



Essentially Ready

A Case Study of Conestoga College's National Framework on Essential Skills Project

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Summary

Literacy research has shown that post-secondary students often do not have the Essential Skills (ES) necessary to be successful in school and work. The National Framework Project provided Conestoga College with an opportunity to provide ES upskilling to post-secondary students to equip them with skills for workplace success. Students in three programs, selected for their close relationship to the labour market, participated in self-directed upskilling, customized to students' programs and career goals. A total of 350 participants were invited to participate in the project with 26 becoming early adopters of the program. Overall, the results of the program were very positive. All 6 of the participants that took part in the entire program experienced skill gain in at least two of the three skills of document use, reading text and numeracy. When means were examined, skill gain was seen across all participants in all three Essential Skills from pre-test to post-test. Given that adult learners need to be in a state of readiness to learn, strategies that make ES relevant to each learner's skills should be examined. Future research and efforts to upskill post-secondary students should consider ways to integrate ES upskilling into the existing curriculum.

Business Case

Conestoga College has participated in many Essential Skills projects over the last five years. Funded both federally and provincially these projects have worked with various stakeholders, such as employers, workers, and community organizations. We continue to seek out opportunities to use the knowledge and expertise that has been developed in the area of Essential Skills. To assist in this pursuit, regular analysis of the local economy and community business needs are conducted to recognize issues related to Essential Skills and attempt to provide innovative solutions to meet these needs.

The business case for this project was built on research conducted by T. Scott Murray (2011), which concluded that between 15% and 32% of students admitted to Canadian colleges have ES at Level 1 and 2. Students at these levels are considered “high risk” for negative outcomes such as attrition and lower grades. An increase in demand in the Canadian workplace to meet higher productivity goals necessitates more highly skilled workers. The factors involved in this increased demand include: globalization, a post-recession world and an overall low skilled Canadian workforce.

Based on labour market research, the Health and Business sectors demonstrated the greatest demand (Canadian Nurses Association, 2009; Human Resources and Social Development Canada, 2007). Thus, we approached faculty where students had the most to gain. One area was the Personal Support Worker (PSW) program, which leads directly to employment. The other two programs selected, the Career Development Practitioner (CDP) program and the Human Resources (HR) Management program, are post graduate programs that are one year in length, and are also expected to lead directly to employment. All of these programs were selected because these students would be close to the labour market and using ES as the measurement of workplace readiness will be relevant to them as they plan to enter the workforce.

Partnerships

Through previously nurtured relationships built through participation in other projects, we engaged the Guelph Chamber of Commerce whose president strongly supports the use of and the work in Essential Skills. We also requested the support of the Workforce Planning Board of Waterloo-Wellington-Dufferin. Both of these partners have strong links to business needs and are interested in supporting both the business community and the workers that live in our community. Both partners provided letters of support,

which state their agreement with the value of the project. These letters of support were collected and submitted as part of our application package for participation in the framework project.

Internally within Conestoga College, we developed partnerships and relationships with individuals who championed the project in their respective departments and assisted us in accessing participants for the framework project. John Richards, Chair of Certificate Programs and Continuing Education in the School of Health and Life Sciences and Community Services, assisted us with gaining access to the PSW students by introducing us to faculty members who allowed us to give a presentation to students inviting them to participate in the project. Lynn Bard, a faculty member in the HR Management program, and Rob Straby, the coordinator of the CDP program, provided similar functions for their respective programs.

Awareness and Promotion

Our awareness and promotion took place in a variety of ways. Emails were sent to individuals telling them about the project. One-on-one and small group meetings were held to gain support from internal college partners. When advertising and promoting the project to students, presentations were held in classes.

Initially, a broad email was sent out by the Dean of the School of Career and Academic Access to college administrators to make them aware of the project. The ES Practitioner followed this up by making appointments to inform Program Coordinators and Faculty about the benefits of the project and to secure their support.

In some cases we contacted faculty that we had past relationships with first, in order to get their opinion of the usefulness of the project and secure their participation before we contacted program coordinators or chairs. The champions that arose through this project, as named above, have been people who recognized the usefulness of the project and ES overall as well as contacts that have had experience in Essential Skills through past project participation.

The ES Practitioner prepared an info sheet for the project but we did not create brochures as the marketing has been targeted to specific programs. We did, however, create two PowerPoint presentations: one presentation was for a quick marketing and recruitment session that was delivered in the classroom and the second presentation was developed to assist participating students in understanding the project once they

had signed up to participate. In total, 350 students were invited to participate in the project through presentations given in various classes.

Approval from the college ethics board was also required for this project. Project details, including materials and procedures, were shared with the members of the ethics board who reviewed them to ensure that participants would be treated in a fair and equitable manner. The project was found to be ethical and approval was obtained.

Essential Skills Interventions

Adult Education Principles

In the past, the typical post-secondary student was a young adult in their late teens entering into their studies directly from high school. This is increasingly not the case: approximately 60% of the students who confirmed admission to an Ontario public college in 2012 did not enter college directly from high school (Ontario College Application Service, 2012). This speaks to the fact that there is no “typical” college student; students come from diverse backgrounds, with personal histories that inform the way they learn.

This knowledge informed the adult education principles we adopted when implementing the framework project. Based on the *Principles of Adult Education* by Malcolm Knowles, and on our Essential Skills Practitioner’s knowledge of Essential Skills methodology, we adopted a learner-centered approach. The practitioner worked with each learner to develop individualized learning plans, allowing each learner to be self-directed in his/her upskilling journey. Training was offered on a one-to-one basis at the learners’ convenience, with resources selected that were tailored to learner’s programs of study and career goals. Customized learning plans were also developed online, using PLATO, for students who were interested in online learning.

Drawing from Knowles’ work, recognizing that learners need to be in a state of readiness to learn, the timing of this project was not ideal. Anecdotally, students reported that they were too busy with their current workload to make time for upskilling. Starting this program in September, when school is just beginning, would have resulted in improved participant engagement.

Professional Practitioner Skills

Lisa Bauman was the Essential Skills practitioner on the project. Lisa drew on knowledge gained through her undergraduate degree as well as her schooling and training to become a career development practitioner, along with her work experience to guide her through her work. All of these factors worked to inform the approach Lisa adopted as the practitioner on the framework project.

Through completion of Essential Skills courses and training offered by Douglas College working closely with learning experts such as Michael Hardt, as well as work experience with Essential Skills projects, Lisa has developed a great deal of competency in ES. Lisa's content knowledge, combined with her adaptability, her strong commitment to the project, as well as her passion and enthusiasm all combined to equip her with the skills she needed to be successful in this project.

Combining her ES knowledge with the labour market information she found on the careers students were interested, Lisa made the case for the framework project with staff and faculty at Conestoga College who had little exposure to Essential Skills. These efforts assist us in gaining access to students across various programs. Lisa drew on her skills and the project mandates to create job profiles that matched with students' career goals. She used her skills in social media to develop a LinkedIn group for the participants, providing them with a space and opportunity to communicate and share information.

Where Lisa's skills were most beneficial and applied was in the development of individualized learning plans. She was flexible and adaptable to meet each student's needs, whether this was around places and times to meet, or tailoring their upskilling curriculum to their programs and career goals. Lisa's excitement and commitment to the project were clear in her ability to engage students throughout the course of the intervention.

Types of Interventions

We named the program "Essentially Ready". We felt this name was easier to remember, and was more relatable for students. There were two main goals for the project: 1) Assist students/participants in moving from Level 2 to Level 3 in document use; 2) Create awareness of workplace expectations for students as they enter the workforce.

Every effort was made to adhere to the outlined project framework as closely as possible. We did this in order to maintain the integrity of the research being conducted, and data being collected across all sites. Our experience with participating in and conducting research gave us a clear understanding of the importance of adhering to the project framework in order to allow for comparisons to be made across sites, and to increase the generalizability of the findings.

From the beginning, we made the decision to take an individualized, learner-customized approach, where students would work with the Essential Skills practitioner to develop a customized learning plan based on their program of study and their career goal. Participants were to complete their upskilling both in one-on-one personalized sessions with an Essential Skills practitioner, and independently. We adopted this approach to allow for differences in students' individual learning styles and cultural backgrounds. We felt this customized approach would be most effective in garnering participant engagement in the program.

Participants were tested using the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES), both pre and post. Any students who presented with English as a Second Language (ESL) were to be assessed using the Versant Oral Fluency Test. However, we did not have any students who fulfilled this category.

After completing the TOWES pre-test, each participant met with Lisa one-on-one to discuss their test results and to work on their individualized learning plan (see Appendix A). Students left this meeting knowledgeable of their skills, and armed with upskilling material Lisa gathered for them based on their program of study and career goals. This included material from the HRSDC websites, SkillPlan, Measure Up, and most commonly, Workplace Education Manitoba. Occasionally, students were also set-up to access online ES curriculum/content through PLATO web, an online learning platform that allows a teacher to customize curriculum and assignments for each learner. We made the decision to use PLATO web because it is a program we frequently use in other Essential Skills projects and because Lisa liked the way curriculum, assignments and assessments could be customized for each learner and monitored by her to see how students were progressing.

Students were made aware of, and encouraged to take advantage of one-on-one, personalized upskilling provided by Lisa at their convenience. On average, Lisa spent six hours with each student. During that time, Lisa would discuss students' career goals, go through the materials she was assigning to them, assist them with difficulties they were having in their classes, and any troubles they were having with any of the ES

assignments they were working on. The amount of time students spent independently upskilling likely varied from student to student, but is unknown as data was not collected.

A total of 350 students were invited to participate in the project. Of this number, 49 students wrote the TOWES pre-test. See Figure 1 for the distribution of TOWES document use scores on the pre-test.

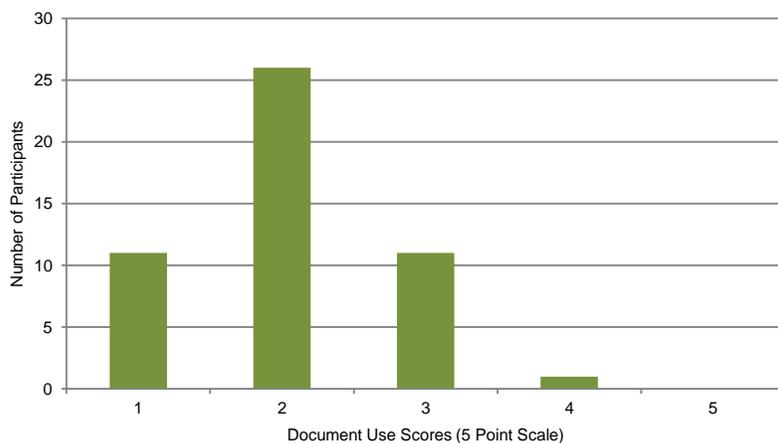


Figure 1 - Distribution of TOWES document use pre-test scores ($N = 49$).

Twenty-six were eligible for the project under the established protocols, and became “early adopters”. Lisa was also able to get permission from ACCC for one student who scored at Level 1 on document use to participate in the project; this exception was made because the student scored a Level 2 on reading, which indicated that she would likely be able to handle the upskilling materials that would be assigned. As the project progressed, only 12 participants persisted with upskilling. In the end, only six participants wrote the TOWES post-test at the end of the intervention.

Statistical analyses were conducted and revealed that there was a significant increase in participants’ document use scores from pre-test to post-test. This seems to indicate that the intervention had an impact, and was successful in assisting participants in improving their document use scores. As can be seen from Figure 2, participants also saw skill gain in numeracy and reading text as well, but the gains were not as large. Notably, each of six participants who completed the post-test experienced skills gains in at least two of the three Essential Skills tested, and overall, when the score means were examined, there was skill gain in all three Essential Skills.

Overall, we could cautiously say that the Conestoga College framework intervention project was successful in assisting participants in increasing their gains in reading,

document use and numeracy. However, given the small sample size of six participants, we cannot say with confidence that similar results would be seen if this project was implemented in other settings.

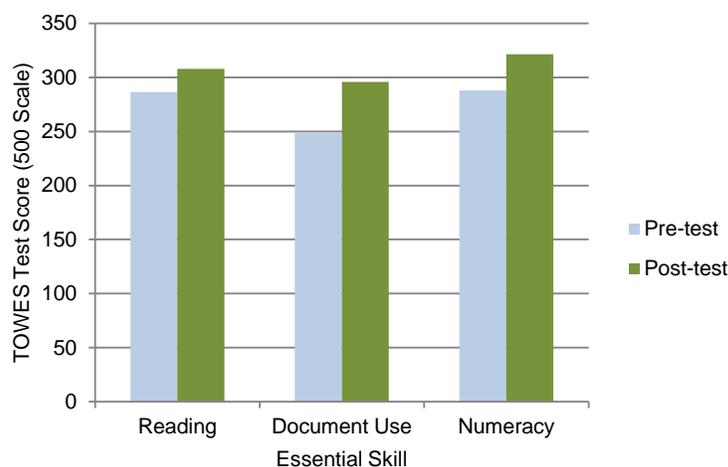


Figure 2 - TOWES pre-test and post-test results for reading, document use and numeracy ($N = 6$).

We made every effort to provide students with access to one-on-one, personalized upskilling. Lisa held office hours every week on most days, for most of the day. For the Personal Support Worker (PSW) students, Lisa drove to the offsite location where students were doing practice study and held office hours there. What we found was that our participants preferred to work independently in a self-directed manner. This forced us to alter our upskilling delivery plan. In addition to being available for one-on-one in-person upskilling, Lisa increased her scope by staying in touch with students in order to keep them engaged. She regularly emailed students to provide support, checked on progress, and sent them additional upskilling resources. Lisa maintained consistent communication with her students until the end of the intervention. All participants were offered and basically received the same intervention, which consisted of individualized, learner-centered upskilling tailored to their program and career goal, provided through paper-based and online exercises.

Transition Pathways to Employability

The transition pathway that best described our participants in the National Framework project was the “from intervention to employment” pathway. The three programs that we drew participants from PSW, post-grad HR, and CDP, were all one- year programs aimed at equipping students with practical skills for entry into the workplace. Descriptions of the programs can be found in Appendix B.

The expectation in all of these programs is that employment is the next step. We intentionally selected these programs because of the focus and close relationship to the job market; the assumption was made that students in these programs would all have work at the forefront of their minds. The programs that the participants come from are directly related to employment. All of these programs teach students skills that will be immediately applied in the workplace upon completion of their one year of study.

Upon completing the intervention, many students were in the process of completing work terms or practicums and would be beginning their employment search. With the intervention fresh in their minds, the participants would be in a position to immediately apply their ES training to their work. Additionally, students from the HR and CDP programs would be in a unique position to also integrate ES into their work in the career development and hiring field. As HR professionals, these students would be able to advocate for ES training for workers who were having trouble functioning in their positions due to inadequate skills. Career development practitioners would be able to assist clients in developing the skills they would require to be successful in their chosen careers.

Personal Reflection

We appreciated the opportunity to participate in the National Framework project. Our participation in the project can be summed up by two key words: patience and perseverance. In total, “Essentially Ready” lasted approximately four months. The one major change in delivery from planning to implementation was the low uptake of one-on-one, personalized upskilling with the ES practitioner. Instead, our participants chose to complete their upskilling independently, in their own time. While this was not what we had originally planned, we were able to quickly adapt to meet our participants’ needs without compromising the integrity of the framework project.

Another barrier to the project implementation was the number of unforeseen delays, such as the issues with the management of the entire framework project, coordination, length of time required for ethics approval, changes made to the project design, delays related to the TOWES Prime tool, and the like. While a September start date was planned, participant recruitment and testing did not occur until early in January 2012. We believe this late start played a large role in the lower than anticipated participation rates and student engagement.

Overall, we learned the importance a clear structure for communication and project management in large multi-site projects. There were many delays that we believe affected the success of this project that could have been mitigated with better communication, coordination and project management. These issues with the National Framework project greatly detracted from our participation experience.

We faced many challenges with engaging students in a post-secondary context. On a systems level, we discovered the importance of having decision-makers as allies. Faculty and staff would be interested in the project, but it was challenging to get them to follow through on their commitment to participate. This speaks to the need to integrate ES into post-secondary curricula. In the current Ontario publicly-funded college climate, where individuals are often at capacity for work, it is difficult to find resources to take on something that is seen as an extra. Integrating ES into post-secondary could result in more resources allotted to these efforts.

At the individual level, students were very busy with school and did not want to take on additional work, particularly if they believed that they had strong Essential Skills. Consistent with adult education principles, we found that students learned when they were ready. While we invested effort into motivating students, providing prizes, and talking about the labour market, it was only when students perceived that they needed to improve their Essential Skills that they committed. This readiness often showed up when they began struggling with schoolwork.

Conestoga's contribution to the framework project was unique because it was managed by two experienced researchers. Dr. Glen Gorman and Dr. Thanh-Thanh Tieu are both trained researchers with backgrounds in experimental psychology. Both project managers have had extensive experience managing research projects. Dr. Tieu managed an international Social Sciences and Humanities Council (SSHRC) funded research project, which saw the implementation of an intervention program across four sites. Given their experience in research and in managing research projects, the process of the National Framework project, and the required stages were familiar to Dr. Gorman and Dr. Tieu. Therefore, they were able to efficiently and effectively manage the project and all of the research and reporting requirements. Due to their familiarity with research, Dr. Gorman and Dr. Tieu were very careful about maintaining the integrity of the project, and following the structure of the project as laid out by the lead colleges and partners such as ACCC and Douglas College so that the results generated by Conestoga would be generalizable to the data collected at the other sites. Given Dr. Gorman and Dr. Tieu's experience, there were times when the unforeseen delays in the project were frustrating because the project managers were on top of the project and ready to move forward.

The National Framework project was an excellent learning experience. We were able to become active participants in a growing network of Essential Skills experts, increased our skills through training provided, and experience ES work being implemented across Canada. We also learned about engaging our own college community. We continue to implement the lessons that we learned in our Essential Skills work today.

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APPENDIX A

LEARNING PLAN

CLIENT INFO	ONLINE LOGIN INFORMATION	TOWES RESULTS
CLIENT NAME:	WEBSITE:	READING TEXT:
CONTACT INFO:	USERNAME:	DOCUMENT USE:
PROGRAM:	PASSWORD:	NUMERACY:

TOOLS/NEXT STEPS		
ESSENTIAL SKILLS TO WORK ON	<input type="checkbox"/> DOCUMENT USE <input type="checkbox"/> NUMERACY <input type="checkbox"/> READING TEXT	
MOTIVATION/COMMITMENT TO THE PROGRAM		
IMPROVING MY ESSENTIAL SKILL WILL ENABLE ME TO:	MOTIVATION SCALE 1 TO 10:	EXTRA OPPORTUNITIES FOR HELP ARE:
MY PLAN TO ACHIEVE THIS GOAL		

My Post TOWES Date will be: _____

Web Based Resources to Check Out

Essential Skills: http://www.rhdcc-hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/essential_skills/general/home.shtml

Ontario Skills Passport: <http://skills.edu.gov.on.ca/OSPWeb/jsp/en/login.jsp>

Measure Up!: <http://measureup.towes.com/english/index.asp>

*LISA BAUMAN - 519-748-5220 ext. 2510
Doon Campus, Main Building Room 2A137*

lbauman@conestogac.on.ca

Monday – 9:00 to 4:30pm

Tuesday – 9:00 to 4:30 pm

Wednesday- 9:00 to 4:30 pm

Friday's by Appointment

Cancellation Policy:

Should you need to cancel or reschedule your appointment, workshop or TOWES– please contact your Client Advisor. We ask whenever possible that you provide us with a 24 hour notice to cancel individual appointments and workshops.

APPENDIX B

Human Resources Management (Post-Graduate)

In an increasingly complex, working environment, the services of a competent human resources professional are increasingly valued. Thriving organizations employ these practitioners to manage their most important resource, the people who make things happen.

Graduate Opportunities

- Graduates are prepared for entry to mid-level management positions with human resources departments, community organizations, private practices, learning institutions, government departments and consulting firms.
- 88% of 2008-2009 graduates found employment within six months of graduation. Their average starting salary was \$35,008.

Personal Support Worker

Make a difference for people with supportive care needs. Choose a career as a Personal Support Worker.

This program will prepare you to provide supportive care to individuals and families in a variety of settings, such as long term care facilities and community home care. Students will be provided with the knowledge and skills to assist clients of all ages with the activities of daily living, including personal care, home management and nutrition and family responsibilities.

As with other Health Science programs, students are taught theory in a classroom setting and will be required to apply the theory to lab and clinical experiences in institutional and in home care settings.

Graduate Opportunities

- Personal Support Workers contribute to the quality of life of individuals by promoting their independence and dignity; social, emotional and physical needs; mobility; personal appearance; comfort and safety. Graduates understand the roles, responsibilities and limitations of the Personal Support Worker and work as a member of the health care team, communicating effectively, and observing and reporting changes in clients' conditions.

- 95% of 2008-2009 graduates found employment within six months of graduation.

Career Development Practitioner (Post-Graduate)

The field of career development is evolving and expanding today, enabling practitioners to work in a variety of roles. This program is designed for individuals who are or would like to work in roles such as career counselors, employment counselors, career information practitioners, career development practitioners or job developers.

Skills acquired in the program may offer career mobility to graduates who wish to serve a broader variety of client groups, attain more in-depth competencies in selected areas of specialization, or who may wish to assume more proactive management roles, strategies, and choices in their current professional setting.

The skills and knowledge taught in this program include:

- Individual counselling and group facilitation.
- Theoretical models of career development.
- Future trends analysis in relation to career development.
- The tools, techniques and processes of career counseling.
- Assessment in career counseling.
- Electronic tools and techniques.
- Working with diverse populations and equity issues, and Consulting skills for career development practitioners

Graduate Opportunities

- This program will appeal to individuals who are engaged or interested in some form of career development work in professional settings. These include: self-employment, working in community-based agencies, multicultural settings, schools, post-secondary and adult learning institutions, labour adjustment contexts, human resources departments and employment-related services programs in all branches of government.
- 100% of 2008-2009 graduates found employment within six months of graduation. The average starting salary was \$42,305.