



## PROJECT INSIGHTS REPORT

# Young newcomers and international students in diploma programs: Shock-proofing through language confidence

Inclusive Economy

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The number of international students in Canada has increased dramatically, and while students often have the content knowledge to succeed, limited language abilities can negatively impact their studies and transition to employment. To address this issue, BCIT implemented a language assessment for students and provided a suite of language support services to strengthen its existing Language Support for English as an Additional Language (EAL) offerings.

84% of surveyed students agreed the language support helped to improve their English and students attending language support classes scored approximately 5.8 percentage points higher in their communications course than those who required support, but chose not to attend.

Feedback from staff and students suggest there are opportunities to enhance industry integration, student awareness and accessibility in future iterations of the initiative.

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### DATE PUBLISHED

March 2024

### PARTNERS

[British Columbia Institute of Technology](#)

### LOCATIONS

British Columbia

### INVESTMENT

\$522,146

**Final evaluation report:**  
[Evaluation of BCIT's Young Newcomers and International Students in Diploma Programs Project](#)

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### KEY INSIGHT #1

Students who were recommended and attended Language Support classes scored approximately 5.8 percentage points higher in their communication classes than students who were recommended but did not attend.

### KEY INSIGHT #2

84% of surveyed students agreed that language support helped to improve their English and 70% of respondents believed the support positively impacted their academic achievement beyond the communications course.

### KEY INSIGHT #3

Optional support services may increase inequality among participants because individuals with greater motivation and time will access the services while others fall behind. Educational institutions should be cognizant of these risks.

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<b>IN THIS REPORT</b>	<b>The Issue</b>	<b>What We're Investigating</b>	<b>What We're Learning</b>	<b>Why It Matters</b>	<b>What's Next</b>
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## The Issue

The number of international students in Canada has increased dramatically, from less than 200,000 in 2000 to more than 800,000 in 2022. Despite this rise, evidence shows that these students often struggle in the Canadian labour market after their studies and earn less than Canadian born students. It often takes 10-11 years for international students to derive the same economic benefit from their credentials as people born and educated in Canada.

Among the many reasons for this trend, research has identified limited language skills and soft skills as a barrier. While students often have the content knowledge to succeed, limited language abilities can impact their success rates during their studies and transition to employment.

At BCIT, these challenges have increased since the early 2000s and, to address this issue, the Institute's Communication Department established Language Support Classes in 2009, primarily serving international students and newcomers. However, BCIT saw an opportunity to increase attendance at academic support classes and leverage more qualitative and quantitative data to manage student progress.

## What We're Investigating

To strengthen its language support for English as an Additional Language (EAL) students, whether they are international or domestic students, BCIT introduced new processes and services. Studies have found that implementing post-entry language assessments (PELA) and providing subsequent academic assistance has been effective in helping EAL students excel academically. As such, BCIT assessed the English language skills of students across 14 programs that have embedded language support classes.

Those with lower English language skills received information and access to In-Class Language Support: weekly English classes focused on assignments and related needs. Students also had access to Flexible Language Support where they could book 15-25 minute tutoring sessions with an EAL instructor. In addition, a number of students could participate in mock interviews with industry partners and receive support to improve their practical job application skills.

All students, regardless of their PELA scores, also have access to an English Language Success Hub as well as the English Lounge. The former is a self-serve online platform where all students and faculty can access language learning content. The English Lounge is a weekly peer conversation group that allows students to practice their language skills in an informal setting.

The project aimed to:

- Develop and deliver innovative, confidence-building content and language integrated curricula.
- Develop and evaluate post-admission language diagnostic assessment instruments.
- Work with industry partners to offer authentic job seeking and interview training programs for EAL students.

In addition, BCIT worked with the Future Skills Centre's Accelerator Program to better understand student and alumni needs through surveys and interviews. The project team sought to gather student feedback on the language support provided and inform future iterations of these services.

## What We're Learning

Over the course of project implementation, 512 recommendations were made to BCIT students who scored poorly on language assessments administered early in the school year. Approximately 123 international students participated in the project activities during 2021-2022, and 54 international students participated between April 1, 2022-December 31, 2022. It is not known whether there were repeat service users across the two different time periods tracked.

### **Improvements in confidence and academic results**

BCIT surveyed participants and found that 80% of students felt more confident with English after attending Language Support classes and 84% agreed the language support helped to improve their English. Students gained confidence from opportunities to speak in English or practice presentations (e.g. In-Class Supports, the English Lounge, Flexible Language Support), and from mock interviews with real hiring managers.

Surveys also found that 90% of participants believed the language support positively impacted their academic performance in communications class. Likewise, 70% of respondents believed the support positively impacted their academic achievement in other classes. Importantly, evidence shows that students who were recommended and attended Language Support classes scored approximately 5.8 percentage points higher in their communication classes than students who were recommended but did not attend. Failure rates in Communication classes dropped by 25% following the implementation of the language support classes.

### **Opportunity to strengthen career support and industry integration**

While it is still too early to measure the impact of Language Support services on the labour market outcomes of participating students, initial reflections suggest an opportunity to enhance this aspect. Up to 15 students at a time could have taken part in mock interviews with industry partners, but only 4-5 students participated each quarter. This is likely due to the fact that only two employers participated in the initiatives and students were required to engage in six hours of employment application and interview preparation.

In addition, there is an opportunity for language support instructors to have more content knowledge of the program they are teaching and to provide more chances to network with potential employers. Though co-op placements are desirable and present a chance for strengthening language skills, they are reserved for those with high grades and some student visas do not permit work placements. Respondents also shared that self study is imperative to qualify for roles beyond the entry level, pointing to competing priorities and skill development needs beyond language.

### **Barriers to language support**

BCIT leaders, instructors, and students highlighted several barriers to the program. First, the heavy course workload at BCIT might inhibit student participation in language support classes. Beyond discouraging deeper learning of class materials, the heavy workload can also take a toll on mental health and work-life balance, especially among students that also work part-time. Opportunities to integrate language learning into class hours and/or offer more online classes may help to integrate this learning without further adding to the burden.

Student interviews revealed a need to improve the communication and accessibility of support services. Some students were not fully aware of the available services or how to use them. High-performing students seem to use support services more often and get ahead while those struggling do not get the help they need. Other barriers identified include the potential stigma associated with needing extra language support and an opportunity for greater consideration for existing language ability (some felt they could opt out of communications courses).



## Why It Matters

Given the steady rise in international students in past decades and the continuation of this trend as part of Canada's immigration strategy, this project provides important insights on how post-secondary institutions can better support and integrate international students. Personal assessments, language support offered in various formats, integration of industry / discipline-specific content within language support, collaboration with industry, and close monitoring of student progress are important to student confidence and achievement.

Language skills are a key issue for newcomer integration overall. Research has shown that while English as an additional language (EAL) classes are available to newcomers as part of the settlement process, many note that these services do not adequately prepare newcomers for the labour market. Insights from BCIT's experience may be applicable to language support services beyond post-secondary institutions as well.

From an inclusion and equity perspective, this project illustrates the need to assess skill development programs within a larger context. Beyond the effectiveness of the program itself, it is important that the support service does not unreasonably increase the time burden on participants or detract from other vital priorities. Optional support services can also risk exacerbating inequalities as motivated individuals with more free time may take advantage of the support as others fall behind. These insights are applicable for all skill development practitioners, not just those serving newcomers or working outside in post-secondary institutions.

## What's Next

BCIT is working to publish a paper on the development and validation of their post-entry language assessments (PELA) in a national journal. Other academic papers on the project's work are being submitted and presentations on the test development process have been well received at conferences in Canada and abroad.

Members of BCIT's project team are also participating in a national working group with Colleges and Institutes Canada (CICAN) to create and provide microcredentials for newcomers to Canada. These microcredentials focus on communication, adaptability, and collaboration, and are based on the Ministry of Employment and Social Development Canada's essential skills framework.

## HOW TO CITE THIS REPORT

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