

Executive Summary of the Final Report

Analysis of Foundational Learning and Implications for Northern Alberta

Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse

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Executive Summary

I. Study Background

This engagement was commissioned by the Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse, a consortium of four colleges (Grande Prairie Regional College, Keyano College, Portage College and Northern Lakes College) and the Northern Alberta Development Council (NADC).

The primary objective was to explore and analyze models, programs, trends and other innovations of foundational learning, and to make recommendations regarding those that might be viable to be considered or adapted in whole or in part as solutions to addressing the problem by stakeholders in Northern Alberta (including individuals, families, K-12 educational institutes, postsecondary institutes, other organizations and associations, employers and other levels of government).

The project was completed over the period late June to late October, 2012 and entailed two principal phases or components:

- Activities in the initial phase of the project were associated with gaining a better understanding of the dynamics of the problems and opportunities and major components included a review of relevant statistics and trends, an analysis of K-12 student performance associated with Achievement and Diploma Test results and other “performance” factors monitored by Alberta Education and School Boards, and a review of occupational supply and demand for non-professional occupations and their associated skills requirements. These findings were later augmented with a higher level analysis of the barriers faced by students in remote, rural and northern locations in accessing educational opportunities and the policies and positions of the Governments of Alberta and Canada.
- The primary phase of the project had three sub-components. A comprehensive model review explored issues related to program design and delivery, expanding capacity and developing pathways, solutions to financial issues, promising emerging research and a broader and higher level review of the systems, procedures, and policies of Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Norway. A business case was developed to support the need for additional foundational learning. Finally, telephone interviews were held with expert relevant stakeholders to validate findings and develop a broader understanding of issues, needs and potential solutions.

This report should be viewed as a “starting point”. Due to the project’s scope and available budget, readers and users need to be mindful of a number of limitations, as summarized below:

- The report makes use of 2006 Census data (2011 is still not fully available for some categories and subjects) and School Board data for which there are minor inconsistencies with the boundaries of the NADC region, although they do not have a material impact on findings and conclusions.
- The number of successful interviews (13) is relatively small, and while comments are valuable, it is sometimes difficult to deduce trends.
- Finally, data readily available within the public domain (for the discussion and analysis of models for example) is rarely specifically focused on the unique needs of Northern Alberta and judgment has been required in terms of how it is used for this project.

II. Preliminary Supporting Research

From the research of the Primary phase, a number of factors of relevance are highlighted below.

Select Socioeconomic Factors

Key findings include:

- Generally the composition of the NADC region population is younger than the rest of the province. Northern Alberta has a smaller proportion of its population in the older age categories (i.e. 60 years plus) compared to the balance of the province (10.9% compared to 15.2%). Conversely, the Northern Alberta has a higher proportion of children and young adults under the age of 20 compared to the balance of the province (31.3% compared to 25.9%).
- The NADC region has a substantially higher proportion of persons with Aboriginal identity than the rest of the province (18.0% vs. 4.5%).
- The NADC region has similar total proportions of employment and unemployment as the rest of Alberta. However, the rate of unemployment in many of the smaller communities within the NADC region is significantly higher than the larger communities. This is evidenced by the average unemployment rate for NADC communities being 13% as compared to 5% for communities outside the NADC.
- The NADC region had a substantially higher proportion of persons 25-64 years old who had not obtained a certificate, diploma or degree as compared to the rest of Alberta (23.5% compared to 14.7%).
- The NADC region has a substantially smaller proportion of immigrants than the rest of the province (6.3% compared to 17.5%). However, there is some evidence of a growing need for foundational learning among these individuals, family members and other temporary foreign workers.

Barriers Faced by Foundational Learning Students

Key barriers include:

- **Educational Planning**— lack of awareness regarding options and costs and prerequisites and poor study skills.
- **Socio-Cultural Barriers** – reluctance to leave “home”, poor mentors or role models, mismatched aspirations, and difficulty “fitting in” with learning styles and institutional culture.
- **Physical Barriers** –there is a higher propensity for individuals with poor foundational skills to be “handicapped” and in general, there is a lack of reliable, regular and affordable transportation.
- **Childcare** – lack of quality, reliable and affordable childcare.
- **System Gaps** – lack of technology supports and continuity between systems, especially when there have been delays.
- **Costs** – not covered by some programs, cut backs in supports for disabled, cumbersome and confusing financial support system, eligibility issues for some on-reserve individuals and limits on amounts otherwise available, and higher than “average” costs for housing, transportation and food.
- **Admission criteria** - lack of recognition of prior learning gained through life and work experiences or small grade point averages or missing prerequisites.

Potential Major Policy Changes

The Government of Canada has signalled through *Action Plan 2012* that social funding mechanisms, such as social impact bonds (SIBs), with enhanced input from local stakeholders, may play a greater role in the future. (Through a SIB, a government contracts with a partner organization to deliver a particular service, with payment conditional on improvements to an associated social outcome. The delivery agency obtains funding from a private financier or philanthropic entity or other investors. If the social outcome is achieved, the social impact bondholder receives a risk-adjusted rate of return from the government, while the government saves money because the improved social outcome offsets future expenditures.)

Commensurate with the social funding policy, at this time, the Government of Canada has not indicated a level of funding or strategy for existing programs such as those associated with Sector Councils, or Skills and Partnership Fund — Aboriginal (SPF), and Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS) that are scheduled to expire or be reviewed after the 2014-15 fiscal year.

Additional analysis and discussion of the preceding background factors as well existing programming and policies and positions of the Governments of Alberta and Canada is contained in Chapter 2 – Environmental Scan.

III. Student Performance

Generally speaking, according to a range of indicators including Diploma and Achievement Test results, as well as high school drop-out and transition rates, the preparedness and performance of Northern Alberta students is lower than that of students in the rest of the province, especially in areas of math and Social Studies and upon reaching the age range of 12-13. Comprehensive data and analysis at the School District and Census Division levels are presented in Chapter 3 – Summary and Analysis of Student Performance.

IV. Future Skills Requirements and Opportunities

Clear pathways to employment opportunities are important for many foundational learning students. In this regard, there are a number of occupations with skill levels that may be suitable to be integrated and contextualized to curriculums. These occupations are broken down by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada into Skill Level “C” (requiring a postsecondary certification) and Skill Level “D” (more experience oriented). In the absence of better information at the local college level, a number of occupations may have the best “prospects” for learners to obtain employment. Additional detail is presented in Chapter 4 – Occupational and Skills Analysis.

V. The Business Case for Increased Foundational Learning

There is a strong business case for increasing investment in foundational learning based upon:

- **Learning gap** - Using the proportion of individuals who do not hold high school diplomas as a surrogate of skill level, there is a fairly significant difference between the figure for Northern Alberta (33% of those over 15 years) and the figure for the balance of the province (23% of those over aged 15 years) resulting in approximately 22,000 individuals, of whom more than 52% are Aboriginals. Furthermore, the performance of primary and secondary students in Northern Alberta, as measured by Achievement Test and Grade 12 Diploma Exam results, drop-out and postsecondary transition rates and is lower than for the balance of the province, and these results likely play a strong role in deficits or weaknesses later in life.
- **Alignment with policies, goals and initiatives of the Governments of Alberta and Canada** – Both levels of government have set aggressive goals between now and 2014-15 with respect to improvements in high school completion rates, student performance, postsecondary attendance, available financial assistance for learners, economic development and greater global competitiveness, improving labour force participation and employment levels, reducing dependence on social programs, as well as gains in more efficient and cost-effective delivery of government programs and services. In some instances, separate goals have been set for FNMI individuals.
- **Economic benefits** – Improvements in educational levels are correlated strongly with reduced cost for the delivery of social and health programs, exploiting business booms and improved corporate profitability; and will be crucial to meet the projected labour force requirements (due to growth and attrition/retirement) of the oilsands and oil and gas industries given current royalty policies.
- **Direct cost-benefit** - Finally, the cost benefit analysis of expanding the foundational learning capacity of Clearinghouse Colleges by approximately 700 FLE students (representing approximately 50% of surplus capacity through to 2019) with an “investment” of \$9,000 per student and very conservative assumptions as to benefits of completion, cost sharing, earnings and productivity

improvement yields a hard or direct Return on Investment of approximately 7% to government and 22% to the private sector. For the Government of Alberta, the benefits are likely to be even more significant if other reduced costs are factored in for matters such as health care and social services.

A more detailed discussion of the business case is presented in Chapter 5 – Business Case Outlining the Need for Additional Foundational Learning, which is also supported by the contents of Chapter 2 – Environmental Scan and Chapter 3 – Summary and Analysis of Student Performance.

VI. Distillation of Key Findings from Discussions with Stakeholders

Key findings include:

- Generally speaking, goals, objectives and targets for programs are not well documented and follow up mechanisms and procedures could be enhanced, and there is a need for longer-term follow-up on a “holistic” basis.
- The need for improved access to social and support services (mental health, guidance counsellors, Aboriginal elders, dealing with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder mentors, coping or life skills programming, and school nurse etc).
- Changes to content with suggestions for more “softer skills” (increasing GED requirements and adopting some European system practices) and more math, science and physics.
- More stable funding to facilitate better long range planning, integration of “soft skills” (for which many employers will not provide funding or endorse training at lower levels) and mitigation of risks associated with program development.
- Improved transportation for learners.
- Extend eligibility periods for funding provided under some Human Services programs.
- A need for more reliable outcomes reporting and information sharing.
- There may be a need for more programming effort for immigrants and temporary foreign workers.

Additional discussion and analysis is presented in Chapter 6- Summary and Analysis of Stakeholder Consultations.

VII. Model Review Findings

This discussion is broken into a number of components according to the focus of the models.

Models for Curriculum Development and Delivery

Foundational learning, especially at lower “essential skills” levels, needs to be delivered in a way that it is, tasked based, employment oriented, and contextualized around the goals, experiences (including fears) and limitations of learners, and in a way that allows learners to readily absorb and stay abreast of progress.

Models for Building Capacity and Creating Pathways

A number of models reviewed have certain aspects or features that may be worthy of more detailed review as to how aspects may be adapted or adopted to overcome barriers, optimize delivery of foundational learning to enhance the number of postsecondary learners in Northern Alberta. The existing models that may warrant greater study for utilization or adaptation (in whole or in part) include:

- Pathways to Education
- Industry Shared
- System for Adult Basic Education Support (SABES)
- BC Construction Industry Skills Improvement Council
- Advising

- Dual Credit
- Career Pathways
- Manitoba Adult Learning Centres
- Wraparound

Each of these models is discussed and analyzed in more detail on pages 68 to 84 of Chapter 7 – Model Review.

Models to Address Financial Issues

In an era of restraint, the use of more creative financial solutions such as Social Impact Bonds (SIBs) and “pay for success” systems may be part of an array of “new and innovative” solutions.

Other financial models of interest include Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) and Incentive Bursaries or Scholarships to encourage attendance.

A more complete discussion of models to address financial issues is presented in pages 85 to 88 of Chapter 7 – Model Review.

Emerging Models or Research

The model that may hold the most promise is *Connecting Aboriginals to Manufacturing (CAM)* being undertaken by Workplace Experience Manitoba because of its holistic approach including:

- The initial counselling and assessment, which includes a holistic family approach and prepares participants to leave their home communities;
- The ongoing “wrap-around support” that is provided;
- Program content which is contextualized but highly relevant and provides participants with a credential and a strong base of skills (welding, electrical, drafting etc) to consider further education; and
- Strong employer involvement and mentoring, which has led to pathways for employment for participants.

A more complete discussion of emerging models and research is contained in pages 89 to 91 of Chapter 7 – Model Review.

Insights from Exploration of Trends and Activities in Other Countries

A number of emerging trends suggest movement toward more of a demand driven system and reward for achievement, which also argues for the need for greater emphasis on planning performance indicators and outcomes (and degree of difficulty) and the length of programs.

Both Australia and England have systems in which there are a greater number of services providers, including those from the private sector, and there might be thought of as competition for learners. Compensation (and/or the renewal of contracts to provide training services) is based on more specific achievement of goals or other indicators that are indicative of the degree of difficulty or cost in providing services, and greater emphasis will be placed on such factors when evaluating programs and determining funding.

The governance or delivery model/system in New Zealand may be worthy of exploration to determine if there are aspects that may help to improve foundational learning planning in Alberta or Northern Alberta. The New Zealand model/system has more substantial linkages between the various stakeholders that, in recognizing the complexity of the problem, may help to improve information flow and accountability. A national body with responsibility for foundational learning as well as the creation

of entities with mandates for specific groups (Maori and “Pacific Islanders”) may help to better represent the interests of these disadvantaged minorities that have rapidly growing populations (and bring the possibly a deterioration of skills, if not addressed).

A more complete discussion of trends and activities in other countries is contained in pages 92 to 106 of Chapter 7 – Model Review.

VIII. Recommendations

The principal recommendations arising from this study are summarized below.

Near-term Recommendations

The recommendations are categorized according to a number of themes or topics.

Curriculum Design and “In-Class” Delivery

1. Review policies and procedures to ensure that best practices are followed so that suitable learning atmospheres are created according to the backgrounds of individuals and that content, especially for lower skill leveled learners in programs with life skills and work place skills components is task-based and contextualized according to occupations and the backgrounds of the individuals.
2. As part of a broader strategy to improve linkages with other stakeholders, and to provide meaningful pathways to learners for engagement in the workforce, begin to consider how the skills needs and levels of difficulty for occupations, which are forecast to be in short supply, might be contextualized greater into curriculums.
3. Explore ways to enhance the effectiveness of on-line and video-conferencing approaches.

Planning and Administration

4. Begin to address potential weaknesses in the establishment of goals, performance metrics and ongoing monitoring of outcomes for programs and individuals.
5. Review existing policies and practices to address potential weaknesses in communication and information sharing among stakeholders including existing and potential learners, private sector employers and other levels of government.
6. Review existing policies and practices to explore gains that might be realized with respect to pooling of marketing, contract management, research and other related issues regarding linkages with stakeholders.

Linkages with the K-12 System

7. Explore the potential for more dual credit programming and sharing of facilities.
8. Explore to improve outcomes on Achievement and Diploma test exams, and other performance indicators such as graduation and transition rates.

Addressing Other Potentially Urgent Gaps

9. Investigate the need to consider the expansion of services to address a growing numbers of immigrants and temporary foreign workers.

10. As a temporary measure until other solutions are found (based on policy decisions), we would recommend that Clearinghouse colleges consult with other stakeholders to consider how the problems of expiration of Training for Work benefits after 30 months and inequitable funding for some First Nations learners might be resolved.

Program Funding

11. Based on the business case, it is recommended that strong consideration be given to increasing the resources available for the delivery of foundational learning programming and that planning activities take account of factors such as distance, remoteness, program complexity and administration requirements that may affect or increase costs.
12. It is recommended that the concept of an “Education Maintenance Allowance” (EMA) be considered to encourage secondary students, particularly those from low income families, to stay in school and achieve satisfactory progress.

Longer-term Recommendations

The following recommendations relate to dealing with a potential new paradigm or “landscape” that may emerge for foundational learning policy.

1. It is recommended that Clearinghouse college planners begin to become more familiar with social funding concepts and possibilities, such as Social Impact Bonds, as possible alternative to direct funding by the Government of Alberta.
2. It is recommended that Clearinghouse college planners explore ways and means (including consideration of models/systems in other countries such as New Zealand) that might facilitate more effective relationships or partnerships in the future on a continuous improvement basis.