



Ontario Chamber of Commerce

# Skills Bridge Preliminary Evaluation

Capacity-Building for  
Canadian Small &  
Medium-Sized Enterprises



This report was produced as part of a project funded by the Future Skills Centre (FSC), with financial support from the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.

FSC 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 Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint ADE, and The Conference Board of Canada

The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Future Skills Centre or the Government of Canada.



# Partners



The Diversity Institute conducts and co-ordinates multi-disciplinary, multi-stakeholder research to address the needs of diverse Canadians, the changing nature of skills and competencies, and the policies, processes, and tools that advance economic inclusion and success. Our action-oriented, evidence-based approach is advancing knowledge of the complex barriers faced by equity-deserving groups, leading practices to effect change, and producing concrete results.



The Future Skills Centre (FSC) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to driving innovation in skills development so that everyone in Canada can be prepared for the future of work. We partner with policy makers, researchers, practitioners, employers and labour, and post-secondary institutions to solve pressing labour market challenges and ensure that everyone can benefit from relevant lifelong learning opportunities. We are founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint, and The Conference Board of Canada, and are funded by the Government of Canada's [Future Skills program](#).



The Ontario Chamber of Commerce (OCC) is the indispensable partner of business and Canada's largest, most influential provincial chamber. It is an independent, non-profit advocacy and member services organization. The OCC has 60,000 members, including large multinational corporations, small-to-medium-sized enterprises, labour unions, postsecondary institutions, non-profits, associations and close to 150 chambers of commerce and boards of trade. The OCC's mission is to convene, align and advance the interests of its members through principled policy work, value-added business services and broad engagement to drive competitiveness and economic growth in the province.



Magnet, housed at Toronto Metropolitan University, is a Centre of Innovation focused on the future of work. Magnet creates trusted partner networks and advances social innovation through tailored digital solutions. By bringing together innovators from across the labour market ecosystem, Magnet facilitates collaborative projects, supports social innovation and applies a systems approach to assessing how existing technologies can be adapted and integrated to further solutions for future of work challenges. We are committed to digital-first, inclusivity, social innovation, and building connections that drive economic and social prosperity.

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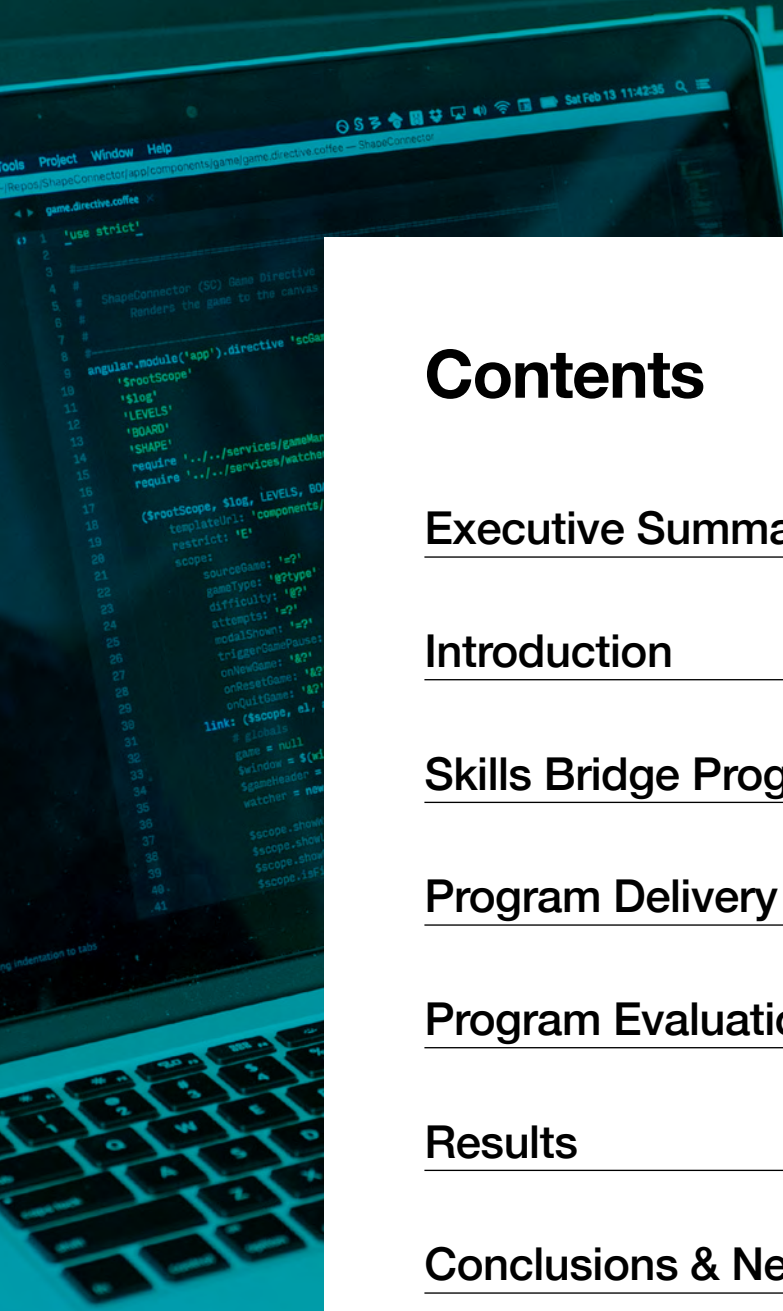
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# Executive Summary



## Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the backbone of Canada's economy, are the focus of the Skills Bridge project. Defined as enterprises with fewer than 500 employees, SMEs represent 99.7% of employer businesses in Canada. They employ 63.8% of the private-sector workforce—7.8 million people in Canada in 2022.

Despite the role of SMEs in driving the Canadian economy, research underscores pressing challenges. These businesses suffer severe labour and skills shortages, as well as a lack of access to the expertise and resources of large companies to address their upskilling and human resources (HR) needs. Many SMEs lack the capacity to develop and deliver training and are unable to release people for training due to responsibility sharing in the workplace. For these reasons, SMEs prefer to recruit new talent to meet their skill demands and under-invest in skills and training. However, SMEs often lack the HR professionals and resources needed to support recruitment of highly skilled workers. This dynamic affects their ability to innovate, grow and compete.

In response to this pressing, evidence-based need, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce (OCC), Diversity Institute (DI) and Magnet collaborated in 2021 on the Skills Bridge project, funded by the Future Skills Centre (FSC). The project sought to develop and test a new approach to addressing SMEs' skills shortages through a platform tailored to their upskilling needs. The three partners had long identified, through their research and programs, that SMEs need timely and easily accessible skills training, especially in relation to equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). Based on extensive research on the barriers SMEs face in terms of skills and training, this project addresses the need for a credible, cost-effective, time-efficient, user-friendly and scalable learning management system for small businesses with accompanying support. The project allowed for the building and testing of the Skills Bridge platform, which integrates a learning management system (LMS) with the existing Magnet platform, providing access to content tailored to meet the needs of SMEs.

## Program design

The Skills Bridge project aims to overcome barriers to upskilling faced by SMEs. By developing and testing the Skills Bridge platform and its curated training content, the goal is to build knowledge about what works to address SMEs' upskilling needs. The project also seeks to develop, test and iterate a shared digital platform for SMEs across Canada to address identified needs.

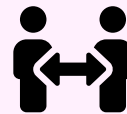
### The Skills Bridge project objectives:

- > To understand the skill and training needs of SMEs and entrepreneurs
- > To understand the barriers SMEs and entrepreneurs face in accessing skills and talent
- > To develop, test and iterate a national platform to support the recruitment and skill development needs of SMEs and entrepreneurs, while assessing the platform's technological, operational and economic feasibility
- > To identify the functionality and features desired by SMEs
- > To advance EDI skills and capacity for SMEs, entrepreneurs and the ecosystem
- > To develop a sustainability plan for a shared service.

Based on a standard prototyping approach (build, test and iterate) the partners worked together on a prototype platform to link offerings from different providers while developing customized courses from January 2022 to March 2023. A variety of sources were used to define the needs of SMEs, including literature reviews, consultations and focus groups.

## Skills Bridge project key objectives

To understand the **skill and training needs** of SMEs and entrepreneurs



To understand the barriers SMEs and entrepreneurs face in **accessing skills and talent**

To **develop, test and iterate a national platform** to support the recruitment and skill development needs of SMEs and entrepreneurs, while assessing the platform's technological, operational and economic feasibility



To identify the functionality and **features desired by SMEs**

To **advance EDI skills** and capacity for SMEs, entrepreneurs and the ecosystem



To develop a **sustainability plan** for a shared service



## Program areas of focus

➔ Skills for success

➔ Specialized programming

➔ EDI programming

➔ Digital skills

➔ Management skills

### **The areas of focus initially identified were as follows:**

- > Skills for success
- > Specialized programming
- > EDI programming
- > Digital skills
- > Management skills

During this period, four testing phases were completed with ongoing feedback on courses, the platform, the supports and unmet needs.

While features of the prototype were being tested, a fully integrated Skills Bridge platform was developed, responding to feedback. The platform was launched via Magnet in beta version on June 19, 2023. The beta launch enabled project partners, funders and an initial group of SMEs that were involved in the testing phases to engage with the customized

Skills Bridge platform. The current iteration of the platform allows SMEs to assign employees (learners) to take a selection of custom-built course content as well as a selection of content developed by the OCC and DI through a centralized platform that integrates an LMS into the Magnet platform.

## Program delivery

Beginning in January 2021, the Skills Bridge project developed, tested and launched an integrated platform to address the skills gaps of SMEs. Further, the project deployed free and sponsored training and skills development content for a minimum of 200 companies through a collaborative partnership with 50 chambers of commerce.

### **The work followed an iterative process:**

- > Engage fully and directly with chambers of commerce, SMEs and their employee-learners.
- > Develop and test the successive versions of the prototype LMS, informed by the stakeholder feedback.
- > Develop and curate evidence-based content.
- > Build and test the fully integrated Skills Bridge platform.



# Learning management system Skills Bridge iterative process

## Planning

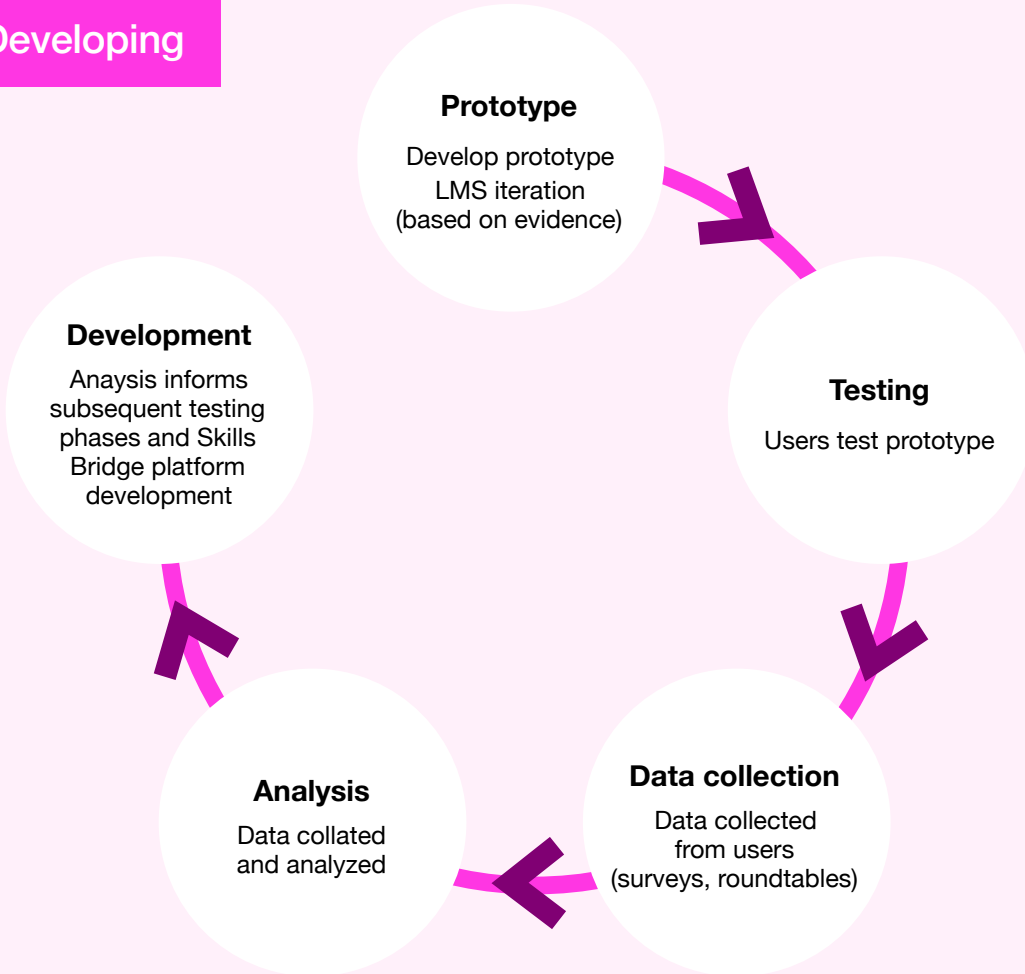
### Platform selection

- > Surveys
- > Roundtables
- > Environmental scan

### Content curation & development

- > Course scorecard surveys
- > Roundtables
- > Environmental scan
- > Employment and Social Development Canada skills

## Developing



## Result

Finalized Skills Bridge learning platform



## Program evaluation

This project focused on evaluating the effectiveness of addressing skills needs among SMEs through the development, testing, iteration and evaluation of a national LMS. The aims were to understand SMEs' skills and training needs, as well as the barriers they face in accessing training and talent. The LMS was designed to support the recruitment and skills development needs of SMEs and entrepreneurs, including the advancement of EDI skills and capacity in SMEs, entrepreneurs and the ecosystem.

### **The aims of the national LMS and its courses included:**

- > identifying and validating training content that meets the needs of SMEs
- > providing SMEs with access to training resources that promote diverse and inclusive hiring practices
- > developing an evidence-based training model that is cost-effective and scalable.

This preliminary report covers March 2021 through Sept. 30, 2023. It details the evaluation activities, learnings and evidence from across the project phases that were leveraged to inform the iterative design, development and implementation of the Skills Bridge platform. Further, it underscores the challenges, impacts, innovations and key insights that have resulted from our evaluation of this project.

## Results

The Skills Bridge project approaches change across Canada's economic ecosystem by prototyping and testing an innovative platform to address the challenges faced by SMEs. The project provided valuable insights into the needs and preferences of diverse learners from diverse SMEs across the country.

Through the test period, the project engaged 55 chambers of commerce from across Canada, as well as 861 SMEs and their employees. Of the 861 SMEs that participated in training, 385 engaged in coursework, where their 691 individual employee-learners registered in courses to improve knowledge around digital and management skills following the Skills for Success framework and customized learning plans.

Individual employee-learners registered in courses to improve knowledge around digital and management skills following the Skills for Success framework and customized learning plans.

### **Learners that completed the post-course survey rated the training materials (overall) as satisfactory:**

- > 77% rated the quality of the course as high
- > 96% believed learning objectives were clearly outlined
- > 69% found the course content compelling and useful
- > 83% achieved course learning objectives
- > 83% were likely to recommend the course they took to a co-worker or a friend.



### Survey results of training materials

**77%** rated the **quality of the course** as high

**96%** believed **learning objectives** were clearly outlined

**69%** found the **course content** compelling and useful

**83%** **achieved** course learning objectives

**83%** were **likely to recommend the course** they took to a co-worker or a friend.

Regarding delivery, 88% of participants reported not experiencing any barriers to taking courses. They also suggested areas for improvement, including adjusting the course length, having more industry- and geographical-specific content and having speakers with lived experiences from equity-deserving groups.

## Equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) training by the numbers



**1,021 learners**

across 666 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)



**508 employees**

participated in EDI webinars



**71%** of all SME employee-learners **engaged in EDI training**

Building EDI awareness and skills is central to the success of SMEs across Canada. The Skills Bridge project supported 1,021 learners across 666 SMEs through EDI training. While about 508 employees participated in EDI webinars, 71.4% of all SME employee-learners engaged in EDI training of some kind.

The results also show that the program was impactful in two key areas. First, SME employees improved their skills in key areas. The pre-program research identified 12 skill areas reported by SMEs. The self-reported data from participants show that they made statistically significant improvement in eight of the 12 skill areas, including management, numeracy, innovation, problem solving, adaptability, entrepreneurship, digital skills and writing.

Second, SMEs have improved or will improve diversity and inclusion practices and processes. Participants reported that they learned new topics. For example, more than 45% of participants learned about the 50 – 30 Challenge. Overall, 89% plan to apply the course content in their current roles.

## Conclusions

**To be successful, SMEs and entrepreneurs require support. Specifically:**

- > In serving SMEs, it is critical to recognize the resources and capacity constraints they face in developing and participating in training and the opportunity costs associated with training during work hours.
- > The demand for training was wide—ranging across disciplines, functions and sectors.
- > Levels of satisfaction with the programming were high in French and English, although response rates in French were lower.
- > SME employees have diverse backgrounds, needs and preferences. They also have wildly divergent digital and learning skills, as well as differing capacities for navigating online courses.
- > Strong preferences emerged for shorter courses as well as bundles and pathways to developing learning plans.
- > In addition, there was interest in more formal credentials to confirm and showcase knowledge gains and achievements.
- > There was strong recognition of the need for capacity building with respect to EDI and good uptake on the offerings.
- > The project provided considerable feedback on the functionality, features and supports needed in a simple and easy-to-use, shared LMS platform.



By taking these needs and preferences into account, input from this project informed the development of an integrated platform led by Magnet and a range of service providers.

Having demonstrated the technical and operational feasibility of a shared skills platform for SMEs, more research is needed on user needs, competencies and impacts, as well as on the economic feasibility and sustainability models for the platform.





# Introduction

## Small and medium-sized enterprises: Skills and training needs

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) drive the Canadian economy and are at the core of the Skills Bridge project. They make up 99.7% of employer businesses in Canada and employ 63.8% of the private-sector workforce—about 7.8 million people in Canada in 2022.<sup>1</sup> In addition, many of these SMEs are micro-enterprises; businesses with one to four employees make up 55.3% of Canadian enterprises.<sup>2</sup> By adding businesses with five to nine employees, this number increases to 73.8%,<sup>3</sup> meaning that almost three-quarters of Canadian businesses have one to nine employees.

Women own nearly 20% of businesses in Canada, with more than 99% of these businesses being SMEs.<sup>4</sup> Other equity-deserving groups are also under-represented. Indigenous-owned businesses account for 1.7% of private-sector businesses,<sup>5</sup> for example, while around 15% of private-sector businesses are owned by racialized people.<sup>6</sup> Black entrepreneurs represented 2.1% of all business owners.<sup>7</sup> These groups face diverse, population-specific barriers, the challenges

of which are even greater for women with intersecting identities.<sup>8</sup> As a result, it is critical that programming aimed at SMEs consider the unique needs of SMEs led by these communities.

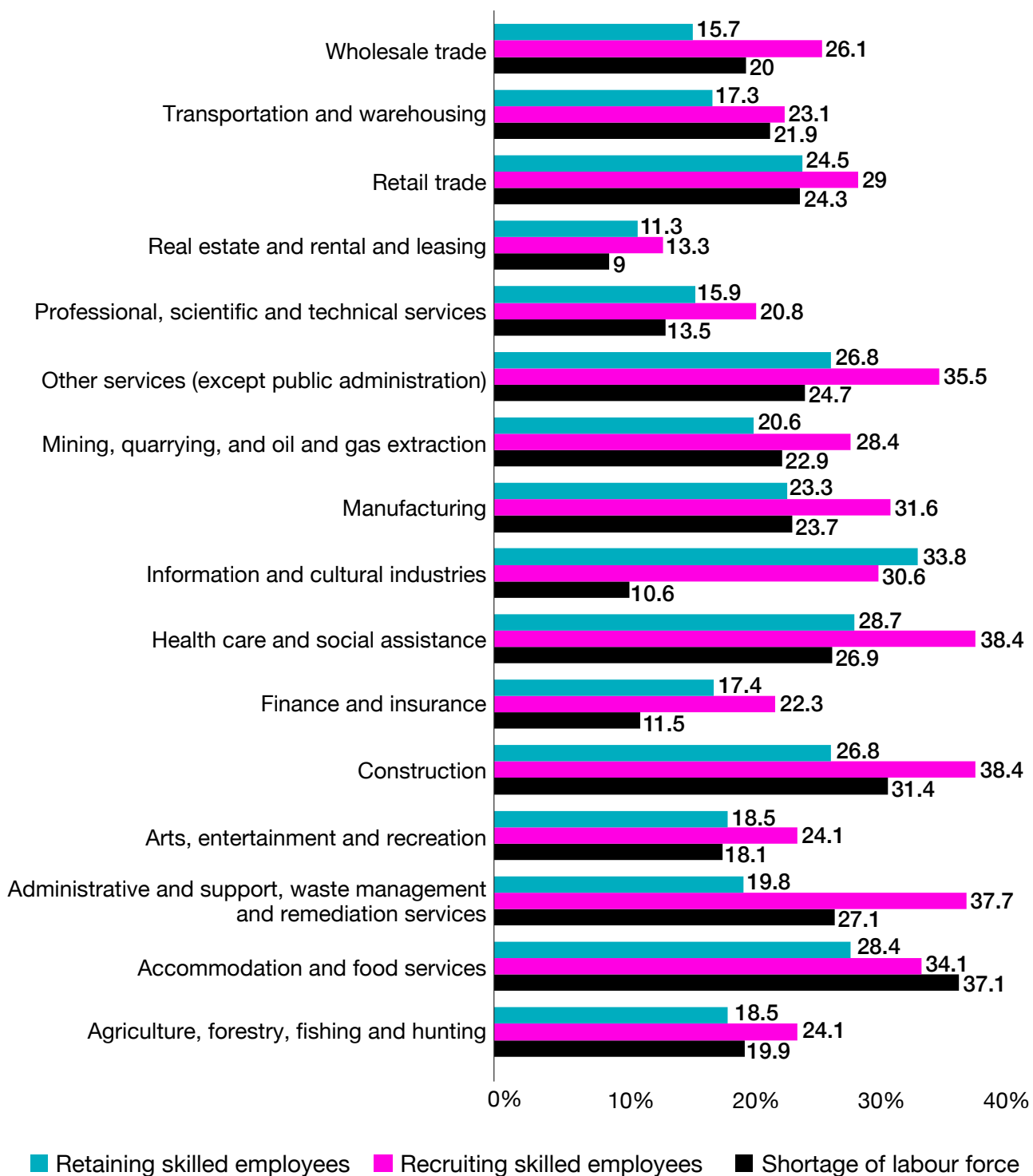
Macro-level factors such as technological innovations, changes in the global division of labour, changes in business organization, demographic shifts and changes in consumption patterns, among others, are redefining the labour market and creating new challenges for businesses of all sizes.<sup>9</sup>

## Labour and skills gaps

Small and medium-sized enterprises face challenges in hiring, retaining and training talent. They often lack human resources (HR) professionals and resources needed to support recruitment of highly skilled workers or for training, retraining and upskilling existing employees.<sup>10</sup> Of those reporting recruitment or retention challenges, 61% state that obstacles are worse than 12 months ago.<sup>11</sup> Also, 36% of Canadian businesses report labour shortages at various skill levels across industries, with the most acute shortages present in the accommodation and food services, retail and trade, and manufacturing sectors (Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1**

Percentage of Canadian businesses experiencing labour shortages and challenges recruiting and retaining skilled employees by industry, first quarter 2024



Source: Statistics Canada. November 2022. *Obstacles to business growth for small and medium enterprises*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3310060301&pickMembers%5B0%5D=3.3>

While SMEs are the engine of the economy, they are seldom central to the skills agenda.<sup>12</sup> Skills gaps and labour shortages have long been a feature of the Canadian economy and they remain a top concern for SMEs. The challenge of a “skills gap” has been an important issue for decades, with various causes including an aging population, increasing global competition and rapid technological changes. Further, due to demographic shifts, most of the growth in the Canadian workforce will be driven by immigration, pointing to the importance of being able to attract and retain skilled immigrants.<sup>13</sup>

Multiple research studies suggest that SMEs view the ability to attract and retain talent as a critical competitive issue. For example, a 2019 Business Development Bank of Canada study of 1,000 businesses indicated that 40% of SMEs identified skills shortages as a major competitive challenge, up 4% from the previous year.<sup>14</sup> A 2020 Ontario Chamber of Commerce report found that 65% of SMEs believe that the ability to recruit and retain talent is one of the top three factors contributing to an organization’s competitiveness.<sup>15</sup>

The digital divide is not just a function of geography or access to infrastructure. It is also about the skills needed to access and use the technology. Some of the most significant gaps are a lack people who understand how to match the technology to organizational needs and support its adoption.<sup>16</sup>

To increase the proportion of post-secondary graduates with relevant credentials, many employers advocate for encouraging younger students to embrace technology skills. However, other employers have begun to question the value of traditional post-secondary credentials. They instead argue for stronger, more current competency frameworks and alternative, more responsive pathways.<sup>17, 18, 19</sup> Typically, post-secondary institutions are slow to adapt.<sup>20, 21</sup> While immigrants and racialized people are overrepresented in the sector, there is evidence that they face barriers in gaining access to the workplace and are often underutilized.<sup>22, 23</sup>

## **Barriers in addressing skills gaps**

Small and medium-sized enterprises face challenges in hiring, retaining and training talent. They often lack the HR capacity needed to support recruitment, internal training initiatives and the creation of standard operating processes. It has been reported that 62% of SMEs tried to recruit employees in the last six months and, among those, 82% experienced at least one challenge. The top challenge, cited by 60% of respondents, was finding someone who possessed adequate qualifications.<sup>24</sup>

Evidence shows that the impact of labour shortages across SMEs is aggravated by a widespread inability to implement strategies to upskill or reskill current employees. Small and medium-sized enterprises typically



lack the resources to invest in training and upskilling.<sup>25</sup> As a result, the Business Development Bank of Canada reports that many entrepreneurs resort to using less qualified and younger workers, attempting to improve workplace efficiency and asking employees to work longer hours.

A further challenge is that, embedded in a fragmented ecosystem, SMEs find it difficult to navigate and to find information and supports. For example, a survey by Indeed shows that 59% of SME owners find new employees through word of mouth.<sup>26</sup> A recent survey of 331 companies shows that 75% of firms indicate a need to invest in training and retraining their workforce.<sup>27</sup> However, fewer than one-half are investing in training, often citing lack of time and resources among the main reasons. They also often hope to recruit employees with the required skills instead of investing in training.

## Skills for Success framework

The COVID-19 pandemic, paired with ongoing technological advancements, has changed the ways we work and the skills required to thrive in a shifting labour market.<sup>28</sup> Globally, we are seeing that digital skills and skills associated with innovation and entrepreneurship are increasingly in demand.<sup>29</sup> Other skills, such as resilience, stress tolerance, flexibility and leadership are also increasingly in demand. Similar trends are observed here at home: social-emotional skills and basic or mid-level digital skills are frequently needed by Canadian employers. Canada's Skills for Success framework identifies several social-emotional skills (i.e., problem solving, communication, collaboration, adaptability, creativity and innovation) and digital skills essential for navigating today's rapidly changing world (Figure 2).

**FIGURE 2**

**Employment and Social Development Canada's Skills for Success model**



Source: Government of Canada. (n.d.). *Skills for Success*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/jobs/training/initiatives/skills-success.html>

The Skills for Success model is intended for all Canadians who need to improve their foundational and transferable skills. The model responds to the needs of the current and future labour market. Given these nine skills have been identified as an industry standard reflecting the labour market's rapidly

changing skill requirements, the model was used as a guiding framework in content development and curation for the Skills Bridge project. Other research indicates that social-emotional skills are some of the most essential.<sup>30</sup>



## Digital skills

The COVID-19 pandemic rapidly accelerated the rate of digital adoption across sectors and these skills remain high on SMEs' lists. Despite the association of digital skills with computer science and engineering (i.e., deep digital skills) and the unabating demand for specialists, most SMEs report that they need relatively simple levels of digital skills associated with use of standard office applications and some more advanced tools like structured query language (SQL). The demand for skills related to artificial intelligence (AI) has exploded in recent years,<sup>31</sup> but there is limited research to update previous surveys on digital skills in SMEs. Emerging skills in demand include the skills needed to support the transition to net zero, or so-called "green skills."

## Skills to support equity, diversity and inclusion

Canada can look to equity-deserving groups as part of the solution to the country's skills shortages. However, barriers at the societal, organizational and individual levels hinder the full participation of members of equity-deserving groups in the Canadian labour force.<sup>32</sup> At the societal and organizational level, educational credentials have traditionally served as stand-ins for the assessment of individual social-emotional skills. This means that those who have the means to acquire credentials are more favoured in the job market. Thus, the



***Emerging skills in demand include the skills needed to support the transition to net zero, or so-called "green skills."***

practice of seeking credentials rather than skills creates a major hurdle in hiring and promotion.

Research has also highlighted that SMEs often present more barriers to women and diverse employees due to heavy dependence on informal recruitment processes, disadvantaging candidates from equity-deserving groups.<sup>33, 34, 35</sup> In spite of these barriers, SMEs are increasingly aware that expanding the talent pool by including more women and other diverse groups could help them close the skills gaps and reduce labour shortages. However, they also often indicate a lack of know-how and not knowing where to start.



## The impact of the pandemic

For many, access to skills training was interrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic. In cases where training did continue, its focus often shifted to managing the changes in the workplace caused by the pandemic.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the pandemic dramatically increased the rate of digitization, forcing many more businesses to pivot to online offerings. However, many lacked the skills to exploit digital technologies critical to innovation, growth and survival.<sup>37</sup>

The lack of technological innovation in SMEs is a major barrier to economic development with some sectors (e.g., infrastructure) lagging. Digital skills and the skills associated with defining and adopting innovative technology solutions are critically needed. Additionally, while large corporations have invested billions in upskilling and reskilling employees with digital skills, most SMEs lack the capacity to undertake this in a systematic way. The rapid conversion to working remotely has increased dependence on technology. Yet many SMEs lack the tools and training to manage a workforce remotely and ensure employees have the tools and support they need.



# Skills Bridge Program Design

## Overarching program research goal

The purpose of the project was to design and test an innovative approach to addressing the needs of SMEs. This approach uses a shared digital platform, the Skills Bridge Ontario Chamber of Commerce Learning Management System (OCC LMS). The project sought to develop, test and iterate a shared digital platform for SMEs across Canada to address the identified needs.

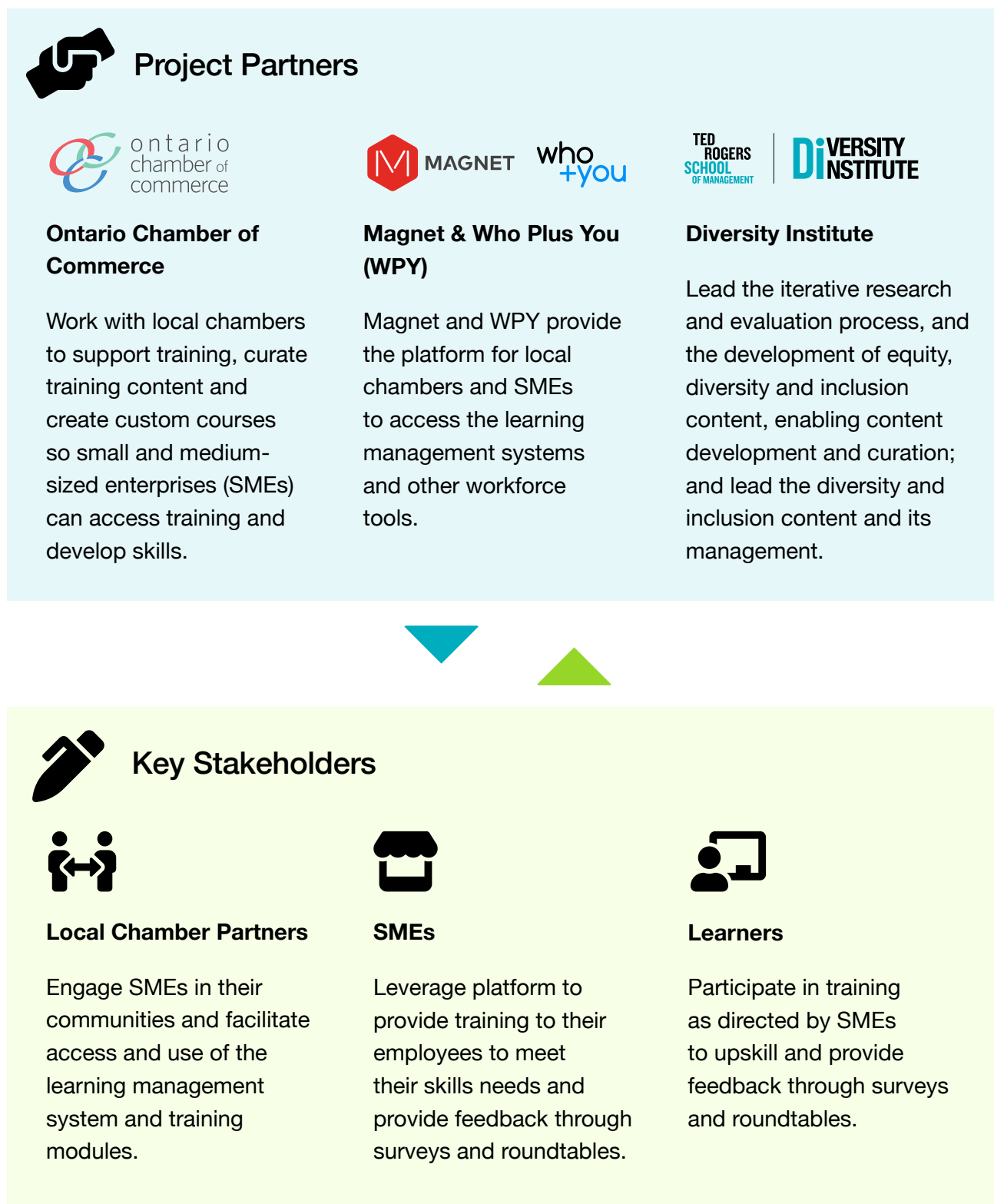
### **Program objectives included the following:**

- > To understand SMEs' and entrepreneurs' skills and training needs
- > To understand the barriers SMEs and entrepreneurs face in accessing skills and talent
- > To develop, test and iterate a national platform to support the recruitment and skill development needs of SMEs and entrepreneurs, technological, operational and economic feasibility)
- > To identify the functionality and features desired by SMEs
- > To advance EDI skills and capacity in SMEs, entrepreneurs and the ecosystem
- > To develop a sustainability plan for a shared service.

## Project partners and roles

The program was designed by DI, Magnet and the OCC (Figure 3). It was based on research that indicated that SMEs were facing skills and labour shortages and lacked the capacity to develop, upskill and reskill their employees, as well as research into the barriers to employment and advancement faced by equity-deserving groups. There was also evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digitization and made the shortages more acute, but research and experience revealed the potential of shared platforms and programs.

**FIGURE 3**  
The Skills Bridge program's project partners



The Skills Bridge project aimed to support SMEs' training and skills development needs across Canada. Through a collaborative partnership, the project sought to leverage technology to reduce fragmentation between industry stakeholders and SMEs, help create more inclusive workplaces and develop economies of scale in training and skill development. To this end, the project operationalized a Canadian-made, evidence-based platform to allow SMEs to curate online skills courses for the staff, then evaluate their use and impact.

**Specific targets included:**

- > Providing free and sponsored training and skills development content to a minimum of 200 companies through a collaborative partnership with 50 chambers of commerce
- > Identifying, sourcing and validating training content to meet the needs of SMEs across Canada, through collaboration between chambers and SME stakeholders
- > Providing SMEs with access to training resources that promote diverse and inclusive hiring practices, with at least 50% of participating companies receiving training and resources to help them adopt diversity and inclusion plans and processes
- > Developing an evidence-based model that is both scalable and customizable enough to meet the unique skills and training needs of SMEs.



## Program targets



Providing free and sponsored **training and skills development content** to a minimum of 200 companies through a collaborative partnership with 50 chambers of commerce



**Identifying, sourcing and validating training content** to meet the needs of SMEs across Canada, through collaboration between chambers and SME stakeholders



Providing SMEs with access to training **resources that promote diverse and inclusive hiring practices**, with at least 50% of participating companies receiving training and resources to help them adopt diversity and inclusion plans and processes



**Developing an evidence-based model** that is both scalable and customizable enough to meet the unique skills and training needs of SMEs





## Needs assessment

Content for the testing platforms and final Skills Bridge integrated LMS leveraged existing research and best practices regarding skills for SMEs, online learning principles for courses and LMS usability and accessibility. Here we outline central elements and principles, as well as some of the instruments developed, to ensure a systematic approach to testing and knowledge building of the project.

Five roundtables with SMEs were conducted in fall 2021, prior to the initial testing phase, as preliminary research to gauge the interest in such a platform and gain insights into the type of content that should be included. Attended by 53 representatives from SMEs and chambers, these preliminary conversations with stakeholders showed a strong interest in supervisory skills. Training people to be good managers and better equipping them to lead and support employees were also identified as important.

Chambers of commerce and SMEs also highlighted the importance of basic business and entrepreneurial skills, such as how to start a business, do financial statements and find resources for new businesses. Participants pointed out their interest in hiring more diverse workers, including newcomers, to reduce labour shortages and access new pools of skilled workers, while developing EDI knowledge. Finally, participants in the early roundtables spoke of skills related to mental health at the managerial and individual level, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Based on the findings from these roundtables, four skills were identified as priorities for the project:**

- > Equity, diversity and inclusion
- > Entrepreneurship
- > Management
- > Mental health and wellbeing.

These four priorities were added to the nine identified through the Skills for Success model, resulting in 13 key skills of focus.

## Course selection and development

Building on the above research, a course evaluation scorecard was developed and used to evaluate existing courses in testing Phase 1. This would inform course selection in subsequent testing phases. Research was conducted to identify learning design best principles, which was then leveraged to develop an LMS strategy and incorporated into the scorecard. In addition, feedback and insights gleaned from the early roundtable discussions were consolidated into a list of the most common mistakes (see Appendix B), which were also incorporated into the scorecard along with the findings of the environmental scan.

This detailed course evaluation tool was implemented to benchmark course curation and content development, as well as ensure content consistency and quality.

### **The course evaluation tool is composed of 48 evaluation criteria across seven areas:**

- > Alignment with the skills bridge project goals
- > Learning design criteria
- > Format and design
- > EdI and universal design
- > Engagement with the learner
- > Quality assurance
- > Overall impact



## Course evaluation tool criteria

Alignment with the skills bridge project goals

Learning design criteria

Format and design

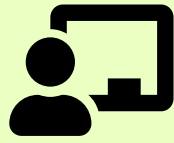
EDI and universal design

Engagement with the learner

Quality assurance

Overall impact

The scorecard was implemented beginning in testing Phase 2 and beyond. It provided a systematic way to assess course quality prior to sharing with learners for content curation activities, as well as a set of guiding principles for the project's content development activities.



***When the fully integrated Skills Bridge LMS was launched in a beta version in 2023, there were:***

- > 18 courses tailor-made for the project*
- > 8 courses were developed by DI*
- > OCC led the development of 10 courses*

Asynchronous courses were developed with program partners and made available on the Skills Bridge project during the beta phase. Learning objectives, approach and length were set by the program partners. In the case of the OCC courses, OCC and DI led the development of the course content. Then, creation partners were selected through a request for proposal (RFP) process and contracted to develop the course, which was uploaded to the Skills Bridge platform in the beta phase.

When the fully integrated Skills Bridge LMS was launched in a beta version in 2023, there were 18 courses tailor-made for the project. Eight courses were developed by DI (as discussed below), while OCC led the development of 10 courses.

Nine existing courses from the Advanced Digital and Professional Training (ADaPT) program were also included. The content had already been created by and validated through ADaPT.

As asynchronous course development involved external contractors to produce the content, courses in English and French were added to the Skills Bridge LMS as they were completed. Additional courses from ADaPT, beyond the initial nine, were also uploaded to the platform during the beta phase. Overall, a total of 86 courses were on the Skills Bridge platform as of May 2023.

## **Equity, diversity and inclusion content**

An additional objective was to advance EDI skills and capacity for SMEs given the prominent role they play in the labour market and their high potential to build a more inclusive economy. In the evaluation process, SMEs also identified EDI as a priority. Many SMEs were aware that accessing untapped segments of the labour market could support them in addressing their skills gaps. Finally, a review of existing EDI courses on the market as part of an environmental scan and their analysis using the evidence-based course scorecard developed during this project showed gaps where additional EDI content developed for SMEs would add value.

To meet this objective and address the needs of SMEs, the Skills Bridge project included the systematic curation and delivery of high-quality EDI content, as well as the creation and delivery of newly developed synchronous and asynchronous EDI content. This was implemented through customized EDI training consisting of eight webinars, 26 curated EDI courses and eight custom-designed EDI courses created by DI based on its own research.

To develop the custom EDI courses, course topics were selected based on SME feedback collected via roundtables, and an environmental scan and additional research conducted by DI. Content was reviewed to ensure focus on SME perspective and audience. Content that did not target SMEs was removed. Best practices from large companies were replaced where possible with examples from SMEs, although this was sometimes more difficult to find.

## Developing equity, diversity and inclusion courses

**With some changes to course topics, focuses and names, DI developed the following eight 60-minute courses:**

- > Introduction to EDI
- > Creating an Inclusive Organization (The Diversity Assessment Tool Course)
- > Increasing Diversity in Boards and Leadership
- > Understanding Bias, Microaggressions and How to Be an Ally

- > Inclusive Human Resources: Attracting, Developing and Retaining Talent for the 21st Century
- > What Gets Measured Gets Done
- > Diversity and Inclusion Through the Value Chain
- > Diversity and Inclusion Through the Value Chain - Supplier Diversity

**Synchronous learning content took the form of real-time webinars focused on EDI. Between Nov. 24, 2022 and March 31, 2023, the OCC and DI hosted eight webinars focused on EDI, including on the following topics (see Appendix A for summaries):**

- > Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Matter
- > Why EDI is Good for Business
- > Diversity in Leadership; Inclusive HR Practices
- > Unconscious Bias & Microaggressions
- > EDI Strategy

Participants were recruited by the OCC through their networks and online, including through emails and social media posts. The webinars were attended by 508 unique attendees.

The Skills Bridge project leveraged the course scorecard and the roundtable feedback during the project to evaluate EDI content. High-quality content that would best meet the needs of SMEs was selected for inclusion. A total of 33 EDI-focused courses were offered to OCC chamber partners and SMEs.

# Program Delivery



## Project development and activities

Based on extensive research and experience identifying challenges for SMEs in addressing labour shortages and skills gaps, the Skills Bridge program focused on the development, testing and launch of an integrated shared training platform. The program was designed to develop free and sponsored training and skills development content for a minimum of 200 companies working with 50 chambers of commerce. Through an iterative process informed by stakeholder feedback, the team engaged with chambers of commerce, SMEs and their employee-learners to develop and test the successive versions of the prototype LMS (Figure 4). They also developed and curated evidence-based content, while building and testing the Skills Bridge platform. The project built on existing research and knowledge about best practices for online learning design and research on labour market trends.

Each successive phase incorporated and refined the content and testing platform. The objective was to build a model tailored to SME needs and knowledge about what works and can be scaled and reproduced more broadly.

## Here we discuss the project development and activities related to the:

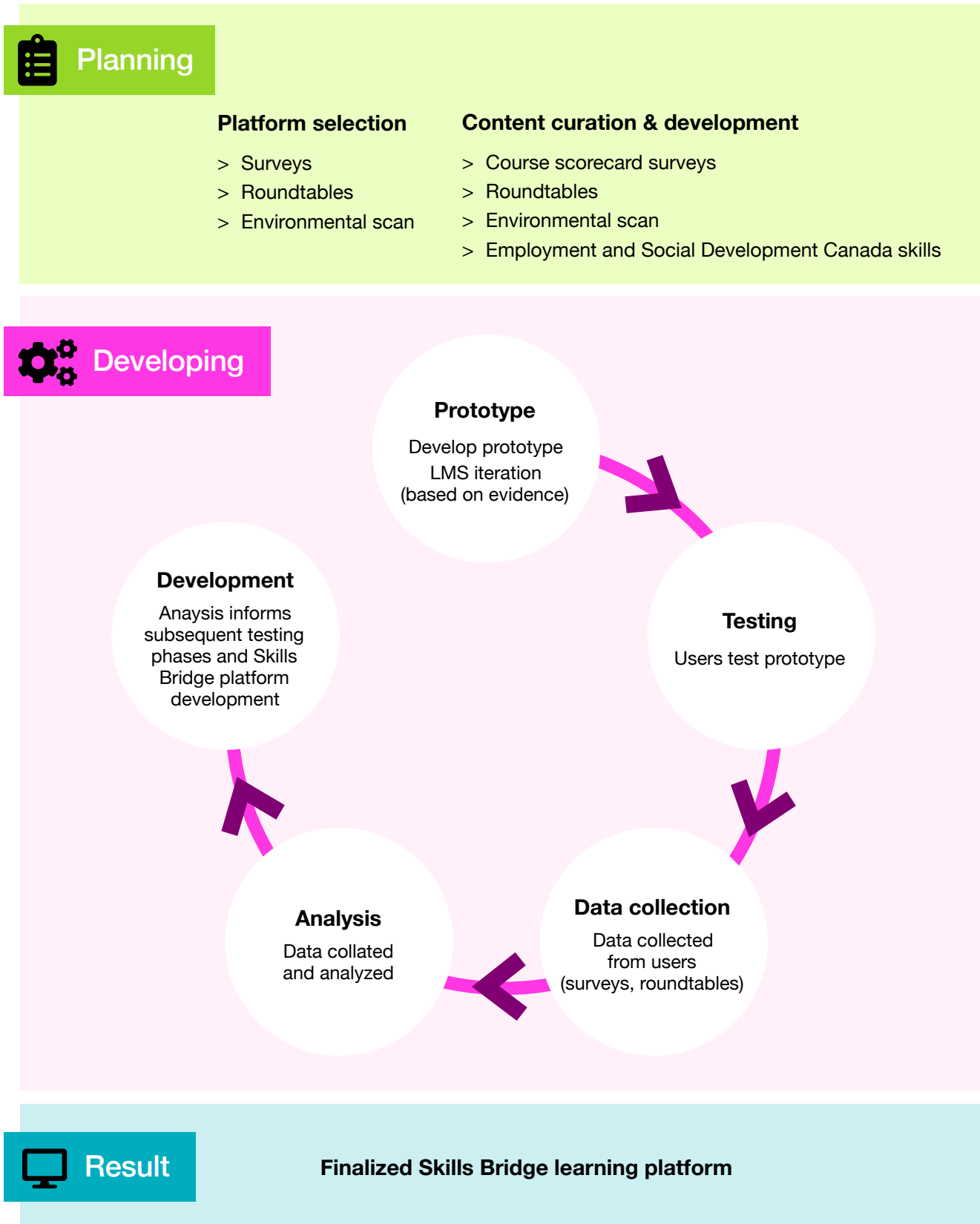
- > Project's evidence-based foundations
- > Four testing phases of the prototype lms and content
- > Content development and curation activities
- > EDI-specific activities
- > Final integrated Skills Bridge platform

The Magnet platform was developed through a partnership between Toronto Metropolitan University and the OCC using technology provided by WhoPlusYou and others, initially to match job seekers to employers. It has evolved into a national AI-enabled digital platform integrating numerous technologies and services. These allow stakeholders to build customized digital communities that deliver education, training and employment services that connect businesses, job seekers and service providers. The communities can include integrated job boards, LMSs, assessment tools, communication and knowledge mobilization tools, and program management and data collection tools.

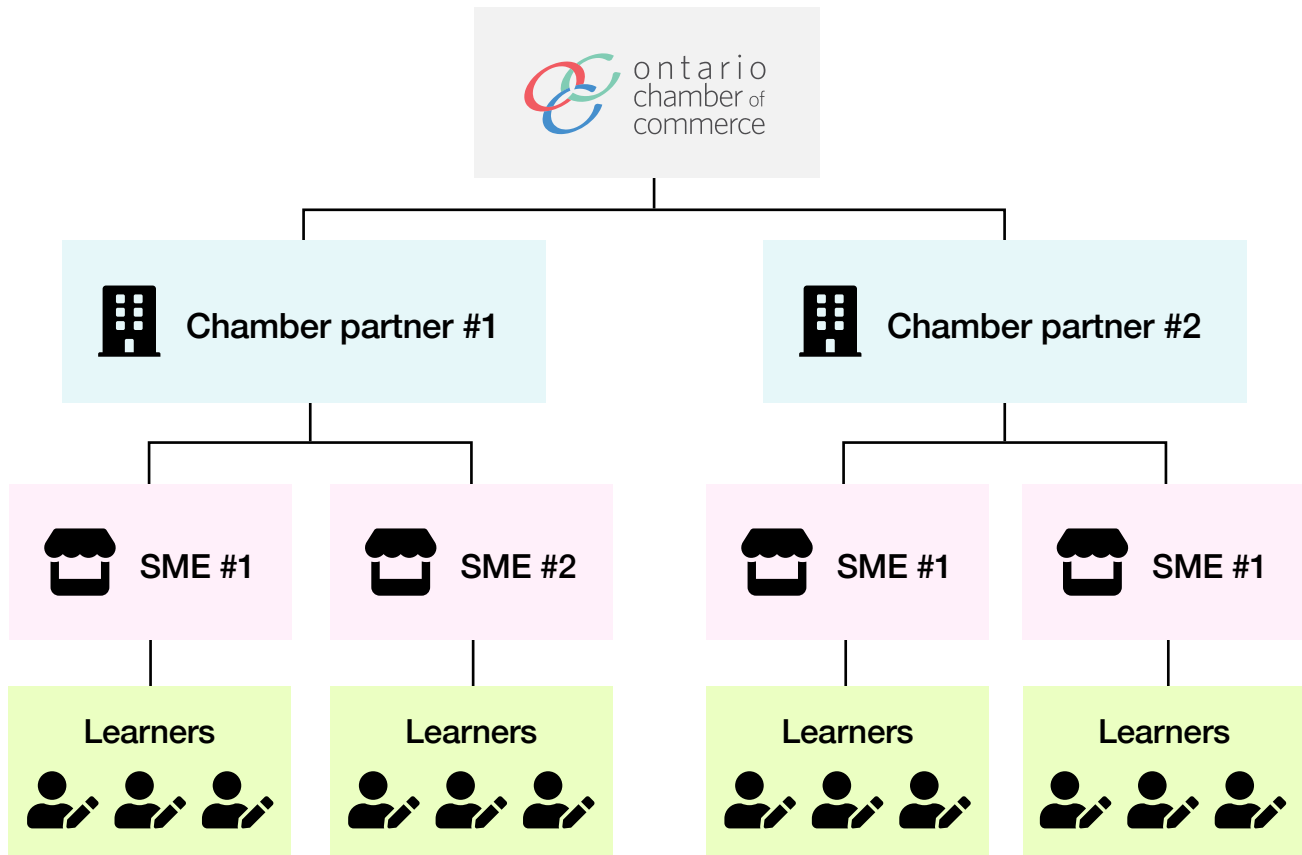


**FIGURE 4**

**Learning management system Skills Bridge iterative process**



**FIGURE 5**  
**Recruitment for Skills Bridge program**



Note: SME = small and medium-sized enterprise.

By leveraging the Magnet platform, users have access to resources beyond training, including job seekers, work subsidies and more. During the development phases, the program incorporated content and LMSs from Canada and around the world, including:

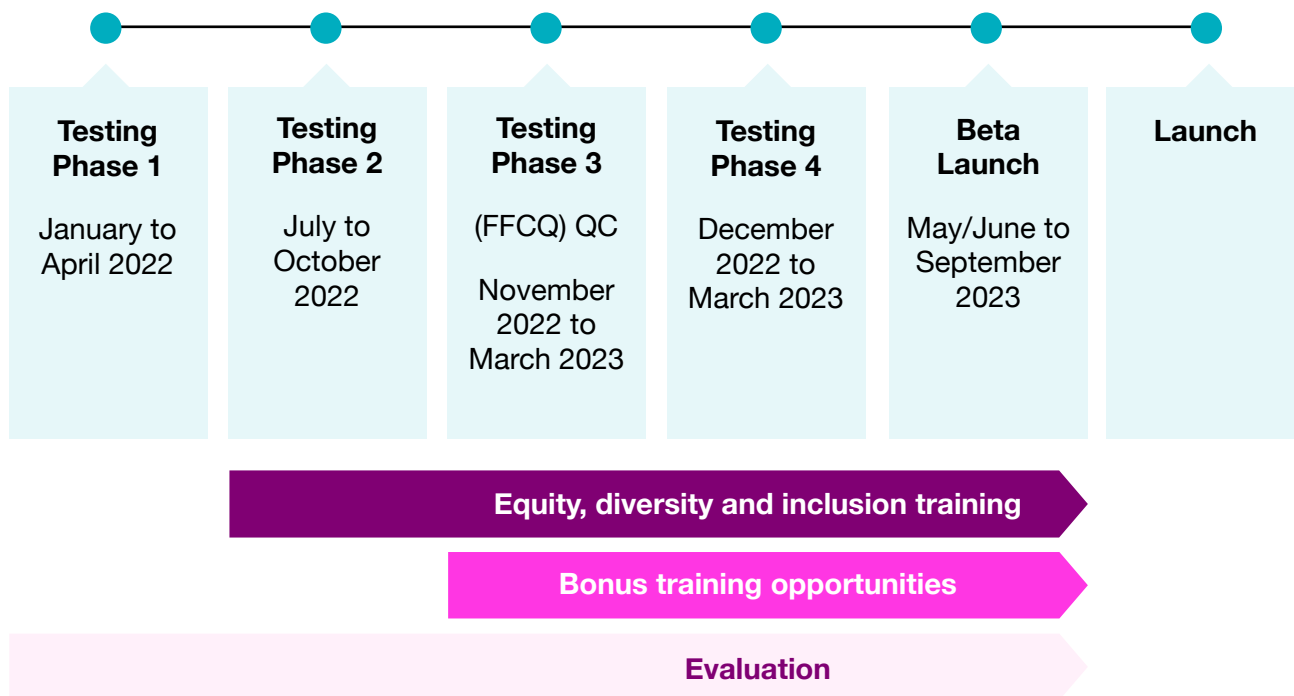
- > Bluedrop
- > Prepr
- > LinkedIn Learning
- > Skillsoft
- > Ontario Tech University
- > Udemy
- > Udacity

- > Biz Library
- > EdX
- > DominKnow
- > Coursera Skills Share
- > Rapid
- > Lingel Learning
- > Go!

The OCC connected with chambers of commerce across the country, which in turn recruited participants (Figure 5). Given the opportunity costs of participating in training, incentives were provided for chambers of commerce and participating companies.

**FIGURE 6**

**Testing Phases: Timeline and Activities**



## Developing and testing initial learning management system content

To allow for testing of the platform design, usability and content across multiple stakeholders and regions of Canada, a prototype LMS was launched with content, then iterated and tested through several phases (Figure 6).

### Testing Phase 1

In this phase, six content providers were identified as leaders in the field of online learning: Bluedrop, Prepr, Skillsoft, LinkedIn Learning, EdX and Ontario Tech University. They were then contracted to provide learning content. Content from two of these providers, Bluedrop and Skillsoft, were delivered through an integrated user experience built by Magnet and Bluedrop (acting as a technology provider in addition to its role as a content provider). Content from the four other providers (Prepr, LinkedIn Learning, Ontario Tech University and EdX) was delivered through each provider’s native LMS platform, which was linked to a prototype LMS provided by the OCC.

Through these six content providers, there were 36 courses offered in this phase (Table 1).

**TABLE 1****Testing Phase 1 courses**

Content provider	Courses
<b>Bluedrop</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Time Management</li> <li>&gt; Customer Service</li> <li>&gt; Do's and Don'ts of Effective Supervision</li> <li>&gt; Recruiting with Social Media</li> <li>&gt; HR 101</li> <li>&gt; Problem Solving</li> </ul>
<b>Ontario Tech</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Catalyst for Change</li> <li>&gt; Design Iteration</li> <li>&gt; Action Through Conclusion</li> <li>&gt; Challenge Assumptions</li> <li>&gt; Digital Literacy</li> <li>&gt; Pattern Identification</li> <li>&gt; Resilience</li> <li>&gt; Lead Through Influence</li> <li>&gt; Grit</li> </ul>
<b>Prepr</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Ecommerce 101</li> <li>&gt; Diversity &amp; Inclusion Lab</li> <li>&gt; Mental Health - Care Lab</li> </ul>
<b>EdX</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Let's Get Happy: Happiness Drives Performance</li> <li>&gt; Empathy and Emotional Intelligence at Work</li> <li>&gt; Teamwork &amp; Collaboration</li> <li>&gt; Unconscious Bias: From Awareness to Action</li> <li>&gt; Analyzing Data with Excel</li> <li>&gt; Leading With Effective Communication (Inclusive Leadership Training)</li> </ul>
<b>LinkedIn Learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Excel Essential Training</li> <li>&gt; InDesign: Learn the Fundamentals</li> <li>&gt; HTML Essential Training</li> <li>&gt; Develop Your Presentation Skills</li> <li>&gt; PowerPoint: Creating an Infographic</li> <li>&gt; Business Writing Strategies</li> </ul>
<b>Skillsoft</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Accounting for Non-Financial Professionals</li> <li>&gt; Recruiting, Screening, and Onboarding: Ensuring Onboarding Success</li> <li>&gt; First-Time Manager Essentials</li> <li>&gt; Developing Leadership Skills</li> <li>&gt; Effective Business Writing</li> <li>&gt; Understanding Cognitive Bias</li> </ul>



## Testing Phase 2

During the second phase, another iteration of the prototype LMS and course content was developed and tested. This was informed by the feedback from testing Phase 1 and leveraged the instruments developed in Phase 1, such as a course scorecard and an environmental scan.

In this iteration, five providers (Coursera, Skillshare, Yukon Learning, Bluedrop and Skillsoft) were contracted to provide learning content. Content from two of these providers, Bluedrop and Skillsoft, was delivered through an integrated user experience built by Magnet and Bluedrop (acting as a technology provider in addition to its role as a content provider).

Off-the-shelf content from Yukon Learning was contracted by OCC and delivered through Magnet. Content from the other providers (Coursera and Skillshare) was delivered through each provider's native LMS platform, although learners accessed this content by passing through the same portal website provided by the OCC in testing Phase 1.

For Phase 2, participants were able to select from six predetermined themed bundles of four courses, in response to SME feedback that learning paths would be helpful to structure the content. Twenty-four courses were offered in this phase. The six bundles were: Leadership 101/Supervisory Skills, HR & Recruitment, Small Business Fundamentals, Communication Skills, Digital Tools & Skills, and Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (Table 2).



**TABLE 2****Testing Phase 2 courses**

Content provider	Courses
<b>Coursera</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; How To Manage Remote Teams</li> <li>&gt; Diversity and Inclusion for HR Professionals</li> <li>&gt; Fundamentals of Operations</li> <li>&gt; Teamwork Skills: Communicating Effectively in Groups</li> <li>&gt; Digital Footprint</li> <li>&gt; Emotional Intelligence</li> </ul>
<b>Skillshare</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Organizational Culture and DEI: How To Build an Inclusive Work Environment</li> <li>&gt; Mastering Digital Productivity: Creating a Custom System That Works</li> <li>&gt; Effective Communication: 5 Best Practices for Remote Teams</li> <li>&gt; Practical Project Management Skills for Everyday Success</li> <li>&gt; Design Thinking 101 for Talent Leaders</li> <li>&gt; Professional Development: Leadership Communication for the Future of Work</li> </ul>
<b>Magnet</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Closing Deals</li> <li>&gt; Collaborative Communication</li> <li>&gt; Cultural Competence</li> <li>&gt; Bridging the Diversity Gap</li> <li>&gt; Communication</li> <li>&gt; Basic Computer Literacy</li> <li>&gt; The Reality of Being a First-Time Manager</li> <li>&gt; Conducting an Effective Hiring Interview</li> <li>&gt; Using Numbers on the Job</li> </ul>

### Testing Phase 3

The third phase was conducted in French. The platform and content were adapted to focus on testing French-language and Quebec-based providers to understand what types of content and design would resonate with Francophone learners in Quebec. To facilitate testing, OCC contracted Fédération des chambres de commerce du Québec (FCCQ) to deliver French-language skills training to SMEs in Quebec.

Six providers (LinkedIn Learning, Coursera, ADaPT, Amplio Stratégie, TÉLUQ, Propulsion RH and Fédération Québec en réseau) were contracted to provide French-language learning content. All 46 courses were delivered through each provider's native LMS platform, which learners accessed through the prototype LMS (Table 3).

As with Phase 2, the courses were organized into learning bundles. In addition to courses sourced from contracted providers, French-language courses from DI's ADaPT program were included. ADaPT is a skills development and work placement program aimed at preparing post-secondary graduates and students in their final semester for a changing world of work. A work-integrated learning program, ADaPT provides 70+ hours of training in in-demand skills through professional and digital workshops. It also provides pathways to careers for participants, which include populations under-represented in the workforce.



*A work-integrated learning program, **ADaPT** provides **70+ hours of training in in-demand skills through professional and digital workshops**. It also provides pathways to careers for participants, which include populations under-represented in the workforce.*

**TABLE 3****Testing Phase 3 courses**

Content provider	Courses
<b>Coursera</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Effectuation : l'entrepreneuriat pour tous</li> <li>&gt; Devenir entrepreneur du changement</li> <li>&gt; Diversité et inclusion sur le lieu de travail</li> <li>&gt; L'excellence opérationnelle en pratique</li> <li>&gt; L'avenir de la décision : connaître et agir en complexité</li> <li>&gt; Animer une séance collaborative</li> </ul>
<b>LinkedIn Learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; L'essentiel de Excel 2021</li> <li>&gt; L'essentiel de PowerPoint 2021</li> <li>&gt; Découvrir Office 365</li> <li>&gt; Travailler en équipe</li> <li>&gt; Les fondements de la gestion du temps</li> <li>&gt; Grammaire et orthographe française</li> </ul>
<b>TELUQ</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Littérature Oralité</li> <li>&gt; Enquêtes et Découvertes 1</li> <li>&gt; Entreprendre au Québec</li> <li>&gt; La rédaction interculturelle</li> <li>&gt; Féminisation et rédaction inclusive</li> <li>&gt; L'orthographe française et les rectifications de l'orthographe</li> </ul>
<b>Amplio Stratégie</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; S'entraîner à la gestion de crise</li> <li>&gt; Intégrer la gestion à distance et hybride au quotidien</li> <li>&gt; Développer son leadership d'influence</li> <li>&gt; S'adapter à l'organisation renouvelée du travail</li> <li>&gt; Développer ses habiletés de gestion</li> <li>&gt; Prendre soin de sa santé physique en milieu de travail</li> <li>&gt; Prendre soin de sa santé mentale en milieu de travail</li> <li>&gt; Optimiser son télétravail</li> </ul>
<b>Propulsion RH</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Santé mentale et bien-être au travail</li> <li>&gt; Civilité et harcèlement au travail</li> <li>&gt; Diversité culturelle</li> <li>&gt; Surmonter les défis de la supervision d'équipe</li> <li>&gt; Meilleure pratique de gestion de l'EDI</li> <li>&gt; Savoir stimuler l'innovation par la créativité</li> </ul>
<b>Formation Québec en réseau</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Sensibilisation à la gestion de la diversité Culturelle</li> </ul>

**TABLE 4****Testing Phase 4 courses**

Content provider	Courses
<b>LinkedIn Learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Communication About Culturally Sensitive Issues</li> <li>&gt; Skills for Inclusive Conversations</li> <li>&gt; Difficult Conversations: Talking About Race at Work</li> <li>&gt; Becoming an Ally to All</li> </ul>
<b>Ontario Human Rights Commission</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Human Rights 101</li> <li>&gt; Working together: the Code and the AODA</li> <li>&gt; Call it out: racial discrimination</li> <li>&gt; Human rights and the duty to accommodate</li> </ul>
<b>Women and Gender Equality Canada</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Gender-Based Analysis Plus</li> </ul>
<b>Canada School of Public Service</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Reflecting on Cultural Bias: Indigenous Perspectives</li> </ul>
<b>ADaPT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Presentation Skills</li> <li>&gt; Business Writing</li> <li>&gt; Communication Styles</li> <li>&gt; Introduction to Search Engine Optimization</li> <li>&gt; Introduction to Microsoft Excel</li> <li>&gt; Building resiliency and positive team connections</li> <li>&gt; Creativity and Problem-solving</li> <li>&gt; Project Management</li> <li>&gt; Time Management</li> </ul>
<b>Harvard University: Office for Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Harvard Implicit Association Test (15 tests)</li> </ul>

**Testing Phase 4**

In the fourth phase, the objective was to focus primarily on EDI and digital skills courses.

In addition to courses from ADaPT, Phase 4 included EDI resources and courses from LinkedIn Learning, the Ontario Human Rights Commission, Harvard’s Project Implicit, and Women and Gender Equality Canada (Table 4).

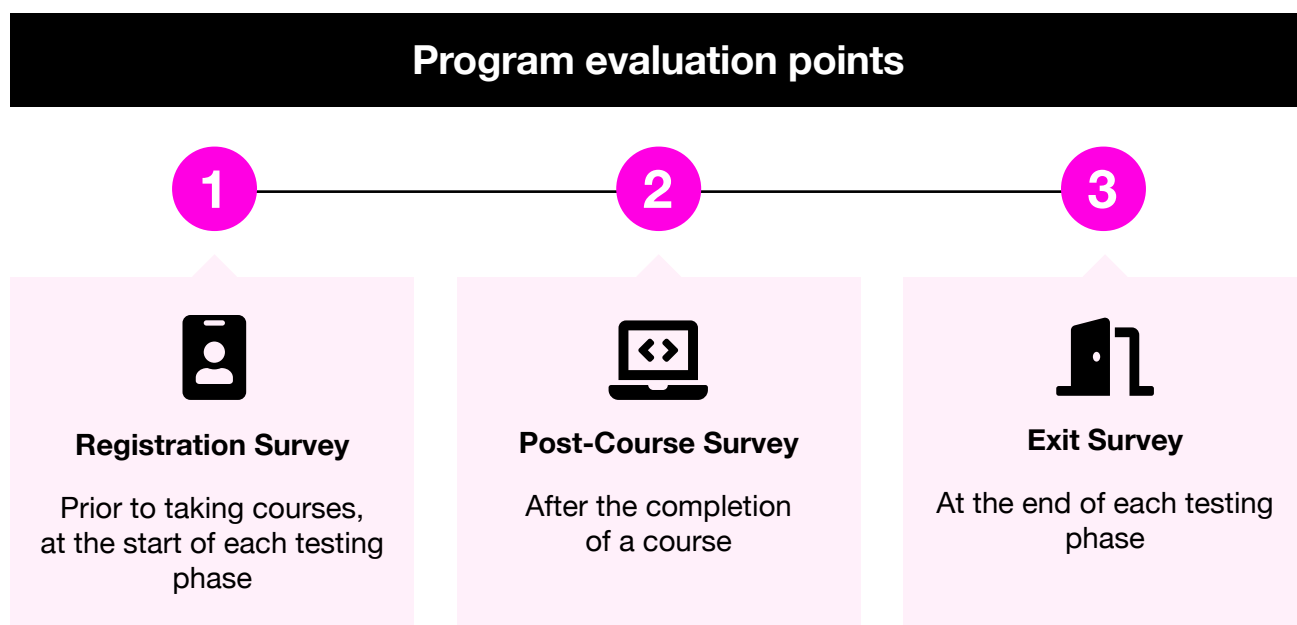
# Program Evaluation



The program evaluation processes included a range of stakeholders and data collection at all phases of the project. Data were collected on participation and perspectives of learners, SMEs and chambers of commerce. Evaluation occurred across three different time points in the project (Figure 7).

In total, 691 learners, 385 SMEs and 55 chambers of commerce participated in training.

**FIGURE 7**  
Skills Bridge Program evaluation time points





**TABLE 5****Survey schedule for the Skills Bridge program**

	Registration Survey	Post-Course Survey	Exit Survey
Learners	X	X	X
Small and medium-sized enterprises	X		
Chambers	X		

**The evaluation results show the following training outcomes:**

- > Overall, three in four learners rated the quality of the course as high.
- > The average quality rating of course was 8.4 out of 10.
- > 83% of learners were likely to recommend their course.
- > 89% of learners plan to apply content to their work.
- > 69% of learners found the course content compelling and useful, with an average rating of eight out of 10.
- > Valuable feedback was provided on course content, as well as the platform, which informed the design of the platform beta version.

## Surveys

Surveys were an important method of data collection for this project. There were three different registration surveys (one adapted for each group), a single post-course survey and a single exit survey. Each distinct group was evaluated differently based on their role in the project, with the objective of understanding the perspectives and feedback of the diverse stakeholders involved. While learners completed three surveys at different time points, data collection from SMEs and participating chambers of commerce focused on data collection only at the outset of the project (Table 5).



## Registration and exit surveys for learners

These collected demographic data, education-level data, employment data and self-assessed skills evaluation data. This data contributed insights on the characteristics of the sample of learners who provided data for the evaluation of the program.

The registration and exit surveys were aligned to allow the project team to compare responses pre- and post-intervention. This was key to our ability to evaluate effectiveness. This data will also enable improvements to the program that consider the experiences of the different groups involved.

## Post-course surveys for learners

The testing and beta launch phases were focused on evaluating the courses that learners completed just prior to receiving the survey. Given that the program is intended to be accessible and useful for the full range of SME employees, this data provides insights on whether the content meets this goal.

The data collected from SMEs is critical to evaluating the success of the program, because this is a program focused on addressing the skills needs of SMEs; however, there is also important data to be collected from SMEs. This was accomplished through registration and exit surveys for SMEs during the testing and launch phases, as well as focus groups at the end of the testing phase and during the launch phase.

## Registration surveys for SMEs

Data was collected on organizational characteristics such as SME size, location, demographic characteristics of the organizational leadership, organizational policies and practices, and whether the organization possesses skills training materials that could be leveraged for training. Data on organizational characteristics such as size, location and demographic characteristics allows for an understanding of the characteristics of the sample of SMEs that will be providing data for the evaluation of the program. The project team can then understand how representative the sample of SMEs is with respect to the wider population of potential participants.

Given that the program is intended to be accessible and useful for a full range of Canadian SMEs, this data aims to ensure that the project is meeting these accessibility objectives and driving program improvement where it is not. Participating SMEs were also asked if they had training materials they were interested in digitizing for inclusion in the Skills Bridge platform's content to leverage existing expertise.

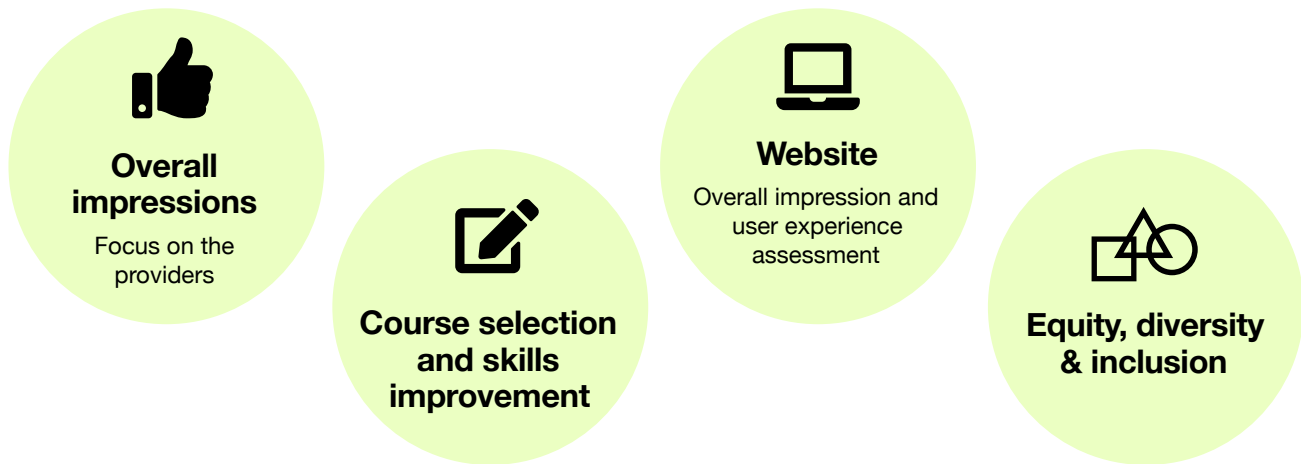
## Registration surveys for chambers

Data was collected from chambers of commerce through registration surveys during the test phases. No registration surveys were completed during the beta phase for this reporting window (up to Sept. 30), as the chambers had already participated in one of the testing phases and filled out a registration survey at that time. Organizational information that was collected was used to help the project team understand the sample of chambers participating in the project.

Given that the program is intended to be accessible and useful for a full range of SMEs, and that the chambers are the primary means of connecting with SMEs, this data was important for enabling program improvement. And, as with SMEs, the collection of data on whether chambers have training materials of interest for digitizing will also provide an indication of whether opportunities exist for new content to be added to the platform through collaboration with chambers that would leverage their existing expertise.

For each testing phase, an analysis of the survey data was conducted and findings summarized in internal survey reports for project partners. This facilitated the incorporation of feedback into subsequent platform iterations and the final integrated Skills Bridge platform itself.

**FIGURE 8**  
Roundtable themes



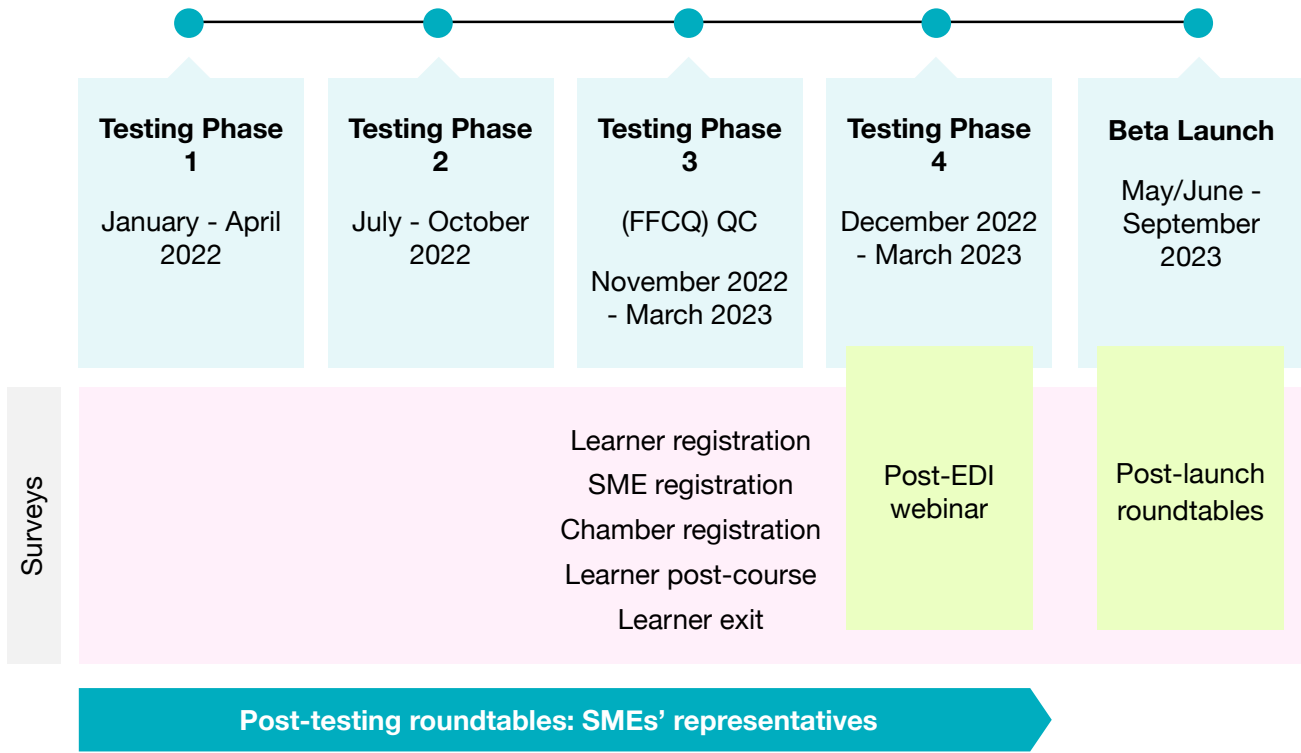
## Roundtables

Pre-roundtables including participating SMEs and local chambers of commerce were convened before the project’s activities began. Roundtables were also convened at the end of each testing phase to gather qualitative feedback from select chambers, SMEs and representative learners from SMEs. Comments were gathered on the LMS user experience and the quality and relevance of the content being offered. Suggestions for improvements to the prototype LMS or Skills Bridge platform, the course offerings and the course content were solicited. Roundtable moderators guided the discussion using a guide designed by the DI research team, which was organized around four central themes (Figure 8). The moderators asked additional direct questions about content they would like to see.

To capture the conversation during the roundtables, notetakers were present and the Zoom sessions were recorded, anonymized and transcribed. These notes and transcripts were the basis for this analysis, in addition to some feedback received by email. A thematic analysis was conducted, identifying cross-cutting themes that emerged from the feedback. For each testing phase, this analysis was summarized in an internal roundtable report for project partners. These reports facilitated the lessons learned to be incorporated into subsequent phases. In total, 15 roundtables have been conducted throughout the project, the last of which was held in March 2024 at the end of the current beta launch (see Appendix A).

The comprehensive data collection of the project was an important element in the design. It aimed to ensure that the Skills Bridge platform is aligned with the needs of SMEs and maximizes the opportunities to build knowledge about how best to address the skills gaps and capacity building needs faced by SMEs.

**FIGURE 9**  
Project Data Collection Points<sup>1</sup>



In total, this project involved 31 data collection events across the four testing phases and beta period (Figure 9).

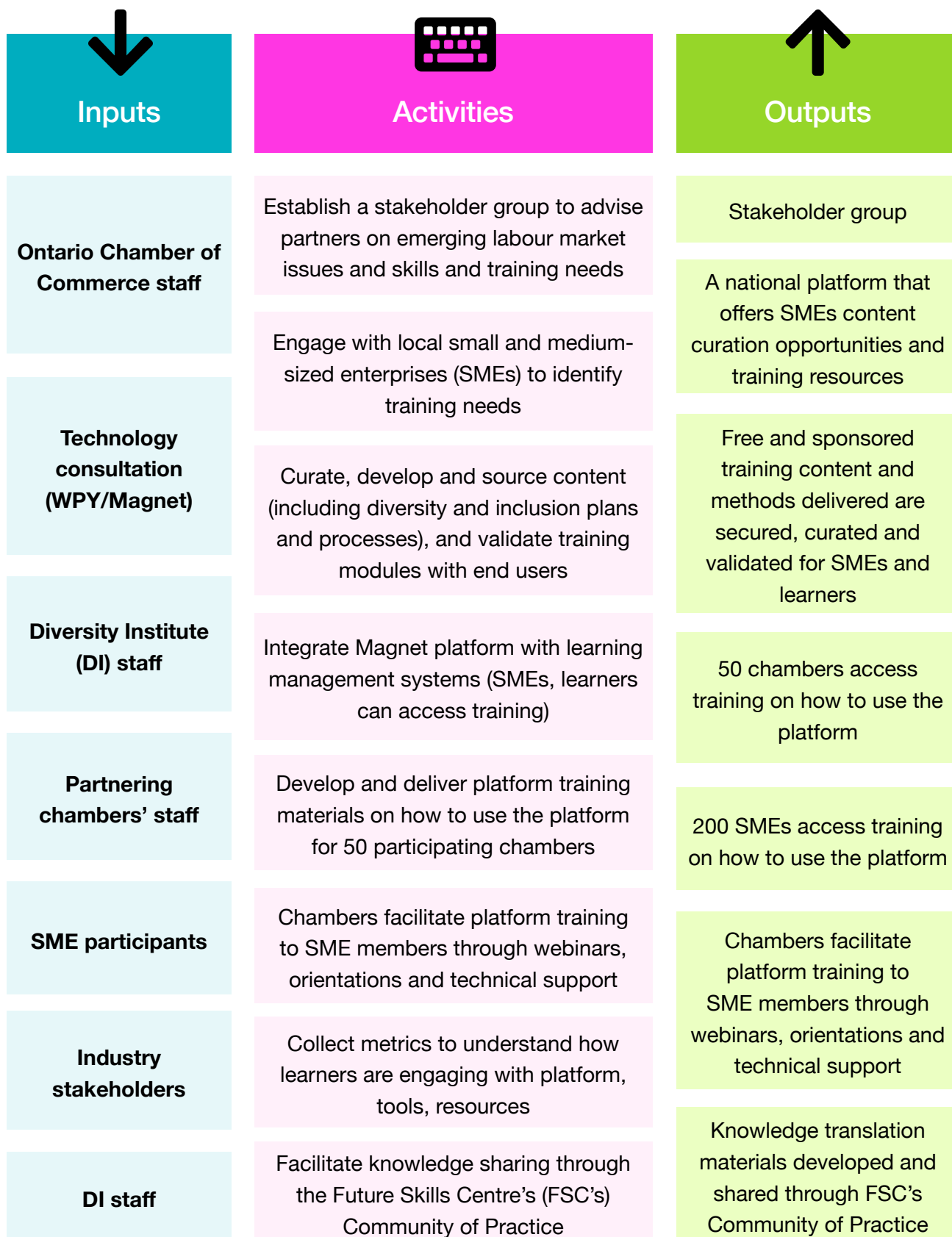
The logic model outlined the inputs (e.g., the technology, staff and content), the activities (e.g., the engagement, design and delivery) and the outputs produced by the program. These included engagement, learning, data and knowledge, with a focus on short-term, intermediate and long-term goals (Figures 10A + 10B).

<sup>1</sup> Figure 9 shows the 31 data collection points for testing Phases 1 through 4 and the beta period. Prior to the testing phases, pre-roundtables were held, which are not shown but would bring the total over the course of the project to 32.



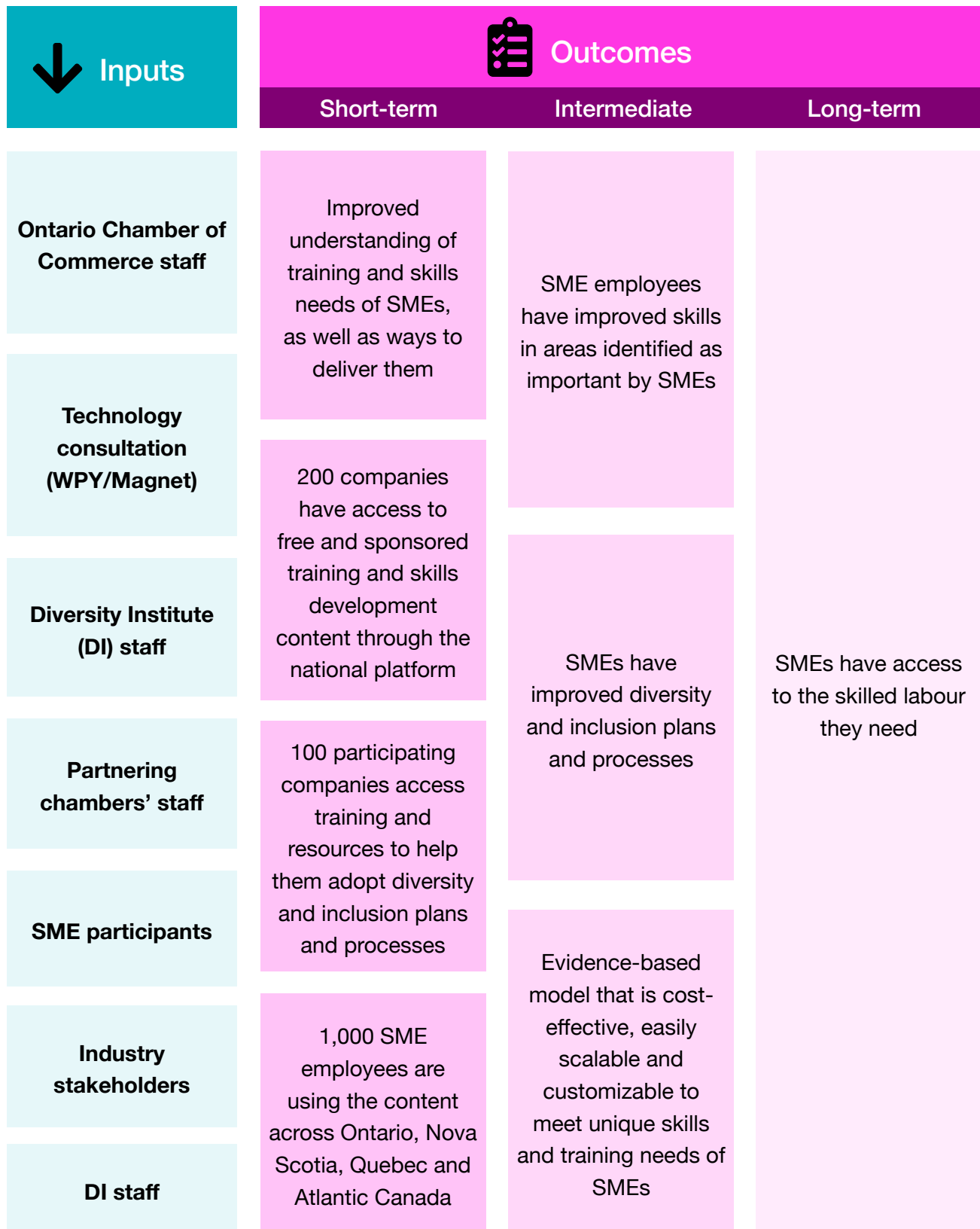
**FIGURE 10A**

**Skills Bridge platform logic model (activities & outputs)**



**FIGURE 10B**

Skills Bridge platform logic model (outcomes)



# Results



## Participation

Fifty-five chambers of commerce from across Canada were engaged in the program. In addition, 861 SMEs engaged in training, of which 385 engaged in courses. A total of 691 learners registered in courses, 1,021 learners across 666 SMEs took EDI training, 508 people participated in EDI webinars and 71.2% of learners engaged in EDI training, including courses and webinars. For the courses delivered in four phases, 515 unique learners, 385 SMEs and 55 chambers participated in the process (Table 6; note that some participated in more than one phase.)

### Phase 1

In the first phase, 88 SMEs were recruited through 15 participating chambers of commerce. They were provided access to online skills training courses for 176 learners. Feedback from the roundtables suggested that, while still in need of refinement, the LMS filled an important need for SMEs. Participating SMEs confirmed that they often lack dedicated resources to provide and engage in meaningful learning, when compared to what large organizations have available. Regarding the courses, participants

## Participation by the numbers



**55 chambers of commerce** from across Canada



**861 SMEs** engaged in training



**691 learners** registered in courses



**1,021 learners** took EDI training



**508 people** participated in EDI webinars

primarily cited length as the main barrier, especially in the context of having to complete multiple courses over a short period due to the structure of the initial testing phase. As one participant said, “I am self-employed, or at least I was only one doing the six courses and it did feel like quite a bit of work, so I was very glad when the deadline was extended to the

**TABLE 6**  
**Overview of Skills Bridge program participation**

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3 (Fr)	Phase 4
Learners	176	264	123	111
Registration surveys	120	170	83	70
Post course surveys	457	497	158	168
Exit surveys	64	127	56	46
Small and medium-sized enterprises	88	122	64	107
Registration surveys	59	88	38	69
Chambers	15	21	15	3
Surveys	14	14	10	0
Roundtables	3	3	2	3
Participants	79	33	20	9

end of April because that made it a lot more manageable.” Some attempted longer courses and did not finish. Others did not even attempt courses that interested them, solely because of the length.

Participants also singled out interactivity as an important signifier of whether they liked a course or not. This was especially the case for courses that kept them engaged with questions and tested them throughout. This helped in avoiding the “I got distracted for two hours, but the platform still thinks I progressed” phenomenon. Clear and straightforward content was also a critical factor, with LinkedIn Learning often singled out as a champion in this category.

Moving forward, many participants said that organizing the courses in buckets or packages, instead of by provider, would be more useful. Splitting courses by provider led many to perceive some courses as redundant or duplicates. Instead, the feedback was to have the content organized in categories, such as soft skills, tech skills, managerial skills and similar.

Regarding EDI, many participants said that it is often misunderstood. They said that it could be one of the most central offerings to companies, as the need and demand are already there or will be. They pointed out that the course material itself, however, also needs to reflect diversity, as it often lacks representation and is westernized.



## Phase 2

In the second phase, 21 participating chambers of commerce recruited 122 SMEs, which provided access to 264 learners to test the prototype LMS and provide feedback.

Three roundtable discussions were held with 33 participants representing SMEs and learners to obtain feedback on the Phase 2 content and prototype LMS design. Feedback indicated a need for a fully integrated, single platform to make the platform navigation easier to use. Regarding the courses, participant feedback echoed Phase 1 feedback that cited length as the main barrier. Participants also indicated a preference that courses offer options for different ways of learning, including text and audio transcripts that can be accessed at their convenience, such as while commuting.

Participants were particularly positive about courses that kept them engaged with questions, testing them throughout a course as they learned, as well as those with built-in mechanisms to prevent them from being able to multitask or get distracted. Participants indicated built-in confirmation mechanisms were necessary to achieve meaningful course completion. Many participants, however, said they would like to be able to have downloadable course materials outlining key learning points to keep for future reference or to share with colleagues after they complete a course. Participants also said that providing a certificate or attestation of completion consistently for all courses would be a good way to conclude a course, as they were unclear if they had completed some courses.



Regarding the course content, the main feedback was that many of the courses were too basic and not always well-adapted to the business realities of SMEs. As one participant put it, “Small business is not a little big business. Small business is its own thing.” Respondents articulated a need for content that is designed for small businesses to meet training needs. Beyond training targeting SMEs, participants were also interested in tailored content on certain topics, including sales, data analytics (e.g., Google, Amazon), marketing (e.g., social media, SEO), small business fundamentals (e.g., bookkeeping, accounting), how to manage growth, EDI and staff training.

Regarding EDI, many participants mentioned a strong interest and highlighted its value. However, the content offered was described as a little too ‘Walk through this checklist and everything will be fine,’ while the workplace reality is more complex. Therefore, EDI content recognizing complexity is important and desirable.

### Phase 3

The FCCQ recruited 64 SMEs through 15 Quebec-based chambers of commerce in this phase. This provided access to 123 learners, who tested and provided feedback on the prototype LMS and its content. Participating SMEs were provided with a funding incentive per learner to subsidize their participation and offset staff costs. Participating SMEs assigned between one and three staff members as learners to complete one course

bundle from a curated list and to participate in data collection activities. Learners were able to complete additional courses from other bundles if they chose to do so. There were three roundtable discussions held in French with 20 SMEs and learners to obtain feedback. Overall, feedback suggested the LMS was meeting an essential need for SMEs. According to roundtable participants, the concept is remarkable, but the execution still needs some fine-tuning, especially in terms of platform and user experience. Connectivity issues and confusion due to the large volume of emails from the FCCQ and various learning platforms were experienced by most participants.

Respondents found the courses and information provided on the platform very useful. The main critiques were that some of the courses were too basic, too long or not quite adapted to organizational realities in Quebec (e.g., they were poorly translated or used content from France that included different terminology). Respondents liked most of the course providers, aside from Coursera, which some users felt was challenging to navigate and had content that was too basic. Amplio Stratégie, Propulsion RH and LinkedIn Learning received the most direct positive feedback.

Participants really liked the interactive aspect of certain platforms (e.g., Amplio Stratégie) and the diversity of courses offered. However, they also mentioned a desire for more in-depth training on a wider range of subjects, including marketing, social media, communications,



SME management, recruitment, mental health, customer service, non-profits, sustainability and ethics. There was also a strong preference for shorter courses, or ones that can be broken down into segments, that offer practical tools. Content translated or produced elsewhere also presented issues around quality and terminology.

The main feedback on the LMS was that the configuration of the site, which requires participants to navigate to the various course providers' websites to access the courses, was difficult to use. The need for more timely technical support in using the platform was also raised, as some participants had difficulty connecting to some of the providers to access courses. One recommendation was to consider external resources, such as consultants, for more information and support. An additional issue was confusion over the prototype platform through which learners accessed the content; some participants went directly to the supplier's site, which led

to complications versus using the dedicated links shared via email. The question of support is therefore a crucial issue that needs to be addressed to ensure an optimal learner experience.

Regarding EDI, some feedback raised concern about not wanting content that is too "heavy" and whether the subject matter was suitable for asynchronous training. In addition, the aspect of platform inclusiveness in terms of accessibility was mentioned and supported by other participants. An interest in ensuring that the platform was fully accessible to persons living with a disability was also expressed.

## Phase 4

In this phase, 30 chamber partners provided access to 107 unique SME and 111 learners. Only three of these chambers had not participated in a previous testing phase, thus accounting for the absence of chamber registration surveys. As with previous phases,

**TABLE 7****Implementation results of the Skills Bridge project**

Outcome	Description	Target	Actuals
Provide free and sponsored training and skills development content to SMEs through a collaborative partnership with local chambers of commerce.	Unique local chamber of commerce partners engaged (i.e., have access to the platform)	50	55
	Unique SMEs engaged (i.e., have access to the training and skills development content via the prototype LMSs and Skills Bridge platform)	200	388
	1000 SME employees are using the content across Ontario, Nova Scotia, Quebec and Alberta	1000	498
Provide SMEs with access to training resources that promote diverse and inclusive hiring practices	Unique SMEs engaged in EDI training	50% of participating SMEs <sup>2</sup>	591 (registration for webinars was separate from course)

user feedback indicated there is still some work to do to improve the user experience. Regarding the courses, participants primarily cited length as the main barrier. This was a constant through multiple rounds of roundtables; long courses are a challenge unless there is a clear way to segment them. There is still a strong preference for content that is interactive and offers varied formats (e.g., audio, video, text) that will allow learners to learn at their convenience, including interest in content that would be accessible while commuting.

2 Target was articulated as “Deliver EDI training and resources to 50% of participating SMEs” in the funding agreement. Since 200 was the target for participating SMEs, 100 reflects 50% of the minimum target for participating SMEs.

Another recurring theme was that participants would like the ability to download some of the content and have something to keep and share with colleagues. Additionally, participants mentioned that providing a certificate or attestation of completion consistently for all courses would be a good way to conclude a course, echoing comments from previous roundtables.

Many participants mentioned a strong interest in EDI and that they see it as valuable. Some of the participating SMEs already have EDI policies in place. Overall, the content was very well-received and participants were eager for more. Participants are aware of the complexity of recruiting diverse hires, tracking diversity and managing a diverse workforce with employees



from different cultures. In this context, any content and tools to support them would be welcome. Table 7 presents the implementation results of the Skills Bridge project, with expected results compared to actuals. This data is up-to-date as of Sept. 30, 2023.<sup>38</sup>

In most cases, the project exceeded its targets, with more than 388 companies participating from 55 chambers of commerce. There were 1,215 learners across these SMEs that participated in training; 515 of these were unique learners. The participation aligned with the current geographic representation of SMEs in Canada, with the majority of small businesses in the four most populous provinces of Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia and Alberta.<sup>39</sup>

According to registration survey data, the SMEs came from across industries, including professional, scientific and technical services (n=31); health care and social assistance (n=27); retail trade (n=24); art, entertainment and recreation (n=23); and accommodation and food services (n=17). The most common response to this question was “other/ unsure” (n=53), which suggests that the question wording might have been unclear or that the question options were not comprehensive.

Most of the SMEs (85.5%) reported an organization size of fewer than 50 employees. The majority (72.5%) were also for-profit organizations. They were generally balanced in organizational model between business-to-consumer (48%) and business-to-business (42.5%). Further, 71.1% offered their services in English and 24% offered their services in French. Almost three-quarters (74.6%) used English as their primary language for internal communication and 22% used French.

Equity-deserving groups were fairly well-represented in senior roles in many SME organizations surveyed. Close to three-quarters of organizations (71.8%, n=158) indicated that individuals from equity-deserving groups (e.g., women, racialized or Indigenous persons, persons with disabilities) hold senior leadership positions. Slightly over one-half of SMEs had representation from equity-deserving groups on their boards of directors (55.8%, n=96). In addition, when it comes to diverse ownership, fewer than two in five (38.8%, n=87) SMEs had no representation from equity-deserving groups among owners.

Women were the group most likely to be represented in ownership and senior leadership roles in SME organizations. Most SMEs indicated that more than one-half of their ownership team (58.6%, n=126) and senior leadership team (53.6%, n=120) identified as women.

However, women were not as well-represented on the boards of directors across SMEs, with only about 44% identifying as women. Almost all SMEs said that less than one-half of their ownership team, senior leadership team and board of directors have representation from the Indigenous community, racialized people or persons with disabilities.

Overall, an important strength of the project in terms of this outcome is that it incorporates feedback from diverse SMEs from across the country. Because of that, the project has been able to develop content that speaks to common needs of Canadian SMEs while



***An important strength of the project in terms of this outcome is that it incorporates feedback from diverse SMEs from across the country. Because of that, the project has been able to develop content that speaks to common needs of Canadian SMEs while addressing specificities that are important in a given local context.***

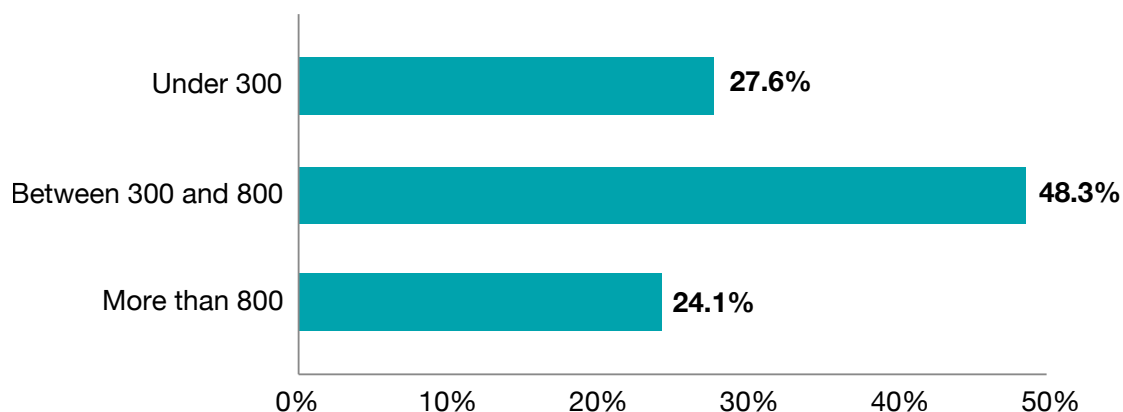
addressing specificities that are important in a given local context. For example, ensuring local French-language training and data collection allowed cultural and linguistic differences of this region to be reflected.

A potential limitation of the project is that SMEs from some provinces were not represented at all or underrepresented in the testing data. For example, only 1.5% of the SMEs engaged were headquartered in British Columbia, in contrast to the large representation of SMEs operating in that province.

Another important challenge was the slowing of recruitment of SME participants during the beta phase of the project (for the reporting window up to Sept. 30). In Phases 1 through 4, SMEs were recruited through local chamber



**FIGURE 11**  
**Organization size of participating chambers**



of commerce partners. However, at the start of the Skills Bridge beta period, SMEs were recruited directly by OCC from those who had been engaged in Phases 1 through 4. In addition, in testing Phases 1 through 3, an incentive structure connecting course and survey completion was implemented.

## Chamber participation

Fifty-five unique local chambers of commerce participated, surpassing the project target of 50. Chambers completed 38 registration surveys. The chambers varied in membership size, with almost one-half (48.3%) indicating they have between 300 and 800 members (Figure 11).

In terms of the chambers' geographical representation, as expected, it mapped to the same provinces as seen in the distribution of SMEs. Overall, chambers were engaged in the project and contributed to its success by recruiting participating SMEs. As with the SMEs, while the project was successful in engaging a diverse range of chambers from provinces across Canada, a limitation was that certain provinces were underrepresented

or not represented at all. Local chamber participation was instrumental in facilitating the participation of SMEs and an important outcome of the project. To achieve the project's objectives, an important step in its implementation was to engage and provide capacity development strategically to chambers. In this way, they will be better able to support employers facing labour market disruption and contribute to their resilience in attracting and retaining diverse talent.

However, since the project objectives focused on outcomes and impact for SMEs and their employee-learners, the outcomes do not include metrics for local chamber participation. Perhaps as a result, the chamber registration survey did not collect data on chambers' experience using the platform, their recommendations for the platform or their experience of participating in the project and recruiting SMEs. Given the challenge the project has faced in recruiting SMEs for the beta phase of the project, it would be helpful to understand the chamber perspectives given their important role in ensuring the uptake and use of the Skills Bridge platform.

## Learner demographics

From the inception of the project up until Sept. 30, 2023, the reporting window for this report, 454 learners completed registration surveys. Of them, most were between the ages of 30 and 49 years (58.3%, n=195; Figure 12).<sup>3</sup> Most learners (88.5%, n=378) were Canadian citizens by birth. The majority (88%) have post-secondary education.

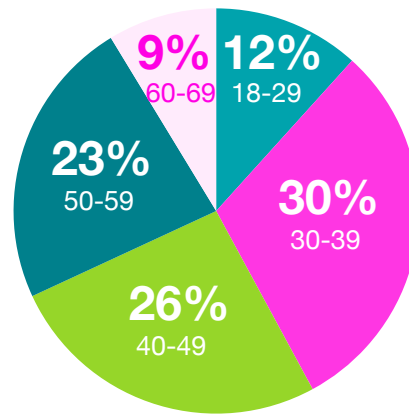
### Representation of equity-deserving groups in learners

Given the pervasive under-representation of equity-deserving groups in SME leadership and ownership, the lower numbers of these groups in the testing sample are not surprising. In this regard, the project made important efforts to ensure some representation of these populations by partnering, where possible, with chambers of commerce that represent equity-deserving groups, such as Canada’s 2SLGBTQI+ Chamber of Commerce (CGLCC).

The majority of learners in the cohort identified as women (73.1%, n=329; Figure 13).<sup>4</sup> Only 2.7% of learner surveys were completed by those identifying as Indigenous or Métis (n=12), and fewer than 7% of learners who filled out surveys represented persons with a disability

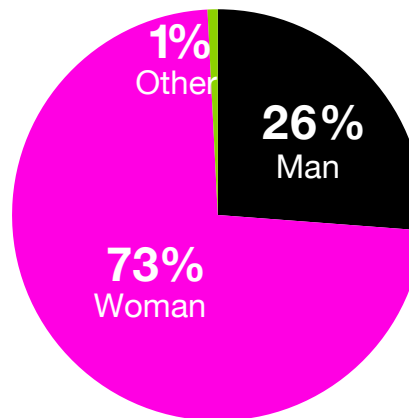
**FIGURE 12**

Age of registered learners across all project phases



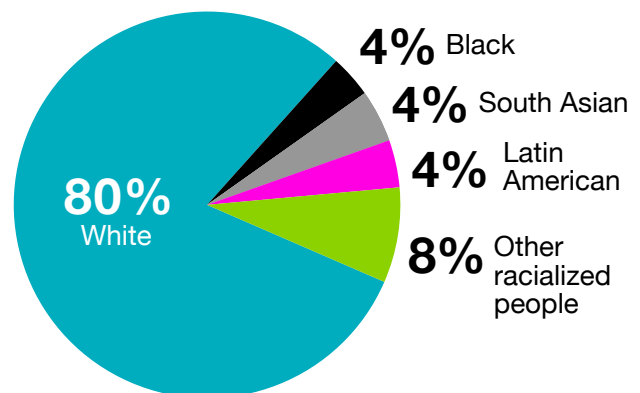
**FIGURE 13**

Gender of registered learners across all project phases



**FIGURE 14**

Ethnicity of registered learners across all project phases



3 There was a total of 454 respondents in this survey, but only 334 responded to the question related to their age group, while 120 of them chose “Prefer not to answer” or left it blank.

4 There was a total of 454 respondents in this survey. While 450 people responded to the question related to their gender identity, four chose “Prefer not to answer” or they left it blank.

(n=30).<sup>5</sup> There was slightly more representation of learners from racialized groups, with almost 20% of survey respondents identifying as an ethnic group other than white (Figure 14). As a result of the efforts to target Francophone learners during Phase 3, more than one-fifth of total unique learners identified as Francophone (22.3%, n=99).

This short-term outcome reflects the extent to which the Skills Bridge project was able to engage SMEs to participate in EDI training or access EDI resources. As discussed earlier in this report, research shows that SMEs can play an important role in building a more inclusive Canadian economy but more resources are needed to support them. Indeed, more than one-half of SMEs say their organization has an EDI strategy (64.6%) and a diverse hiring strategy (61.1%). Despite this, less than one-half (38%) of the SMEs who participated in the survey say they have a dedicated HR role in their organization or mandatory EDI training for employees (27.6%).

The EDI activities in this project included synchronous and asynchronous learning and complemented the testing and development of the Skills Bridge platform. Given that 388 unique SMEs participated in the Skills Bridge project, the 50% metric for this threshold is 194. As of Sept. 30, 2023, 591 unique SMEs had accessed training and resources to help them adopt diversity and inclusion plans and processes.

5 There was a total of 454 respondents in this survey. While 444 people responded to the question related to whether they are persons living with a disability, 10 chose “Prefer not to answer” or left it blank.

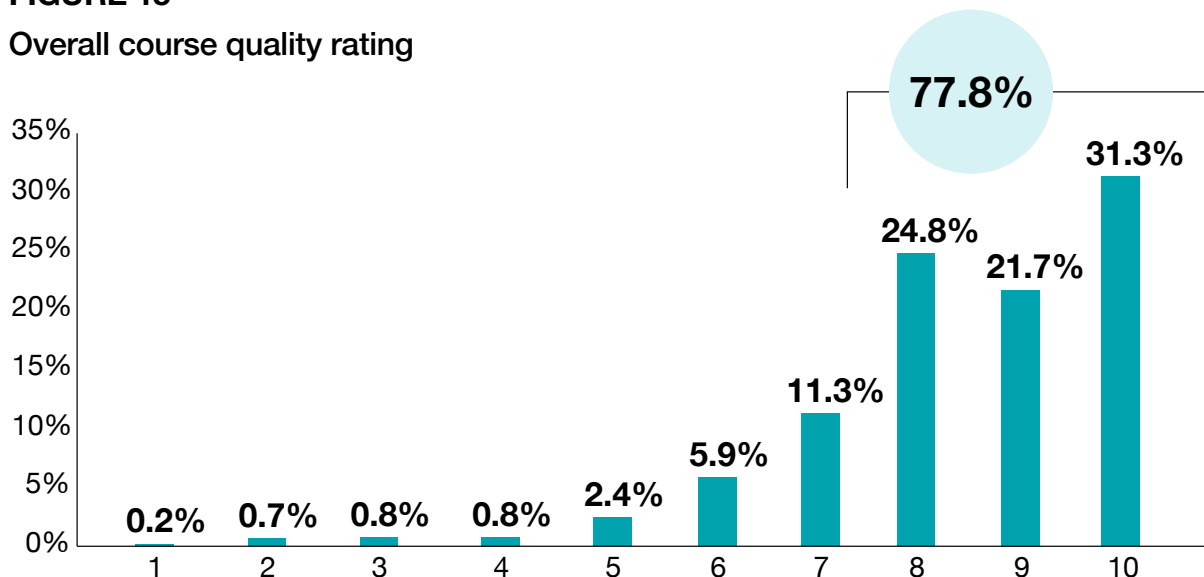


*Research shows that SMEs can play an important role in building a more **inclusive Canadian economy** but **more resources are needed to support them.***

Webinars on EDI supplemented the asynchronous EDI content from the prototype LMS and the Skills Bridge platform. During the project, 584 learners participated in these webinars. Overall, 917 learners across 597 SMEs engaged in EDI training in asynchronous courses and synchronous webinars.

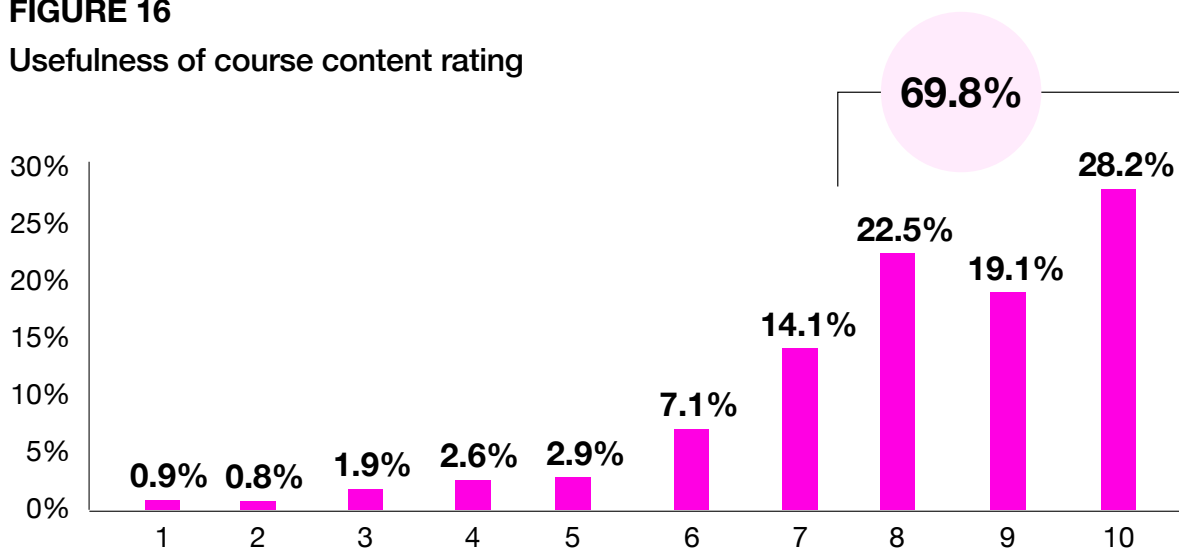
**FIGURE 15**

**Overall course quality rating**



**FIGURE 16**

**Usefulness of course content rating**



## Improved understanding of small and medium-sized enterprises' training and skills needs

The course content received positive feedback from participants. Overall, 77.8% of learners rated the quality as high, with an average rating of 8.4 out of 10 (Figure 15).

In addition, 69.8% of learners found the course content to be useful, with an average rating of eight out of 10 (Figure 16). As a result, 83% of learners were likely to recommend their course to a co-worker or friend.

Overall, the delivery of the training was satisfactory for learners: 96% believed learning objectives were clearly outlined, 83% achieved course learning objectives, and 88% experienced no barriers to taking courses.

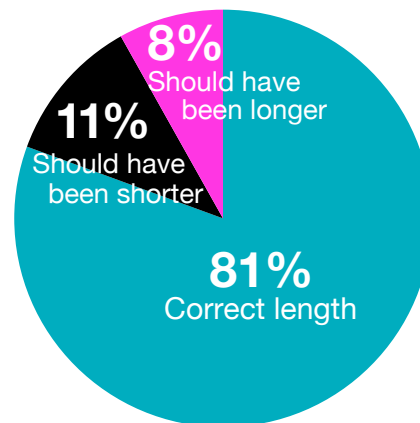
During the pre-program testing phase for the prototype LMS, the feedback from roundtable discussion focused on the challenges in navigating the course on different platforms. Not all were user-friendly. The program team adjusted the platform, then learners of all four phases were asked to rate the platform for satisfaction and user friendliness. They reported overall satisfaction, with 88% saying they were able to complete courses without barriers. The top three platforms for satisfaction, with scores out of 10, were LinkedIn Learning (8.89), Amplio Strategies (8.72) and Skillshare (8.66). The top three platforms for user friendliness were LinkedIn Learning (9.17), Amplio Strategies (9.08) and ADaPT (8.87). Additionally, participants shared their opinions on how to improve the delivery of EDI training:

### Length

About 80% of the participants agreed that the course was the correct length, but others suggested longer classes for in-depth discussion (Figure 17). For example, a participant said, “An hour-long workshop is a great start. Although it has been some time since we’ve been having these conversations in our communities, it is good to finally be able to tangibly ‘put our hands to the plow’ and ‘practise what we preach’ while being expected to meet certain criteria within our businesses and communities. Personally, I would love to see this workshop be a two-to-three-hour session(s) with case studies, perhaps, and with a more interactive component.” For those already familiar with EDI concepts, a deeper discussion on each topic is needed.

**FIGURE 17**

**Opinion on course length**



### Tailored content

Many participants were happy with the training content tailored to SMEs, but others requested sector-specific training. For instance, a participant noted, “Excellent session with highly acclaimed speakers! Please include the lens of not-for-profit organizations in future sessions as well.” Another participant asked for more examples “that include non-profit agencies, how to specifically avoid tokenism (i.e., how to be strategic when introducing/incorporating allyship/LGBTQ2S+ campaigns in an organization that has never done it before); i.e., how to start without appearing inauthentic.”

A participant pointed out that the content was only for urban settings: “It was very well done. I do think the perspective is a bit from a large urban setting that may cause resistance in more rural-based companies. It has a big city feel.” Participants’ geographic areas should be considered in future content development.

Another aspect of tailored content is to consider the differences in participants’ level of EDI knowledge. As some requested more time for in-depth discussion, others asked for an introductory class.

**TABLE 8****Assessment of participants' skills before and after training**

	Registration Mean	Exit Mean	Difference	Significance
Management	4.04	4.27	0.23	0.000
Numeracy	3.89	4.08	0.19	0.000
Innovation	4.30	4.41	0.12	0.005
Problem solving	4.42	4.53	0.11	0.003
Adaptability	4.48	4.58	0.10	0.008
Entrepreneurship	4.27	4.36	0.08	0.038
Digital skills	4.23	4.31	0.08	0.032
Writing	4.44	4.52	0.08	0.035
Equity, diversity and inclusion	4.40	4.46	0.07	0.066
Communication	4.48	4.55	0.07	0.052
Reading	4.69	4.74	0.05	0.122
Collaboration	4.52	4.57	0.04	0.144

**Application to micro-businesses**

Concerns about how to apply training contents to micro-businesses were raised. As one participant said, “Some of the best practices are hard to actually implement with under five staff.” Providing a business case for EDI, including for micro-businesses, could be beneficial for future participants.

**Presenters with lived experience**

A few participants suggested having presenters who have lived experience as an equity-deserving group member. For instance, a workshop led by a Black woman, who is a leader in the Black community and EDI advocate, received positive feedback. One participant said, “She is a fantastic speaker.

Her expertise shown through both in content and being able to support learners through questions and answers. From high-level to actionable steps, this is a presentation all marketing professionals should attend.” Another participant asked to “include a presenter who can share personal experiences and insights.”

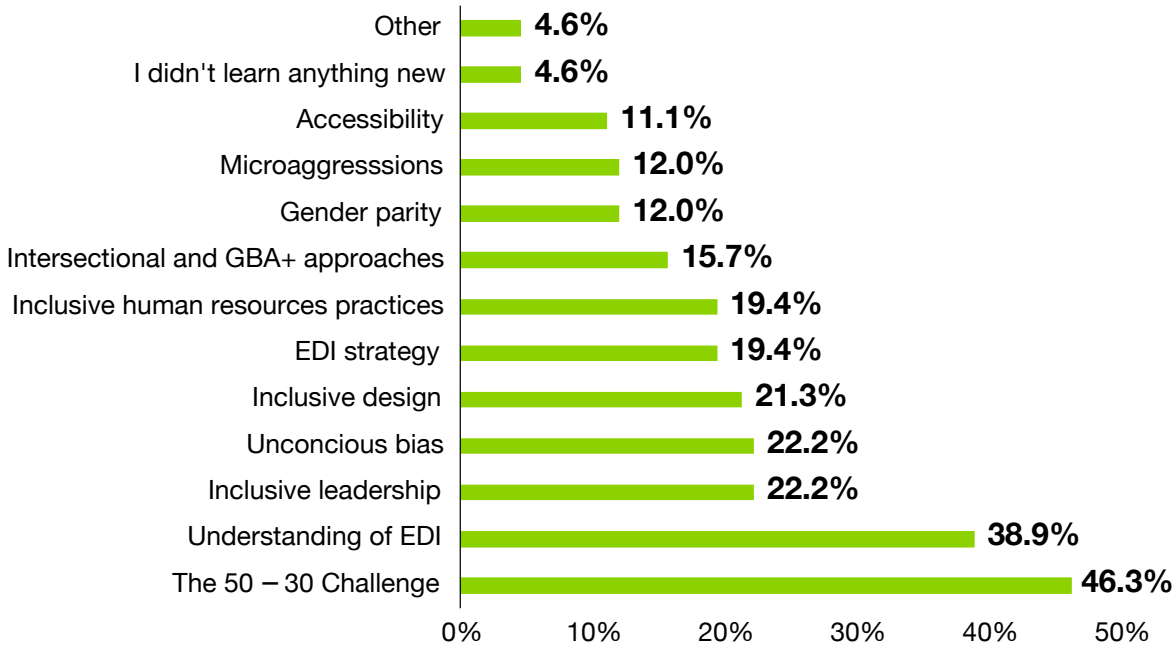
**Intermediate outcomes****Improved skills important to small and medium-sized enterprises**

The project had learners assess their skills before and after training (Table 8). Improvements were seen across all 12 of the skill areas in the survey. Statistically significant



**FIGURE 18**

**Equity, diversity and inclusion topics learned for the first time**



improvements were reported in the eight most-improved skill areas: management, numeracy, innovation, problem solving, adaptability, entrepreneurship, digital skills and writing. Most of these areas were among the lowest rated pre-training, demonstrating the effectiveness and relevance of course content.

**Improved equity, diversity and inclusion plans and processes**

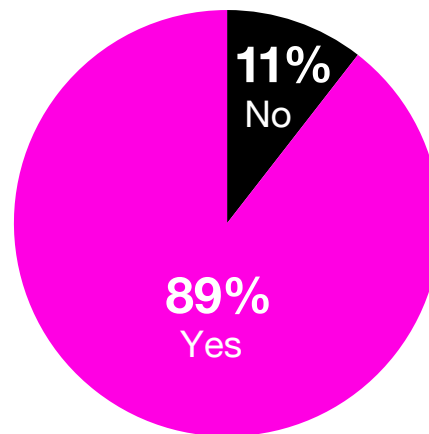
Previous research shows that while SMEs are receptive to EDI, they struggle with competing priorities, lack of resources and difficulty in knowing where to start.<sup>40</sup>

As an ecosystem partner with the 50 – 30 Challenge, DI has undertaken extensive research and developed tools and resources to advance EDI for SMEs. Skills Bridge made these available. More than 45% of participants learned of the 50 – 30 Challenge and tools to advance their EDI strategies. During the project, almost 300 SMEs accessed the Diversity Assessment Tool app to develop EDI plans. Many of these were part of the Skills Bridge Program. Participants also indicated that Skills Bridge had enabled them to increase their knowledge of unconscious bias, inclusive design and inclusive leadership strategies (Figure 18).



Among these topics, the most compelling were reported to be “Diversity, equity and inclusion matter” (49.4%) and “What is diversity and why does it matter?” (38.7%). As introduced above, the training provided multiple tools and resources for SMEs to advance EDI. Among these, the top three tools identified as useful were the 50 – 30 Challenge (28.2%), the DI website (23.1%) and the Diversity Assessment Tool (12.8%). Overall, 89% plan to apply course content to their current roles (Figure 19).

**FIGURE 19**  
Percentage of participants who said they plan to apply course content to their current job





# Conclusions & Next Steps

This report covers the program's evolution and results from its inception until August 2023. The results of this phase, using a prototyped LMS, curated and custom developed content, and limited wraparound supports, were critical to providing insights into the development, launch and sustainability of the Skills Bridge program to support the learning needs of Canadian SMEs.

The program contributed in a number of ways toward advancing our understanding of SME skills and training needs, as well as to the development of a sustainable shared platform to meet their needs.

## Small and medium-sized enterprise and entrepreneur needs

Findings from the literature review were reinforced through the consultations and evaluations and were important to inform the functional requirements for the beta Skills Bridge platform.

### It was found that SMEs:

- > Need training that is mindful of their limited capacity, by ensuring courses are not too long and content is clear and straightforward
- > Underscored a preference for interactive courses that kept them engaged with questions, testing them throughout as they learned
- > Indicated a preference for courses that offer options for different ways of learning, including reading transcripts and audio courses for commuting
- > Preferred courses to be organized thematically in buckets, rather than by provider
- > Indicated EDI training is a priority
- > Wanted a platform navigation experience that was clear and easy to use, with the ability to access courses through a single login
- > Expressed that they would like to have downloadable course materials that outline key learning points to keep for future reference after they complete a course
- > Indicated they would like a certificate or attestation of completion consistently for all courses.



*The project provided important insight into the **technological and operational feasibility of a shared learning platform for SMEs**. It also provided rich and detailed feedback on the functionality of the platform, content, navigation and support.*

## Development, testing and iteration of a prototype national platform

The project provided important insight into the technological and operational feasibility of a shared learning platform for SMEs. It also provided rich and detailed feedback on the functionality of the platform, content, navigation and support. This informed the development of the beta version of Skills Bridge.

The prototype linked several platforms for the testing phases while the development of the fully integrated Skills Bridge platform was underway. The approach to building the Skills Bridge integrated LMS was to leverage the Magnet platform and identify an appropriate LMS to integrate. An important first step in building Skills Bridge was to determine which LMS to integrate with Magnet/WhoPlusYou.

To evaluate the options available, the project team needed to identify which LMS would best serve the purposes of the project, in particular regarding technical compatibility considerations with the Magnet platform. It also needed to evaluate potential LMS platforms based on the important priorities for SMEs, learners and chambers, as determined through research and stakeholder feedback. An important step in this process was to leverage the evidence-based scorecard (see Appendix B) to evaluate over 15 platforms and off-the-shelf course providers for inclusion in the LMS.

## Equity, diversity and inclusion skills and capacity in small and medium-sized enterprises, entrepreneurs and the ecosystem

The appetite for EDI support was evident throughout the program, as demonstrated through the SMEs' demand for formal courses, webinars and feedback. It is important to ensure the material is digestible and relevant to the SMEs' organizational goals and objectives. Materials designed for the program will be available through the platform on an ongoing basis (see the Appendix)





## Implications for development and design of a sustainable shared platform

In February 2022, informed by the feedback of the initial testing phase participants, a collaborative search took place between DI, OCC and Magnet/WhoPlusYou to develop Skills Bridge. A review of 15 LMS vendors based on functional requirements (including accessibility, SCORM compliance and ease of use) led to the selection of Docebo LMS, as it balanced e-learning content customization and user experience specifications with technical integration specifications required by Magnet/WhoPlusYou. The integration implementation plan was developed and executed between spring 2022 and spring 2023, with delivery of the OCC Skills Bridge platform coinciding with the beta launch.

The new version of Skills Bridge allows SMEs and their employees to use a single sign-on via Magnet to access courses on the LMS (via the Docebo integration), as well as access other tools and resources (e.g., talent recruitment) available on Magnet more generally. The beta launch phase will run to September 2024 with ongoing data collection. While the technical and operational feasibility have been demonstrated, the focus of this phase will be testing new content and assessing the economic feasibility of the platform, as well as options to support its sustainability.



# Appendices

## Appendix A: EDI Workshop Summaries

### **Diversity in Leadership (The 50 – 30 Challenge)**

In this webinar, we will explore why diversity in leadership matters and how to increase diversity in your organization's boards and leadership. This session will address: the status of board diversity, why diversity in leadership matters, voluntary codes, and the ways forward.

### **Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategy (Diversity Assessment Tool)**

In this webinar, we will explore the importance of embedding equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) into your business strategy, and ways you can improve and track your organization's progress implementing EDI best practices. This session will address: the current state of EDI in SMEs in Canada, the six dimensions to consider in your EDI strategy, and resources such as the Diversity Assessment Tool.

### **Tapping Into New Talent Pools - Recruiting and Hiring Immigrants**

In this webinar, we will review inclusive human resource practices and considerations, and how to tap into new talent pools by recruiting and hiring immigrants. This session will address: the challenges and barriers faced by immigrants in the recruitment process, recruitment practices that recognize a wide range of skills and talent, and ways that immigrants drive economic success.

### **How To Leverage Diversity in Procurement**

In this webinar, we will cover the importance of diversity in procurement for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This session will address: supply chain basics, demographics of SMEs in Canada and the state of supplier diversity, benefits of supplier diversity, and ways to improve supplier diversity.



## **Inclusive Human Resources Practices**

In this webinar, we will define and review inclusive practices and considerations in human resources (HR), and how they can help small and medium-sized enterprises. This session will address: the impact of organizational culture on HR, challenges and barriers to inclusive HR practices, and best practices and solutions to HR challenges.

## **What Diversity and Inclusion Means for Marketing**

In this webinar, we will cover the concepts of inclusive marketing and how to apply best practices to your organization. This session will highlight: key concepts of inclusive marketing, marketing gone wrong, inclusive campaigns and their impact, and how to build effective inclusive marketing strategies.

## Appendix B: OCC/LMS Course Evaluation Scorecard

Name of course:

Name of course provider:

Course language (English, French, both):

Link to course:

Reviewed by:

Instructions for module reviewers:

Please indicate on a scale of 1-5 your rating of the course with the criteria listed below. If selecting strongly disagree, please enter 1 in the corresponding box. If entering strongly agree, please enter 5 in the corresponding box. In your rating of the course please view the course in full on the device of your choice (tablet, computer, and/ or mobile), then conduct a secondary review of the course on an alternate device checking that the course functions in a similar manner with little or no difficulties accessing content. Course content does not need to be evaluated on second review - solely functionality of course.

Q#	Criteria for Evaluation	1	2	3	4	5	NA	Total	Comments
<b>Alignment with Project Goals</b>									
1	The learning outcomes are defined and measurable								
2	The course teaches 1 or more of the 13 OCC-LMS skills identified (see OCC LMS Skills Definitions)								
3	It is clear how the skill(s) are being tested / evaluated								
4	Participation/completion of the course is trackable								
5	Assessment results are trackable								
6	Learner satisfaction is measured								
TOTAL		0	0	0	0	0		0	
<b>Learning Design Criteria</b>									
7	Learning outcomes are clearly presented at beginning of the course.								
8	Goals and objectives of the course are clearly stated								
9	Audience is clearly defined. ie. This course is for people who ....								
10	Instructional goals and learners objectives align through clearly defining audience and delivering on presented learning outcomes.								
11	Prerequisites and technology needs are stated.								

Q#	Criteria for Evaluation	1	2	3	4	5	NA	Total	Comments
12	Course duration is clearly indicated.								
13	Feedback is provided through use of terminology, rationale for questions, mnemonic devices, and/or tips to learn and study the material?								
14	Detailed feedback on quiz and/ interactive activities is provided.								
15	Detailed feedback on quiz and/ interactive activities is actionable.								
16	The course is interactive (ie. clickable, quizzes, requires user input)								
17	Different media formats are used and/or available								
18	The course provides real world examples and / or case studies.								
19	The lessons follow a logical narrative to fulfill instructional goals.								
20	The course stimulates recall or ask questions on previous lessons or situations?								
21	The course enables the creation of job aids (a one-page connector that relates to world tied to learning experience)								
22	Learner is prompted to provide course feedback.								
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>		<b>0</b>	
<b>Format &amp; Design</b>									
23	Course design, including text and visuals, add to the learning experience								
24	Branding and theming is aesthetically pleasing and consistent throughout the course.								
25	The sound quality is clear and understandable.								
26	Sourced material is easily identified / intellectual property of other creators is respected.								
27	Table of contents, resources, and indexes are present.								
28	The course is accessible for people with a basic Internet connection / materials are able to be downloaded when internet access is available.								

Q#	Criteria for Evaluation	1	2	3	4	5	NA	Total	Comments
29	When tested on two or more device types (computer, mobile, tablet) course functions in a similar manner with little or no difficulties accessing content.								
30	The course leverages cutting edge technology (AR, VR, etc.) that enhances the learning experience. (If experience is poor select strongly disagree)								
31	The visual content easily digested and understood.								
TOTAL		0	0	0	0	0		0	
<b>Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Universal Design</b>									
32	Overall you feel the content meets Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1) Level AA. Further discussion points on accessibility can be found at the end of this scorecard.								
33	The course uses real world examples that illustrate diverse people, cultures, and /or perspectives.								
34	The course uses inclusive graphics that illustrate diverse people, cultures, and /or perspectives.								
35	The course uses inclusive language, including inclusive pronouns								
36	The course uses language that could be understood by someone in the 8th grade.								
TOTAL		0	0	0	0	0		0	
<b>Engagement with Learner</b>									
37	The content is presented with enthusiasm across media and assets.								
38	Excluding external distractions, the course materials draw the learner's attention.								
39	The content encourages re-engagement in learning subject matter if additional courses on subject matter are released.								
TOTAL		0	0	0	0	0		0	
<b>Quality Assurance</b>									
40	The course is free from noticeable bugs								
41	The course is free from spelling and grammatical errors								

Q#	Criteria for Evaluation	1	2	3	4	5	NA	Total	Comments
42	The course is easy to load and navigate.								
43	The course correctly captures all inputted data.								
	<b>TOTAL</b>	0	0	0	0	0		0	
	Overall Impact								
44	Overall, you learned something from the course.								
45	Overall, you feel able to apply what you learned and /or created referencable materials								

## OCC/LMS Course Evaluation Scorecard

Name of course:

Name of course provider:

Course language (English, French, both):

Link to course:

Reviewed by:

Instructions for module reviewers:

Please indicate on a scale of 1-5 your rating of the course with the criteria listed below. If selecting strongly disagree, please enter 1 in the corresponding box. If entering strongly agree, please enter 5 in the corresponding box. In your rating of the course please view the course in full on the device of your choice (tablet, computer, and/ or mobile), then conduct a secondary review of the course on an alternate device checking that the course functions in a similar manner with little or no difficulties accessing content. Course content does not need to be evaluated on second review - solely functionality of course.

Q#	Criteria for Evaluation	1	2	3	4	5	NA	Total	Comments
46	Overall, the course was effective.								
47	Overall, you liked the course.								
48	Overall, the course successfully teaches one or more of the 13 OCC-LMS skills identified								
	<b>TOTAL</b>	0	0	0	0	0		0	
	<b>TOTAL ALL CRITERIA</b>	1	2	3	4	5	NA		Comments
	<b>COURSE SCORE</b>							0	
	(See tab 3 & indicate below numerical score and corresponding level rating - not acceptable, minimum, average, above average, exemplar)								

Q#	Criteria for Evaluation	1	2	3	4	5	NA	Total	Comments
<b>Additional Course Information</b>									
	Universal Design for Learning Discussion Notes								
	Reviewing the course materials, what are your thoughts on the content's accessibility. Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1) Level AA found here.: Minimums for font size and colour contrast are met. Audio, video, and image files contain applicable closed captioning and/or alt text. Content is accessibility reader / assistive technology friendly. Content is safe for individuals prone to seizures (ie. No presence of strobing images and flashes)								
	Course Level (see tab 2 for level definitions)								
47	For what level of learning - Basic, Intermediate, Advanced - is the course designed? How do you know the course is designed to this level (e.g. course name, course content etc.)?								Type your answer here:
48	To what level - Basic, Intermediate, Advanced - are the learning outcomes tested and measured with evidence? Please provide your rationale.								Type your answer here:
	OCC-LMS Skills Mapping (see tab 2 for skills & competencies)								
49	Do you feel the course educates about 1 of the Essential Skills and New Skills (see tab 2) and does it use any specific tools or techniques or a blend of both?								List the Future Skills course tool, techniques etc. here:
50	Any other observations or additional comments about the effectiveness, design, or usefulness of this course?								Type your answer here:
<b>Alignment with Project Goals</b>									
1	The learning outcomes are defined and measurable								
2	The course teaches 1 or more of the 13 OCC-LMS skills identified (see OCC LMS Skills Definitions)								
3	It is clear how the skill(s) are being tested / evaluated								
4	Participation/completion of the course is trackable								
5	Assessment results are trackable								
6	Learner satisfaction is measured								
	TOTAL	0	0	0	0	0		0	



Q#	Criteria for Evaluation	1	2	3	4	5	NA	Total	Comments
<b>Learning Design Criteria</b>									
7	Learning outcomes are clearly presented at beginning of the course.								
8	Goals and objectives of the course are clearly stated								
9	Audience is clearly defined. ie. This course is for people who ....								
10	Instructional goals and learners objectives through clearly defining audience and delivering on presented learning outcomes.								
11	Prerequisites and technology needs are stated.								
12	Course duration is clearly indicated.								
13	Feedback is provided through use of terminology, rationale for questions, mnemonic devices, and/or tips to learn and study the material?								
14	Detailed feedback on quiz and/ interactive activities is provided.								
15	Detailed feedback on quiz and/ interactive activities is actionable.								
16	The course is interactive (ie. clickable, quizzes, requires user input)								
17	Different media formats are used and/or available								
18	The course provides real world examples and / or case studies.								
19	The lessons follow a logical narrative to fulfill instructional goals.								
20	The course stimulates recall or ask questions on previous lessons or situations?								
21	The course enables the creation of job aids (a one-page connector that relates to world tied to learning experience)								
22	Learner is prompted to provide course feedback.								
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>		<b>0</b>	

Q#	Criteria for Evaluation	1	2	3	4	5	NA	Total	Comments
<b>Format &amp; Design</b>									
23	Course design, including text and visuals, add to the learning experience								
24	Branding and theming is aesthetically pleasing and consistent throughout the course.								
25	The sound quality is clear and understandable.								
26	Sourced material is easily identified / intellectual property of other creators is respected.								
27	Table of contents, resources, and indexes are present.								
28	The course is accessible for people with a basic internet connection / materials are able to be downloaded when internet access is available.								
29	When tested on two or more device types (computer, mobile, tablet) course functions in a similar manner with little or no difficulties accessing content.								
30	The course leverages cutting edge technology (AR, VR, etc.) that enhances the learning experience. (If experience is poor select strongly disagree)								
31	The visual content easily digested and understood.								
	<b>TOTAL</b>	0	0	0	0	0		0	
<b>Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Universal Design</b>									
32	Overall you feel the content meets Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1) Level AA. Further discussion points on accessibility can be found at the end of this scorecard.								
33	The course uses real world examples that illustrate diverse people, cultures, and /or perspectives.								
34	The course uses inclusive graphics that illustrate diverse people, cultures, and /or perspectives.								
35	The course uses inclusive language, including inclusive pronouns								
36	The course uses language that could be understood by someone in the 8th grade.								
	<b>TOTAL</b>	0	0	0	0	0		0	

Q#	Criteria for Evaluation	1	2	3	4	5	NA	Total	Comments
<b>Engagement with Learner</b>									
37	The content is presented with enthusiasm across media and assets.								
38	Excluding external distractions, the course materials draw the learner's attention.								
39	The content encourages re-engagement in learning subject matter if additional courses on subject matter are released.								
	<b>TOTAL</b>	0	0	0	0	0		0	
<b>Quality Assurance</b>									
40	The course is free from noticeable bugs								
41	The course is free from spelling and grammatical errors								
42	The course is easy to load and navigate.								
43	The course correctly captures all inputted data.								
	<b>TOTAL</b>	0	0	0	0	0		0	
<b>Overall Impact</b>									
44	Overall, you learned something from the course.								
45	Overall, you feel able to apply what you learned and /or created referencable materials								
46	Overall, the course was effective.								
47	Overall, you liked the course.								
48	Overall, the course successfully teaches one or more of the 13 OCC-LMS skills identified								
	<b>TOTAL</b>	0	0	0	0	0		0	
	<b>TOTAL ALL CRITERIA</b>	1	2	3	4	5	NA		Comments
	<b>COURSE SCORE</b>							0	
	(See tab 3 & indicate below numerical score and corresponding level rating - not acceptable, minimum, average, above average, exemplar)								
	<b>ADDITIONAL COURSE INFORMATION</b>								

Q#	Criteria for Evaluation	1	2	3	4	5	NA	Total	Comments
	Universal Design for Learning Discussion Notes								
	Reviewing the course materials, what are your thoughts on the content's accessibility. Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1) Level AA found here.: Minimums for font size and colour contrast are met. Audio, video, and image files contain applicable closed captioning and/or alt text. Content is accessibility reader / assistive technology friendly. Content is safe for individuals prone to seizures (ie. <u>No presence of strobing images and flashes</u> )								
<b>Course Level (see tab 2 for level definitions)</b>									
47	For what level of learning - Basic, Intermediate, Advanced - is the course designed? How do you know the course is designed to this level (e.g. course name, course content etc.)?								Type your answer here:
48	To what level - Basic, Intermediate, Advanced - are the learning outcomes tested and measured with evidence? Please provide your rationale.								Type your answer here:
<b>OCC-LMS Skills Mapping (see tab 2 for skills &amp; competencies)</b>									
49	Do you feel the course educates about 1 of the Essential Skills and New Skills (see tab 2) and does it use any specific tools or techniques or a blend of both?								List the Future Skills course tool, techniques etc. here:
50	Any other observations or additional comments about the effectiveness, design, or usefulness of this course?								Type your answer here:

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