



The Conference Board  
of Canada

## CASE STUDY 16

*A core product of the  
Employability Skills  
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**Name of Program**  
Alberta Advanced  
Education and Career  
Development's  
Employability Skills  
Development Initiatives  
for Adult Learners

**Skills Developed**  
• Academic  
• Personal  
Management  
• Teamwork  
• Science Literacy

Developing and assessing adult learners' employability skills

# ALBERTA'S INITIATIVES FOR ADULT LEARNERS

## *When Traditional Education Yields Diminishing Returns*

BY KURTIS KITAGAWA

August 1998

Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development is developing the generic employability skills of adult learners—particularly those who do not benefit significantly from traditional academic programming—to ensure that it has the human resource capacity to meet the challenges of the new economy.

### Overview

Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development (AECD) responds to the needs of adult learners and the economy. One major aspect of this responsiveness is the reform of programming for adult learners—including those who do not benefit from traditional academic programming—to reflect the view that employability skills are key to making adult learners successful in work. The adult learning system is therefore incorporating employability skills development in several areas. This case study focuses on two of these areas:

- adult development reform, and
- labour market training programs and services.

The policy environment that shapes these efforts emphasizes the need to

reduce expenditures, enhance accountability and demonstrate results. The work has been guided by consultation with major stakeholders at such venues as the Minister's Forum on Adult Learning and the Growth Summit, at which Albertans spelled out priorities relating to preparations for, and management of, anticipated economic growth in the province. Alberta has also been a driving force behind the Ministerial Council on Social Policy, an interprovincial forum that is trying to work out a new relationship between the provincial and territorial governments on the one hand and the federal government on the other.

Alberta's emphasis on the connection between people and prosperity is one of the cornerstones of the province's economic development strategy. In an intensively knowledge-based economy, people are the most important resource with which government, business and education have to work. Increasingly, all partners—governments, business, employers and schools—are playing their part in developing the employability skills that prepare people to participate fully and meaningfully in a rapidly changing economy.

From AECD's standpoint, the most important of these skills are capacities for

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### NBEC Mission

We help business and education leaders work collaboratively to promote the development of a learning society that will prepare Canada's young people for a changing world.

lifelong learning, adaptability and innovation. These skills enable workers to navigate the many transitions they increasingly need to make: from school to work, from job to job, from career to career or from employment to self-employment and entrepreneurship. That said, AECD concerns itself generally with programming in the areas of academic, employability and occupation-specific skills.

The academic skills include literacy, numeracy, language and mathematics. Under the heading of employability skills, AECD includes the communications, thinking, learning, personal management and teamwork skills identified by the Conference Board in its Employability Skills Profile. It also includes computer literacy and employment readiness. Finally, by occupation-specific skills, AECD means technical/vocational skills, classroom- and workplace-based learning/experience, and training for self-employment or entrepreneurship.

### *Adult Development Reform*

AECD is integrating the academic/education, employability and occupation-specific skills described above in a comprehensive Adult Development Reform Initiative (ADRI).

### *Labour Market Training*

Alberta incorporates employability skills development into all its labour market training programs and services, which are designed to:

- help unemployed Albertans make successful transitions to work.
- help “at risk” Albertans keep employed and reduce their dependence on government assistance, and
- maintain a skilled and productive workforce that contributes to the province’s economic and social development.

### **Objectives**

- Developing and integrating adult learners’ generic employability and job-specific employment skills for employment readiness.

- Developing employees’ occupation-specific skills for in-demand jobs in the labour market on a learning-in-context model.
- Developing adult learners’ technology-related skills.
- Providing employees with work experience commensurate with their generic employability and occupation-specific skills to enable them to get better jobs and remain employed.
- Developing as far as possible a seamless adult learning system that enables learners to take advantage of new learning opportunities as they arise.

### **Groups Served**

- Adult learners, employers and the economy at large.

### **Activities**

#### *Adult Development Reform*

AECD’s mandate encompasses adult development: the education and training of adults who have low levels of education (typically less than Grade 12) and limited employability skills. For most of these adults, topping up their academic education is one way to prepare them for the world of work or further learning. For others, however, upgrading academic qualifications is not the most effective way of helping them to get and keep jobs. ADRI addresses the needs of both groups of adult learners. A reformed adult development system will provide all adult learners with an appropriate mix of academic, employability and occupation-specific knowledge and skills to enable them to find work or embark on a course of postsecondary education to prepare them for work.

#### *Labour Market Training*

AECD’s labour market training programs and services are shaped by departmental policies and by two agreements, the Canada–Alberta Labour Market Development Agreement and an agreement between AECD and a second provincial department, Alberta Family and Social Services.

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## The Employability Skills Forum Mission

We are committed to improving the productivity and quality of life for individuals, organizations and society by enhancing the employability skills of the current and future workforce of Canada.

This study was made possible through funding by members of the Employability Skills Forum.

### Forum Members

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Under both of these agreements, labour market training programs will continue to help Albertans increase their employability and self-sufficiency.

Labour Market Training comprises six main elements:

1. *Career Employment and Assistance* helps Albertans make informed decisions about their career, education and employment goals. Services include help for unemployed and underemployed individuals in assessing their employability skills and identifying their learning needs, and referrals to programs and services that will help them develop their skills. The province is piloting employability skills assessment tools to facilitate this process.
2. *Job Placement* matches unemployed Albertans seeking work directly with employers needing to fill jobs in in-demand sectors of the labour market. In doing so, Job Placement focuses on helping clients develop job search, acquisition and retention skills so they can make successful labour market transitions in the future.
3. *Training on the Job* helps unemployed Albertans acquire occupational skills and experience directly with prospective employers in in-demand sectors of the labour market. Training on the Job helps Albertans develop occupation-specific skills, along with transferable employability skills such as teamwork, on an employer's worksite for up to one year. Program participants become employees and are paid wages by their employers. Employers, in turn, are reimbursed for the training and experience they provide for participants. Training on the Job uses the Conference Board's Employability Skills Profile to help develop training plans to meet the needs of individual clients.
4. *Skills for Work* uses the Conference Board of Canada's Employability Skills Profile to help unemployed Albertans develop customized plans to combine life management skills, occupational skills and basic skills upgrading with the practical work experience needed to obtain jobs in in-demand sectors of the labour market.

5. *Self-Employment* develops unemployed Albertans' generic employability skills and helps them start their own business through instruction in business plan development and one-on-one business counselling, coaching and guidance for up to 26 weeks.
6. *Local Labour Market Partnerships* provides funding to help community partners address local labour market needs and issues. Partners' activities include identifying and developing approaches to promote successful labour market transitions for Albertans, including the continuous development and assessment of their employability skills.

### Resources Required

#### *Adult Development Reform*

The overall annual budget for Adult Development Reform is \$175 million. The ADRI required:

- \$1.5 million for design and pilot activities, and
- six task teams, representing 70 to 80 person-years in public and private providers (public community colleges, private vocational schools, etc.) over three years.

#### *Labour Market Training*

The annual budget for Labour Market Assistance includes provincial and federal funding totalling approximately \$153 million.

### Achievements/Outcomes

To ensure accountability, AECD has developed a common yardstick for measuring how many program participants get jobs (and at what rate of pay), how many of these keep their jobs and what employability skills they develop as a result of participating in the province's programs.

### Benefits

#### *Adult Learners*

- Enhance their employability skills.
- Gain access to a broader, more integrated range of learning options.

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- Acquire better jobs within shorter time periods.
- Benefit from a flexible adult learning system that allows them to enter, exit from and re-enter as changes in the job market require them to learn new skills.

### Employers

- Participate more fully in the design of training opportunities.
- Will eventually be able to assess and compare candidates' employability skills credentials instead of having to take academic qualifications as a proxy for employability skills.

### Economy at Large

- Benefits from a generically skilled adult workforce.
- Benefits from a more productive workforce that can upgrade skills quickly and efficiently.

### Innovation

AECD's innovation lies chiefly in targeting the significant minority of adult learners for whom academic programs are not an avenue to a secondary credential or postsecondary education, and do not significantly improve their employment prospects or quality of life. AECD is increasing practical or applied academic learning opportunities for these adult learners and enhancing their employability skills in an attempt to maximize the return on its investments of public resources in adult programming.

AECD's innovations in programming reform to address the needs of all adult learners include:

- development of an Essential Competencies Framework that is used to establish student outcome measures, program standards, provider accountability and quality assurance, and
- development of an employability assessment instrument with complementing program modules.

### Keys to Success

To reform adult learning systems, it is essential to operate out of a policy context that supports:

- having a business planning system whereby program managers develop annual business plans showing what they will do and how they will measure the results,
- standardizing outcomes for adult learner programming across deliverers,
- enhancing system-wide collaboration between funders, public and private providers, employers and adult learners, and
- increasing contextual learning or applied academics programming opportunities for adult learners.

### Greatest Challenge

The greatest challenge facing AECD derives from the enormous demands that moving to a knowledge economy places on the adult learning system. To make the transition, governments must broaden their focus, moving away from a concentration on formal learning toward a more complex vision that integrates formal learning with the development of employability skills and occupation-specific skills.

### NBEC Publications Relating to Employability Skills Development and Assessment

*Employability Skills Profile*

*Science Literacy for the World of Work*

*Best Practices in Assessing and Developing Employability Skills—20 Case Studies (Sept. 98)*

*The Economic Benefits of Improving Literacy in the Workplace, 206-97 Report.*

*Enhancing Employability Skills: Innovative Partnerships, Projects and Programs, 118-94 Report.*

*Linking Teachers, Science, Technology and Research: Business and Education Collaborations That Work, 144-95 Report.*

*1998 100-Best Partnerships IdeaBook*

*1997 100-Best Partnerships IdeaBook*

*1996 100-Best Partnerships IdeaBook*