MAKING EMPLOYMENT AND SKILLS TRAINING WORK FOR INDIGENOUS YOUTH:
Promising practices for program design and delivery

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A note on context

Context is crucial to any conversation about the employment, education, and training experiences and outcomes of Indigenous youth. Canada's historic and ongoing legacy of colonialism – of which the residential "school" system is a major part – continues to have daily impacts on the lives of Indigenous communities and youth. As such, it is essential that any workforce development initiative geared towards Indigenous youth is designed and implemented with this context in mind. Those leading or supporting these programs – particularly non-Indigenous settlers – are encouraged to engage in ongoing listening and learning, continually reflect on their own power and privilege, and familiarize themselves with key documents. These include the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report, Indian Act, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action, and Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Calls for Justice.

Indigenous youth in Canada continue to face systemic and structural barriers to accessing, participating, and succeeding in employment, education, and training. Funded by the Future Skills Centre, the Two-Eyed Seeing Network aims to engage a network of Indigenous communities, industry leaders, workforce and social development experts, and education and training providers to address barriers and establish a shock-proof pathway to work for Indigenous youth in British Columbia. Led by the Construction Foundation of British Columbia, project partners include Two Eyed Seeing Consulting CCC Inc., Foresight Cleantech Accelerator Centre, Vancouver Island University, the Electrical Joint Training Committee, and the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC).*

To support the Two-Eyed Seeing Network in its activities, SRDC was tasked with conducting secondary research on promising practices related to workforce development and employment and skills training for Indigenous youth. This brief offers a summary of promising practices that emerged from a review of internal documents from the work of SRDC and our partners. While by no means exhaustive or generalizable across all contexts, we hope this document can offer a useful starting point for those seeking to develop and deliver accessible, meaningful, and equitable workforce development initiatives for Indigenous youth.

This is part of a series of three research briefs developed for the Two-Eyed Seeing Network. To learn more about the Two-Eyed Seeing Network, provide feedback on this resource, or ask questions about the project, visit www.2esn.ca or send an email to info@2eyedseeing.com.

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*SRDC is an independent, non-profit social policy research and evaluation organization with staff located across Canada. The team supporting the Two-Eyed Seeing Project includes those of Indigenous and non-Indigenous ancestry, all of whom are located on the unceded and unsurrendered land of the Algonquin Anishnaabeg people, in the city colonially known as Ottawa.

Acknowledge and address barriers to participation

Unreliable internet or technology access, a lack of government-issued identification, housing or food insecurity, transportation barriers, mental health challenges, experiences of discrimination, and mistrust stemming from historic and ongoing racism and colonialism are just a few barriers to Indigenous youth accessing, participating, and succeeding in employment programming. An awareness of these barriers is crucial to offering effective, appropriate, and culturally-safe employment programming to Indigenous youth. Further, service providers should understand that these barriers are not a result of inherent or individual deficits among Indigenous youth: they are structural and systemic in nature.

The following are just a few strategies that can help service providers address the day-to-day barriers encountered by Indigenous youth:

- Pursue several **outreach strategies** to reach youth where they are at (e.g., social media, radio, community bulletins).

- Hire **staff** who are friendly and welcoming when engaging with youth.

- Avoid overly-strict **eligibility criteria.**

- Aim to simplify the **application process** and support youth to access programs (e.g., through obtaining documents or identification, filling out any required paperwork or application form).

- Seek to address any **material barriers** to participation by removing fees, offering food, providing transportation, or similar approaches.

- Ensure programs and any outreach materials are **easily understandable** and highlight the most important information (e.g., contact details, dates).

- Inform prospective participants about the **benefits and potential drawbacks** or costs of programs, including the potential loss of other supports or services.

- Consider alternative ways to **reach underserved or overlooked youth** (e.g., offering programs in rural or remote communities, supporting access to online or distance training).

Hire the right staff

The individuals leading employment programs can play a major role in helping Indigenous youth feel comfortable, safe, welcome, and included. Staff, instructors, and providers have an understanding of cultural safety, strong interpersonal skills, and the ability to adapt a program's content or approach to reflect the needs and experiences of Indigenous youth. Employee education and training can foster cultural awareness, build confidence and capacity, and increase understanding of and commitment to decolonization, anti-racism, and social justice. However, employment programs should also prioritize hiring Indigenous staff, instructors, and providers whose backgrounds, experiences, and identities reflect the youth they serve. Inviting Indigenous staff to inform or guide a program through their own lived experience offers an invaluable opportunity to foster cultural safety and relevance. The presence of Indigenous employees can also provide youth participants with role models who they can see themselves in.

Cultural safety: "An outcome based on respectful engagement that recognizes and strives to address power imbalances inherent in [systems…] It results in an environment free of racism and discrimination, where people feel safe when receiving [services]."

Cultural humility: "A process of self-reflection to understand personal and systemic biases and to develop and maintain respectful processes and relationships based on mutual trust. Cultural humility involves humbly acknowledging oneself as a learner when it comes to understanding another's experience."

Source: First Nations Health Authority

Prioritize participant safety and wellbeing

Workforce development programs should seek to acknowledge, address, and account for historic and ongoing colonialism, racism, and systems of power and oppression when designing and delivering services for Indigenous youth. More specifically, applying a trauma-informed lens to programming calls on service providers to recognize the role of current and intergenerational trauma in youths' lives and support them accordingly. Such an approach is especially important when working with Indigenous youth given their increased risk of exposure to trauma resulting from violence, colonization, over-representation in the child welfare and criminal-legal systems, and Canada's legacy of residential schools. Ensuring that employment services for Indigenous youth are informed by this lens can help avoid re-traumatization and contribute to their success within a given program.

Consider the following four principles when seeking to design and implement workforce development initiatives for Indigenous youth that adopt a trauma-informed approach:

Programs should be underpinned by an **understanding of trauma and violence**, as well as their impact on peoples' lives and behaviour. This can be supported through staff education and training, including through sharing relevant resources.

Seek to enhance **physical and emotional safety** in program environments, including in learning spaces, policies, and other practices. For example, checking in with youth regularly can offer participants the chance to share feelings or opinions without fear of judgment or repercussions.

Foster opportunities for **choice, collaboration, and connection** among participants. Flexible services where Indigenous youth have agency and are involved in decision-making can help contribute to this.

Promote a **strengths-based and capacity-building approach,** emphasizing nurturing environments that build on the strengths Indigenous youth already have.

Offer effective program components

Employment programs that combine multiple service offerings can help meet youth where they are at in their journeys, and are associated with greater success. For Indigenous youth, certain types of interventions may be especially useful. Early and ongoing opportunities for **career exploration** (e.g., through job shadowing) can help expose youth to diverse career paths and contribute to greater program effectiveness. More **hands-on or experiential approaches** (e.g., on-the-job skills training, site visits) that more closely reflect Indigenous ways of learning can help build Indigenous youths' interest in and ownership over this process. Various forms of **skills training** (e.g., technical/job-specific skills, Essential Skills, employability/interpersonal/life skills) have also proven effective, depending in part on how work-ready an individual youth is. Meanwhile, access to **mentorship or coaching** – both in and outside the workplace – may also be valuable for Indigenous youth. This includes supporting youth to develop relationships with mentors or coaches that are intergenerational in nature, as well as with those who can speak not only to employment, but also to culture, family, education, and so forth. Lastly, programs may wish to offer interventions to support youths' longer-term success upon **transitioning out of employment and skills training.** Examples might include support with résumés, referrals to other service providers, job search assistance, and guidance for navigating workplace incidents or challenges, including those related to racism or other forms of discrimination.

Incorporate wraparound supports

Employment programs that seek to support Indigenous youth in all aspects of their lives can help them thrive both within and outside of the labour market. Examples of the types of wraparound supports that those designing and implementing these programs might consider are offered below.

Wraparound supports can benefit both Indigenous youth and their families, and should be ongoing, flexible, and "cradle-to-grave" in nature. By establishing relationships with culturally-specific partners such as Indigenous youth councils, Friendship Centres, and organizations that provide services directly to Indigenous youth, employment programs can further grow their capacity to provide or refer youth to safe and accessible wraparound services.

Adopt an inclusive and supportive approach

A program's overall approach is also key to fostering an environment where Indigenous youth can participate and benefit. The following values can help guide welcoming and effective employment programming for Indigenous youth:

Strengths-based. Rather than focus only on weaknesses, explore ways to build Indigenous youths' assets or strengths rather than address weaknesses, and seek opportunities to recognize, share, and celebrate youths' successes. Those leading workforce development initiatives can also acknowledge the courage and perseverance of Indigenous youth in light of systemic barriers, and approach program delivery with this in mind.

Examples of wraparound supports in employment and skills training

Identification and documents (e.g., accessing a SIN or driver's license)

Technology and internet access

Clothing (e.g., work uniforms)

Transportation (e.g., bus pass)

Physical and mental health services (e.g., trauma-informed/ victim services, Elder counselling)

Caregiving support

Food

Income support

Language courses

Housing (e.g., rental supplements)

Social events

Peer mentorship and support

Youth-informed/led. Opportunities for self-directed learning may help youth feel a greater sense of ownership over and investment in a program. Programs may also wish to seek input from participants to ensure that success is defined and measured inclusively and in a way that resonates with Indigenous youth.

Flexible. Wherever possible, service providers working with Indigenous youth should incorporate flexibility into their employment programs. This may take the form of flexible pathways through services, flexible entry/re-entry/exit points, access to drop-in services, and the availability of individualized service pathways based on youths' personal needs, strengths, and interests. Where working in partnership with communities, flexibility to adapt programming to their unique context and circumstances will also be important. Flexibility is also key to supporting accessibility, ensuring that programs can be adapted to address diverse learning styles, explore alternate assessment practices, and offer accommodations for participants with disabilities.

Relationship-focused. The importance of positive relationships within employment programming for Indigenous youth should not be overlooked. A focus on strong and trusting connections between Indigenous youth and staff can help staff better understand and address youths' needs and offer emotional support. Building relationships between youth and their communities as well as with other participating youth can also contribute to a program's success.

Develop programs with Indigenous youth in mind

The intentional inclusion of cultural or traditional content within employment and skills training can support youth to be more comfortable and confident with their identities, establish a sense of belonging and stronger community connections, and encourage active participation and engagement. This can take several forms. Programs might seek to incorporate activities with cultural relevance or significance, for instance traditional crafts (e.g., making moose-hide slippers, beading), land-based activities (e.g., fishing), or fostering connections between youth and Elders. Embracing culturally-relevant approaches to teaching and learning (e.g., hands-on methods, story-telling, focus on relationships) and integrating concepts such as self-determination into curriculum are also important considerations. Where a program is focused on a specific sector or connects youth directly to jobs, providers should consider whether these opportunities are meaningful to Indigenous youth and in alignment with their cultural values. Further, initiatives can also support youth to explore how to translate cultural knowledge and skills to an employment context, along with the value of doing so.

Kirkness and Barnhardt's **4 R's of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility** offer a helpful framework for designing employment and skills training with Indigenous youth in mind. The **Outland Youth Employment Program** offers one example of this framework in practice: the program features a curriculum informed by traditional and Western knowledge, as well as the inclusion of cultural activities such as drum making.

Workforce development initiatives designed with Indigenous youth in mind have the potential to be grounded in strong community relationships, informed by traditional wisdom and values, and deeply reflective of Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. Given this, those involved in this work may explore the feasibility and value of offering programs or cohorts exclusively for Indigenous youth participants.

Introduced in 2019, the **Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce's Indigenous Engagement Charter** is intended to serve as a roadmap for businesses in their commitment to advancing reconciliation. Signatories commit to the following six actions over a three-year term:

1. Develop an internal Indigenous engagement strategy;

2. Educate their workplace on Indigenous history and culture through training;

3. Enhance HR practices to attract, hire, and retain more Indigenous workers;

4. Implement procurement practices, actions, and partnerships;

5. Reinforce relationships and support Indigenous communities through community involvement; and

6. Provide clear annual reporting of actions undertaken in the Indigenous Engagement Charter Program.

These commitments and their associated metrics can provide a helpful starting point for employers seeking to more meaningfully commit to reconciliation within their work.

Engage with partners

Job- or sector-specific employment and training programs are generally more effective when relevant employers are actively involved in design and delivery. In addition to ensuring programs are aligned with local labour market needs, engaged employers can enhance experiential learning opportunities by offering work placements, site visits, or mentorship. Closer relationships with employers can also help programs gain knowledge about workplaces that are most likely to be safe and welcoming for Indigenous youth, including those that have adopted practices related to anti-oppression, anti-racism, and cultural safety. Further, service providers may be able to support employers in improving their approach to Indigenous youth inclusion. This could include helping companies understand the benefits of hiring Indigenous youth, offering education or training opportunities, challenging harmful attitudes or beliefs, and providing insight into inclusive workplace policies (e.g., time off for cultural activities).

Those leading workforce development initiatives can also ensure that the appropriate Indigenous partners – for instance, Indigenous-serving organizations, Elders, and other community leaders – are meaningfully involved. In doing so, programs should devote ample time to developing positive and trusting relationships. They should also seek to involve Indigenous partners throughout design and delivery, rather than only on an as-needed basis. Such a process can build community buy-in and create the groundwork for programs to support youth to connect with Indigenous leaders and other culturally-specific services.

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