

Pre-employment Training

Prepared for the
Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse

Prepared by:
Beverly MacKeen PhD

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Pre-employment Training

The Northern Alberta Clearinghouse Project is a partnership of northern colleges who each year identify a number of priority research topics. The partner colleges are: Fairview College, Grand Prairie Regional College, Keyano College, Lakeland College and Northern Lakes College. The investigation of relevant issues as well as industry requirements for pre-employment training in northern Alberta colleges was one such priority topic. The terms of reference also included a requirement to search for possible partnership projects that colleges could undertake.

Methodology

Several college deans of trades and technology were contacted to obtain clarification of the issues in pre-employment programs. Senior staff from the Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Division were asked to comment on the departmental view of the merits of pre-employment initiatives.

A number of stakeholders were interviewed to gain an understanding of their experiences and perspective on the issues. The stakeholders included employers, industry associations and the Alberta Aboriginal Apprenticeship Project staff.

A Program Head from Northern Lakes College provided detailed information about a partnership project that the College has introduced for the oil and gas industry that could serve as a model for similar programs for trades preparation.

The Issues

The issues in development and delivery of pre-employment programs vary among member colleges in the Clearinghouse Project. One college reported that potential participants in pre-employment programs are more likely to take readily available and well paying oil field jobs than to chose an eight-month course. Other colleges indicated that pre-employment enrollment is dependent on the trade; where there was a perception of immediate employment as an apprentice following training, students enrolled. This “spottiness” is in marked contrast to the pressures to provide a sufficient number of training seats to meet the demand for apprenticeship technical training.

College spokesmen were agreed on one major issue. High school counsellors and teachers do not have information and an understanding of the role that pre-employment programs can play in facilitating a student’s entrance to the apprenticeship system. Consequently, students are not presented with this option when they are examining career choices. There was consistent frustration concerning the colleges’ inability to send the message about these programs to the appropriate sources within their catchment area.

With the current economy generating extremely low unemployment, construction contractors have looked to college pre-employment programs as a source of entry level workers. With enrollment inconsistent, college administrators are hesitant to invest in the development of programs that may not be fiscally viable.

Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training

Senior staff from the Division provided information about the perception of pre-employment courses as part of the larger apprenticeship system. The Executive Director indicated that the department recognizes the value of learning and views pre-employment training as valuable preparation for apprenticeship.

The Manager of Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board Operations indicated that the Board actively supports pre-employment training. The Board has approached the Minister with a proposal that enhanced “pre-apprenticeship” training be included in the range of publicly funded programs. The proposal would have resulted in programs that could be described as closer to pre-trades training than pre-employment. The Minister was unable to approve implementation of the proposal.

The issue of promotion of apprenticeship and pre-employment training was discussed with the Divisional Co-ordinator of Promotion. The lack of awareness of the benefits of a trade career among school officials is a long-standing concern of all trades stakeholders.

The Division continues to create and distribute print materials about the trades, with schools being the target audience. The latest is an information brochure, “RAP for Parents” that promotes the benefit of early involvement in a trades career. Divisional staff also promote and circulate the joint industry/government sponsored CD ROM, *Trade Up!*, which targets junior and senior high school students with information about the positive aspects of a trades career. A recent and successful endeavour was an information session held for Zones 2 and 3 guidance counsellors. The counsellors were familiarized with trades occupations, entrance requirements and routes to enrollment. They were given the opportunity to ask questions and to discuss preferences for future information. The seminar, face-to-face format, was received very positively.

A Model Partnership Project

This project included an examination of possible partnerships in the delivery of pre-employment training.

A program head from Northern Lakes College provided details of the development and delivery of a partnered program designed to train oil industry workers. The program is unique, particularly in the way it was developed.

The program was developed to encourage area residents to engage in training that would allow them to take advantage of work in the oil industry. In order to ensure that the program met the needs of employers, a task force was struck, including representatives of local contractors, high schools, the Big Stone Band, Indian and Northern Affairs, oil companies and the College. The mandate of the task force was to oversee development of a program that would result in employable graduates whose skills would be suitable for work in the industry.

A consultant who is proficient in program development and who has experience with instruction for Aboriginal groups was hired. He supervised a survey of potential employers to determine what competencies were required of employees, how many vacancies were forecast, recommended training methodology and what grade equivalency would be recommended.

The result was an integrated, two-year curriculum that contained self-enhancement themes, learning skills, acquisition of safety certification, and overview of the industry and basic skills.

The curriculum is integrated in that it is a workplace essential skills program, with basic instruction embedded in the language and materials of the workplace. A good deal of the learning requires teamwork. Field trips resulted in lessons that used the observations of the field trip in class assignments; for example, blueprint drawing would be based on the details

of a recently visited gas installation. Reading, science and math assignments would use industry literature and problems.

The appropriate Apprenticeship Entrance Examination is the exit standard.

The first class had an initial enrollment of 25, with 23 eventual graduates. All 23 were employed in the industry at the time of reporting.

A second program is currently underway. The curriculum was re-validated and refined using feedback from the employment community prior to the second program offering.

Development funding came from a combination of industry contribution and some Indian and Northern Affairs funding. Delivery, including student support, was funded through a combination of Employment Insurance, Alberta Skills for Work and regional Bands.

The Alberta Aboriginal Apprenticeship Project

The Alberta Aboriginal Apprenticeship Project is a result of an Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board project that followed up on the recommendations of the *National Aboriginal Participation in Apprenticeship* study. The organization provided the following overview information.

The purpose of the project is to “increase Aboriginal participation in apprenticeship and to promote apprenticeship training in Aboriginal communities”. A targeted Aboriginal apprenticeship strategy is one solution to address the skills gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and the skills shortages now evident in the province.

Funding for the project is shared by the federal government, the Alberta government, educational jurisdictions and Aboriginal groups from First Nations and Metis organizations.

The project will focus on an awareness program to remove the main barriers that impede Aboriginal entry in trades and three industry-driven pilot projects (Edmonton, Fort McMurray and High Level) to assist Aboriginal people to enter and complete apprenticeship training programs.

A steering committee with membership from industry, government, educational jurisdictions and Aboriginal groups oversees the project. Future offices are planned for Fort McMurray and High Level.

The staff of the project are aware of the benefits of pre-employment training and have been involved with several related programs. Through their experiences they have come to a number of conclusions. The first is that standard educational prerequisites for pre-employment are out of the reach of many from the Aboriginal community. Secondly, this group requires instruction and experience in life-management skills and a greater understanding of the world of work. Their recommendation is that participants complete life-skills/upgrading and then go on to a pre-trades program. This would include trades exploration with time spent in each of a number of trades and then into pre-employment training in the trade of choice.

The spokesman for the project was asked to comment on the transferability of the Northern Lakes College petroleum industry program to the trades. The response was very positive. There was an indication that the project could be involved in such a trades related program.

The recommendation was that the Western Cree Alliance, Lesser Slave Lake Regional Council and bands of the North Peace should be approached for support and participation from the beginning.

The Construction Industry

The construction industry is experiencing a tight labour market. This is reflected in the marked increase in apprenticeship enrollment over the past several years. The petroleum industry has expressed concern that it competes for entry level workers from the same sources as the trades.

The Trades Co-ordinator from PCL Contractors, a large industrial construction firm, indicated that his company is still relatively successful in attracting entry workers into a first year apprenticeship. He has also hired graduates of pre-employment programs, primarily from NAIT. At this point, the supply of workers is such that there is little interest in participating in innovative projects to increase worker supply.

The President of Merit Contractors Association reported that his member firms through the Association are concentrating on hiring and retaining apprentices. This year, the Association has budgeted \$600,000 for apprentice tuition support. Any shortages that exist tend to be in specialized occupations where there is not a long term need.

Discussion and Implications

Participation in pre-employment programs among northern residents is not consistent. This leaves colleges in the position of knowing that they have valuable programs that lead to employment, but hesitant to risk the expense of preparing and marketing the program when the enrollment is uncertain.

One of the factors that contribute to this dilemma is the current availability of jobs in the petroleum industry for individuals who do not possess either apprenticeship or post secondary prerequisites. The cyclical nature of the

petroleum industry can lead to unfortunate situations for some of these workers.

A study of labour market conditions in Northeast Alberta, *Edmonton N.E. Labour Market Analysis*, in 28 Alberta communities examined unemployment by industry cross tabulated with age and highest educational attainment. In those communities whose major industries were in the petroleum sector, the highest rates of unemployment were found among young males lacking high school completion whose previous employment had been petroleum industry related.

The national study, *Aboriginal Participation in Apprenticeship*, presents a well-documented overview of barriers to participation in apprenticeship for Aboriginal people. Two of the major barriers are lack of educational prerequisites and distance to locations of technical training. The Alberta Aboriginal Apprenticeship Project is an outcome of the national work. Project staff confirmed the barriers cited. Further, the staff expressed encouragement that northern colleges are in a good position to explore partnership projects, targeted for Aboriginals, designed to provide upgrading, life/work skills and technical skills that prepare participants to enter the trades.

Promotions and marketing staff from Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training share the frustration of the colleges in the difficulty in raising awareness of the benefits of careers in the trades among school counsellors. The inability to maximize communication with junior and senior high school students is a long-standing and an ongoing priority of AIT staff. College staff also continue to raise awareness in their area schools. Unfortunately, no new solutions came to light in this research.

There are two possibilities that could be considered for the future of pre-employment training, neither of them short-term endeavours.

With the northern colleges located in close proximity to several First Nations Bands and Metis communities, young people from those communities could become students of a partnership program for pre-employment training

developed in a similar fashion to the Northern Lakes College petroleum program.

The first of the positive aspects is related to the demographics of the area. The workforce, particularly in construction, is aging as is the rest of the population. The average age of the Aboriginal population is considerably lower than the non-Aboriginal group. The youth of the Aboriginal population will be vital to the workforce supply of the future, as the current workforce retires.

The second positive aspect of providing an integrated learning program for Aboriginal youth is the positive social and economic impact such training could have on their communities. Unemployment and low education levels are higher in many of these communities than others. Leaders recognize the necessity of increasing youth educational attainment to address unemployment and social problems.

Conditions for the development of new programs for Aboriginal communities are positive. Specifically, the Alberta Aboriginal Apprenticeship Project is supportive of the concept of an integrated learning program. Facilitating such projects is within the mandate of the organization and the staff members are prepared to be of assistance to colleges interested in participating

The second possibility involves preparing pre-employment training programs designed for unemployed workers from the petroleum sector. This is a longer term undertaking that requires monitoring activity in the oil and gas industry in order to have timely programs available for oil and gas workers who become unemployed in a downturn.

People who have experience in the field bring skill sets to a training program that would provide a foundation for training. Program design would need to consider what those skill sets are in order to avoid duplication.

Sources

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Contacts

Chris Donovan
Trades Co-ordinator
PCL Contractors (780) 435 – 9826

Gary Dorn
Manager, Board Planning and Support
Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training (780) 422 – 4768

Shirley Dul
Executive Director
Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training (780) 422 – 1185

Maureen Fraser
Program Head
Northern Lakes College (780) 849 – 8611

Lloyd Gwin
Alberta Aboriginal Apprenticeship Project (780) 408 – 1840

Karen Hildebrandt
Merit Contractors Association (780) 455 – 5999

Bob Keddy
Dean, Trades and Technology
Fairview College..... (780) 835 – 6636

Stephen Kushner
President
Merit Contractors Association (780) 455 – 5999

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Brian Lupul
Dean, Trades and Technology
Lakeland Community College (780) 853 – 8536

Marla McCready
Training Director
Merit Contractors Association (780) 455 – 5999

Patricia Peterson
Program Promotion
Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training (780) 427 – 8765

Olie Schell
Director, External Operations
Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training (780) 427 – 5770