

Future Skills Centre - Centre des Compétences futures

# Feedback for Participants

**August 2019 Call for Proposals**  
**Future Skills Centre**

## Introduction

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In August 2019, the Future Skills Centre released a Call for Proposals that asked organizations from across the country to submit Letters of interest for innovative projects that test or evaluate new and emerging approaches, or that expand, scale or replicate promising approaches.

We reviewed 360 Letters of Interest in response to our open call, representing a very diverse and wide geographic, population and sector focus. We were impressed by the scale, quality and range of initiatives that have been put forward.

Given the scale of the response, however, we had to make some difficult decisions. In the end, a total of 58 projects were selected to advance to the second, competitive ‘full proposal’ round.

This feedback is intended to help participants understand how these decisions were made, to support future applications and those entering the full proposal round by providing more information about how criteria were applied in practice.

## Call for Proposals Overview

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This call was designed to address some of the key themes we’ve been hearing from the skills ecosystem in our early scanning of the landscape. Projects were asked to address at least one of three objectives.

1. Support Canadian workers facing labour market disruption to transition to new jobs or industries.
2. Engage employers in more effectively developing and delivering demand-driven solutions to skills gap challenges.
3. Optimize skill development systems by building the capacity of service providers to better collaborate with each other and other organizations that could expand or improve their services.

## Overview of the review process

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Applications were initially screened by subject matter experts for relevance and need, and to ensure that they had information that would allow a determination on Equity and Diversity criteria. The screeners determined whether projects had strong, good, weak or no relevance. Projects that were assessed as being strong or good (159) were subject to a portfolio analysis by staff to ensure that there was a strong field of proposals from across the country and that addressed a range of equity and diversity needs.

Ultimately, **129 proposals** went to full review.

There were three review committees. Review committees were made up of two external subject matter experts from across the country, plus representatives of the Centre's partners: Conference Board of Canada, Diversity Institute at Ryerson University, Magnet, and Blueprint ADE. Using a rubric, two reviewers independently assessed and scored each proposal. After independent assessment, committees met and established consensus scores for reviewed projects based on the two reviews. All reviewers declared conflicts of interest prior to review and were not allowed to see or rate projects in which there was some risk of perceived conflict.

Projects underwent an additional review for evidence-generating potential, led by Blueprint ADE and Diversity Institute. The evidence review took into account initial ratings of evidence-generating potential from reviewers and an additional assessment using an evidence guide. Recommendations about whether projects belonged in the evidence stream were re-assessed by independent experts in policy research.

## What made a strong proposal?

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Following the guidelines for proposals, successful projects were strong in each of four areas:

- relevance and need;
- project design;
- capacity to deliver; and,
- equity and diversity.

### Relevance and Need

**Strong proposals made more direct and clearer connections to either or both the demand- and supply-sides of the workforce development equation.**

- Strong applications tended to have clearer problem statements that articulated a complex problem and recognized challenges facing both the demand- and supply-sides of the workforce development equation.
  - Weak applications tended to focus primarily on the needs of specific target or underrepresented groups without making a connection to how the challenges faced by this group relate to the challenges in the labour market or the workforce development system.
- Strong applications tended to make a clearer, more direct link between their problem statement and the FSC-CCF objective(s) they felt their project would address. Similar to how they approached the problem statement, the relevance and need sections of their project summaries tended to offer a more complex picture connecting the demand- and supply-sides of the equation.
  - Weak applications tended to be more uni-dimensional in their articulation of the problem and the need and made little direct link to FSC-CCF objectives.
  - A good number of applications, made some link to the FSC-CCF objectives, but the projects were focused very far downstream (e.g. raising awareness of middle-years students about opportunities in construction) or so were so general in nature that the link was superficial (e.g. providing college students with access to more literacy supports to improve their education outcomes, enabling them to stand a better chance in the labour market).

- The bulk of applications that were judged not to be relevant did not make a link to an FSC-CCF objective(s), but rather tended to see this funding stream as an opportunity to support their usual programs. Many of those programs may well be good and desirable, and many provided strong cases for need and evidence for their intervention, but they were not directly relevant to FSC-CCF objectives.
- There were a few applications that were focused on selling a product or service to FSC wrapped up as a project proposal (as distinct from those being incomplete noted above).

## Project Design

**Strong applications tended to provide a clearer and more detailed description of their model and its components, including connections between activities and expected outputs and outcomes, as well as including a detailed plan for implementation.**

- Strong applications tended to have already done some research or development (piloting) to support their project plan. They included descriptions of what they had done and how that influenced the model design they proposed.
- Many applicants struggled with the concepts of “model” and “activities”, and often often struggled to differentiate these from implementation plans or processes. Although a logic model template was provided, the majority of proposals did not use that template which may have weakened their applications and the distinctions between sets.
- Relevant but weaker applications were more likely to simply provide a very high-level description of what they planned to do, often not distinguishing between model activities and implementation activities. They were much less likely to have done much R&D, and it often appeared that what they were presenting was in an early ideation stage.

These differences played out when it came to questions related to potential for evaluation of the proposed projects. Strong applications were better able to talk about what kinds of evaluations of components of their work had already been done, and were more likely to make references to ideas or programs they were learning from/building on/adapting. Weak applications often presented their project idea as unique when, based on the screeners’ or reviewers’ knowledge of the field, it was not, and there were in fact many evaluation type resources that could have been referred to.

### **Very few projects submitted theories of change.**

A theory of change explains how the activities undertaken in a project can contribute to a chain of results that lead to the intended or observed impacts. When well-done, it can be an useful planning tool and also create the framework for monitoring and evaluation. From the perspective of reviewers, when an applicant sets out a theory of change, it tends to make operating assumptions explicit and provide insight into the most important factors from the perspective of those applicant.

### **Many direct service programs could be aligned to the FSC Common Outcomes Framework – but not all were.**

There was no clear pattern on whether or not applicants referenced the FSC-CFF Common Outcomes Framework (COF). Because the Centre is committed to generating knowledge from the experience of those working on funded projects, reflection on measurement matters.

- The majority of proposals that included a direct service component would easily, or with adaptation, work with the Common Outcomes Framework (with outcomes like skill growth, obtaining employment, pursuing further education or advancing with an employer). Where it is appropriate, projects that expressed outcomes in terms of the Framework shows an understanding of Centre objectives.

By contrast, many applications, especially in relation to objective 3 ‘optimizing skill development system’, did not involve a direct service component. For these proposals, the Common Outcomes Framework might be less useful. In those cases, proposals were stronger when they identified clear objectives and outcomes they expected to achieve over the life of the project.

### **If a project can be scaled, replicated or expanded it is likelier to make an impact on the skills development landscape in Canada.**

- Some applicants suggested that their projects could be replicated, but most were silent on this aspect of impact.
- If lead organizations have evidence or reason to believe their project can be effectively scaled or replicated, they should clearly articulate it rather than leaving reviewers to make their own judgment based on subject matter expertise.

**Among “relevant” applications, most applicants did not address how contextual factors might impact their project.**

- Even among those deemed strong, this was a question that was largely skirted over. It is hoped that at the full-proposal stage, these issues will be addressed more directly given the longer length of the proposals.

## **Capacity to Deliver**

**Strong proposals had more developed partnerships in place, which was also reflected in assessment of delivery capacity and equity, diversity and inclusion.**

- Strong proposals tended to include a clearer articulation of their project partners. It was easy to differentiate between confirmed partners, and those that were not, and between delivery partners and partners with advisory roles.
- Weak proposals were more likely to say, but not demonstrate, that they had strong relationships that would enable them to deliver the project, and to name them as “partners like...” or “drawing from our partners...”
- For those that had partners clearly named and roles delineated, this also help them address EDI broadly in their applications.

**Clear timelines and budget justification (within the limited space available) enhanced reviewers’ sense of the capacity of organizations or teams submitting proposals.**

- Reviewers were skeptical of projects that appear to have budgeted based on maximum funds available.
- Reviewers were favourably impressed when projects demonstrated commitment to the endeavour through matching funds.
- Projects with articulated timelines appeared more organized, concrete and achievable to reviewers.

## Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

**Most ‘direct service’ projects were focused on specific target/underrepresented groups.**

- Those that were deemed strong presented detail outlining specific experiences and needs of their target groups, connected those needs to the project offering, and demonstrated their track record of working with their target group with examples.
- Those that were deemed weak tended to rely on assumed expertise and made more declarative statements about how the needs of target groups would be addressed and/or their track record in working with those groups.

**Stronger projects clearly articulated the relationship between the proposed project and goals relating to equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI).**

- Projects that claimed to be useful to all equity seeking groups, without identifying particular barriers or challenges, often received less favourable EDI ratings.
- Not all projects, in all relevant categories, were—or should be—designed to deliver specific EDI goals. This was especially true among theme 3 ‘optimizing skill development systems’ proposals. For those projects, ultimately, certain underrepresented groups may be the beneficiaries, but the project was focused on driving collaboration to fix a system failing, so not at the stage where EDI is front and centre. In these cases, organizations relied on describing their broader commitments to and actions to support EDI goals; some drew the connection to indirect benefits.

## Evidence Stream

The Future Skills Centre’s approach to evidence generation involves identifying solutions with the most promise to move the dial on pressing challenges, and supporting sustained, high-quality implementation as they build evidence to inform scaling decisions. Project leads, working with the Centre, will co-develop and execute a customized evaluation plan that is linked to a larger learning agenda to help promising interventions improve their performance and impact over time.

In addition to strong performance on the four general criteria – relevance and need, project design, capacity to deliver and equity, diversity and inclusion, a determination that a project belonged in the evidence stream was made based on whether there was:

*A clearly articulated model, with certain key features:*



- based on evidence or informed by relevant theory in the literature
- with potential to be replicated or expanded
- that at scale, could have a significant impact on a pressing need

The other central criteria for projects accepted in the Evidence Stream is readiness for evaluation. Projects in the Evidence stream are undertaking to work closely with Future Skills Centre and our partners towards a goal of rigorous, independent evaluation. Prerequisites for that goal is that the proposed project should be designed and delivered in a way that would make rigorous evaluation feasible now or in near future, and that proponents seem to have interest in, and capacity for participation in rigorous arms-length evaluation.

## Profile of Applications

# of LOIs received	# of LOIs not recommended	# of LOIs ineligible	# of LOIs recommended
361	283	6 incomplete, 14 withdrawn	58

### Profile of LOIs Recommended for Invitation to Submit a Full Proposal Application:

#### Evidence or Innovation Stream

# of LOIs not recommended	# of LOIs recommended for Evidence Project Funding	# of LOIs recommended for Innovation Project Funding
58	14	44

#### Objectives

# of LOIs recommended	Supporting workers to manage labour market transitions	Engaging employers	Optimizing skills development systems
58	19	28	11