

Essential Skills: Focus on Aboriginal Workers

Respondent Profile

British Columbia has one of the most diverse populations of Aboriginal people in all of North America. The province is home to 198 First Nations, more than any other province or territory in Canada and is approximately one third of Canada's 612 First Nations. Regions span from the Coast of Vancouver and Mountains, west to Vancouver Island, to Northern B.C., Cariboo Chilcotin Coast, Thompson Okanagan and the Kootenay Rockies. Today there are approximately 170,000 Aboriginal people in British Columbia, representing just over four per cent of the total population. There are 28 distinct peoples, rich in diversity with many dialects traditions and a vast history.

B.C. is home to the 2nd largest Aboriginal population in Canada, which represents 17 percent of the nation's total. 60 percent of the B.C.'s Aboriginal population are urban, 20 percent live in the census metropolitan area of Vancouver. The Aboriginal working age population is growing more than 5 times faster than non-aboriginal.

They are much younger on average than the non-Aboriginal population and make up five percent of B.C.'s prime working age population. 13 percent are between the ages of 15 and 24.¹

Skill Gaps & Training Needs

Literature / web review and respondent information reveal common themes pertaining to the skill gaps of Aboriginal / First Nations and Métis learners in British Columbia as follows:

- Technical & Professional training/education
- Essential Skills training
- Need for work experience
- Access to training particularly in remote communities
- Life skills (including motivation issues, drug/alcohol, etc)
- Funding

There are clearly many champions within Aboriginal / First Nations and Métis communities who are leading the way at the community level and inviting employers and educators to work in partnership with them to infuse Essential Skills into relevant programming and training. However, clearly identified in both the literature and survey responses is the significant proportion of the Aboriginal / First Nations / Métis population who need Essential Skills and technical or professional training.

¹ Source: "Skills and Learning in Canada, A Public Policy Forum, Review of Key Issues that Could Affect Canada's Future Economic Prosperity and Dev.t" www.ppforum.ca/common/assets/publications/en/ppf_cga_skills-reporten.pdf, 2008
Source: www12.statcan.ca/English/census06/data/highlights/aboriginal/pages/Page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo=CMA&Code=59Table=1&Data=Count&sex=1&Age=1&StartRec=26&Sort=2&Display=Page&CSDFilter=250

Challenges are layered and include life skills issues, some of which stem from intergenerational ties. Aboriginal / First Nations / Métis communities have communicated their desire to have autonomy and as such they have identified the need to develop role models, trainers and educators from their own communities who can provide culturally relevant training. For those individuals living in remote communities training often requires the learner to relocate leaving behind families and bringing the high costs additional housing and other expenses. Additionally, training that provides a direct link to employers so that lack of work experience can be addressed would be of benefit for the learners.

Congruent with B.C.'s labour market information is the need to provide training for B.C.'s top industries. Trades training followed by senior administration / management, health care and education are among the top four occupations identified. Ideally, the challenge is to find some means of providing to remote areas.

A final key consideration is the need to recognize Aboriginal / First Nations / Métis determination to develop and deliver their own programming based on their unique approach, a factor they view as critical for success.

Existing Workplace Curricula & Resources

Literature and web reviews indicate that there is a broad array of Essential Skills training, programs and resources available for Aboriginal / First Nations and Métis communities.

HRSDC's Aboriginal Affairs Unit has been proactive in coordinating a B.C./Yukon Essential Skills Guiding Team comprised of the 14 AHRDAs (Aboriginal Human Resource Development Agreement holders) who are responsible for administering employment programs for Aboriginal communities throughout British Columbia. This team has worked collectively since October 2006 to focus on building capacity and increasing Essential Skills awareness. Initially Douglas College provided individuals from these organizations with the 'Introduction to Essential Skills' workshop. In the past year, the guiding team has developed their own Introductory Essential Skills Workshop that they deliver to continue building awareness and capacity. The B.C./Yukon Essential Skills Guiding team includes:

- Aboriginal Community Careers Employment Services Society (ACCESS) Urban AHRDA, West Vancouver, B.C.
- First Nations Employment Society (FNES), Vancouver, B.C.
- SKEENA, Terrace, B.C.
- Aboriginal Labour Force Alliance, Whitehorse, YT
- Cariboo-Chilcotin Aboriginal Training Education Centre Society (CCATEC), Williams Lake, B.C.
- North Island Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council Aboriginal Management Board (NINTCAMS), Campbell River, B.C.
- Central Interior Partners, AHRDA, Kamloops, B.C.

- Okanagan-Ktunaxa AHRDA, Kelowna, B.C.
- Ktunaxa Nation Council Sub-Agreement, Cranbrook, B.C.
- Coast Salish Employment & Training Society (CSETS), Duncan, B.C.
- STO:LO, Chilliwack, B.C.
- Métis Nation of B.C., Abbotsford, B.C.
- North East Native Advancing Society (NENAS), Ft. St. John, B.C.
- Prince George Nechako Aboriginal Employment and Training Associations) PGNAETA, Prince George, B.C.

Over the past two years, each AHRDA on the B.C./Yukon Essential Skills guiding team has worked to reach out to their local employers and colleges/universities to engage them in participating in the development of Essential Skills programming/training. The biggest gap they see in achieving their goal appears to be their own head start in the field, as few educational centres have truly begun to integrate Essential Skills into their programming. Some highlights of the programming that has been developed follows.

MNBC and ACCESS provide a nationally funded project called 'Essential Skills for Aboriginal Futures'. The project partners with employers to design training that focuses on culturally relevant and Essential Skills materials to prepare Aboriginal persons for specific employment opportunities. In addition, MNBC and ACCESS have integrated Essential Skills as a preparatory precursor to their trades training opportunities that include carpentry, electrical and plumbing.

PGNAETA has invested in opening the 'Workforce Centre of Excellence' with a specific focus on delivering Essential Skills programming to the Aboriginal Communities they serve. PGNAETA uses TOWES and incorporates Essential Skills into a variety of training opportunities which includes the trades.

Sto:lo Nation Human Resources Development has been delivering Essential Skills programming to the Aboriginal clients served under the Fraser Valley AHRDA and supports the Yellow Cedar Learning Centre to work with clients who have learning barriers. In addition, Sto:lo Nation created the well known 'ESI' Essential Skills Investigation movie, a short awareness DVD that introduces individuals to Essential Skills.

A number of additional Aboriginal / First Nations organizations also offer Essential Skills training. Some of the well known projects include:

VanASEP (Vancouver Aboriginal Skills Employment Program, a 5 year initiative launched in late 2003 aims to create sustainable employment for Aboriginal / First Nations persons through the development of partnerships in economic initiatives leading to lasting benefits for Aboriginal / First Nations / Métis communities, families and individuals.

Currently VanASEP links construction projects to a source of labour supply, focusing primarily but not exclusively on opportunities relating to the Vancouver Trade and Convention Centre project, the Vancouver Port Expansion project and the Sea to Sky

Highway project. VanASEP recruits and trains Aboriginal workers for construction sector careers. Resources used include TOWES the Test of Workplace Essential Skills as well as SkillPlan's numerous Essential Skills resources.

More recently VanASEP began delivering Essential Skills training for the Aboriginal/First Nations communities of Douglas, Skatin and Samaquham for the Harrison Hydro LP project.

Kla-how-eya offers a variety of training opportunities in Surrey, B.C. and has partnered with Douglas College to offer Essential Skills preparatory training for their culinary arts program.

First Nations Social Development Society (FNSDS) has incorporated Essential Skills training through inclusion in their curriculum for on-reserve employment counsellors and workers.

Research on Essential Skills training or educational opportunities within public post secondary schools revealed that only a handful of institutions currently embed or offer Essential Skills training for their students. It is clear, however that there is a shifting focus towards Essential Skills. Unfortunately, common to many educational institutions is the notion that they have always taught and included Essential Skills, an issue inherent in the broad context of the term "essential skills". Therefore, HRSDC's concept of 'Essential Skills' is often mistaken and true applications of Essential Skills based training are somewhat lacking.

In an effort to increase awareness and knowledge around Essential Skills Douglas College in Coquitlam, B.C. offers educator and practitioner workshops focused on understanding and integrating HRSDC's Essential Skills into training. Several of the AHRDAs have participated and completed the "ES Integration workshop series".

Other Essential Skills focused training includes the Essential Skills Profile Analyst Certificate issued by Bow Valley College and SkillPlan's Workplace Materials Developer Certificate. Several AHRDA representatives had also taken this training.

Based on the information submitted through our survey instrument, 47% of the respondents identified existing resources relating to Workplace Essential Skills for the Aboriginal / First Nations learner. Most programs focus on the reading, writing and document use skills and are embedded into other training with an employment focus. For example, pre-apprenticeship candidates in the Maintenance Worker Upgrade program offered through North Island College and Tseshaht Admin Office incorporate numeracy, writing, reading and document use.

Recommendations

Canada's First Nations population is young and growing at a rate 5 times greater than the average population providing a valuable, untapped resource that can assist to address skill shortages and benefit Canada in today's global economy. A review of current Essential Skills resources, tools and programming in contrast with identified needs of the Aboriginal / First Nations / Métis learner leads us to conclude the following recommendations.

- Develop holistic programming to provide Essential Skills, life skills and occupation specific training, linking directly with employers wherever possible.
- Assess and explore methods to deliver cost effective training/education to remote learners.
- Provide ongoing Essential Skills training that provides First Nations educators and practitioners with the knowledge and skills needed to successfully deliver Essential Skills training and education to their community of learners

Research Methodology

In order to generate a comprehensive picture of the state of workplace Essential Skills training for Aboriginal / First Nations / Métis learners across the province of British Columbia, Douglas College conducted an extensive literature and website review and sought the input from Aboriginal / First Nations / Métis communities through:

- Focus groups
- Face to face interview
- Telephone interview
- Telephone and e-mail requests for completion of an online survey

The data gathered was then analyzed to review skill gaps and identify recommended potential pilot programs to address recognized needs. Douglas College employed an Aboriginal Consultant to assist with design of the project's data collection methodology. A letter requesting participation and partnership in the project was forwarded to all B.C. AHRDAs (Aboriginal Human Resource Development Agreement holders), and a variety of Aboriginal / First Nations / Métis organizations on May 5, 2008. Interested parties were provided with more detail and asked to submit a work plan and budget prior to commencing work on the project .

The following organizations participated as project partners:

- Yellow Cedar Learning Centre, Chilliwack, B.C.
- Nuuchahnulth Tribal Council, Port Alberni, B.C.
- North Vancouver Island Aboriginal Training Society, Campbell River, B.C.
- Sto:lo Nation Community Development Department, Chilliwack, B.C.
- Prince George Nechako Aboriginal Employment & Training Association, Prince George, B.C.

This report was prepared by Douglas College working with Yellow Cedar Learning Centre (Chilliwack), Nuuchahnulth Tribal Council (Port Alberni), North Vancouver Island Aboriginal Training Society, Sto:lo Nation Community Development Department (Chilliwack), and Prince George Nechako Aboriginal Employment & Training Association (Prince George). For more information and to read the full report, please contact Pam Tetarenko at tetarenkop@douglas.bc.ca.