



# First Nations, Inuit and Métis Essential Skills Inventory Project (FIMESIP)

## Case Study:

**Essential Skills for Aboriginal Futures  
(ESAF),  
Aboriginal Community Career Employment  
Services Society (ACCESS)**



**Canada**

This project is funded by the  
Government of Canada's Office  
of Literacy and Essential Skills



## About the First Nations, Inuit and Métis Essential Skills Inventory Project (FIMESIP)

The Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF) in partnership with Employment and Social Development Canada's Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, the Assembly of First Nations, the Métis National Council and the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami developed a comprehensive inventory of Essential Skills initiatives aimed at First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. The *First Nations, Inuit and Métis ES Inventory Project's (FIMESIP)* goal is to better understand the state of practice with respect to Essential Skills initiatives tailored to First Nations, Inuit and Métis youth and adults living in diverse communities throughout Canada and to share these insights and lessons learned with a larger community of practice. Through FIMESIP, we have identified factors ("markers" of promising practice) that contribute to the initiatives success. **The markers, inventory, case studies and evaluation toolkit are available at: [www.fimesip.ca](http://www.fimesip.ca).**

CCDF gratefully acknowledges the support of the Steering Committee and Working Group of FIMESIP:

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### FIMESIP Case Study: Essential Skills for Aboriginal Futures (ESAF), Aboriginal Community Career Employment Services Society (ACCESS)

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The FIMESIP project was funded by Employment and Social Development Canada.



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#### Acknowledgements

Our many thanks to the ESAF Machinest Foundations Course Participants, Ivan Kiss (ESAF Curriculum Developer/Instructor), Cori Thunderchild (ESAF Program Director) and Darcy Wilson (ESAF Employer Partner (Manager 311 Call Centre, City of Vancouver)) for taking the time to speak to us about this initiative.

## About the Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF)

CCDF is a non-profit organization that works to advance career services and the capacity of the profession to respond with empathy and skill to their clients and stakeholders in an ever-changing work environment. CCDF is a nationally and internationally recognized leader in the field of career development and works on a range of projects and specializes in areas of:

- **Applied Research:** Creating an evidence-base for the outcomes of career services and interventions;
- **Policy Consultation:** Bringing policy makers and service providers together to develop policy that is attuned to the realities of service provision in the field;
- **Training:** Developing and delivering training courses to a range of practitioners aligned to the competencies set out in the Canadian Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners;
- **Resource Development:** Making career products that respond to client and practitioner needs;
- **Service Capacity Building** Working with diverse partners to enrich and strengthen career services and to integrate career, community, economic and workforce development.

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## Overview

Essential Skills for Aboriginal Futures (ESAF) is a department of the Aboriginal Community Career Employment Services Society (ACCESS), the only urban Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS) holder in British Columbia. Since June 2007, ESAF has been developing and delivering innovative Essential Skills (ES) training programs to the urban Aboriginal community in the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD).

Funded through Aboriginal Skills and Employment Partnerships, ESAF provides unemployed Aboriginal youth (16+) and adults with the targeted training they need to obtain either advance vocational/technical training or employment in a specific occupation or trade. ESAF offers up to 10 training programs a year, depending on available funding.

To date, ESAF has successfully delivered eight 8-week pre-technical trades programs and has partnered with over 18 employers to provide 8-12 week customized occupational training programs. ES enhancement is at the core of all ESAF programs and is seen as the critical bridge to working successfully with employers and clients.

ESAF pre-technical trades courses are designed to equip participants with the skills needed to successfully complete advanced technical training. For example, the Machinist Foundation program prepares participant to successfully complete machinist technical training at the British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT), maintaining a grade average of 80% - 85% throughout, and then progress into a 4 year apprenticeship program. The ESAF's employer partnership programs train learners for specific employer- identified occupations with the goal of moving participants directly to employment.

To date these programs have seen a completion rate of 90% and a placement rate of 78%. The Director of ESAF links their success directly to the emphasis on ES, high functioning employer partnerships, the ability to tailor their training to participant and employer needs, the provision of "wrap around" support for participants and the expertise and dedication of their team.

## Essential Skill Focus

While all nine ES are integrated throughout ESAF's programs, through their customized training approach participants receive focused instruction in the ES most important to the specific trade or occupation for which they are being trained. Needed ES are taught within the context of the specific work tasks associated with each occupation or trade, and wherever possible, authentic work site materials and documents are used.

For example, in the Machinist Foundation program, ES curriculum is developed to reflect the training materials and texts used at BCIT and the skills set and knowledge first year apprentices are required to have. ESAF instruction concentrates on trades-related applied Math while the other ES such as Document Use, Reading Text and Thinking Skills are built around Numeracy and seamlessly interlaced.

In the Employer Partnerships programs, ESAF staff meet with employers to identify the ES that the participants will need to have to successfully perform the specific jobs employers are offering. For example, in a partnership program with the City of Vancouver's 311 Call Centre, ESAF staff visited the work site, spent two days observing call centre staff at work and met with the call centre manager and staff to identify the skills, knowledge and attitudes required for the job. As a result the ES curriculum for this training focused on Oral Communication, Writing, Computer Skills, and Decision Making. Given the specificity of each training and delivery, no two programs are ever the same. Each program demands the development of its own unique ES curriculum.

## Objectives

ESAF's stated goal is "to deliver innovative ES programs to the Aboriginal Community through employer partnerships and customized training that supports employment success and retention." The Director of ESAF stated that the goals of the program looks beyond measurable outcomes of employment and advanced training to empower individuals by encouraging and acknowledging ability and building hope. Based on participant testimonials and instructors' observations, ESAF participants have demonstrated increased self-awareness, self-confidence, drive, motivation and hopefulness. Participants enrolled in the Machinist program, for example, stated that they already felt a positive change in their life and identified some of the key



outcomes of this program as “education as a whole, a sense of accomplishment, confidence, success in the workplace and in our own personal life [and] sharing it with your friends and family”.

## Promising Practice (Keys to Success)

### **Methodology/Approach**

ESAF works in close partnership with the business community in the creation of their Employer Partnership programs. Employer partners have included Safeway, Fortis Gas, Toronto Dominion Bank, BC Housing, CN Rail, and the City of Vancouver to name a few. ESAF looks for large organizations or businesses that have the capacity to hire and are willing to engage with ESAF in the development and delivery of the program.

ESAF takes a very personable approach in engaging employers, at times contacting them and asking to “just sit down together and talk.” ESAF presents their model of targeted recruiting and customized training for the specific position the employers are offering. ESAF makes it clear that employers are under no obligation to hire, but must be willing to interview suitable candidates upon completion of the program.

Training curriculum for these employer partnership programs is collaboratively developed with the involvement of the employer and is based on the employer’s stated needs and expectations. ESAF staff visits the work site, observes workers on-the-job, reviews workplace documents and, with employer input, identifies the skills set, attitudes, education level, personality traits and work habits required for the job. ESAF analyzes and assesses the occupational tasks and builds the training curriculum to reflect the employability skills and ES required to get and to keep the job.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is created between ESAF and their employer partner outlining roles and responsibilities. ESAF’s Director states that these are “true partnerships” that are mutually beneficial for both parties. To demonstrate ESAF’s commitment to the partnership, the MOU clearly identifies ESAF’s financial contribution and investment in the training program. Although employers do not often provide cash contributions, they do contribute significantly in-kind.

Throughout the program employers are asked to make class presentations and provide work placement experiences. Human resource or supervisory staff review ESAF participant resumes and provide them with realistic interview practice. During work experiences, both participants and employers continue to be

supported by ESAF. If participants need development of a skill, ESAF will arrange for further training. As one employer stated, “*ESAF really partnered and worked to ensure both their clients and the employer succeeded.*”

In the beginning, ESAF’s Director sought out employer partners but, as the community has become more familiar with the success of the programs, employers are now contacting ESAF and are seeking ways to become involved.

When developing a new pre-technical trades program, ESAF makes every effort to meet post-secondary trades training requirements. ESAF’s curriculum developer/instructor researches the Province’s training and certification specifications, purchases the relevant training manuals and instructional material from BCIT and interviews BCIT trades instructors asking them what skills first year apprentices need as well as what skills first year trades trainee apprentice are typical lacking. The 8-week course is then developed to help students build the skills needed to meet all the entrance requirements of BCIT. ESAF students are prepared to complete BCIT course work, achieve an average grade level of 85% in their academics and to successfully move into apprenticeship training. ESAF’s Machinist Foundations instructor indicated that “*each pre trades program has an extremely high level of specificity and is highly customized for the group of people we are training.*”

### **Structure of the Program**

ACCESS services urban Aboriginal people throughout Metro Vancouver and, as such, serve First Nations, Métis and Inuit clients who originate from all over BC and Canada. The organization has various departments and offers a wide range of services and programs that work together to ensure the success of ACCESS clients.

ESAF programs are advertised through the organization’s extensive professional and community networks, including government offices, libraries, local papers, word of mouth and via ACCESS Employment Services located across Metro Vancouver.

For the recruitment and selection of participants, ESAF works closely with ACCESS Employment Services, as well as with ACCESS Trades, the department responsible for sponsoring industry-certified trades programs.

Screening for ESAF’s Employment Programs begins with an ACCESS Employment Counsellor. Screening is aimed at

identifying candidates whose interest and profile align with the established pre-requisites of an ESAF employer partner program. These candidates are referred to ESAF for further screening and final selection. As an employer noted, *“not only was the training tailored, but the recruitment was tailored to our needs as well, resulting in the right candidates with the right competencies”*.

ACCESS Trades personnel work with ACCESS Employment Services to recruit, screen and select clients for each of the trades training programs offered through their department and then directly refer the successful candidates to ESAF who develops and delivers the 8 week pre-technical trades program for customized ES upgrading before entrance to BCIT.

### **Content of the Program**

A unique feature of ESAF programming and a key contributor to their success is the “wrap-around” financial, personal, academic and on-the-job support offered every ESAF participant. While in attendance, students receive a living allowance and financial support for housing, food, transportation, books and incidentals. Students also have access to targeted supports for family, personal and drug and alcohol issues, as well as employment counselling.

***“We are supported by the governance of ACCESS... Everybody is on board. Our employment counsellors, our whole network... we all work together for the success of the Aboriginal community.... The Directors, although we have our own departments, we all work together. None of us stands in a silo alone.”***

Cori Thunderchild, ESAF Director

For ESAF pre-technical trades participants, these wrap-around services are extended even after they have left ESAF and have begun vocational schooling with BCIT. BCIT tuition/registration fees, student living expenses and apprenticeship fees are covered by ACCESS Trades. ACCESS Trades also offers support and assistance throughout the full term of their apprenticeship. Following the completion of the in-class training at ESAF, students who have been successful in getting a job with the employer partner continue to receive on-the-job support.

***“We work hard to take down every boundary to success.”***

Cori Thunderchild, ESAF Director

This kind of personal support is balanced with high standards. ESAF staff work hard to model professionalism, responsibility and discipline. Students need to apply themselves and show commitment. They are expected to be on time, attend daily and apply themselves. Pre-trades learners are required to achieve an 85% average on weekly tests before advancing to the next lessons. Employment partnership program participants, when on-the-job, are expected to meet the expectations the employer would have for any other employee. One employer commented that he really appreciated that ESAF *“held their people to a very high level of expectation.”* Staff are there to provide participants with extra assistance and support at every level to ensure these standards are maintained.

Participants are very appreciative of this assistance, indicating that *“it feels good knowing you’re not just on your own because you have support systems, you have someone who is going to help you if you need it. Everyone here from the top-down wants us to succeed.”* Participants are equally aware of their responsibilities, commenting that *“as long as your grades are good, as long as you perform, are doing well and not wasting all this you will benefit from all these programs have to offer”*.

While curriculum is developed to meet the needs of partner employers or advanced training requirements, it is also adapted to fit the needs of the ESAF learners. During the first week of class, students complete the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES) to assess ES levels and Structure of Intellect (SOI) testing to assess learning abilities (specifically cognition, evaluation, memory, creativity, and problem-solving.) These assessment results are used to develop an individualized continuous learning plan for each participant. Staff use assessment results to tailor content and ensure effective teaching methods to meet each learner’s assessed needs.

TOWES testing is completed for a second time during the last week of the program to assess ES skill attainment.

## Delivery of the Program

ESAF has a “let’s get it done” approach to the program. Instructors will do whatever it takes to ensure learners are getting the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in their advanced trades training and/or employment. Learning methods include visual and kinaesthetic activities, 3-D demonstrations and self-produced YouTube tutorials on various math concepts. In addition, ESAF has produced two instructional DVDs on Numeracy which are available on-line. (<http://access-essentialskills.com/programs/>)

While ESAF programs are learner-centred and instructors are casual and very approachable, they also self-describe as “strict”. Instructors are very supportive but, as the trades instructor explained “*we do it and redo it until it’s done*”. Concepts are presented in different ways and as many times as required. Quizzes are “written and rewritten until they [students] can demonstrate they have the skills” and obtain at least an 85% on the test.

### Exceptional Staff

ESAF instructors have a sound knowledge of the specific occupational skills beginning taught, knowledge of the nine ES and how they work together and fit with job tasks and an understanding of adult educational principles, curriculum development and effective instruction techniques. ESAF staff come with training/background in the following:

- Degrees in Engineering
- Degrees in Communication
- Knowledge of Applied Math and Physics for a number of trades
- Knowledge of Adult Education Principles and Methodology
- Employment Counselling/ Career Development expertise, Job Club Facilitation Training
- Post-Secondary ES Certification (all staff including administrative staff)
- Guiding Circles Training
- Life Skills, Drug and Alcohol Counselling

While noting the staff’s expertise, ESAF’s Director identified the staff’s passion, creativity and commitment to participant success as their most outstanding qualifications.

## Outcomes of the Program

Program evaluation is a key component to ESAF and the cost of an external evaluation is built into the budget of each new program proposal. At the end of each program, a summative evaluation of program deliverables and outcomes is provided to funders.

To assess participant skill attainment, the program uses pre and post TOWES testing, SOI assessments, and mini-tests/quizzes throughout the program. Participants’ employment and educational status is tracked at three, six and 12-month intervals in keeping with funder reporting requirements.

Increases in participant self-awareness, self-confidence, drive, motivation and hopefulness are also documented through facilitator observation and participant self-evaluations and testimonials.

Evaluated outcomes of ESAF are:

- 78% participant placement rate (employment and/or advance training)
- 90% participant program completion rate
- 85% grade average for participants in ESAF pre-technical trades weekly tests
- 80-85% grade average for participants in advance post-secondary trades training
- increased client self confidence
- increased client self-awareness
- employer partner satisfaction

## Transferability

The ESAF program is currently servicing urban Aboriginal people living in the Metro Vancouver region; however, the model could be applied nationally. According to ESAF’s Director, to ensure transferability an organization would need to replicate the three key elements of the program: partnerships, specific training and wrap-around support. The Director stated that “*what the community would have to inject would be their own creativity, ability, flexibility and willingness.*”

Currently ESAF is in the process of creating a free training and facilitation manual to support ES job-readiness training programs for multi-barriered clients. This free resource will be available as

an online e-book and a DVD via the [ACCESS website](#). This resource will play an important role in supporting other communities in developing the ESAF model of service delivery.

## Lessons Learned/Challenges

One of the challenges for ESAF is funding security. Each time a call for proposals is announced, ESAF must modify their programming to meet the objectives and stated deliverables of the new funding call. Proposals are time-consuming to prepare and place a strain on program staff. Staff expertise and commitment have played an important role in meeting this challenge.

Both an instructor at ESAF and the Director indicated that they have learned to embrace new program ideas through creativity, flexibility and resourcefulness.

One employer noted that their involvement in the program took a bit more of their time initially than hiring through traditional methods would have. However, they stressed that the outcomes were well worth their participation. The employer stated that his new staff were well-trained for the job. His company was able to support ESAF participants and the ACCESS organization to help a group of participants that would not have normally been included in their hiring pool.

## Benefits

The core benefits of the program include:

- **Participants**  
Participants benefit from further education, training for a specific occupation/trade, ES enhancement, funded vocational training and apprenticeship, employment, and increased confidence and sense of accomplishment. They become successful in the workplace and see themselves as a contributor to the community.
- **Community/Families**  
One employer said that the ESAF program enabled them to reach out to a part of the community that they traditionally do not see in their hiring pool. Participants noted that their training not only benefited their families, but also acted to inspire other members of their community to pursue training and education.

- **Employers**  
One employer reported that their participation in the program led to stronger team leadership and a positive change in the office dynamic. He also noted that participation in the ESAF program helped to support the organizations' commitment to inclusivity and diversity in the workplace.

## Contact

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## Resources

The key resources used by ESAF are:

- Test of Workplace ES (TOWES):  
<http://www.towes.com/en/home/home>
- Structure of Intellect (SOI) assessment and materials:  
<http://www.soisystems.com/>
- Skill Plan Resources: <http://www.skillplan.ca/>
- Appropriate Career Planning and ES assessments and tools
  - ◆ ITA Essential Skills  
<http://www.ita.essentialskillsgroup.com/>
  - ◆ Career Cruising: <http://public.careercruising.com/ca/en>
  - ◆ Holland's Self Directed Search:  
<http://www.ita.essentialskillsgroup.com/>
- ES of Numeracy "Get Math" Volume 1 and 2 :  
<http://access-essentialskills.com/programs/>
- Memorandum of Understanding with Employer Partners
- Sample Math Test : ESAF Machinist pre-technical trades program