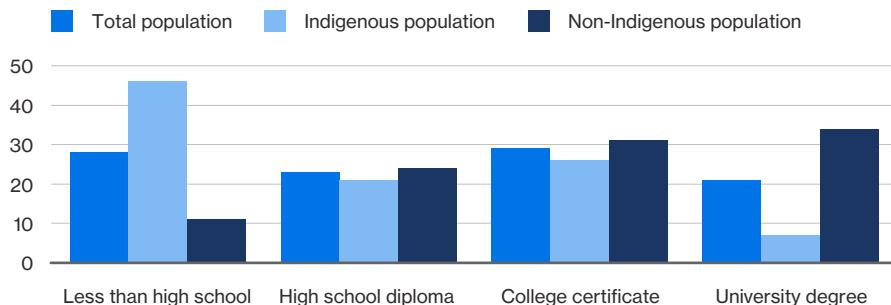
⁹ Key informant conversation, August 16, 2022.

¹⁰ Government of the Northwest Territories, “Government Response to the Findings and Recommendations.”

¹¹ Government of the Northwest Territories, “NWT Bureau of Statistics.”

Chart 1**There Is a Strong Need for Adult Basic Education Programs in the Northwest Territories**

(highest level of education for NWT population age 15+, 2019, per cent)



Sources: Northwest Territories Community Survey; The Conference Board of Canada.

Aurora College will need to develop world-class specializations in education and research for the Northern context while still being responsive to local community needs. The college plans to maintain adult education and access services (such as literacy and essential skills training) after it transitions to a polytechnic.¹² This local learning can build the foundation to complete other post-secondary training either virtually or by moving to a regional campus or another institution. In other Canadian settings, community-based programs for adult learners have successfully reached individuals who were previously disengaged from formal education and built their confidence in learning.¹³

Aurora College Can Develop and Deliver Programs That Prepare Students for Work and Life in Northern Contexts

As a polytechnic university, Aurora College can create and deliver a full range of programs to meet the needs of local students and the labour market. Programs can continue to incorporate teaching on local Indigenous cultures and contexts; incorporating Indigenous cultures and contexts will now extend to locally developed university programs. Doing so may increase the attractiveness of graduates to employers, reduce the need for on-the-job training for new graduates, and make Aurora College a destination of choice for those wanting to work in the North. See Appendix C for a list of initial areas of specialization.

Continuing education programs present another opportunity for Aurora College to expand its offerings. These courses provide learners with low-barrier opportunities to learn in-demand skills and transition into new jobs. For learners who aren't ready to pay for or attend a program full time, continuing education programs can provide an entry point into post-secondary education.

The pandemic moved Aurora College's existing continuing education offerings online, expanding the reach beyond the three college campus communities. Future digital offerings could attract learners from across Canada on topics of national interest, such as climate change science. Saskatchewan Polytechnic created a new School of Continuing Education in 2020 and has since experienced high demand for its offerings, nationally and internationally, contributing to new revenue and partnerships.¹⁴

¹² Government of the Northwest Territories, *Discussion Paper*.

¹³ Bourke and others, "Bringing College Classrooms to the Community."

¹⁴ Key informant conversation, September 1, 2022.

Learning Closer to Home Can Help Students Succeed

Research indicates that Northern students in Canada want to study close to home.¹⁵ However, students must often leave their home community to access education. This experience comes with mental and emotional stress, financial pressures, and exposure to systemic barriers.¹⁶ A polytechnic university in the territory will provide increased access to university education for NWT residents without their having to move away from their family and cultural supports. Investment in the school could also bring enhanced student supports such as new housing, mental health supports, access to cultural activities and country foods, and recreational opportunities.

The Polytechnic Can Build a New Educational Context That Prioritizes Indigenous Trust and Representation

Aurora College has an opportunity to revitalize its relationship with Indigenous communities in the territory as it implements major changes through the transformation process. A recent task force on Northern post-secondary education stressed that past educational experiences were “externally imposed and damaging” for Indigenous peoples. The task force emphasized a critical need for “place-based, Northern-focused, and Indigenous-led post-secondary education opportunities, in the North, by the North, and for the North.”¹⁷

The Aurora College strategic plan has an explicit focus on Indigenous inclusion and aims to be a place of action on reconciliation.¹⁸ The college has introduced a unique tricameral governance model where the Indigenous Knowledge Holders Council has an enhanced role in the management of the institution. At Otago Polytechnic in New Zealand, Māori culture and representation has slowly become an integral part of the institution—from its leadership to the design of its buildings.¹⁹ This involvement makes it a place that engages all students, particularly Indigenous students. In that region of New Zealand, Māori make up 8 per cent of the overall population but 14 per cent of Otago students.



¹⁵ Task Force on Northern Post-Secondary Education, *A Shared Responsibility*; and Sallaffie and others, “Survey of Nunavut Post-secondary Students.”

¹⁶ Task Force on Northern Post-Secondary Education, *A Shared Responsibility*.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Aurora College, *Aurora College 3-Year Strategic Plan*.

¹⁹ Key informant conversation, August 29, 2022.

A Strong Post-secondary Institution Can Support the JK-12 System

Enhancing the JK-12 education system is also a priority for the territorial government.²⁰ The polytechnic could support a stronger basic education foundation for future educational attainment.

Post-secondary outreach can provide enrichment activities for children and youth, such as school presentations, summer camps, mentoring, and support for science fairs. The polytechnic model emphasizes hands-on, progressive skill-building. These opportunities can start at the secondary school level, engaging students early and accelerating them into post-secondary programs. With plans under way to revamp Aurora College's Bachelor of Education program, more teachers from the NWT can qualify to teach at the elementary and secondary school levels, and graduates will be prepared to teach in the Northern context. Aurora College can also build and deliver professional development for current teachers to address current learning needs. Research activities could aid in understanding student needs and progress and develop best practices for education in the territory.

The presence of a strong post-secondary institution can influence youth educational aspirations. Youth who grow up near a university are much more likely to pursue university education than those who don't, particularly youth from lower-income families.²¹ However, this study of Canadian post-secondary education found this effect was lessened for Indigenous youth, suggesting there are other barriers to access beyond financial costs that need to be addressed. A strong, local post-secondary institution has spillover effects on youth even if they don't attend. Such effects include increased awareness of educational and career options and exposure to positive role models.²²

²⁰ Office of the Auditor General of Canada, *Early Childhood to Grade 12 Education*.

²¹ Frenette, "Do Universities Benefit Local Youth?"

²² Do, "The Effects of Local Colleges on the Quality of College Attended."

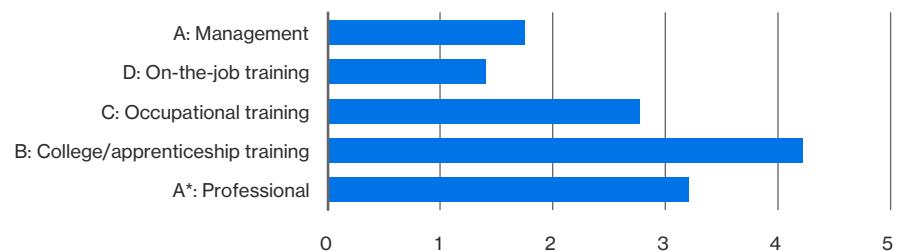
Building Connections With Industry and Community Partners

A key goal of a polytechnic university is to train graduates for current and future jobs. With the ability to design and deliver a full suite of educational programming, Aurora College will be able to respond more nimbly to changing economic conditions and needs of communities.

The NWT will continue to need workers with a variety of skill levels, from high school education to university degrees (see Chart 2, and Appendix A for a definition of the skill levels). Projections to 2040 show that over half of job openings will need a post-secondary credential.²³ Elementary school teachers, registered nurses, and secondary school teachers are expected to be the jobs most in demand.

Chart 2

NWT's Future Job Openings Will Require a Range of Credentials
(number of job openings by skill level, 2021–40, base case forecasting scenario, 000s)



*see Appendix B Table 1 for a definition of the National Occupational Classification System Skill Level Criteria
Sources: Statistics Canada; The Conference Board of Canada.

²³ Conference Board of Canada, *N.W.T. Labour Market Information Resource Module 6*.

An increase in high-quality educational options could attract residents to stay in the territory for school, potentially reducing out-migration. NWT residents are increasingly choosing to pursue education outside the territory.²⁴ Only 21 per cent of governmental student loans go to students studying in the territory—students are studying primarily in Alberta (39 per cent), B.C. (19 per cent), and Ontario (9 per cent). For undergraduate education, 85 per cent of residents who receive loans study outside of the territory.²⁵ If Aurora College can also attract out-of-territory students—and even international students—and retain these individuals in the territory after graduating, the pool of available workers with locally needed skills would further widen.

Polytechnics strive to forge strong connections with local businesses, organizations, and governments. Aurora College can strengthen existing industry and community connections through career-focused polytechnic education that meets labour market needs and includes co-ops and internships, involves industry leaders in advisory committees, and delivers value through applied research projects. More nimble and constructive partnerships are expected as Aurora College's governance shifts to be more independent from the territorial government.²⁶

Growing Research Activities in the Territory

By transitioning to a polytechnic model, Aurora College will grow its applied research capacity.

Applied research is a key focus of polytechnics and takes several forms, such as student-led projects and collaborative research programs involving faculty, students, and industry or community partners. This offering will help Aurora College become a hub for Northern-led research, generating knowledge on the territory's biggest issues and priorities and attracting research dollars to the region. For example, research dollars at Saskatchewan Polytechnic have grown from \$845,000 in 2013–14 (the year the school became a polytechnic) to \$6.3 million in 2020–21 as it expanded its research activities.²⁷

Research topics such as cold-climate testing and permafrost have already been proposed for Aurora College (see Appendix B for a full listing).²⁸ Other Northern institutions have also built their research program on Northern priorities and institutional strengths, which often overlap. For example, Yukon University “investigates Northern questions using Western science and Indigenous knowledge” and has research chairs in Indigenous knowledge, Northern energy innovation, Northern mine remediation, and permafrost and geoscience.²⁹ At the University of Alaska, more than 80 per cent of research conducted is directly related to Alaska, with the slogan “Research conducted by Alaskans for Alaska.” Topics include renewable energy community planning, winter transportation safety, and seafood biodiversity.³⁰

24 MNP LLP, “Aurora College Foundational Review.”

25 Conference Board of Canada, N.W.T. *Labour Market Information Resource Module 4*.

26 Key informant conversation, July 5, 2022; and key informant conversation, August 24, 2022.

27 Saskatchewan Polytechnic, “Annual Reports.”

28 Government of the Northwest Territories, *Advancing the Northwest Territories Knowledge Economy*.

29 Yukon University, “YukonU Research Centre.”

30 UAF Research, “UA Spotlight.”

Growing the research capacity of Aurora College will allow NWT residents to lead, manage, and mobilize their own research. Currently, non-residents lead most research (see Chart 3). With more research funding and capacity, Aurora College can conduct more community-generated projects. Aurora College could grow partnerships with organizations who also have research capacity, such as the Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning, and the Tlicho and Inuvialuit governments.

A polytechnic model will be better able to support researchers from inside and outside the territory. The eventual goal will be to have research experiences (such as capstone projects or fieldwork) for most students, appropriate to their level during their study.³¹ Students will develop research skills and could continue on to graduate-level studies. Services to support research are already expanding, with a pilot research services division and expanded research warehouse infrastructure in Inuvik. Aurora College will need to attract investments to build new facilities required for applied research and to develop the capacity of staff.

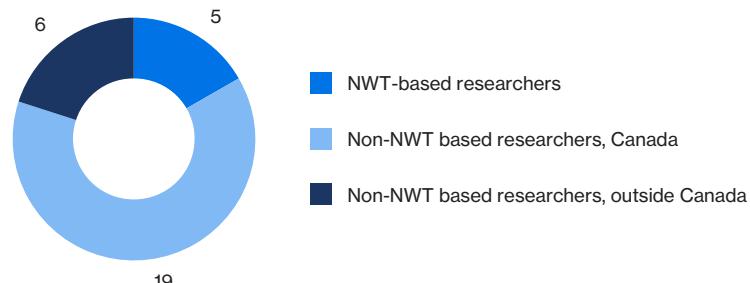


³¹ Key informant conversation, July 8, 2022.

Chart 3

Most Research Licences for Research in the NWT Are Issued to Non-NWT Organizations

(of the most 30 recent research licences in the territory, number of licences issued to primary investigators based on home region.)



Source: NWT Research Database.

Fostering Economic Diversification

The territory has long relied on resource extraction and public service as its main economic drivers. Reducing the territory's reliance on the extractive sectors (such as mining) is a key priority for the Government of the Northwest Territories.³² Post-secondary education is central to this goal of economic diversification. It drives the innovation economy and supports increased economic activity from the creation and sharing of knowledge and ideas.³³

³² Government of the Northwest Territories, "Mandate of the Government of the Northwest Territories."

³³ Government of the Northwest Territories, *Advancing the Northwest Territories Knowledge Economy*.

Quantifying the direct and indirect impacts of post-secondary education is outside the scope of this report. However, according to The Conference Board of Canada's research³⁴ over \$40 billion in spending flows through Canada's colleges and universities each year, which generates over \$55 billion in economic activity after multiplier effects. Almost 700,000 direct and indirect jobs are attributable to spending by post-secondary institutions. Off-campus student spending may generate a direct benefit to surrounding localities of up to \$17.5 billion and about \$1.9 billion in institution-related tourism spending.

Moreover, post-secondary institutions contribute greatly to human capital and the intellectual development of individuals. Those who graduate from college or university tend to benefit from better labour market outcomes, reduced risk of unemployment, and higher earnings. The Government of Canada spent \$15.8 billion on research and development in the higher education sector in 2019–20 year.³⁵ Post-secondary institutions can work toward embracing the opportunities for applied research and knowledge creation for economic diversification.

Next Steps

Becoming a successful polytechnic university won't happen overnight. Changes will occur incrementally, and Aurora College will build its reputation over years. Despite challenges in areas such as staff capacity, funding, and working on a small scale, Aurora College has an opportunity to become a key part of the NWT's social, economic, and cultural fabric through this transformation.

Aurora College can strengthen the education ecosystem in the territory through partnerships with local, Indigenous, and federal governments; other post-secondary institutions; employers, and organizations. The polytechnic university can grow new opportunities for learning, work, and community development, while enhancing the quality of education and raising the profile of the NWT on national and international levels.

34 Grant, *The Economic Impact of Post-secondary Education in Canada*.

35 Statistics Canada, "Spending on Research and Development."

Appendix A

Methodology

Our analysis for this project draws from several sources:

- a review of academic and grey literature on topics of polytechnic education, Northern education, and the socio-economic context of the Northwest Territories
- a comparator scan of relevant jurisdictions and institutions nationally and internationally
- publicly available data and existing economic analysis and forecasting by The Conference Board of Canada
- eleven semi-structured conversations with 15 key informants (some conversations held as a group):
 - four from Aurora College leadership
 - seven from the Government of the Northwest Territories
 - four from other Canadian and international post-secondary institutions

Appendix B

Table 1

National Occupational Classification System Skill Level Criteria

Skill level	Education/training required
Skill level A:	These occupations can be classified as either "management occupations" or "professional occupations."
Management occupations	These occupations are characterized by a high level of responsibility, accountability, and subject matter expertise. Expertise can be acquired through either formal education or extensive subject matter expertise.
Professional occupations	These occupations require a university degree (bachelor's, master's, or doctorate).
Skill level B: College/apprenticeship training	These occupations usually require college education or apprenticeship training.
Skill level C: Occupational training	These occupations usually require secondary school and/or occupation-specific training (up to two years).
Skill level D: On-the-job training	These occupations usually revolve around on-the-job training.

Source: The Conference Board of Canada

Appendix C

Initial Areas of Specialization

Aurora College's Initial Areas of Specialization¹

- skilled trades and technology
- mineral resource and environmental management
- Northern health, education, and community services
- business and leadership

NWT Government's Proposed Research Topics²

- developing and testing cold climate products and technologies
- designing green technology for restoring and remediating resource extraction sites
- implementing emerging technologies for remote service delivery
 - establishing a Northern housing development
 - researching permafrost and cold regions
 - receiving and managing data from satellites



¹ Government of the Northwest Territories, *Discussion Paper*.

² Government of the Northwest Territories, *Advancing the Northwest Territories Knowledge Economy*.

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