



Defining Essential Skills

Prepared by: Sandra Hennessey
Prepared for: the College Sector Committee
April 2009



College Sector Committee
for Adult Upgrading

An Overview of Essential Skills Definitions Across Provincial, National and International Jurisdictions

Essential Skills, as researched and defined by Human Resources Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) in 1994, are the skills needed for work, learning and life. They provide the foundation for learning all other skills and enable people to evolve with their jobs and adapt to workplace change. The research included identification of 9 Essential Skills, their definitions and the development of rating scales to measure the complexity levels of these skills when applied to tasks. The Essential Skills Research Project also developed a methodology to document the application of Essential Skills in Canadian occupations. This documentation uses a template known as an Essential Skills Profile.

Essential Skills research and development has focused on workplace applications, with limited focus on other contexts. This focus has led some to think of Essential Skills as connected only to the workplace although the overarching definition identifies these skills as needed for “work, learning and life”. A review of essential skills definitions used in other jurisdictions was undertaken to determine whether a plain-language, context-free approach to Essential Skills was readily available. A brief overview of the findings from other jurisdictions – international and provincial, followed by further HRSDC and Ontario Skills Passport information – is provided below.

International

England, Scotland, Ireland, New Zealand and Australia have coined other terms to describe literacy and numeracy, and in some cases information and communication technologies. Some publications use essential skills as an overarching term that infers, more than refers, to literacy, numeracy and ICT. Literacy, Numeracy, Basic Skills, Key Skills and Skills for Life are terms that are used interchangeably in the United Kingdom. UK countries, New Zealand and Australia have developed their own adult literacy frameworks or curriculums which identify domains and levels. One example identifies Oral Communications, Reading Text and Document Use as one domain. In Ireland, essential skills are defined as literacy and numeracy, which require “the ability to communicate by talking and listening, reading and writing; to use numeracy; and the ability to handle information”. (Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland)

Te Kete Ipurangi, the Online Learning Centre for public schools in New Zealand identifies essential skills as Communication Skills, Numeracy Skills, Information Skills, Problem-solving Skills, Self-Management and Competitive Skills, Social and Co-operative Skills, Physical Skills and Work and Study Skills. The definitions of these skills are provided as the outcomes associated with each skill.

Equipped for the Future (EFF) identifies four categories of generative skills (Communication Skills, Decision-Making Skills, Interpersonal Skills and Lifelong Learning Skills) with four content standards associated with each category. This framing is intended to shift the focus of adult literacy and basic skills instruction and assessment away from a decontextualized skills-based curriculum toward a contextualized, practice-based curriculum. The framework is based on purposes of learning:

Four Purposes for Learning:

- **ACCESS**
To gain access to information and resources so that adults can orient themselves in the world
- **VOICE**
To express ideas and opinions with the confidence they will be heard and taken into account
- **ACTION**
To solve problems and make decisions without having to rely on others to mediate the world for them
- **BRIDGE TO THE FUTURE**
Learning to learn so that adults can be prepared to keep up with the world as it changes

The EFF Work Readiness profile identifies the four categories of generative skills as essential skills: communication, interpersonal, decision-making and lifelong learning skills.

Provincial

The **Manitoba Stages of Literacy and Learning Certificate** curriculum documents for Stages 1, 2 and 3 do not contain definitions of the Essential Skills. The curriculum and facilitator's guide focus on Reading Text, Document Use, Writing and Oral Communications. The facilitator's guide acknowledges that many adult learning programs cover many of the other Essential Skills and points practitioners to the HRSDC Essential Skills website for complexity scales information and examples of skill application in ES profiles. The three stages are aligned to the IALS and Essential Skills complexity scales. (Manitoba Ministry of Education, 2004)

The **British Columbia Adult Opportunities Action Plan** initiated in 2007 explicitly defines literacy as Level 3 in the International Literacy and Skills Survey. Strategies include aligning adult curriculum with IALS and Essential Skills across all delivery systems for consistency, and include the development of standard learning outcomes, assessment and reporting for literacy programs. Although Essential Skills are identified in the plan, the individual Essential Skills and their definitions are not. (Ministry of Advanced Education, 2007)

National

Canadian Language Benchmarks Comparative Framework website does not provide ES definitions, but directs readers to the ES Readers' Guide for further information about the complexity scales. The Comparative Framework states "In the ES framework, a skill domain is expressed in terms of complexity levels. For most skills, there are five such levels. It is important to note that the essence of Essential Skills is captured within these complexity ratings." Four of the nine Essential Skills are included in the Comparative Framework: Reading Text, Document Use, Writing and Oral Communication. (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2005)

HRSDC and the Ontario Skills Passport

The **Essential Skills Research Project** developed a methodology to describe and document Essential Skills as they are applied in Canadian occupations. The methodology includes a definition of each of Essential Skills and a four- or five-level rating scale used to describe the complexity level at which the skill is applied in example tasks. (See Appendix A)

The **Ontario Skills Passport** (OSP) web site, developed by the Ministry of Education, provides various Essential Skills tools and resources. (The site also includes information on Work Habits.) Many of the Ontario K – 12 curriculum documents reference this web site, its purpose and benefits. This web site has been promoted extensively to adult educators and includes easily-accessed tools and resources useful to adults to help them to learn and apply Essential Skills to tasks. The Ministry of Education worked closely with HRSDC in developing this web site and resources. In doing so, individual Essential Skills definitions were modified to be "context-free" using plain language. (See Appendix A)

Recommendation

Use of the Ontario Skills Passport Essential Skills definitions would increase the number of learners and practitioners embracing Essential Skills in learning opportunities.

The HRSDC Essential Skills definitions are written in the context of workers and work and are linked to the complexity scales. Working with HRSDC, the Ministry of Education modified these definitions to remove context and simplify language to make them more accessible and easily understood while maintaining the linkage to the complexity scales. These definitions support application in non-work environments, such as learning, home, health, community, etc.

Appendix A

Essential Skills Definitions

Reading Text – 5 level complexity rating scale articulated to IALS 500-pt. scale

HRSDC	reading material that is in the form of sentences or paragraphs. Reading Text generally involves reading notes, letters, memos, manuals, specifications, regulations, books, reports or journals.
OSP	The comprehension of text consisting of sentences and paragraphs.

Document Use – 5 level complexity rating scale articulated to IALS 500-pt. scale

HRSDC	tasks that involve a variety of information displays in which words, numbers, icons and other visual characteristics (eg., line, colour, shape) are given meaning by their spatial arrangement.
OSP	The use of labels, lists, signs, graphs, charts, tables, forms, and other similar materials.

Writing - 5 level complexity rating scale

HRSDC	writing texts and writing in documents (for example, filling in forms) non-paper-based writing (for example, typing on a computer)
OSP	The preparation of written materials for a variety of purposes.

Numeracy - 5 level complexity rating scale articulated to IALS 500-pt. scale

Money Math

HRSDC	financial transactions, such as handling cash, preparing bills or making payments
OSP	The use of mathematical skills in making financial transactions, such as handling cash, preparing bills, and making payments.

Numeracy - 5 level complexity rating scale articulated to IALS 500-pt. scale

Scheduling or Budgeting and Accounting Math

HRSDC	managing time and money as resources, planning and monitoring their use, assessing best value, reducing waste
OSP	Planning for the best use of time and money, as well as monitoring of the use of time and money.

Numeracy - 5 level complexity rating scale articulated to IALS 500-pt. scale

Measurement and Calculation Math

HRSDC	measuring and describing the physical world
OSP	The measurement and calculation of quantities, areas, volumes, and/or distances.

Numeracy - 5 level complexity rating scale articulated to IALS 500-pt. scale

Data Analysis Math

HRSDC	analysis of numerical data
OSP	The collection and analysis of data in numerical form.

Numeracy – 4 level complexity rating scale

Numerical Estimation

HRSDC	tasks involving any estimation that results in a number
OSP	The production of estimates in numerical terms.

Oral Communication – 4 level complexity rating scale

HRSDC	use of speech to give and exchange thoughts and information by workers in an occupational group
OSP	The use of speech for a variety of purposes.

Thinking Skills – 4 level complexity rating scale

Problem Solving

HRSDC	involves problems that require solutions
OSP	The identification and solving of problems.

Thinking Skills – 4 level complexity rating scale

Decision Making

HRSDC	making a choice among options. Decision making occurs during problem solving, but not all decision making is part of problem solving
OSP	The making of any type of decision, using appropriate information.

Thinking Skills – 4 level complexity rating scale

Critical Thinking

***definition and complexity scales released after Reader's Guide published**

HRSDC	the process of evaluating ideas or information, using a rational, logical thought process, and referring to objective criteria, to reach a rational judgment about value, or to identify strength and weakness
OSP	Critical Thinking is not included in the OSP.

Thinking Skills – 4 level complexity rating scale

Job Task Planning and Organizing

HRSDC	the extent to which the workers plan and organize their own tasks. It does not refer to involvement in the planning function for the organization in which they work
OSP	The planning and organization of one's own work.

Thinking Skills – no complexity rating scale

Significant Use of Memory – no complexity rating scale

HRSDC	includes any significant or unusual use of memory. It does not include normal memory use that is an every-day requirement
OSP	Not included on OSP.

Thinking Skills – 4 level complexity rating scale

Finding Information

HRSDC	involves using any of a variety of sources including text, people, computerized data bases or information systems
OSP	The use of a variety of sources, including written text, people, computerized databases, and information systems. (See also Reading Text, Document Use, Computer Use, and Oral Communication above.)

Working With Others – 4 level rating scale released after Reader’s Guide published

HRSDC	the extent to which employees work with others to carry out their tasks. Do they have to work co-operatively with others? Do they have to have the self-discipline to meet work targets while working alone?
OSP	“Teamwork” included under Work Habits.

Computer Use – 5 level complexity rating scale

HRSDC	indicates the variety and complexity of computer use within the occupational group
OSP	The use of any type of computerized technology.

Continuous Learning – 4 level rating scale released after Reader’s Guide published

HRSDC	the requirement for workers in an occupational group to participate in an ongoing process of acquiring skills and knowledge
OSP	Not included on OSP.

Appendix B

Bibliography

CCLB. (2005). *Relating Canadian Language Benchmarks to Essential Skills: A comparative framework*. Retrieved from itsessential.ca:
http://www.itsessential.ca/itsessential/itsessential_files/doc_viewer_dex.asp?doc_id=175&page_id=408

Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland . (2002). *Essential Skills for Living, Equipped for the Future, Building Tomorrow* . Retrieved from
http://www.delni.gov.uk/essential_skills_and_action_plan.pdf

Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, UK. ((n.d)). *Read, Write Plus*. Retrieved from Implementing Skills for Life: <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/readwriteplus/>

Department of Education, Science and Training, Australia. (2006). *Towards an Essential Skills Framework (working title)*. Retrieved from
<http://www.lwa.au.com/A%20Revised%20NRS%20Towards%20an%20Essential%20Skills%20Framework%20Trial.pdf>

Excellence Gateway. (n.d.). Retrieved from Skills for Life Core Curriculum:
<http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/sflcurriculum>

Human Resources and Skills Development Canada . (n.d.). Retrieved from Readers' Guide to Essential Skills Profiles:
http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/essential_skills/general/readers_guide_who.html

Manitoba Ministry of Education. (2004, October). *Stages of Literacy and Learning Certificate Facilitator's Guide*. Retrieved from Ministry of Education, Manitoba:
http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/ael/all/publications/stages/pdf/fac_guide_en.pdf

Ministry of Advanced Education, B. C. (2007, September). *Adult Opportunities Action Plan*. Retrieved from
http://www.aved.gov.bc.ca/adulteducation/adult_opportunities_plan07.pdf

Ministry of Education, New Zealand. (n.d.). Retrieved from Te Kete Ipurangi – The Online Learning Centre: <http://www.tki.org.nz/>

Ontario Ministry of Education. (n.d.). Retrieved from Ontario Skills Passport :
<http://skills.edu.gov.on.ca/OSPWeb/jsp/en/login.jsp>

Scottish Executive, Communities Scotland. (2003). *An Adult Literacy and Numeracy Curriculum Framework for Scotland* . Retrieved from Communities Scotland:
http://www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk/stellent/groups/public/documents/webpages/cs_008875.pdf