Workforce Essential Skills

Putting literacy to work

Thanks to:

Contents

Introduction

This guide is a synthesis of the experiences of five workforce Essential Skills (ES) program partners from across Canada. With funding from the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES), and training and support from PTP Adult Learning and Employment Programs, the partners were identified in part because of the diversity of the communities and labour markets they work within and because of the diversity of the client groups they serve. The Workforce Essential Skills across Canada (WESCan) project had two objectives in working with these partners: to help them refine or implement workforce Essential Skills programming and to research their experiences to identify what program implementation involves and what contributes to effective programming. Along the way, we came to rely on each other's experience and wisdom and to share in each other's successes and challenges.

From such diversity sprang a common understanding of the elements that contribute to workforce ES programming, and a common commitment to offer strong, flexible programming to meet the needs of employment-bound adults. Those experiences are what inform the contents of this guide.

Workforce Essential Skills is a pre-employment adult education approach that extends beyond job search and résumé writing, to focus on helping participants develop the abilities they will need on the job. In many ways, what contributes to successful workforce Essential Skills programming is what makes any adult education program successful; strong instructors and supports for participants that extend beyond narrow educational needs are significant contributing factors to success. And yet there are some additional features that contribute in particular ways to workforce Essential Skills programming that are worth consideration. **This guide examines what workforce Essential Skills programming is, how it can be designed and who benefits from it.**

WESCan was a two-year research study to investigate workforce ES approaches and implementation processes. Project researchers and PTP staff provided initial intensive training and follow-up support to enable partners to implement workforce ES. WESCan partners documented their entire implementation processes through journals and online postings. Findings from the research informed the development of this guide, and furnished the quotes used throughout the guide. PTP staff and project researchers worked with five partners coast-to-coast.

- *WESCan partners implemented or refined workforce ES programming*
- *Partners reflected on the implementation process and documented findings*

What is workforce Essential Skills?

Goals of workforce ES

> To make programming more relevant for employment-bound participants

> To better prepare participants going directly to employment

Workforce Essential Skills is programming geared to improving adults' skills on the road to employment. In programs for employment-bound adult participants, adult educators focus on the ways workers use skills on the job. Participants see the relevance in what they encounter in the program because the content is drawn from real workplace tasks. Given its clear focus, workforce ES can also be appropriate for individuals who are already employed and who wish to enhance the skills they need on the job.

Workforce Essential Skills is built on the notion that programming should be directly connected to participants' goals, and that doing so results in more meaningful programs and better learning gains. Workforce Essential Skills programming attempts to show connections between what is learned in the program and what is practiced outside the program. It limits the scope of programming but increases the depth of knowledge and skills within that defined scope.

Workforce Essential Skills uses the Essential Skills Profiles[1] as its foundation to understand job demands. When programs are built on the Essential Skills, educators and participants can make direct connections between program content and how workers use their skills on the job. While reading text, document use, numeracy and writing do constitute a major focus of adult education programming, the Essential Skills Profiles help practitioners see how those skills are used within tasks, often in an integrated way. The Profiles also reveal how other skills and abilities, such as problem solving and working with others, contribute to success on the job. These skills play just as important a role in workers' abilities to meet their job demands; the Profiles provide a summary of workplace skill demands that adult educators can draw from.

Features of workforce ES:

- Places emphasis on skills and tasks, such as document use, problem solving and working with others, that have a high priority in workplaces
- Focuses on the skills participants will use at work
- Provides opportunities to learn and practice within realistic contexts
- Draws connections between work and other life applications
- Makes use of authentic workplace materials

The learning that takes place in workforce Essential Skills programs is not limited to workplace applications. Adults tend to learn more quickly and retain their skills better when they learn content that is meaningful and relevant to their lives. The skills taught within an employment context have the same relevance outside of work as well. Consider how often we read schedules, write emails and fill in forms, not only at work, but also at home and in community settings. Workforce Essential Skills tasks can be described for their workplace relevance as well as their relevance to community and family contexts.

[1] For more information on Human Resource and Skills Development Canada's Essential Skills Research Project, or to view the Essential Skills Profiles, go to **http://www10.hrsdc.gc.ca/es/english/ES_Profiles.aspx**

"The workforce ES program allows students to gain self-esteem, self-understanding and basic workplace skills."

"In practice, a workforce Essential Skills program looks very different from a traditional adult literacy program. The aim is not to progress the participant through grade levels towards a grade 12 equivalency exam, but rather to focus on work-specific skills and tasks. Learners are

encouraged to identify the similarities of tasks and documents regardless of the job specifics so they understand the purpose of their instruction."

"We need to avoid confusing skills for FINDING work and skills FOR work."

In this guide, workforce Essential Skills is used to refer to pre-employment skills upgrading, to distinguish it from workplace Essential Skills which usually refers to skills upgrading that occurs in conjunction with an employer, often at a workplace.

Who offers workforce ES?

Workforce ES programming can be offered by a variety of education and service providers. Smaller providers will notice increased demands on their time given the need to liaise with other community service providers and employers wherever possible. It is also beneficial to identify specific staff members whose role will include some dedicated time for resource development and program planning. Nevertheless, providers of workforce ES may not be traditional adult literacy programs. They can also include:

- Employment service providers
- School board and college departments with ties to skills training and workplace training

- Temporary locations set up through labour adjustment initiatives

Under WESCan, workforce ES programming was offered at these locations:

- *First Nations reserve community learning site*
- *Community College upgrading department*
- *School board partnership, housed at one board's location*
- *Community-based literacy agency*
- *Skills development and employment services agency*

Practice and research in workforce ES

PTP's workforce ES materials:

> CAMERA, a series of standardized assessments

> *Signposts*, curriculum guidelines

> *workwrite*, a series of photocopiable workbooks

PTP, a large community-based adult education provider in Toronto, moved from offering upgrading primarily for those seeking access to post-secondary programs to workforce Essential Skills programming in the late 1990s. Since then, PTP has instituted a successful workforce ES program and developed many resources that support workforce ES instruction. While these tools have been enthusiastically received, during training sessions and discussions with providers across Canada, it has become evident that implementing workforce ES programming involves more than just using workforce ES materials. Throughout the guide, elements of PTP's approach to workforce Essential Skills are included to illustrate some of the best of their program practices.

The WESCan project involved two years of program research and development that focused on implementing workforce ES in diverse organizations serving the needs of distinct communities. A call for letters of interest was distributed nationally to identify partners. PTP worked closely with five providers over the course of a year to build community-based, locally relevant workforce ES programs.

The first research objective was to better understand what is involved in implementing workforce ES programming. The visual below summarizes the findings from the research about the key ingredients necessary for successful program implementation.

The second research objective was to explore what effective workforce ES programming looks like. The elements described on the following page were identified through the research.

Ingredients for program implementation

| desire to better serve participants' needs | + | dedicated investment to design, pilot and refine a program | + | easy-to-use tools and resources | + | opportunity to take community needs into account | + | support from experts and others interested in accomplishing similar goals |

Elements of workforce ES programming

Effective workforce ES programs use workplace-oriented learning materials and include facilitated sessions. Some programs also provide holistic programming and opportunities to apply skills through work placements and/or project work; WESCan partners found that each element contributed positively to programs.

Workplace-oriented learning materials

At the most fundamental level, all workforce Essential Skills programs involve bringing the workplace into the program. This is accomplished by using learning materials and activities that reflect the kinds of tasks that workers need to carry out.

"[We] need to build embedded skills (general non-task specific i.e., punctuation, fractions, etc.) in meaningful ways. They are not specifically targeted so much as introduced as tasks require them."

Workforce ES programs strive to make the workforce context explicit enough that participants can connect what they're learning to what they will need to do on the job.

Facilitated sessions

In workforce ES programs, instructors have a role to play in guiding discussions. They can help participants reflect on past experience, learn from each other and start to recognize when they will need to use their newly acquired skills and knowledge at work – and the problems that can ensue if they don't.

"With discussions [participants] can see that the materials are challenging their thought processes and their beliefs about . . . how they relate to the workplace."

Opportunities to apply skills

Workforce ES programs often involve an applied component where participants exercise their developing Essential Skills as they manage real tasks in a supported setting. This might involve construction projects where participants build a picnic table for use on-site, or cooking opportunities where participants prepare meals for themselves and others.

"Through project-based learning and activities . . . learners will prepare for cross-sector entry-level employment, while enhancing their personal health, life skills and community involvement."

Holistic programming

Successful transitions to employment involve more than learning the reading, writing and math skills needed at work. Participants need an opportunity to develop soft skills, such as those required to work with others and they often need supports such as assistance with job search.

"Childcare, transportation, warm supportive learning environment, instructors that are compassionate, fair and hold learners accountable."

Work placements

Workforce ES involves making direct links to employers in the community. For some programs this involves arranging and coordinating off-site work placements for participants at some point during the program. This experience not only helps participants see the connections between what they have learned and the world of work, but it also helps participants recognize the value of such learning.

WESCan partners

The experiences and reflections of these five providers of workforce ES serve as the foundation for this guide. You will read more detailed descriptions of their programs in Stage 4: Implementation.

❶ Tseshaht First Nation
Port Alberni, British Columbia

Tseshaht is one of the 14 Nuu chah nulth Nations on Vancouver Island. In April 2009, Tseshaht introduced a new program, Social Education & Employment Development Services (SEEDS) to the community. The main goal of SEEDS is to help people help themselves through healing, education, employment and personal development. *"We want to create positive change for our community . . . people want meaningful employment and [they] place a high value on health, well-being and employment."* Tseshaht was interested in enhancing the education component of SEEDS by making the program content more relevant to community members.

❷ Parkland College
Yorkton, Saskatchewan

Parkland College is one of eight regional colleges in the province and was established in 1973. It offers programs at five campuses and is the only adult education provider in Yorkton. Traditional adult education programming is geared towards helping adults achieve the GED (high school equivalency diploma) and a secondary school diploma. Parkland was interested in establishing alternative program options for employment-bound participants, and *"To incorporate the Essential Skills into all of our training programs."*

❸ Literacy Link Niagara
Thorold, Ontario

Literacy Link Niagara is a regional network of 12 member adult education programs. The network offers assessment services, coordinates training of front-line staff and carries out research and development projects. Literacy Link Niagara was interested in identifying ways to address the needs of their community, given its lower than average literacy levels and the second highest per capita layoff rate in Ontario.

### ❹ The Saint John Learning Exchange
Saint John, New Brunswick

The Learning Exchange is an adult education centre that strives to help people achieve their goals of education and employment. It serves approximately 400 participants per year. They offer TIES 2 Work, a program that matches job seekers with potential employers and then offers a short-term program to prepare them to be candidates for employment. The Learning Exchange was interested in developing programming suited to lower level participants, *"Learners for whom our [current] programming is not working. These learners are not realistically GED-bound . . . their focus is to become employable."*

❺ FutureWorx Society
Truro, Nova Scotia

FutureWorx was established in April 1984 to address the program and service delivery needs of individuals experiencing difficulty accessing and maintaining meaningful employment. FutureWorx offers a program that includes personal development, academics and on-site work experiences. *"In essence the employment is a by-product . . . at the core of our work, is a desire and mission to assist the individual in realizing their potential and increasing their self-sufficiency."* FutureWorx was interested in using the Essential Skills to enhance the integration of its three program components in order to better meet participant needs.
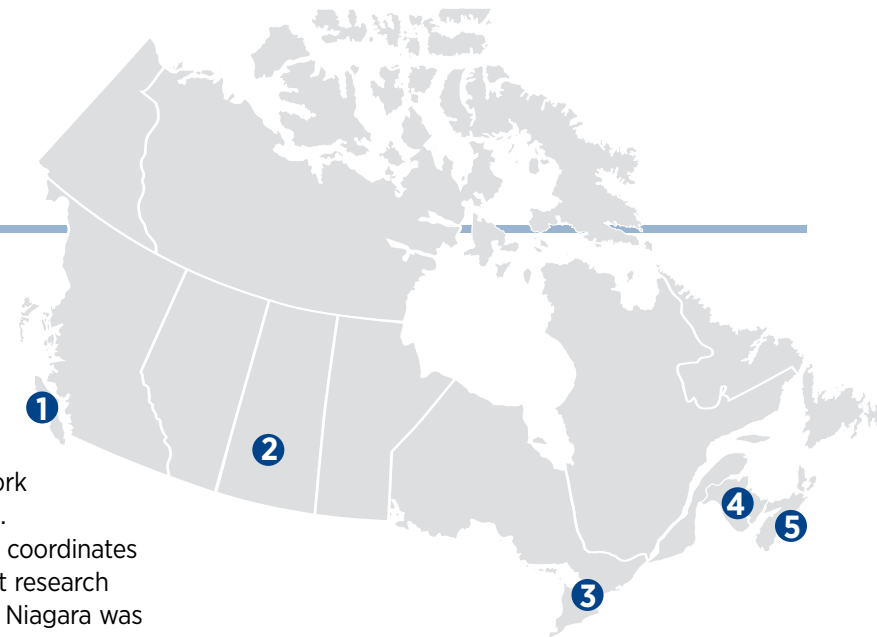
Implementation process

The five providers that built or refined workforce Essential Skills programming were as diverse as the programs they implemented. Despite their differences, the providers followed similar processes to implement workforce ES programming. The stages of implementation are illustrated in the spiral diagram.
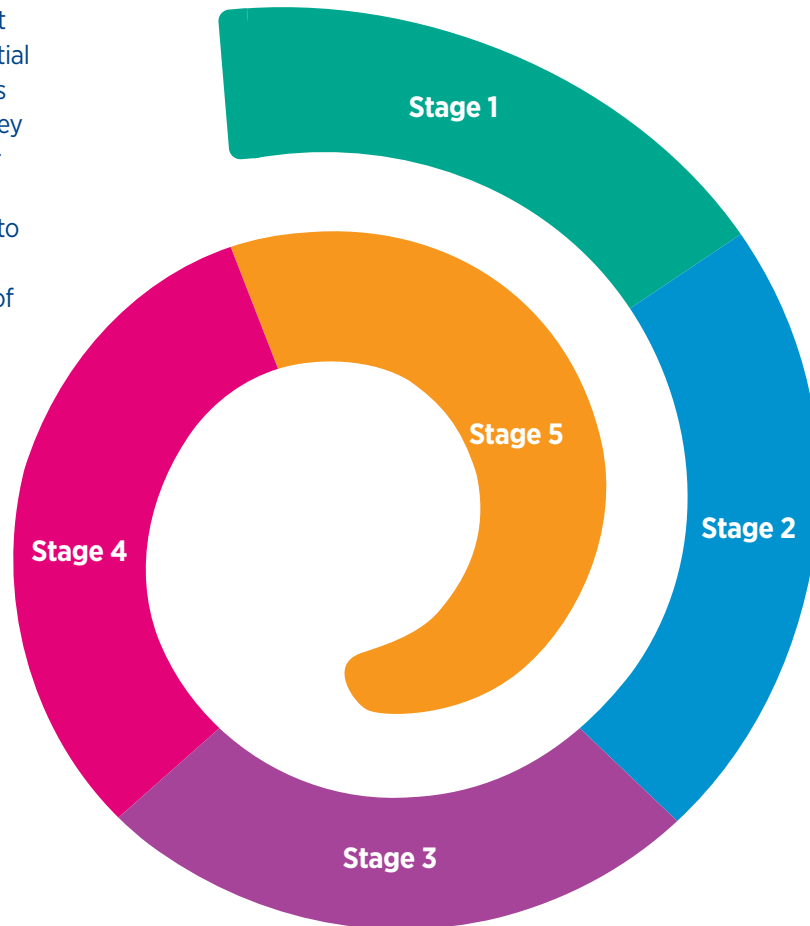
Stage 1: Needs identification

The process of implementation begins when providers identify the need for a different type of program. In some cases, there is a realization that programs being offered aren't serving their communities' needs. Through this realization, they identify a new target group who can benefit from workforce ES programming. In other cases, providers recognize that they can improve existing services.

Stage 2: Resource allocation

During this stage, providers identify the resources they need to begin program implementation. This involves identifying human and financial resources and funding sources to cover their needs. Human resources include program staff and others who develop instructional materials and training.

Stage 3: Program design

The program design stage has providers explore the elements of workforce Essential Skills programming, while considering local needs. This stage provides the opportunity to be creative and think about how a workforce ES program can reach the target audience(s), deliver meaningful content and link to other services and providers if desired. Decisions about intake procedures, program schedules, program content and delivery model are made at this stage after considering the needs identified and the resources available.

Stage 4: Implementation

The program implementation stage is where the ideas explored in stage 3 get off the ground. At this stage, attention shifts to ensuring the program's realization meets expectations.

Stage 5: Refinement

Once a program is up and running, this stage involves reflecting on what works and what is needed to refine the approach. Activities to refine programming don't need to wait until programming has come to an end; minor changes such as those to schedules and program content can occur along the way.

Stage 1: Needs identification

A workforce Essential Skills needs assessment process examines the needs of two client groups: those already served by existing programming and potential clients whose needs are not yet being served. In situations where program staff members are confident that program goals align with the needs of participants who attend regularly, there may still be a sense that some participants fall through the cracks, and that services other than those currently on offer would be of greater benefit to a wider client group.

Needs assessment should take into account the easily identified needs, such as those that participants articulate at program entry, as well as signs that may point to unidentified and/or unfulfilled needs. These signs might include unrealistic participant goals, lack of motivation and high dropout and absenteeism rates.

In assessing their participants' needs, most WESCan partners reached beyond the obvious participant responses and statistics to examine factors that could signal a disconnect between participants' needs and program offerings.

Examine current practice

Investigate participant goals

At program entry, start by asking participants what they hope to do once they have completed programming, and how programming can serve them in their next steps. In particular, identify whether participants' interests lie towards skills training, employment or academic goals. When participants identify academic goals, for example, probe to understand how this objective connects with their next steps and longer-term goals. Are they hoping to achieve academic outcomes in order to access employment? If so, then workforce Essential Skills programming might still be a good option to help target the abilities these individuals will need.

For many adults, the decision to return to a learning environment is synonymous with achieving an academic outcome. As a result, many participants will identify academic goals such as the attainment of a GED, secondary school diploma or entry into post-secondary programs because they are unfamiliar with other options, or believe no other options exist. Consider participants' stated goals of secondary school diplomas and GED in light of their academic background and literacy skills. Adults whose skills will enable them to achieve academic outcomes within a few months are often good candidates for academic programming. However, in cases where adults appear to need substantial interventions that are likely to extend over a period of several years, other kinds of programming, including workforce Essential Skills, may result in more success.

WESCan partners emphasized goal setting as a key factor that helped participants shape their program experiences. Having clear and realistic goals resulted in participants showing an increased sense of satisfaction and confidence with program outcomes. Goal setting was not an isolated activity; for many WESCan partners, it was a process revisited often to allow participants to reflect on and refine their goals.

"I don't think we can stress enough how effective and realistic goal setting is the essence of successful Essential Skills training."

"So many of our students have decided on academic and career paths that may not be realistic. They may view leaving the academic stream as a failure."

Review participant outcomes
There may be a difference between the goals participants identify when they enter programming, and what they do when they leave programming. If statistics are kept about participants' activities once they exit programming, review these to see whether skills training and employment comprise a significant proportion of participant outcomes. It can be particularly helpful to investigate whether participants who identified academic goals go on to achieve those goals within the time frame they set for themselves. In organizations where many participants complete the program or leave the program early and then access employment or skills training, this points to a need to offer workforce ES programming over academic programming.

Explore local labour market needs
Examine the needs of communities in addition to the needs of participants at this stage. Talk to local employers, regional training boards, associations and chambers of commerce to identify occupations and sectors where employment growth is expected. Consider the types of jobs participants are likely to enter. Use this information to determine whether there is a need to focus programming on specific occupations or sectors.

Engaging with employers during this stage has the added benefit of establishing relationships that could be developed into partnerships once program planning is underway. It also provides opportunities for organizations to educate employers about the benefits of workforce ES programming given Essential Skills demands at work.

WESCan partners found that it was necessary to work at getting employers to see the value of ES training. They identified challenges associated with employers' seeking certificates regardless of their relevance to the job.

Consider program duration and participant retention
A common refrain in adult education is that "adults vote with their feet". So, while participants may say they are interested in attending programming, a program with empty chairs speaks volumes. While absentee rates can have different causes, adults who perceive value in what they are doing usually make an attempt to attend programs more regularly and drop out with less frequency. Poor participant retention and attendance could be signs that current programming isn't meeting participants' needs. Bringing in authentic learning content that is directly related to participants' next steps is motivating. Participants then see a direct connection between what they are doing in the program and what they will do on the job.

Without exception, at the outset of the project, WESCan partners identified a mismatch between participants' stated goals and their willingness and motivation to attend programming.

At PTP, participants conduct their own occupational research in which they investigate local employment opportunities, explore options and set employment goals. Participants share their findings by delivering local labour market reports to other participants. This provides a mechanism for keeping everyone current on the latest labour market trends.

"We saw learners really spending many years in programming, but not making gains, getting frustrated, leaving, coming back."

Identify programming potential

To set up for success, there must be a match between program goals and the target group. Providers can begin by being clear about program goals, and then use these decisions to identify who is best served by the programming. In some cases the reverse works better; providers start by identifying the target group and their needs, then build the programming to address those needs.

"In retrospect, it may have been smart to test interested clients first and then build the curriculum around their levels."

Identify potential participants
A number of Canadian studies have shown that only a small percentage of adults with literacy needs ever attend literacy programming[2]. While reasons vary, one substantial contributing factor is that many adults do not see themselves as needing literacy upgrading. With workforce Essential Skills programming, there is an opportunity to change the way literacy upgrading is perceived. Adults may see their needs being more readily met by programming that is tied to employment outcomes and that draws its content from the Essential Skills requirements of work.

Two potential client groups can be drawn from laid-off workers and those currently in the workforce who perceive the need to brush up on some skills to increase their success on the job. These individuals may identify their goals as being able to perform better at a job they already have, to qualify for promotions or to access other kinds of work, perhaps with better pay or more job security. Workforce ES programs strive to meet adult participants where they currently are, and help them build the skills they need to be successful at work.

WESCan partners identified workforce Essential Skills programming as a model that is attractive to adults who don't want to return to a traditional school environment.

"All of the learners had worked previously; however, their work experiences had mostly been unsuccessful due to a variety of factors, but mostly related to soft skill challenges."

"[Workforce ES is] tailored to the learner, it's learner-focused, and it allows them to make transitions to employment when that's possible, in a way that meets the adult where they are at. No adult wants to go into an environment where they are treated like they were in grade 4. This approach allows them to be treated with respect, with dignity, in a way that celebrates the strengths that they have and the awareness and knowledge that they have."

2 Long, E. (2001). *Who wants to learn?* Toronto, ON: ABC CANADA Literacy Foundation. Retrieved March 16, 2011 from **abclifeliteracy.ca**

Establish program goals

When it comes to workforce ES, being clear about program goals means making decisions about what the program will do for participants. Will the program prepare participants for work? Will it prepare them for job search? Will it help participants to manage in a general way in any workplace, or within a specific industry or occupation? These may seem like minor variations, but each intended outcome should lead to a significantly different program design.

Use your program goal to communicate resource needs to funders. A clear goal can also help administrators communicate with staff at all levels of the organization so everyone understands what the program intends to achieve. Adult educators will also use this clear program goal to begin their planning process. Finally, an understandable program goal helps generate interest amongst potential participants by allowing for unambiguous communication about what the program is, who it is designed for, and what the benefits will be for participants.

Identify target group

Program goal and target group are strongly connected. Whatever decisions you have made about the program goal should now help to identify which participants will benefit most from the program. While this might seem self-evident, it can happen that program goals are set independently of target groups. Consider situations where providers are required to work with a specific population. Even if a provider changes its program goals, staff may feel obligated (or may be required) to serve the same population that they always have. This kind of mismatch between program goals and target groups often results in programs that serve theoretical participants better than the real ones who come through the door. Programs that run without clearly defined goals and target groups run the risk of accepting many and serving few.

At one WESCan partner site, participants were able to attend the program regardless of whether they needed literacy skills development. This presented real challenges for program planning, and made the needs of a multi-level class that much more varied. It raised questions about what those higher functioning participants needed from the program, and what the program was able to provide to them. At another partner site, instructors met with resistance when participants who enrolled in the program didn't perceive they needed the skills that were being taught. In both these cases, problems arose because the participants who attended were inappropriate for the program being offered. As a result, the agencies had difficulty meeting participants' needs and the participants felt dissatisfied with the programs.

"Most of the learners were not literacy learners and were referred from other programs; learners had a very specific list of skills that they wanted to learn even if assessment showed they needed assistance in other areas."

By the end of the research phase, WESCan partners concluded that: "Eligibility should be flexible but focused – you want to balance being the best fit with sometimes being the only fit, [so you] have to be adaptable."

"We must find a way . . . to either funnel the learners who are too high a level into another job search strategy or to adapt the program to these learners."

Stage 2: Resource allocation

Funders can play a pivotal role in determining the success of new or revised workforce ES programs. While some program decisions assume funding sources are already in place, others may require seeking new sources of funding. Due consideration should be given to how the new program model can best be funded.

WESCan partners experienced varying degrees of success working within parameters set by funders. Complications arose due to funding restrictions. In some cases, funders retained exclusive control over who entered programming, making it difficult to access relevant new client groups. In other cases, the requirement to coordinate funding created a constant balancing act for administrators. Those partners who had some latitude to allocate resources to address participants' needs, even if it was as limited as providing snack foods, felt these gestures made a significant impact.

Identify resource requirements

With the needs assessment wrapped up and a new or revised program in mind, it's time to think about how to make the program happen. Some decisions about resource requirements may need to wait until the program design stage is complete; however, it is useful to consider in advance which resources are already at hand and what might still need to be accessed or developed. In particular, consider whether facilities already exist, such as a kitchen that could connect participants with work or work-like activities. Having a realistic sense of what is required will help to avoid shortfalls in funding and last-minute efforts to put things in place. Here are some questions to consider when identifying resource requirements:

- What space is available to run the program? What kind of set-up does the space allow? What is the maximum number of participants that can be served in the space available? Does any of the space include a private area for conducting assessments?
- Are there resources such as a job search club, or facilities such as a gym or kitchen already on-site that could be incorporated into a workforce ES program?
- Will opportunities to apply skills be part of the planned workforce ES program? Are different or additional facilities needed? Does the program need equipment or tools?
- Is computer and Internet access available for participants?
- Will materials need to be purchased?
- Will staff training be required?

"Internal challenges have been locating space to do the assessments."

"We consider the cost impact of implementing a workforce ES model to be low. . . . Achieving this requires the will to do so, creativity, and time, but not a lot of equipment or material investment."

Identify staffing needs

Instructors who are comfortable planning lessons, leading facilitated sessions and incorporating holistic programming elements and work placements are critical to the success of workforce ES programs. In some cases, providers may find that the abilities instructional staff need to teach in workforce ES programs are beyond what is required of instructors in their traditional literacy programs. It may be more effective to adopt a team teaching approach if a single instructor doesn't have all the abilities and experience suggested for a successful program.

When assessing staffing needs, consider the time instructors will need to incorporate elements of workforce ES into an existing program or to create a new program. Instructors need time to collect examples of authentic documents used in the community and in local workplaces and to plan lessons that incorporate these materials with other learning activities and resources. Instructor training, particularly in the area of Essential Skills and the how-to's of developing participants' skills within a workforce context, is essential in assisting instructors who are moving from a traditional literacy approach to workforce ES. As programs become established, keeping the program fresh and current given the changing demands of the world of work, will require some ongoing staff time that is not tied directly to program delivery.

WESCan partners found it unrealistic to expect that instructors busy with the day-to-day delivery of programming could dedicate significant time to program planning. Under WESCan, many project partners changed their staffing models so time could be allocated accordingly.

"Being able to have a full-time person coordinate and shepherd others through the project has been invaluable."

Examine existing funding sources

Begin by considering funds and resources already available. Funding for an existing program that is not proving to be effective could be reassigned to the development or delivery of a workforce ES program. Staff members who have an interest in this type of programming, time available to devote to it, and the requisite skills and experience necessary to plan, instruct or assess may already be in place. Existing funding requirements should be examined carefully in light of any changes proposed to existing programming, particularly in case they affect who can attend the program and what they will get out of it.

Many adult education providers rely on multiple funding sources. In these cases, not only is it critical to examine any restrictions related to individual funders, but it is also important to consider how these different sources of funding will work together. Funding conditions may well require providers to seek multiple sources of revenue – and there are definite advantages to having multiple sources of support – yet those same conditions can make it difficult to meet all the funders' targets while providing the services needed.

In extreme but not rare cases, funder requirements may actually work against what providers feel is in the best interest of participants. These requirements can include elements such as intake and selection processes, assessment choices, programming content and outcomes measures. While funders may retain final decision-making authority, adult educators have an important role to play in helping to establish criteria for learner selection and program success.

"There are so often strings attached to funding and we have seen first-hand how negative the effects of particular constraints can be on programming."

Identify new funding sources

Workforce Essential Skills programming can benefit greatly from program supports such as curriculum development, employment counselling, job development and employer outreach. Programs can also look at adding services that complement workforce ES programming. These might include financial literacy and health and wellness activities.

In some WESCan partner programs, participants were able to maintain income assistance benefits, access training allowances or receive extensions to existing supports such as subsidized childcare and extended health benefits because of their attendance in the program. This made all

the difference to being able to maintain their attendance for some participants who could not have attended programming if it had resulted in less income or a cutback in other benefits and supports.

"I don't believe we would have been able to provide a stand-alone program without some type of income assistance attached to it."

"For the duration of the 12 weeks, the participants' funding source was not cut back (even while being paid for three weeks on the job). This was intended to help them transition off of a fixed income, and not be caught in the lurch awaiting their first pay cheque. Childcare, health cards and transportation costs were also covered for participants."

Stage 3: Program design

Program design draws on what has been learned through the needs assessment and takes available resources into consideration. The program design stage requires making some key planning decisions; careful consideration at this stage will be more likely to result in a successful program that avoids common pitfalls.

Make structural decisions

Structural decisions are the decisions that specify the overall set-up of the program. Providers should consider answers to the following questions:

- How can programming reflect local labour market conditions?
- Will the program have a fixed start and end date, or will the program be delivered on a continuous intake basis? If the program has continuous intake, how often will new participants be accepted?
- How long will participants be expected to attend the program?
- Should the program be offered to one multi-level group or should participants be organized into groups according to ability?
- What should the program schedule be? Which days of the week and which hours will participants be most likely to attend?
- What date should the program begin?

Structural decisions should be at least partly informed by the program's objectives and what is known of the target group.

Decisions about program start dates should take into account when participants can begin attending; program duration should be informed by participants' literacy levels at entry and their goals for when they exit the program; program schedules should take into consideration the intensity of ES upgrading required, as well as other supports participants should be able to take advantage of while in the program. Use local labour market conditions to select an occupational or sector focus for the program. Regardless of the structural decisions you make, the implications of those decisions should be thoroughly explored for their benefits and any challenges they might pose to participants, funders and staff.

In seeking ways to help adults develop the abilities necessary at work, it is important that structural elements of programs not pose additional barriers to them on the road to employment. Setting up a program that takes into account the realities participants face is more likely to see positive outcomes. If individuals in the target group are more likely to commit to a program that offers a weekday off so they can attend to family and home responsibilities, this can become part of the program set-up. If there is a time of year when participants are less likely to attend this can also be accommodated at the outset. Daily schedules should also bear in mind the same considerations. For example, although 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM programming often works well for educational institutions, it may not be the best choice for all participants.

At PTP, a pre-employment development (PED) component has been a successful addition to workforce ES programming. Sessions are organized on a monthly basis during which participants can carry out volunteer work in the community. For those who have little or no paid work experience, volunteering can offer opportunities to work with others and see a workplace in action.

One WESCan partner made the decision partway through programming to change the daily schedule to have a later start time. They had been monitoring attendance patterns, and found themselves constantly battling low attendance in the first half of the day. The change to a later start time had an immediate effect; attendance became more regular and there was a significant drop in late arrivals.

"The program is allowing students to tailor their own schedules and define their own hours – and is empowering them to act as employees rather than students and creates more ownership over tasks."

"The summer session operated from June 30 – August 30. Three students attended Monday to Thursday from 8:30 AM to 12:30 PM. Two students attended full days on Thursday and Friday. This was done to accommodate work schedules."

Identify partners

Partnerships with other service providers and community supports can be a great advantage to staff and participants alike; as such, careful consideration should be given to the benefits such partnerships might provide. Partnerships are a key way to make programming and training connect to participants' next steps. This involves creating a willingness among the partners to share information, services and resources – all with the goal of meeting participants' needs.

Examples of potential partners include:

- Employment service agencies that can assist with employment counselling and job search
- Education providers that can offer access to a computer lab or shared instructional time
- Health and wellness providers that can offer services such as counselling and fitness activities
- Social service providers that can offer information and support
- Financial institutions that can provide information about financial literacy
- Employers that can offer work placements and job shadowing opportunities

"[E]ngage potential workplace experience employers early on in the program."

While WESCan partners saw great benefits in working with other service providers, they also identified the need to manage relationships and ensure that service provision doesn't come into conflict between providers. One WESCan partner worked in cooperation with two literacy providers whose needs and interests were not always on the same wavelength with theirs. This partner commented, "We have learned that new programming can be very political and that you need to arm yourself with allies first. It has been difficult not being the delivery agency and having to work with two other agencies in this role."

Incorporate good workforce ES practice

During the program design stage, staff members have a chance to consider program goals and structural decisions. There may be additional program elements that are worth considering because they help meet the unique needs of workforce ES participants. These elements can significantly increase the appeal of a program and lead to improved learner engagement and better outcomes.

Opportunities to apply skills
When participants have the chance to apply their skills in work-like activities in a supported environment, it helps them recognize the importance of the skills they are learning. These opportunities might include project-based learning in which some instructional modules focus on purposeful activities such as planning an event or carrying out a small construction project. Alternatively, in-house jobs could be made available, whereby participants carry out a specified set of tasks on a regular basis. These might include activities such as placing office supply orders, maintaining job boards, preparing meals for program participants or providing services such as cleaning.

"Also proving valuable are the individual projects. These are also Essential Skills driven, for example, planning a summer camp, or a concert. The scenario is defined in a manner that requires the client to draw on all Essential Skills, and the instructor guides them as they run into problems, using workwrite materials as appropriate. The results have been very positive for clients – improved self-esteem, great pride in what they are accomplishing."

Holistic programming
WESCan partners found it was important to include opportunities to develop soft skills, financial literacy and health and wellness. These were important elements of their workforce ES programs.

WESCan partners identified other beneficial program supports, given the complex needs of client groups they worked with. Although not a defining characteristic of workforce ES, each WESCan partner came to recognize the value of including these elements and in making links between life skills and work skills. In recognition that participants may struggle with poverty, trauma, substance abuse and health concerns, WESCan partners found these needs had to be acknowledged and addressed where possible in order for quality learning to take place. While these supports were not always available, several of the WESCan partners identified these as areas for further exploration while refining their program approach.

"In an ideal world we would have supports such as a day care, a guidance counselor, an employment counselor and a job coach on staff, but that is not possible. We must always work in cooperation . . . to secure bus passes and day care allowances for our clients."

PTP staff members identified a need to provide hands-on learning activities. To provide these opportunities, they developed a component they call Teamworks as part of their workforce ES model. Under Teamworks, each participant chooses a team they wish to work on. Teams carry out activities such as running a snack shop, placing office supply orders and creating a monthly newsletter for PTP.

"Challenges – poverty, social and emotional challenges and communication challenges – are an area of concern with this group. I keep the cupboard stocked with food. Several of the students have mentioned that being able to have a good breakfast (bagels, toast, muffins, oatmeal, fruit) helps them through the day. Several of the students have accessed counselling."

Work placements

Employer participation can contribute significantly to the value participants attach to workforce ES programming. At the planning stages, employers can provide insight into work requirements and hiring practices. Arranging for work placements with employers provides participants with a chance to experience the reality of work life, and can sometimes lead to paid work upon program completion. Further, by maintaining a connection to employers, workforce ES programs keep up with changes in the workplace. Otherwise, it can be challenging for adult educators to monitor current workplace conditions from within their educational settings.

When considering work placements, a number of decisions need to be made:

- Who will identify and set up work placements?
- How long will placements be?
- At what stage in the program will they occur?
- What role will the adult educator play during the work placement?
- Are there any factors that could make some participants ineligible for work placements (for example, criminal records)?

"Work experiences might be increased, perhaps two different work scenarios for a two-week period. We felt doing the work experiences in the middle of the program worked. It allowed learners to come back into the classroom and discuss their experiences."

Plan program

Program planning begins with establishing an intake protocol. The intake protocol specifies what information a provider will collect from applicants and how they will collect it. The goal of the protocol is to determine whether the program can meet the individual's needs. Providers need to establish entrance criteria in order to ensure that participants in the target group are the participants who gain access to the program.

As you decide on program elements, program planning can begin to incorporate these elements. Setting the program plan involves developing a schedule of activities or themes, planning lessons and identifying and developing learning activities. Some planning takes place before program implementation, but typically continues on even once programs are operating. Program planning must take into account the structural elements set out. For example, programs with fixed intake and duration will have different planning requirements than continuous intake models.

WESCan partners organized their programs in a variety of ways, each with the goal of addressing participant needs.

"The thematic approach to workforce ES was used because using the workwrite activities without an overarching theme seemed artificial. . . . The use of the theme also provided a lot of opportunity to work on the less concrete Essential Skills such as teamwork and oral communication."

"Problem-based modules were created for each of these areas. . . . A key benefit of this approach was the group work that would be required in order for the participants to accomplish the task. The group work provides the opportunity for participants to gain confidence, speak out and find compromises etc., all key to the building of social capital."

Consider instructional approach

At the planning stage, consideration should be given to what the programming looks like day-to-day. Providing opportunities for group discussion is a defining element of workforce ES because it allows participants to develop not only the skills necessary for employment, but also soft skills. And it is through sharing experiences with educators and peers that participants begin to make connections between instruction and applications outside the program.

In planning a program, it is important to include opportunities for group learning. At the same time, there should be recognition that group learning is not always the best approach given the needs or expectations of participants. You may need to find an appropriate balance between group and individual work each time the group composition changes.

"My preference is to try and have the class work as a group, or in subgroups, on a set task which requires them to exercise a variety of Essential Skills . . . but clients want to have time to work alone as well. It seemed that a 50-50 approach was best. 50% group task work, 50% solo work."

Instructors need to recognize how skills are used outside of a program context and be able to communicate this to participants. Instructors must also be able to find the opportunities within larger task-based ES programming to teach embedded skills. And ideally, they should be able to draw connections across the tasks and skills being taught so participants clearly understand how the skills they are learning apply to a variety of work settings as well as in family and community contexts.

"There will be a lot of Essential Skills building that will also relate to life skills, and we will draw relationships between using these skills in the workplace and at home, for everyday life. Our experience with lower [level] literacy learners is that they struggle with workplace tasks, but also with everyday tasks, therefore relating Essential Skills to home tasks and to work tasks will assist in making a connection that is real for learners."

In workforce ES, where discussions are key components of the program, it can be challenging for instructors to come to terms with their new role. Effective program planning requires a significant effort from adult educators; those with an interest and understanding of Essential Skills, an understanding of skills as they apply to workplace contexts, and strong facilitation skills appear to be the most likely to succeed in this role.

Some WESCan partner sites struggled because instructors selected for program delivery were not prepared to accept their new roles. In some cases, instructors avoided using group discussion and facilitation techniques; in other cases, instructors showed little interest in Essential Skills and how to incorporate task-based instruction into their program.

"The instructor had difficulty understanding her role within the classroom. . . . The instructor was very supportive and patient and assisted learners with life skill problems, however, she did not have a teaching/facilitation background that required lesson planning, classroom management and development and this greatly impacted the success of the program."

"When hiring a facilitator for literacy-based training it is important that the person has a teaching background, can develop lesson plans and has classroom management skills as well as some understanding of workforce Essential Skills."

WESCan partners found that establishing positive group dynamics helped avoid many challenges with learning groups. By limiting self-directed components until groups formed they created a more comfortable instructional space.

"Investing time to develop a safe discussion space is considered essential to an effective workforce ES experience."

"I would prefer to run a class using groups, where we work together through the course units. While we did initially start doing this in the spring, we quickly went to a more individual approach due to tensions in the class. In order to ease these tensions, I will be working through a module called Working Together before we start the actual coursework. This will lay out expectations and responsibilities for working collaboratively right at the start."

Stage 4: Implementation

Careful planning in the program design stage can help providers avoid many of the pitfalls associated with implementing a workforce Essential Skills program. A clearly established program goal and a specified target group helps participants more easily identify whether the program is for them, and helps practitioners plan content and design an instructional approach that meets the stated goals. As the program gets underway, attention can shift to ensuring the program's realization meets expectations.

Implementation requires dedicated efforts across the organization. Practitioners need support from management to handle workloads associated with the change. The converse is also true. Management needs support from on-the-ground staff who will ultimately be delivering the new program.

Open communication with staff and others who have a stake in the program is critical throughout the planning stage and into implementation. Making a transition to workforce ES may require that staff see their roles somewhat differently; certainly there is additional work associated with planning and delivering new programming. These and other changes can be a source of anxiety and uncertainty for program staff, with some staff having the perception that a desire to make changes signals that past efforts were inadequate. These reactions to change can be greatly moderated, however, if lines of communication are kept open, and information is shared freely. On an ongoing basis, mechanisms can be put in place whereby staff and participants alike can ask questions, voice concerns and share successes.

WESCan partners who acknowledged the degree of change required and provided ample time for staff to become accustomed to new approaches, materials and changes in expectations found these efforts were well worth it. They resulted in greater acceptance by staff and a deeper understanding of how they could contribute to the program's overall objectives.

"The model needs to be one of collaboration and co-operation, over the duration of the program."

The following illustrates the diversity of programs that WESCan partners implemented:

Tseshaht First Nation
Port Alberni, British Columbia

Tseshaht First Nation developed a workforce Essential Skills program as part of their Social Education & Employment Development Services (SEEDS) initiative. The program is available to Tseshaht members living on reserve and in receipt of social assistance.

- Fixed duration program with possibility of extensions
- Monday to Thursday from 8:30 AM to 12:30 PM
- Workforce-oriented skills development
- Soft skills development
- Participant-identified projects such as building a picnic table, enhancing the learning area, organizing and hosting a fundraiser and purchasing food for the programs in the building

Parkland College
Yorkton, Saskatchewan

Parkland College implemented the Workforce Development Program, aimed at assisting unemployed and underemployed individuals make a transition to employment.

- Fourteen-week fixed duration program
- Monday to Thursday from 9:00 AM to 3:30 PM
- Workforce-oriented skills development
- Soft skills development
- Work placements for participants

Literacy Link Niagara
Thorold, Ontario

Literacy Link Niagara developed a program for participants interested in starting a small business.

- Nine-week fixed duration program
- Designed to be delivered 4 days per week for 5.5 hours per day
- Occupation-specific Essential Skills development
- Soft skills development through reflection activities
- Partnered with literacy delivery agencies

The Saint John Learning Exchange
Saint John, New Brunswick

The Saint John Learning Exchange focused on enhancing their existing TIES 2 Work program. TIES 2 Work matches participants to jobs as part of the intake process.

- Twelve-week continuous intake program
- Monday to Friday from 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM
- Workforce-oriented skills development, some employer-specific learning content
- Group discussions focused on soft skills development
- Three-week paid work placement with matched employer

FutureWorx Society
Truro, Nova Scotia

FutureWorx enhanced an existing program established to help participants refine employability skills.

- Continuous intake, flexible duration; new participants begin every nine weeks
- Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday 8:45 AM to 4:30 PM
- Upgrading including a mix of traditional academic upgrading, workforce ES upgrading, occupational research and project-based work (three half-day sessions per week)
- Personal development focusing primarily on soft skills (two half-day sessions per week)
- On-site supported work experience where participants clean the building, landscape participant areas and prepare and serve daily lunches and snacks (three half-day sessions per week)

Stage 5: Refinement

Whether it is traditional literacy or workforce ES, what distinguishes responsive and sustainable programs is an ability to reflect on programming that occurs and to refine any aspects that don't seem to be benefiting the model or participants. Despite all planning efforts, no program is perfect the first time around. The reality is that providers must continue to adapt and evolve their goal to provide adult education programs that are as strong as they can be.

Regardless of whether a program is structured as a continuous intake model or whether it is of fixed duration, providers should schedule opportunities to reflect on and refine the program from the outset. Once programs are underway it can be difficult to justify time spent reflecting as the day-to-day demands of the program take over. Sometimes reflection occurs only when a problem is encountered and must be resolved. Scheduling a date for a review and scheduling sessions where everyone involved has an opportunity to sit down and discuss ideas ensure that this key step occurs. Information can also be collected through a formal evaluation process such as a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis, or through conducting focus groups.

To gather information, talk to staff in different positions. Include assessors, instructors and participants to get different perspectives. Have staff members reflect on what's working, what they think isn't ideal and what they would like to see in the future. Consider this an opportunity to document a path to the ideal program for your organization.

The WESCan project provided a means to reflect on successes and challenges; partners took advantage of this opportunity by refining their programs. WESCan partners refined their programs to address any challenges they had encountered and to make the programs more responsive to the needs and situations of the communities they were serving.

Identify successes

Reflection activities involve identifying successes. By identifying successes, providers are in a position to build on them.

WESCan partners identified these successes:

- *Positive changes as participants expressed interest in and enthusiasm for learning*
- *Increased coordination between staff members and with staff at other service providers*
- *Better insights into participants' needs*

WESCan partners found that workforce ES programming was a powerful catalyst for change. At several agencies, attendance improved dramatically, with participants showing greater motivation to learn and improved confidence in their abilities to reach goals. One provider found that a significant shift had occurred in the ways their First Nations' participants viewed their communities. Participants who started the program uneasy about interactions outside their small community began to see that with the support of their Nation they could be part of positive change both on and off reserve.

"I saw leadership and teamwork skills being developed and used within small groups. Participants are more confident and more comfortable asking questions and challenging the why's and how's. They are more engaged and thinking about things."

"The most interesting aspect of WESCan at the moment is the heightened energy and integration of staff which is having a positive effect on them and on clients. The synergy between work exposures and academics is stronger."

"It is very useful to get these glimpses of the generic problems that constitute barriers to their employment."

"Definitely being part of this project has opened up the door to provide an alternate program for those persons who often fall through the cracks in our present system. . . . We found a lot of our learners enjoyed working with the workplace documents and that they felt prepared for the workplace as a result."

Examine challenges

In addition to identifying successes to build on, at the Refinement stage providers must also identify and examine challenges.

The challenges experienced by WESCan partners related to the following:

○ *Managing participants' needs*
To manage the needs of participants, partners organized smaller learning groups or supported project-based learning. Instructors attempted to meet participants' individual needs by including some individualized programming elements and linked participants to other support services as needed.

○ *Addressing on-going resource requirements*
At some sites, instructors and assessors encountered challenges because the new approach required additional preparation time for instructors. Under WESCan, it was observed that staffing models that provide for administrative, assessment and even counselling support for participants appear to be better able to handle the program changes required and to sustain program delivery.

○ *Clarifying the new roles and expectations for instructors*
Implementing a workforce ES approach demands that instruction be approached differently. At some WESCan sites, job descriptions have been revised to favour instructors with work experience and skill sets that are better suited to delivering this type of program.

Institute changes

As successes and challenges are identified, changes can be implemented. There is no need to wait until the end of a program to make changes; some changes can be introduced while the program is operating.

In reflecting on their experiences offering workforce ES programming over a set duration, WESCan partners were enthusiastic about the benefits of the program model. They acknowledged the challenges, and described changes they planned to make to address them. They acknowledged that the program would always benefit from reflection and refinement, for as long as it was offered. Below are some of the ideas for change they considered for the next time:

"Students will be given more authentic roles that resemble workplace roles, rather than "projects" . . . the first two weeks of programming will be focused on expectations, collaborative learning and communication skills. Learners will sign contracts that outline roles and responsibilities. In addition, instruction will expand beyond the workwrite series to include modules in financial literacy. We will also incorporate healing and cultural activities into the program delivery."

"One of the things we had not thought of initially was performing criminal record checks early on. As a result we had difficulty placing learners into work experiences without them. This would definitely be a component we would add into future programs, as part of the intake process. We would assure applicants that having a criminal record is not a factor in admittance into the program, but [the criminal record check] is used to ensure work experience placements that are appropriate."

One agency is now working towards a multi-tiered program that will help participants make the transition to work by attending the workforce ES program, working in an on-site supported work experience and then working in a for-profit business operated by the agency.

Conclusion

From Vancouver Island to the Maritimes, the WESCan partners' experiences illustrate the diversity of workforce Essential Skills programming while revealing core elements that contribute to program success. From their experiences, a process has been identified for establishing workforce Essential Skills programming, elements of successful programming have been explored, and challenges have been identified.

Although the research sample was admittedly small, its diversity of learners, providers and communities created a varied backdrop against which to study factors that contributed to program success. Agencies and institutions that offered some flexibility in program hours and staffing models were quicker to implement programs and to make adjustments as needs arose. Partners who looked outward to build community partnerships and connections to local employers were often able to provide a greater variety of participant supports.

Perhaps most significantly, program staff members who found the balance in adult education between providing targeted skills development and addressing the needs of the whole person saw these efforts pay off in participants' increased sense of confidence, motivation towards learning, and readiness to take next steps. This in turn led to strong participant outcomes for many of the WESCan partners: higher numbers of participants completing programs and moving on to skills training and employment.

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