Engagement on the Future of the Skills and Partnership Fund

What we learned report

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Skills and Employment Branch

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1. Introduction

Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) supports skills development and job training for Indigenous people through SPF and the Indigenous Skills and Employment Training (ISET) program. SPF is a project-based program introduced in 2010. It funds partnerships between Indigenous organizations([i]) and industry employers, thereby complementing ISET by directly linking Indigenous people to specific training and jobs.

The Government of Canada is reviewing SPF to ensure it continues to meet the needs of Indigenous communities. ESDC carried out cross-Canada engagement from January to July 2021. Participants([ii]) provided feedback on what worked well as well as areas that have room for improvement.

This report summarizes what ESDC heard from participants across the country, and identifies future priority areas for investment.

2. Engagement

Due to the global pandemic, ESDC held all engagement sessions online. Participants could opt to attend a French or English session. ESDC officials met with Indigenous organizations, SPF and ISET agreement holders, industry and academic institutions, other federal departments, as well as provinces and territories. Invitations went to over 350 organizations, with nearly 200 participating in the sessions. In total, ESDC held 50 separate sessions (see Annex for complete list of participating organizations):

- · 16 sessions for 106 Indigenous organizations
- · 3 sessions for 31 college and university representatives
- · 3 sessions for over 20 industry partners and employers
- · 13 sessions, 1 for each provincial/territorial government
- · 15 sessions for 16 federal government departments and agencies

Questions were grouped into 5 themes:

1. Program strengths
2. Administrative and process challenges
3. Renewed relationship
4. Building partnerships
5. Future opportunities and priorities

A discussion guide that explained each theme was provided to participants in advance, along with the presentation material.

Following each meeting, ESDC sent session notes to participants for review and comments. ESDC also included a survey of questions asked during the sessions for participants to share with colleagues. ESDC received 17 completed feedback surveys and written submissions.

3. What we learned

Over the course of 7 months, participants engaged in rich discussions and offered valuable feedback on a variety of themes surrounding SPF. Participants also identified opportunities for the future of SPF. They noted opportunities to foster a supportive networking environment and to improve intake and administrative processes. The need to align Indigenous and federal priorities through more strategic investments was also underlined.

1.1 Program Strengths

The sessions were a chance to learn from experience and build on the strengths of SPF. Discussions included a focus on what works well and what makes the program unique. Participants highlighted that SPF:

· is innovative and flexible

· helps establish partnerships

· provides a way to support government priorities in Indigenous communities

· addresses needs by fostering employment and creating local opportunities

· promotes cultural exchange between Indigenous organizations and partners

Participants highlighted the innovative approach of SPF. This enables organizations to tailor supports and approaches to meet the needs of their clients. The program's flexibility enables organizations to face economic downturns by meeting industry and employer specific training needs.

Participants also noted SPF's success in building partnerships and connecting employers with employment ready Indigenous people. SPF has supported a variety of Indigenous organizations to lead projects. This includes enabling a range of proponents to participate from national and regional organizations to entrepreneurial ventures. It has created spinoff opportunities that extend beyond the life of projects. This includes, for example, social enterprises. Government participants indicated that SPF has been key for training Indigenous people to participate in federally funded projects, by creating space to target skills training to match project needs. Similarly, all partners

highlighted employee and employer satisfaction with their involvement in SPF. Employer/industry partnerships have created pathways to specific jobs and encouraged clients to take the next level of training after an initial work experience.

Most participants acknowledged that participation in SPF has resulted in many individuals finding jobs and progressing along the employment continuum. Participants mentioned that this helps to improve self-esteem and quality of life. Participants also said that SPF has supported community needs and priorities, while providing for Indigenous control over community development. For example, participants were able to deliver successful trades projects in numerous Indigenous communities, resulting in skilled employees staying and working in their communities. SPF helps to incorporate Indigenous culture in the learning and training component of projects. This has proven to be a key factor in its success.

SPF has provided the opportunity for cultural exchange to take place between Indigenous organizations and industry as well as training institutions. This is an unexpected result of SPF noted by participants. Improving cultural awareness has led industry representatives to engage Indigenous communities in planning for further partnership opportunities.

1.2   Administrative and process challenges

Although participants had successes to share, they also faced challenges with SPF. Common concerns raised regarding administrative and process challenges included:

· the intake and application processes

· the ability to address unique community needs

· connecting projects with other programs and/or sources of funding to support ongoing success

· measuring successes

The intake process for SPF has taken place 4 times since 2010. The most recent call for proposals took place in 2016. Participants indicated that the timing of previous intake processes has not aligned with project opportunities. This leads to missed opportunities where projects cannot start in time to meet the needs of employers. Many participants expressed the need for a better option for responding to opportunities as they come up. Examples given included a continuous intake process or a targeted or solicited approach.

Most participants felt that the current application process was time consuming and difficult. They brought forward suggestions including submitting project concepts to determine the need for a full application. Indigenous organizations want support in the application process, preferring a shorter process with follow-up and ongoing feedback. They hoped that this would help to reduce the time between project application and approval.

Some of the participants indicated that program requirements have not always aligned with community practices or local conditions. They indicated that SPF should be more flexible in order to meet the priorities of smaller communities. For example, full-time employment after training may not be the best target for some communities. Some communities prefer part-time employment to align with traditional lifestyles. Community or opportunity location can affect project costs, timelines and availability of resources. Examples given included higher costs of wrap around services (childcare, meals, and transportation). The availability of some of those resources in remote or isolated communities is limited. Participants suggested that funding envelopes for these expenses be flexible enough to reflect participant realities.

Furthermore, organizations continue to deal with many challenges. These challenges include issues relating to mental health, addiction, transportation, intergenerational impacts and ongoing traumas from residential schools and COVID-19. Restrictions in place due to COVID-19 (capacity limits, closures, requirements to go online) created issues requiring organizations to pivot and adapt training projects.

Some participants discussed the need for long-term project support. Longer project lengths would support retaining experienced staff while limiting the need to recruit and train new staff. This would enable organizations to better support clients. SPF cannot provide ongoing core funding to organizations. However, these comments suggest that there is a need for transition support as project funding ends. There is a need to help sustain successful projects in the medium and long term. Helping organizations identify and connect with other complementary programs and sources of funds could assist with this.

Many of the Indigenous organizations noted using SPF as a natural bridge from the ISET program. For example, clients have benefited from pre-employment training from ISET then gained job-specific skills through SPF. Some then returned for apprenticeship training through ISET. Indigenous organizations spoke about the positive relationships they have with ISET agreement holders. This has allowed them to work together to plan, select clients for participation in SPF projects, and offer advice.

All participants expressed the need to measure success as identified by Indigenous communities. Reporting on project results should focus on meeting the employment, training, and education needs of communities, rather than on the number of jobs created. For example, improving employability should not be measured by how quickly people find a job but by their success in maintaining long-term employment.

1.3   Renewed Relationship

Participants agreed that SPF has the potential to contribute to reconciliation efforts between the Government of Canada and Indigenous peoples. SPF could contribute by considering the unique needs of various Indigenous peoples across the country while supporting Indigenous economic growth. Common themes heard were:

- the need for Indigenous voices to shape Indigenous programming

- considering diverse cultures, traditions and locations

- enabling self-reliance by supporting organizational capacity building

- addressing and dismantling racism

The Government of Canada has committed to a renewed relationship with Indigenous peoples, based on recognizing rights, respect, co-operation, and partnership. This includes recognizing rights to advance self-determination and self-government. In this context, most participants suggested getting Indigenous perspectives in all program delivery aspects from priority setting to project selection to measuring success. Several participants recommended establishing an Indigenous-led committee to support communication, decision-making and accountability. Supporting Indigenous communities to plan and prioritize regional opportunities would help target investments that have meaningful local impacts.

SPF funding is available to First Nation, Inuit, Métis and unaffiliated Indigenous organizations that represent a variety of diverse cultures, traditions and locations. All have different realities that require program tailoring to ensure investments are being responsive to their needs. Many Indigenous participants indicated that a one-approach-fits-all does not reflect the diversity of relationships and each community's unique economic and social situation. They also reinforced the need to be mindful of program accessibility for remote or isolated communities. Community members often face the challenge of having to move to access training programs and employment opportunities.

Several participants mentioned that funding capacity development at an organizational level should be an ongoing priority for SPF. This would enable community self-reliance. Participants feel there is a lack of organizational capacity in areas such as proposal writing, along with partnership development and maintenance. This results in the need to bring in outside expertise, which limits the participant's opportunity to develop the necessary skills internally. They also felt that the department requesting frequent proposal revisions compromised project approval timelines. Funding could support organizational staff to build internal capacity and develop expertise in areas such as project development, proposal writing, and cultural competency training delivery.

Participants highlighted that racism is a challenge that many Indigenous communities and workers continue to face. This is a reality when dealing with industry partners and non-Indigenous workers at work sites. A lack of cultural sensitivity in the workplace creates barriers to Indigenous organizations finding partners and for Indigenous workers entering the workforce. Industry partners also recognized the need to better support Indigenous employees and provide them with a safe and inclusive work environment. Participants suggested supporting employers' cultural sensitivity and awareness prior to hiring Indigenous workers. This would help to build a solid foundation for sustainable relationships between industry and Indigenous partners.

Throughout the engagement process, many participants reflected that federal programs need to be better adapted to community needs and aspirations to better support self-determination.

1.4   Building partnerships

SPF requires Indigenous organizations to partner with industry employers to provide skills training for Indigenous people. The partnership model aims to facilitate lasting relationships between Indigenous organizations and established businesses. It also aims to equip Indigenous clients with a skillset for employment within specific industries.

During the engagement sessions several participants identified barriers to building meaningful partnerships between Indigenous communities and industry partners including:

·   identifying potential partners

·   the need for all parties to collaborate effectively

·   providing employers with incentives to continue to employ Indigenous employees

Participants across the board discussed the struggle to meet partners and establish relationships that align with upcoming opportunities. They identified the need to increase information sharing and networking opportunities to enable partnerships. Participants also expressed the need for networking opportunities among organizations to share best practices and learn from each other. All participants said they would benefit from a matchmaking type of service or networking events to connect potential partners.

Many also spoke of the need for partners at all levels to better plan and coordinate with each other. This would foster a more nurturing Indigenous economic development environment. Some see the current environment as competitive, as there is limited funding available. Restrictive parameters on funding discourages collaboration. Participants suggested that collaborating to align priorities and identify strategic investment opportunities could help support all partners involved. For example, industry partners suggested they could play a more prominent role in identifying in-demand skills to inform project and partnership development. All parties commented on the need to better coordinate investments. Connecting potential funding partners with projects in a more timely way could help maximize the impact on priorities for communities.

Some Indigenous organizations expressed difficulty in ensuring that industry partners honour employment commitments once projects end. Participants suggested that employer incentives could help create longer lasting jobs. Incentivizing employers could include finding creative solutions to barriers. For example, some participants indicated that industry partners and economic opportunities are often located outside of the community. As a result, Indigenous participants are reluctant to leave their community for training and employment purposes. Incenting employers to offer location-based opportunities could help project participants to stay in their communities.

1.5 Future opportunities and priorities

Participants reiterated that SPF must be flexible enough to address and respond to the evolving needs and priorities of Indigenous organizations, governments and partners. There is a need to maximize training and job readiness for specific jobs in priority industries and growing sectors. Key areas highlighted for training investments are:

· Indigenous community-based public service

· the health care sector

· small and medium-sized businesses along with entrepreneurs

· information technology

· infrastructure

· trades

· clean energy

· marine and blue economy

· other priority sectors

There are opportunities to address Indigenous social and economic needs by targeting specific areas that would build the capacity and self-sustainability of Indigenous communities. Organizations suggested including Indigenous public service as a priority area for investment. They mentioned training needed for financial workers, governance, community-based health representatives, early childhood educators, security officers, and support for maintaining and operating community infrastructure.

Health care as an occupation is a constant priority with high demand and excellent long-term career opportunities. Participants indicated there is an immediate need, in Indigenous communities and across the general population, for certified health care workers such as nurses, community care workers, and personal support workers.

SPF is great at supporting partnerships with large industry partners. However, participants felt there is a need to support small and medium-sized ones as well. Supporting Indigenous self-employed innovators and entrepreneurs was another opportunity mentioned by several participants. Providing training for entrepreneurs helps them succeed and can lead to additional jobs within the business.

The global pandemic has highlighted the need to address the digital divide. This has resulted in a significant impact to Indigenous communities as many do not have access to reliable internet. This leads to reduced training and employment opportunities. There is an immediate need to support digital literacy, broadband infrastructure development, and developing and upskilling technical support providers and other IT professionals.

SPF also has the potential to support planned infrastructure development. It could do this by providing funding for training and job opportunities in federal and provincial/territorial infrastructure projects. For example, over the coming years Canada will invest billions of dollars to renovate and construct federal government buildings, roads, broadband networks and energy systems. These projects will require contracting and subcontracting for skilled workers to support them.

Participants saw education and apprenticeship training in the trades as a way to create employment and develop a labour force. This is to contribute to housing and community infrastructure building and maintenance in Indigenous communities.

Several participants agreed there are opportunities in the clean energy field, including solar and wind power, with an emphasis on the North. Organizations can access both federal and provincial/territorial funding for new clean energy initiatives, infrastructure and zero-carbon economy projects.

Participants also discussed the marine and blue economy. They emphasized opportunities related to sustainable growth and prosperity in ocean-based energy, marine infrastructure, aquaculture, commercial fisheries, coastal and marine tourism, and ocean technology.

Resource-based opportunities continue to exist in mining, forestry and fishing. A few participants also mentioned the continuing need to build a robust, strong, skilled workforce in the transportation sector. There is also a need for trained pilots, truckers, mariners, and other workers. In the north, there is a need for training projects to support the remediating and reclaiming of mines.

4. Next Steps

The results and feedback from the engagement process are informing the next round of SPF funding, and the future of the program. Over time, improvements to SPF program design will aim to:

· help increase Indigenous participation in priority sectors

· improve employer commitment to sustained jobs

· make the program more responsive to a changing economy

· advance reconciliation

[i] The term Indigenous organizations refers to incorporated for-profit and not-for-profit Indigenous controlled organizations, Indigenous controlled unincorporated associations, Indian Act bands, Tribal Councils and Indigenous self-government entities.

[ii] The term participants refers to people who participated in the SPF engagement sessions.

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5. Annex: List of participating organizations

Indigenous organizations (106)

Aboriginal Community Career Employment Services Society

Aboriginal Labour Force Development Circle

Anishinabek Employment & Training Services

Anishinabek Nation, Union of Ontario Indians

The Mi'gmaq Maliseet Aboriginal Fisheries Management Association

Atikameksheng Anishnawbek (Whitefish Lake FN)

Bigstone Cree Nation

Build Inc.

Canadian Mountain Network

Val d'Or Native Friendship Centre

Centre for Aboriginal Human Resource Development Inc.

Champagne & Aishihik First Nation

First Nations Human Resources Development Commission of Quebec

First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission

Communauté Kitcisakik

Community Futures Treaty Seven

Conseil de la Nation Atikamekw

Council for Advancement of Native Development Officers

Dehcho First Nations

Dillon Consulting

Emineskin Cree Nation

Enoch Cree Nation

First Nations Financial Management Board

First Nations Technology Council

First Peoples Development Inc.

Gabriel Dumont Institute

Cree Nation Government

Grand River Employment and Training

Gwich'in Tribal Council

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami

Inuvialuit Regional Corporation

Kahnawà:ke's Economic Development Commission

Kakivak Association

Kee Tas kee Now Tribal Council

Kengjewin Teg Educational Institute

Kivaliq Inuit Association

Kwanlin Dun First Nation

Kyah Wiget Education Society

Labrador Aboriginal Training Partnership Inc.

Lil'wat Nation

Little Red River Cree First Nation

Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation

London District Chiefs Council

Mamaweswen – The North Shore Tribal Council

Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak

Manitoba Métis Federation

Matawa Employment and Training /Kiikenomaga Kikenjigewen Employment and Training Services

Meadow Lake Tribal Council

Métis Nation British Columbia

Métis Nation of Ontario

Métis Nation of Saskatchewan

Métis Settlements General Council

Mi'kmaq Confederacy of PEI

Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre

Mikisew Cree First Nation

Mishkeegogamang First Nation/Confederation College

Moose Cree First Nation

Musqueam Squamish Tsleil Waututlh

Na-Cho Nyak Dun First Nation

National Aboriginal Capital Corporation Association

National Indigenous Economic Development Board

Native Council of Nova Scotia

Niagara Peninsula Aboriginal Area Management Board

Nisga'a Employment Skills and Training

North East Native Advancing Society

North End Community Renewal Corporation

North Peace Tribal Council

North Shore Micmac District Council Inc.

Northern Career Quest Inc.

Northwest Territory Métis Nation

Nunatsiavut Government

Oakdale Employment and Training Society

Okanagan Training and Development Council

Oshki- Pimache-O-Win Education and Training Institute

Oshki-Wenjack

Oteenow Employment & Training Society

Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada

Peguis First Nation Training & Employment

Prince George Nacheko Aboriginal Employment and Training Association

Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec

Rupertsland Institute

Sagamok Development Corporation

Sagkeeng First Nation

Samson Cree Nation

Saskatchewan Indian Training Assessment Group

Scw'exmx Tribal Council

Selkirk First Nation

Seven Generation Education Institute

Sheshatshiu Innu Band Council

Shooniyaa Wa-Biitong

Shuswap Training & Employment Program

Southeast Resource Development Council

Ta'an Kwäch'än Council

Temiskaming Native Women's Support Group

Tlicho Government

Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation

Trade Winds to Success Training Society

Tribal Chiefs Employment & Training Services Association

Tribal Resources Investment Corporation

Tuangasuvvingat Inuit

Tulo Centre of Indigenous Economics

Victoria Native Friendship Centre

Western Cree Tribal Council

Wolastoqey Tribal Council Inc.

Women of the Métis Nation

Yellowhead Tribal Development Foundation

Industry partners (8)

Conference Board of Canada – Corporate-Indigenous Relations Council

Hall Beach

Joint Economic Development Initiative

Lennox Island Development Corporation

Métal Marquis Inc.

Nova Scotia Construction Sector Council

PLATO Testing

Rexforêt

Education institutions (31)

Alberta Regional Council of Carpenters

Anishinabek Educational Institute

Aurora College NT

British Columbia Institute of Technology

Cambrian College

Camosun College

College Boreal

College of New Caledonia

College of the North Atlantic

Conestoga College

Confederation College

Contact North

Écofaune boréale

Fleming College

Georgian College

Indigenous Institutes Consortium

Kagita Mikam

Lakehead University

Laurentian University

Maritime College of Forest Technology

Maritime Environmental Training Institute

Memorial University

Mi'kmaq-Woastoqey Centre

Mount Royal University

Nova Scotia Construction Sector Council

Nunavut Artic College

Nunavut Literacy Council

Ogwehoweh Skills & Trades Training Centre

Ontario Tourism Education Corporation

Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies

Six Nations Polytechnic

Provincial and Territorial Governments (13)

Alberta

British Columbia

Manitoba

New Brunswick

Newfoundland and Labrador

Northwest Territories

Nova Scotia

Nunavut

Ontario

Prince-Edward Island

Quebec

Saskatchewan

Yukon

Federal Government departments and agencies (16)

Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency

Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada

Canada Economic Development for Quebec Regions

Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency

Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission

Employment and Social Development Canada

Environment and Climate Change Canada

Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario

Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario

Fisheries and Oceans Canada

Indigenous Services Canada

Natural Resources Canada

Public Services and Procurement Canada

Transport Canada

Western Economic Diversification Canada

Women and Gender Equality Canada