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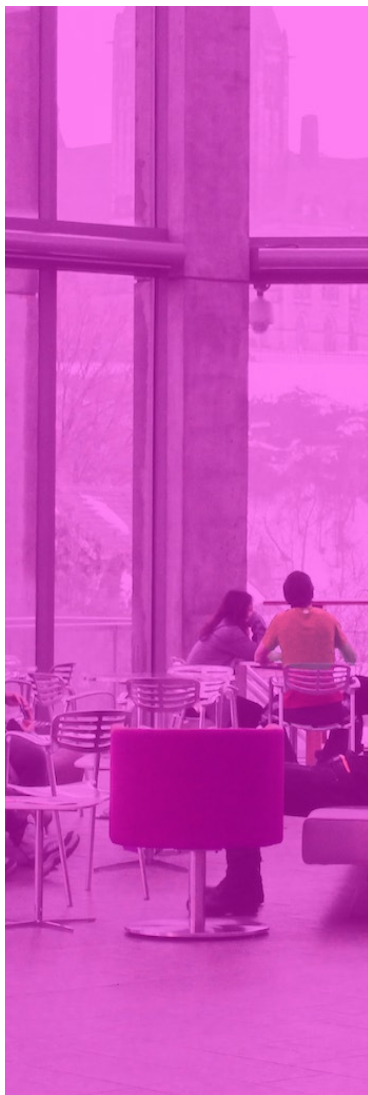
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Essential Skills for Learning and Working

Perspectives From Education and Employment
Leaders Across Canada

Impact Paper | March 10, 2022



Future Skills Centre

The Future Skills Centre – Centre des Compétences futures (FSC-CCF) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure, and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead.

The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are Ryerson University, Blueprint, and The Conference Board of Canada.

If you would like to learn more about this report and other skills research from FSC, visit us at fsc-ccf.ca or contact info@fsc-ccf.ca.

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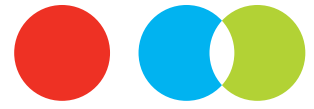


**The Conference
Board of Canada**

Blueprint

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Key Findings

- In our Regional and Virtual Sounding Tours (RST, VRST), leaders in education, skills, and employment from across Canada shared their perspectives on the essential skills required for educational and labour market success. These skills included the following:
 - foundational skills, including digital literacy
 - social and emotional skills (SES)
 - employment readiness, including career guidance
- VRST participants indicated that these essential skills play an important role in navigating educational and career transitions and that certain aspects of these skills increased in importance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital literacy as well as SES such as resiliency, self-management, and communication were noted as important skills during the economic uncertainty and virtual work triggered by the pandemic.
- Development of these essential skills takes time and should be embedded in lifelong learning initiatives.



Background

The world of work is changing, as are the roles that people occupy and the skills they need.

How can workers be sure they have the skills they will need to succeed?

How we learn and demonstrate skills through qualifications is also changing. For example, while there is much uncertainty around the future of microcredentials, these new, short-term offerings are becoming increasingly common. According to a 2021 survey, the majority of post-secondary institutions in Canada are now offering or planning to offer these short-term programs.^{1,2} Additionally, there was a rise in Canadians taking massive open online classes, or MOOCs—increased during the pandemic.³ The first wave of COVID-19 fast-tracked a shift to virtual education opportunities; almost overnight, more than 1.2 million university students and 800,000 college and polytechnic students moved their learning online.⁴ This will likely have a lasting impact on the way education is delivered.

In partnership with the Future Skills Centre (FSC), The Conference Board of Canada brought together Canadian leaders to discuss education, skills, and training. The Regional Sounding Tour (RST) examined key challenges in Canada's skills systems and asked leaders to think about the future. To expand on findings from the RST,

we introduced the Virtual Regional Sounding Tour (VRST) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

What did participants in our Sounding Tours have to say about the essential skills needed for the present and future Canadian economy?

Start With People

Education, skills, and employment leaders across Canada agreed that the skills most in demand and essential for learners to master were not technical. According to the (V)RST participants, although technical skills are important, it is the personal, interpersonal, and professionalism skills—and the ability to use them in a digital context—that are considered the most useful in the most positions, and the most in need of prioritization. Based on what we heard, we have broken down these skills into three categories: foundational skills such as literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy; social and emotional skills (SES); and employment readiness skills.

The skills discussed in these consultations have long been known to be important. But the fact they are still being talked about across the country and becoming identified as more critical than ever to navigate the COVID-19 world merits their continued discussion.

1 Pichette and others, *Making Sense of Microcredentials*.

2 As it stands now, there is very little consistency and clarity around the meaning of micro-credentials, and much more work is needed regarding their future, including perception of them by employers and industry. For more on how our RST and VRST perceived this, please see our publication on post-secondary education, *Beyond the Classroom: The Future of Post-Secondary Education Has Arrived*.

3 Impey, "Massive Online Open Courses See Exponential Growth During COVID-19 Pandemic."

4 Schrumm, "The Future of Post-Secondary Education."

A Sounding Board for Canadians

The Conference Board of Canada, in partnership with the Future Skills Centre, spoke with education and skills stakeholders across Canada about their priorities, strategies, and regional perspectives.

Regional Sounding Tour, October 2019 to March 2020:

- 1,032 participants across 12 events;
- free-flowing conversation with prompts to discuss the following: regional skills priorities, important skills for career success, how to better support vulnerable populations, vision for a better skills ecosystem.

Virtual Regional Sounding Tour, December 2020 to March 2021:

- 344 participants across 14 events;
- free-flowing conversation with prompts to discuss the following: how the pandemic changed program priorities, current labour market challenges, examples or suggestions for initiatives to address these challenges.

Acknowledging regional variations and unique perspectives, an analysis of 92 transcripts identified five major themes:

- equitable recovery
- essential skills
- reimagining post-secondary education
- the changing nature of work
- social and digital infrastructure

For a discussion of the other four themes, see the other reports in the series, which can be accessed at <https://www.conferenceboard.ca/futureskillscentre/sounding-tours>.



Social and Emotional Skills More in Demand Than Ever

Social and emotional skills allow people to adapt and be resilient in changing environments.

Across the country, SES—also called people skills, soft skills, transferable skills, or 21st-century skills—have long been a priority for education and employment leaders. Prior to the pandemic, employers were already asking for SES; one RST participant went as far as to say that employers were “dying for them.”

Teach them soft skills, and technical skills can be taught later.

RST participant, Calgary, Alberta, November 2019

We heard about how important it was for learners and workers to listen effectively, manage time, work across cultures, be self-aware, analyze problems, and be creative. Communication in particular is considered a key skill.

From industry focus groups, recent graduates, and all our advisory groups ... communication is the number one skill that comes up.

RST participant, Humber Valley, Newfoundland and Labrador, October 2019

Other participants mentioned the importance of mental health while doing online work, noting that people need to learn to take the time to regenerate offline. Another training provider commented on a gap in self-management among their clients.

When they're at home, finding strategies and having the skills to manage their own learning is a really important skills gap that we saw.

VRST participant, Nova Scotia, January 2021

Resilience also came up frequently as an important individual characteristic/skill.⁵ Participants spoke about this skill in different ways, from the importance of being adaptable and being able to ask for help when needed to embracing change or having good coping skills. Participants noted how important it is for people to be able to manage emotions and build relationships at work. And a connection was made between resilience and the increased importance of adaptability during the pandemic in order to remain agile with all the changes and uncertainty.

The adaptability, analytical skills, those type of things are high-level skills that, once mastered, will allow you to navigate your career as the world of work changes and technologies are introduced. So, I guess what the pandemic has done is put a little more [emphasis] on those, which will hopefully help folks navigate.

VRST participant, Prince Edward Island, January 2021

5 We are aware, however, that there are critiques of resilience discourses—about how it may shift responsibility for systemic failures to individuals—and that tension remains between the individual and the system.

We heard the belief expressed that strong SES would help young people succeed in any career path and that a solid SES skill set would help youth switch jobs more easily. With the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, VRST participants recognized the importance of SES in difficult employment times. Participants shared their belief that SES will help people pivot to new jobs, or even new fields, as required.

One of the things COVID has done has been to get those businesses and individuals to look more at some of the future skills that are needed in terms of core competencies ... and the importance of how you can look at these as transferable skills ... such as creativity, or innovation ... and how they are transferable between sectors and occupations, which would also help in gaining jobs or new employment for people because very few stay in the same career direction these days.

VRST participant, Southern Ontario, March 2021

This belief is supported by recent work at The Conference Board of Canada that has shown people working in occupations at high risk of automation and low mobility can leverage SES, such as active listening and communication, to transition to new opportunities.⁶

Development Is a Lifelong Process

The future of work requires strong SES. We know that employers are demanding SES, and these skills are therefore critical for employability and career success.⁷ Some questions remain: How are SES being fostered across the country? And how has SES development changed during the pandemic?

Some participants were not so sure that SES could be taught explicitly, instead believing that SES were developed through work and life experiences. We know that experiential learning opportunities are important for developing SES.⁸ Canadian students participating in work-integrated learning opportunities were more likely than students without this experience to feel they have good people skills, presentation skills, and leadership skills.⁹

Those are often skills that are developed and entrenched through work experience. I worked in the service industry when I was young. I had to learn at the age of 19 how to cut people off from alcohol and figure out if they were going to punch me in the face!

RST participant, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, February 2020

6 Gorea and Fadila, "Searching for Strengths: Gaps and Opportunities for Social and Emotional Skills Development in the Tourism and Hospitality Sector."

7 Giammarco, Higham, and McKean, *The Future Is Social and Emotional*.

8 Ibid.

9 Abacus Data, *Work Integrated Learning and Post-Secondary Education*.

Equitable access to these work experiences that are so key to building transferable skills is an important consideration. Not all youth have the same access to work experiences,¹⁰ and some racialized groups in particular face greater challenges in their career development and trajectories.¹¹

Despite concerns about whether SES can be formally taught, participants mentioned multiple initiatives across the country that aim to develop such skills. We heard about a free online course called “Navigating Extraordinary Times,” developed at Athabasca University in Alberta in response to the pandemic. Thousands of Canadians have completed this micro-credential on leadership, adaptation, emotional regulation, and effective communication. In Winnipeg, we heard about the importance of a trauma-informed approach to training, including teaching resiliency. A trauma-informed practice considers and incorporates the influence of an individual’s past experiences on current behaviours and emotions, seeking to create a supportive space for learning.¹² In Ontario, participants mentioned the Head Start in Business¹³ as an example of training in entrepreneurial skills that also builds SES skills.

So really focusing on those ideas of soft skills – working in teams, troubleshooting, being innovative – puts the student in the driver’s seat too, especially with marginalized youth. It allows some of them to have a voice – some of them for the first time really – in their educational trajectories because they are in the driver’s seat.

VRST participant, Northern Ontario, March 2021

We also heard that the transition to virtual learning made teaching SES more difficult at the level of students. Instructors told us that assessing students’ progress was also difficult over video, often having only the level of online participation as a proxy for achievement. Other instructors agreed it was difficult to teach skills such as interpersonal skills and management virtually. It is important, when considering skills development education and training, to also be inclusive and address systemic barriers to access. For more on this, see previous work from The Conference Board of Canada¹⁴ and the Future Skills Centre.¹⁵

Basic Literacies Are Foundational

Basic literacy and numeracy are key building blocks for future learning.

These skills are needed to be able to function effectively in any workplace. Participants expressed concern that individuals lacking basic literacy skills were falling behind and becoming discouraged. Similarly, we heard that some individuals do not have enough of an understanding of mathematical concepts to apply them to everyday work problems, impacting their ability to work. These key literacies are a starting point for learning other technical skills; without these key literacies, opportunities in formal education, experiential learning opportunities, and professional growth are often out of reach.

10 For more information on this topic, see our other issue briefings in this series: Smith and Rizk, *Social and Digital Infrastructure*; and Macpherson and Rizk, *Recovery for All*.

11 Deloitte, “Black in Canada: Acknowledging Our Past, Owning Our Present, and Changing Our Future.”

12 Alberta, “Trauma-Informed Practice.”

13 Head Start in Business. <https://www.headstartinbusiness.com>.

14 Giammarco, Higham, and McKean, *The Future Is Social and Emotional*.

15 See, for example, Cooper, *Skills Development in the North*.

There is increasing awareness of the need for learning environments that enable full participation for all learners.¹⁶ Participants in our Sounding Tour discussions cited an example of the importance of making learning relevant, culturally appropriate, and experiential to better engage students.



When kids are not connected to school, when they see it as something that is an alien culturally; they weren't learning math because they didn't think it was about them.... When they had to actually use a tape measure, all these kids learn fractions. Before, none of them were learning fractions because they didn't think fractions had anything to do with them or their lives or their people.

VRST participant, Yukon, January 2021

Digital Literacy Is Now a Prerequisite

The pandemic accelerated the transition to digital spaces. Having access to technology, a reliable Internet connection, and digital literacy skills are now crucial for many employment and education opportunities and services.¹⁷ Even everyday activities such as accessing health information are now done online. Being able to navigate virtual work and education was important prior to the pandemic—and gaps in access seen as an equity issue—but the pandemic has intensified these concerns.¹⁸

¹⁶ DeLuca, Klinger, and Volante, "Culturally Responsive Teaching in a Globalized World."

¹⁷ Anderson, Rainie, and Vogels, *Experts Say the "New Normal" in 2025 Will Be Far More Tech-Driven, Presenting More Big Challenges*.

¹⁸ For more on the impacts of the pandemic, see our upcoming report on social and digital infrastructure needs: *Social and Digital Infrastructure: Laying the Groundwork for an Inclusive Recovery*.

Skills do not exist in isolation. Being able to work and learn effectively online is about more than just accessing and using devices.



And skills do not exist in isolation. Being able to work and learn effectively online is about more than just accessing and using devices: strong SES are required as well. VRST participants emphasized the importance of strong communication and self-management skills to be able to thrive online.

We really want to accelerate our support ... for those (skills training) clients who have limited exposure or no exposure to technology.... It's not only about technology and some traditional skills; there are way more things that can be added ... self-management, mental health wellness ... networking online, being comfortable communicating on screen.

VRST participant, Saskatchewan, March 2021

Prior to the pandemic, participants told us that older adults need more support to learn basic digital literacy skills. We heard from participants that the pandemic has been particularly hard on older adults who are not as likely to have the right technology and know how to use it.

One of the biggest barriers we have (as older adult workers) is using and accessing technology. So when (the pandemic) happened in March (2020) it was very, very difficult. It still is very difficult.

VRST participant, Newfoundland and Labrador, December 2020)

We also heard, though, that younger people need support as well to use technology effectively. Participants shared the belief that, while youth may all have phones and use social media, the skills required to use technology in the workplace or classroom are different.

And teaching youth ... we assume they know the technology. Most of them didn't, and neither did we.... It was like, "How do we have a Zoom call? What does this look like? Where's the chat function?"

VRST participant, Nova Scotia, January 2021

Employers Seeking Work-Ready Individuals

The need for people skills trumps the requirement for technical skills.

On the Sounding Tour, we heard that employers are looking for a suite of personal and interpersonal characteristics in employees. Employers wanted employees who were punctual and able to solve problems effectively. Participants hoped that young people could better develop self-confidence that will help propel them forward in education and work.

We have a really hard time getting people who are motivated, who will show up to work, who dress appropriately, who ... have confidence, a good attitude, are accountable, know how to manage stress in their lives.

VRST participant, Nova Scotia, January 2021

We heard that there is a greater need since the start of the pandemic to learn more about how to function professionally in the workplace. One participant told us that youth want advice on basic workplace activities, such as professional communication. The City of Calgary Youth Employment Centre started a TikTok channel that has been popular during the pandemic. Some of their most successful posts focused on job searching, how to leave a voicemail message, and how to answer specific interview questions.

Guidance Is an Important Aspect of Career Development

An important aspect of this work readiness is career guidance. We know that careers follow a different trajectory now than they did a generation ago and that new careers and fields will be created in coming years. A 2020 OECD study shows that teenagers (particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds) have a limited knowledge of available careers.¹⁹ They are often unaware what jobs are in demand in today's labour market and what education and skills they would need to obtain certain jobs.

It goes back to lack of knowledge about the jobs available and what the labour market is like—just in general (knowing) what jobs you could pursue.

RST participant, Sudbury, Ontario, November 2019

Participants in the Regional Sounding Tour spoke frequently about the importance of career guidance and about their belief that it should start early, in the K-12 system. For example, participants noted that increasing teachers' knowledge of career opportunities as well as developing stronger connections with industry would help the school system support youth career guidance. Youth need to know what types of jobs might fit well with their interests and talents and what skills are expected of them in professional settings. If youth had more awareness of and guidance regarding exciting career opportunities, it could increase their motivation to pursue the education to get there.

Working for Work Skills

Amid the progressive shifts that were already under way in learning and work—such as the increasing prevalence of micro-credentials and gig work—the COVID-19 pandemic introduced rapid changes. Learning shifted online overnight and caused the loss of an unprecedented number of jobs and businesses across Canada.

We sought to hear from education and skills leaders across Canada about their perspectives and priorities, both before and during the pandemic. Our Sounding Tours, both Regional and Virtual, stressed the importance of Canadians building their transferable skills such as creativity, intercultural competencies, and the ability to assess the quality of online information. These skills are needed so workers can be “job ready” at any point in their careers and be able to adapt to the changing nature of society. These

¹⁹ EduSkills OECD, “Dream Jobs?”

foundational, social, emotional, and workplace-aligned skills are the building blocks of successful learning and professional growth. These findings aligned with the recent Skills for Success model released by the Government of Canada,²⁰ which highlights the importance of adaptability, problem-solving, and digital skills. The Sounding Tour participants referred to all these skills.

We know that building essential skills like literacy, communication, and problem-solving takes time to develop and should be approached with a lifelong learning mentality through all stages of an individual's life. It is important to develop these essential skills early in an individual's educational trajectory, ideally beginning in the K-12 years and in collaboration with the post-secondary system. Providing more frequent and equitable experiential learning opportunities is valuable for building overall career guidance, so individuals develop a greater understanding of what is expected of them. We have to build on these essential skills—foundational skills such as digital literacy, SES, and employment readiness skills—so people can adapt to changing conditions and pursue educational and career options that are exciting and fulfilling for them.

What's Next?

FSC is partnering with hundreds of community organizations, employers, and various government agencies from across Canada to advance our understanding of skills development. We are testing the implementation of the skill areas mentioned in these VRST sessions, looking closely at what is working, for whom, and under what conditions. FSC will continue to share the insights on these skills, including the areas discussed in this briefing, such as basic numeracy and literacy, SES, and other work readiness skills.

FSC is also digging into the questions raised about career guidance systems and the need for better information and advice about critical career choices and trajectories. As reported by VRST participants, the current guidance systems do not provide young people with the necessary information and advice about future prospects, and adults usually can access guidance only when their employment is interrupted. FSC is partnering with the Labour Market Information Council to ensure that timely and beneficial information is available for career guidance. FSC is also unveiling a new initiative in early 2022 that will address systemic challenges in the current career guidance system, working closely with provinces and territories across the country.

20 Employment and Social Development Canada, "The New Skills for Success Model."



Appendix A

Methodology

In collaboration with the Future Skills Centre (FSC), The Conference Board of Canada talked with Canadians who are actively engaged in the country's skills and training community, as well as with individuals interested in learning more about skills development and the future of work.

The Regional Sounding Tour (RST) brought together Canadians who are actively involved or interested in education, employment, skills, and training. The RST was held in-person between October 2019 and October 2020.

The Virtual Regional Sounding Tour (VRST) focused on how the country has been impacted by COVID-19 and how the Future Skills Centre can help on the road to recovery. The VRST was held virtually between December 2020 and March 2021.

Who Attended?

Most participants who attended both the RST and VRST were employers and professionals working in government, post-secondary institutions, professional associations, and non-profit organizations across Canada. We spoke to 1,376 participants in 26 Sounding Tour “stops.”

Data Analysis

In total, we analyzed 92 transcripts (52 from the RST, 40 from the VRST) to help us understand communities' needs and think of a regional approach to skills training that aligns with the future of work.

Data were organized by region and whether the tour stop was in-person or virtual. Team members created a code book to code transcripts consistently. We also looked at popular themes in grey literature (news clippings, journal articles) to help us identify the latest research in skills gaps, upskilling, equity, and shifts due to the pandemic. We coded only the conversations with participants, removing all staff commentary and remarks. NVivo 12 software was used to code all interviews.

To learn more about whom we spoke to and what we asked, please visit the [Sounding Tours](#) webpage.

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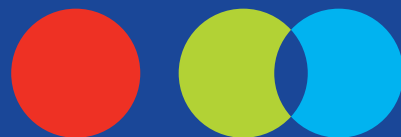
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