

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

Case Study:

**New Brunswick Aboriginal Workplace
Essential Skills Project
(NBAWES)**



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.**

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

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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;
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Overview

The New Brunswick Aboriginal Workplace Essential Skills program (NBAWES) was a pilot project run by the Joint Economic Development Initiative (JEDI) with funding from the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) in 2010-2011 to meet the needs of Mi'kmaq and Maliseet First Nation learners. The focus of the program was to help unemployed or underemployed adult learners increase literacy levels from a level 2 to a level 3 and to prepare them for additional training, post-secondary education, or employment. Along with Essential Skills (ES) training, the program also included a work placement. In the pilot, there were 30 participants accepted and, of those, 20 students successfully completed the program.

The pilot was delivered in 34 week sessions at two delivery sites: Miramichi and Fredericton. The curriculum for the pilot was based on the Government of New Brunswick's Workplace Essential Skills (WES) courses; however, the courses were modified to meet the needs of First Nations learners. The curriculum was adapted to reflect the local cultural practices, histories, and traditions of the Mi'kmaq and Maliseet communities. As part of the adaptation process, a committee of Elders was invited to learn about NBAWES and offer their advice and guidance in its development. Once the pilot was underway, they were also invited to participate in the classroom as guest speakers and instructors for portions of the program.

The NBAWES project was overseen by a Steering Committee with representatives of the First Nations communities, JEDI, educational institutes, employers, and staff of the Government of New Brunswick's Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour and the federal department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. These stakeholder groups were also represented on an Evaluation Committee that reported the project's progress.

Upon completion of the first pilot project, the NBAWES curriculum was adapted and used by another project, the New Brunswick Aboriginal Information and Communications Technology Project (NBAICT). The NBAWES curriculum was modified and shortened to serve as the front end course for the 'Orientation to ICT Careers' portion of the NBAICT curriculum. The NBAICT model also included a work placement with employers in the region, but focused on work in ICT in the areas of 3G Smartphone Repair, Network/Desktop Support and Mobile Application Development. The adapted NBAWES curriculum in the NBAICT

model was evaluated by New Brunswick Community College (NBCC) and credits that can be applied toward certification in the ICT sector have been awarded for the modules.

This case study focuses primarily on the NBAWES project, but also offers insights gained from the pilot of the NBAICT project as well. JEDI continues to adapt, strengthen, and broaden the NBAWES curriculum for future training programs to support career development for First Nations people in the mining, energy, ICT and trades sectors.

Essential Skills Focus

The NBAWES and NBAICT projects have content that engages [all nine ES](#). The Government of New Brunswick's WES curriculum likewise addresses all nine ES and was a key foundation to the development of the NBAWES curriculum. The NBAWES curriculum includes more self-reflection and self-discovery activities, draws upon participants' own life experiences, and incorporated First Nations cultural traditions and teachings. The program is designed to increase participants' ES from a level 2 to level 3.

The 34-week NBAWES program includes ES training, life skills training and cultural awareness. The NBAICT program continued to combine these three elements but was condensed into a 12-week program. The NBAICT Program focuses on ES training at the beginning of the course and then bridges into the content of the 'Orientation to ICT' course. The approach taken in the NBAICT program allows students to gain a foundation in ES at the beginning and, as their confidence as learners grows, they are well positioned to undertake the technology training found in the orientation course. The developers of the NBAICT program found that this approach to ES training worked well for this group.

The ES in both curricula were taught through short lectures, group discussions, personal discovery, class work, group work and experiential learning that made connections between the ES content and learners' life and cultural activities. For example, ES are integrated into cultural-based activities such as making of a dreamcatcher. Students are taken out to the forest to pick red willow for the dreamcatcher. Cultural teachings are shared during the field trip. Upon returning to class, students are taught how to make a dreamcatcher and, at the same time, the ES of numeracy (i.e., geometry) is connected to the activity as the instructor talks about putting the willow into a circle and the other shapes (e.g., triangles, pentagons, octagons, etc.) that the sinew is making in

the centre web of the dreamcatcher.

The integration of ES in both curricula called on the instructors to make use of 'teachable moments' to help learners grasp links between cultural learning and the development of the ES in their everyday life. The more an instructor could facilitate these connections, the more confidence participants had in developing their ES.

“Our role [as instructors] is to help learners to have remarkable, unforgettable experiences that will help them identify with, and perhaps overcome the fear of developing ES and, as an instructor, to do this means that you have taught the essence of the program,”

Eugene Rolfe, NBAWES instructor

Objectives

The NBAWES program has two main objectives:

- Increase the literacy and ES of Aboriginal adult learners in the Maliseet and Mi'kmaq communities by adapting and developing literacy and ES tools specifically tailored to meet their needs;
- Improve retention and successful completion of literacy and ES training among Aboriginal adult learners.

The objectives were derived from the need to find new ways to engage First Nations learners in ES training and to help them move toward further education or employment. The program objectives were supported by the Steering Committee. The NBAWES project had a clear four-phase project plan that was led by an experienced Project Manager and a team of experienced educators (most of whom are First Nations people with either Bachelor or Master's degrees in Education and who are from the local communities). The project had a strategic communication plan, a third party evaluation process, and a commitment to teach the participants in a learner-centred approach.

Promising Practice (Keys to Success)

Methodology/Approach

The crux of the methodology and approach to NBAWES is to fully infuse ES training into a First Nations learning environment. As such, the program is guided by nine learner-centred principles:

- Participants are treated with respect.
- Participants' prior experience is valued and honoured.
- Participants are actively involved in learning.
- Participants are goal-oriented.
- Participants seek relevance to real life.
- Participants seek practical applications of content.
- Participants are provided a supportive and safe environment.
- Participants' experimentation and creativity are encouraged.
- Participants should have feedback mechanisms in place.

The curriculum and program was developed to reflect local First Nations cultural traditions, history, life experiences and context in the content and teaching philosophy. This was achieved by working with curriculum designers who had experience working in First Nations contexts, through the support and contributions of Elders, and by having trainers, all but one, who were First Nations people from the region.

Instruction and the learning environment was First Nations-centred, with consistent application of culturally-based learning processes. For example, students in the classroom participated in talking circles throughout the training to provide a way for them to discuss challenges, support one another, and identify solutions. The Instructors found that the circles and other First Nations approaches to learning really made a difference in the morale of the students and positively impacted their motivation levels.

Structure of the Program

The NBAWES pilot was structured to have two delivery sites based on locations that suited the First Nations groups for which the training was designed to address. For the Mi'kmaq student group, classes took place at the New Brunswick Community College in Miramichi. For the Maliseet student group, classes were delivered at St. Thomas University in Fredericton. The program was intentionally housed in post-secondary settings to provide students with an experience at these institutions. The Program Developers thought that this would benefit students who continued on to post-secondary, other training, or employment, they felt that the experience of being immersed in a formal setting would provide an opportunity that most of these students would not have had, help them become more familiar with this kind of learning environment and, eventually, increase their comfort level with it. Being a student on campus also gave them access to

other services, such as Wi-Fi, a student card, a student bus pass, and to the campus gym. The participants also had the opportunity to audit courses in other programs. The result of hosting the program at these institutions was quite positive. Participants took pride in being students at these institutions; some bought clothing with the school's logo to wear.

To maintain this sense of accomplishment and motivation for the students, Project Staff hosted celebrations of learning, networking events, and recognized student success on campus and in the communities. At each institution, students were supported in their learning by two instructors and a student support coach.

The students were recruited from the local communities. To be admitted to the program, they needed to fill out application forms, complete literacy assessments, and meet the criteria for the program. The provincial WES officers assisted with completing the literacy assessments. The project was marketed to potential candidates through a variety of means, including word of mouth, posters, pamphlets, presentations and the NBAWES website.

Content of the Program

The curriculum included 21 courses, with an addition of five optional courses for a total of 26. The program began with the course 'Learning and Life' which includes units on exploring First Nations culture, traditions and history. Other courses ranged from ES specific topics ('World of Words', 'Working Math', 'Reading Text') to courses on 'Personal Wellness' and 'Business Manners and Etiquette.' The full curriculum is available on COPIAN's website at: <http://library.copian.ca/learning/browse/series?name=NBAWES+Curriculum>. The content was designed to engage learners through reflective learning activities and by connecting the learning to their sense of self, engaging both their emotion and spirit.

In as far as possible, content for lessons integrated information from the local community. A powerful example of this was including copies of the Peace and Friendship Treaties signed by the ancestors of course participants as Reading Text materials in the course.

Delivery of the Program

The program was delivered in each site by instructors who were experienced in adult learning principles and, in all but one case, also had experience teach First Nations people from these regions. As the instructor and student had similar backgrounds,

there was a sense of connection that was built upon throughout the course.

Participant numbers were capped at 15 to better support a learner-focused approach. The curriculum provided the overall direction and guidance to the instructors; however the success of the training relied on the strength of the instructors to be in-tune with learners' needs, adapt materials 'on the fly' and capitalize on teachable moments as they arose. Having a smaller class and time to get to know the interests and life stories of students was important to making the training successful. Where there were modules that referred to experiential learning opportunities, the instructors were responsible for developing and arranging the activity. This is where the support of the Employment & Training officers from the communities and JEDI staff helped the instructors by sourcing cultural experts, Elders and other guest speakers.

“The curriculum was profoundly important in setting the vision, and provoking all of us to think: What does it mean to engage the First Nations learner in a meaningful way?”

Everyone– the instructors, curriculum developers the PSE institutions – was motivated to ask themselves and try to answer the questions: How is it different and how does it have to be different?”

Eugene Rolfe, Project Coordinator, JEDI, and past NBAWES instructor

Outcomes of the Program

The outcomes of the NBAWES pilot project include:

- Twenty out of 30 Maliseet and Mi'kmaq adult learners raised their literacy and ES levels from level 2 to level 3. Of those 20 that graduated from the program, 18 had reported they found either part-time or full-time employment or had plans to continue with other post- secondary education. Their high graduation rate meant that the pilot exceeded the program's objectives of increasing Maliseet and Mi'kmaq adult learner access to and retention in literacy and ES training and increasing their employability;
- There has been an increased demand for the training post-pilot. The program has received over 120 applications. This

demonstrated that: a) a program like this is needed; and, b) the program is valued by the participants, their families, and the broader community;

- The program has wide applicability and transferability to other training programs and to specific sectors (e.g., the NBAICT project);
- The province saw the need to support Aboriginal learners in their WES program and have since partnered with JEDI to assist in making connections between the community members and the WES officers across the regions. There is some training being delivered in the communities now and the government has hired a person to be a liaison to promote ES training in the communities. The way that WES is delivered for Aboriginal learners has been influenced by the NBAWES curriculum and approach.

Transferability

The NBAWES program curriculum has been successfully adapted for the NBAICT program. JEDI continues to integrate the approach with further programming, including their mining, energy and trades training.

Some ideas on how to support the transferability of the training to other regions include:

- Make the cultural content relevant to the local community where the training takes place and/or specific to the learners in the course;
- Consult with local Elders for guidance in the development of the training;
- Ensure that partnerships are established and stakeholders from the communities, educators, employers and provincial and federal governments who can support and guide the initiative are involved;
- Describe the project clearly to these partners and maintain their buy-in and engagement in the project through regular contact;
- Understand the labour market and training needs where the training takes place;
- Focus on hiring qualified adult educators of local Aboriginal descent when possible to support strengthening the instructor – student relationship and building student engagement in the training;
- Provide resources to support instructors in incorporating a

variety of strategies in the delivery of ES training to Aboriginal adults. NBAWES has developed a “Making the Most of NBAWES” instructors training package, a Facilitator’s Manual and a Resource Kit;

- Have a communication plan to market the program to participants from the local communities and to employers who sponsor the work placements. The communication plan should outline how the program will support student retention and employer continued commitment;
- Make extensive use of cultural practices and events to help connect the training to the students’ culture; and
- If you have multiple training sites, bring the classes together at various times during the course. NBAWES found that this helps to keep the participants motivated in their learning and can provide opportunities for networking, if employers attend, with a wider group of people to support career planning after the training is complete.

Lessons Learned/Challenges

Some of the lessons learned from the NBAWES pilot are:

- Give yourself time to plan. Create reasonable timelines and etch out the key deliverables for each phase of the work plan. Planning helped the staff keep on track and provided direction to everyone involved in the development and delivery of the project;
- Have a human resource strategy and policies so that everyone is clear about the expectations of the project and their roles and responsibilities;
- A blended ES and technical training model works well. Initially, in the NBAICT project had six weeks of the ES training (the NBAWES shortened program) followed by six weeks of technical training. They found that the transition from ES to technical skills training was difficult for learners. Instead, they now use a blended model with two weeks at the beginning of the course focussed on ES training followed by a slow transition with less ES training and gradually more ICT technical skills training introduced during weeks three to nine. Weeks 10-12 are solidly focused on ICT technical training. NBAICT also maintained the ES instructor throughout the program, having them teach ES during first six weeks and then transitioning into the role of an ES coach for the remainder of the program to assist students and maintain their progress.

Benefits

The project found, through evaluation, that:

- **Participants:**
 - * Raised their literacy and ES levels, thus enabling them to seek further education and/or secure employment;
 - * Were better equipped to support their families and community in activities such as helping children with homework or working on documents for the community (e.g., project proposals);
 - * Had an increased sense of pride, saw themselves as learners and wanted to set career goals;
 - * Reconnected with who they are. One participant commented that ‘it helped fill a hole in my life’; and,
 - * Had a sense of community in the classroom that helped them support one another.

“It’s been a really very positive experience, it really has. I haven’t had a network of being in the Aboriginal community for a long, long time. So [through] this course and through meeting people that are like me, I feel like they are my family, and feel like they care about me, and I’m doing positive things...”

Corinna Merasty-Gallant, Participant from the NBAICT project, now taking the Mobile Application Development program

- **JEDI:**
 - * Has the expertise and capacity to successfully deliver ES training to First Nations peoples;
 - * Has curriculum that can be utilized in future projects; and,
 - * Has the opportunity to create more partnerships provincially and nationally with their expertise.
- **Maliseet and Mi’kmaq communities:**
 - * Have an increased capacity among their members to enter into further post-secondary training and employment in a range of sectors;
 - * Have members who have a stronger understanding

and connection to their culture; and,

- * Have members with increased self-esteem, motivation and the ability to achieve other things in their life that required learning, such as getting a driver’s license.
- **Post-secondary Institutions:**
 - * Have gained an awareness of what is needed to bridge learning to First Nations peoples;
 - * Have introduced their organizations to new learners; and,
 - * Raised their profile among the communities that took part in these projects.
 - **Employers:**
 - * Have benefited from having skilled workers in their businesses; and,
 - * Have raised awareness about their businesses in the community.
 - **The Government of New Brunswick:**
 - * Has gained insight into the ways its WES program could be adapted to better reach, engage, and retain Aboriginal learners; and,
 - * Has stronger connections with First Nations communities.

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Resources

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