



ESAT Research

Findings from the preliminary research
phase and recommendations for the
design of a next phase of research

December 2020

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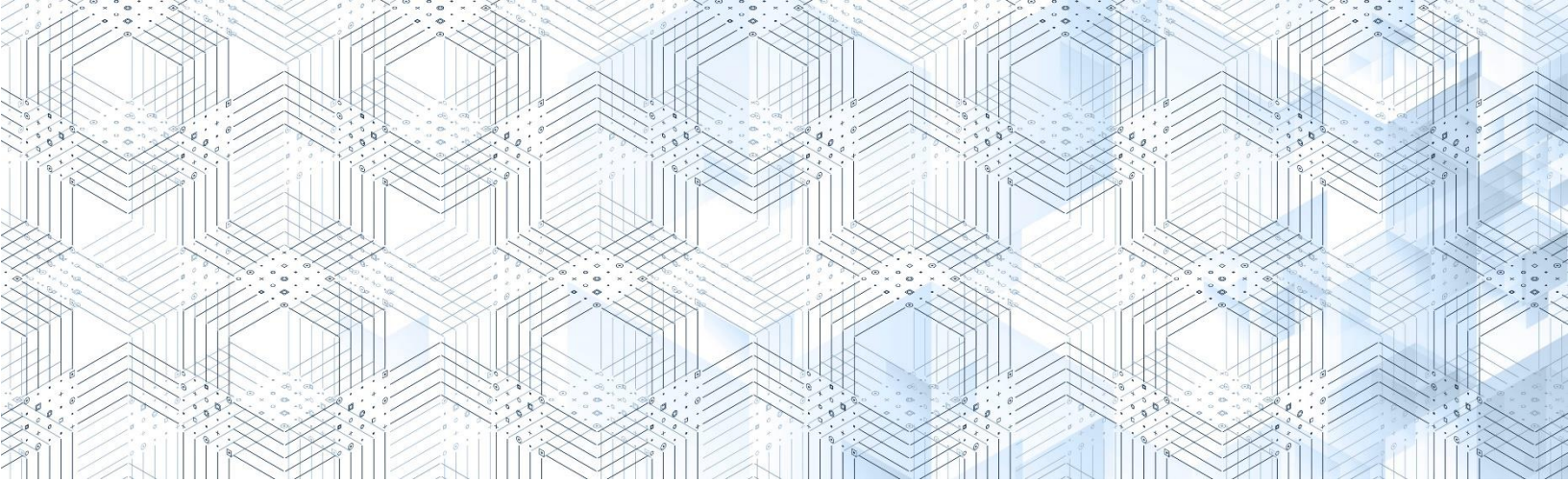
FSC is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, 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

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Introduction

Purpose

In spring 2020, the Future Skills Centre (FSC) awarded seed grant funding to Futureworx to work with Blueprint to undertake preliminary research on the Employability Skills Assessment Tool (ESAT). This project, led by Blueprint and supported by Futureworx, aimed to develop an overview of how ESAT is used, identify outcomes achieved through ESAT, and lay the groundwork for a subsequent more in-depth study of outcomes related to ESAT. This report presents these research findings, and makes recommendations for the design of a next phase of research.

Background

FUTURE SKILLS CENTRE (FSC)

FSC is a federally funded organization mandated to support innovative approaches to improving the skills of people living in Canada. FSC is a partnership between the Conference Board of Canada, Ryerson University, and Blueprint, and funded by Employment and Social Development Canada.

FUTUREWORX

Futureworx is a non-profit organization that aims to help people with diverse needs identify their strengths and goals, develop skills and achieve success in school, work, and life through providing employment, educational, and training programs, as well as business, corporate, and customized services. Futureworx developed the Employability Skills Assessment Tool (ESAT), which organizations may purchase to use in their programs.

ESAT

ESAT (the Employability Skills Assessment Tool, developed by Futureworx) is a tool that was designed to support the assessment and development of an individual's social and emotional skills (otherwise referred to as employability skills). It is meant to be used by participants and staff within a cohort-based program and has been applied within a variety of program contexts ranging from short-term employment or literacy programs, to longer-term technical training programs or post-secondary programs. ESAT ultimately aims to support the development of participant self-awareness, behavioural changes, and improved labour market outcomes.

ESAT focuses on nine employability skills: motivation, accountability, attitude, time management, stress management, presentation, teamwork, adaptability, and confidence. Organizations also have the option of customizing ESAT to add new skills.

There are several core components of ESAT:

- **Staff observations of participants:** Throughout the program, staff are to observe participants in terms of how they present employability skills, with the option of making notes within the ESAT data system. Staff are to use ESAT exemplars, or descriptions of how each employability skill looks in practice, as the basis of their observations and assessments.
- **Participant self-assessments:** Several times throughout a program, participants are to complete an online self-assessment questionnaire. Participants will answer questions about their own skills (with six 6 questions per skill).
- **Staff assessments of participants:** At certain intervals throughout a program, multiple program staff are to assess each participant's employability skills, using the ESAT exemplars, and assigning a score out of a maximum of six for each skill. Staff are to enter their scores into the ESAT data system.
- **Consensus meetings:** After staff have completed their assessments, they meet to review their scores and arrive at a consensus score for each participant and each skill. These consensus scores are entered into the data system.
- **Participant de-briefs:** Once participant self-assessments, staff assessments, and the consensus meeting has taken place, a program staff is to meet individually with each participant to debrief. This meeting entails reviewing a radar plot produced by the ESAT data system that visually maps the self-assessed and staff-assessed scores next to each other for each skill. The skills ratings are plotted against three colours: scores from 1-2 are shown as red, 2-4 as yellow, and 4-6 are shown as green. A red score indicates that participant

behaviour is not appropriate for the workplace, a yellow score that the participant's skills are progressing, and a green score that skill levels are appropriate for the workplace.

This cycle of observation, self-assessment, staff assessment, consensus meetings, and participant debriefs are to take place several times throughout a program. Futureworx recommends at least three times to be able to identify a trend. The ESAT data system will ultimately produce a "distance travelled" plot that illustrates the progress a participant has made in their employability skills over the course of the program.

INTEGRATED PROGRAM MODEL

The use of ESAT within a program is one part of a broader model Futureworx promotes as being particularly effective in supporting participant employment outcomes. This model, the Integrated Program Model, consists of employability skills taught alongside technical skills and essential skills, rather than being taught as distinct programming components, and participants apply their skills in a work placement.

Methodology

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

We worked with the Futureworx team to identify their short- and long-term research and evidence goals for ESAT. For this preliminary research phase, we focused on the short-term research and evidence goals, with an eye to how they could be built upon in future phases to work towards achieving longer-term evidence-generation goals.

The research questions explored in this phase of work were:

1. Which organizations and programs use ESAT? How is ESAT currently being implemented? In particular, this question explores: the kinds of organizations and programs using ESAT; purpose and duration of programs; participant characteristics; number and type of skills assessed; frequency of assessment; number and function of staff; degree and nature of involvement of employers; and approach to participant coaching and debriefing.
2. What early evidence is there for ESAT's outcomes? In particular, this question explores early evidence for outcomes such as: increased participant self-awareness and articulation of their employability skills; improvement in participant employability skills; and enhanced staff capacity to support employability skills improvement.

3. What implementation factors are associated with positive outcomes?
4. What do staff perceive to be the greatest strengths and challenges of using ESAT, and opportunities for strengthening ESAT?

RESEARCH METHODS

We began by working with Futureworx staff to develop preliminary logic models for ESAT and the Integrated Program Model to ensure there was a shared understanding of the inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes for participants and for program staff. We drew on the outcomes identified in these logic models to explore staff perceptions of ESAT's outcomes in the research methods outlined below. These logic models are included in Appendix 1.

Following this, we developed three lines of inquiry, as well as a sampling strategy. These are outlined below.

Sampling strategy

We began by inviting staff of all organizations that use ESAT to complete a survey, and to provide consent for a de-identified version of their ESAT scores data to be analyzed as part of the evaluation. On the survey, we asked respondents if they were willing to participate in an interview. Of those who agreed, we selected a sample of organizations to invite to participate in an interview. We selected organizations using several metrics. First, we identified programs that had been using ESAT for at least one year, since it takes about that much time to fully integrate the tool. Second, we aimed to achieve diversity across various other metrics, including: organization type (e.g., post-secondary institution, community agency, employment service provider), target population (e.g., youth, newcomers, Indigenous people, individuals with disabilities), and approaches to using ESAT (e.g., total number of assessments completed, number of staff involved, etc.). We compiled a list of 10 organizations and invited one or more staff from each to participate in hour-long semi-structured video conference interviews.

Lines of inquiry

1. Survey of staff from organizations that use ESAT

Program staff from all organizations that use ESAT were invited to complete a survey about their experience using ESAT, including the following topics:

- Information about the organization, program, and program participants

- ESAT implementation details (e.g., ways in which programs deliver ESAT within their programs; the way participants, staff and employers engage with ESAT and respond to ESAT results)
- Perception of participant and staff outcomes from using ESAT within programs (based on the outcomes identified in the ESAT logic models)
- Perception of challenges, strengths, and opportunities to strengthen ESAT

2. Analysis of ESAT assessment data

As part of using ESAT within a program, staff and program participants are required to enter skills assessment scores into a database. Futureworx invited all ESAT-using organizations to provide consent for a de-identified version of their skills assessment ratings data contained in the ESAT database to be viewed for the purpose of this research project. For organizations that provided consent, the data was securely transferred to Blueprint and analyzed to identify changes in ESAT assessment scores, including whether staff-assessed scores increase over time and whether self-assessment and staff assessment ratings become more similar over time. We used these measures as proxies to indicate participant skills increases and participant self-awareness of their employability skills.

3. Interviews with a sample of staff from organizations that use ESAT

We interviewed staff from 10 organizations that use ESAT. These interviews built on the survey findings to gather a greater depth of information about how ESAT is used, the challenges, strengths, and perceived opportunities to strengthen the tool, and the perceived outcomes of the tool.

LIMITATIONS

A number of factors limited our ability to carry out our research methods as planned, which meant that we were not able to fully answer some of our research questions. In particular:

- **Limited availability of ESAT data:** The ESAT data system was designed to support program staff using ESAT, and not designed to support analysis of this data. This meant that the ESAT data system user agreement did not permit Futureworx to use the data in the system for research purposes, and we were required to obtain consent from each organization to use a de-identified version of their data for research purposes. As a result, we had a much smaller amount of data available than originally anticipated. Additionally, for organizations that consented to make available a de-identified version of their ESAT scores data, some data had been deleted or was unusable, which further limited our available data.

- **Inaccessibility of ESAT-using organizations due to COVID-19:** Many of the organizations that we invited to complete the survey and consent to sharing a de-identified version of their ESAT scores data were closed due to COVID-19, and were much more difficult to reach by email or phone, or had very little extra capacity to participate in this research. As a result, our response rates for the survey and for data-sharing consent were lower than anticipated.

As a result, although we had originally planned to link survey data (regarding how organizations are implementing ESAT) to ESAT scores data (used as a proxy for positive outcomes of increased participant skills and self-awareness) to identify relationships between ESAT implementation factors and positive outcomes, we did not have enough data to be able to undertake this analysis. This meant that we were not able to fully answer our third research question (What implementation factors are associated with positive outcomes?).

Further, we could only partially answer our second research question (what early evidence is there for ESAT's outcomes) since the outcomes data we collected (staff survey, staff interviews, ESAT scores data as inputted by staff and participants) was entirely based on staff perceptions, rather than externally-generated outcomes data, and such outcomes data was not available to us.



Findings

Summary of Findings

Overall, our research activities led us to the following findings:

- **There is ample variability in ESAT use and implementation.** A survey of approximately 45 percent of ESAT-using organizations indicates that ESAT is being used in a range of different program contexts, many of which take different approaches to implementing ESAT. Some of the ways programs are implementing ESAT align with Futureworx's recommended approach and with the Integrated Program Model, but many do not.
- **Staff perceive positive outcomes for participants.** Overall, staff perceive that participants of ESAT-using programs achieve positive outcomes, especially related to improvements in self-awareness of employability skills, employability skills, and wellbeing. Staff-assessed ESAT scores demonstrate consistency with these perceptions, indicating that participants' employability skills may increase (as perceived by staff based on staff-assessed scores), and that participants become more self-aware of their employability skills (based on increased alignment between participant self-assessed and staff-assessed scores).
- **Staff identify several implementation factors as key to success.** Across many interviews with staff, common themes emerged regarding the importance of various implementation factors, all of which aligned with Futureworx's Integrated Program Model and Futureworx's recommended use of ESAT as outlined in the User Guide. These factors include: having staff buy-in to the importance of employability skills and assessment, resourcing additional capacity for staff to dedicate the necessary time towards ESAT use, including more than one perspective in the staff-assessment process, integrating employability skills content across programming, and debriefing results with participants.

- **Staff agree on many of ESAT’s core strengths for their participants.** Staff were generally in agreement that ESAT has many strengths, including that it is easy to use, helps staff establish a common language around employability skills, and eases tension during potentially difficult conversations with participants – making these more objective and professional.
- **Staff shared some common challenges with ESAT and areas for improvement.** Staff identified some challenges with ESAT, including that some participants find the self-assessment questions unclear, and that using ESAT as recommended often requires more time than is feasible. Staff identified some opportunities for improvement, mostly related to increasing the platform’s ease of use and adding specific features or options for customizability.

1. Which organizations and programs use ESAT? How is ESAT currently being implemented?

We drew on the results of our program staff survey and interviews to answer this question.

KEY FINDINGS

Our research found that 1) ESAT is being used in a range of program contexts, each of which implement ESAT in a different way, and 2) implementation aligns with some aspects of what is recommended by Futureworx, but not all.

The following implementation factors differ significantly across programs:

- Degree to which the curriculum or program components focus on employability skills
- Amount of time staff are able to dedicate to using ESAT
- Number of assessment cycles
- Program duration
- Cohort size
- Number of staff involved
- Whether and how employers are involved

Organizations tend to follow Futureworx’s recommendations for implementing ESAT in the following ways:

- Futureworx recommends debriefing participants about ESAT scores, and eight of the ten organizations we spoke to hold participant debriefs
- On average, approximately three staff are involved in assessing participants, which aligns with Futureworx's recommended number of staff involved

Organizations tend to implement ESAT differently than recommended by Futureworx in the following ways:

- Futureworx recommends having staff consensus meetings about assessments, but only three organizations of the ten we spoke to hold consensus meetings
- The average number of staff and self assessments reported by surveyed organizations both fell short of the recommended 3 assessments of each type, with an average of 2.5 staff assessments, and 2.3 self assessments taking place during the course of the programs

In interviews with ten organizations, we found that time constraints were a major factor in limiting staff's ability to implement ESAT as recommended by Futureworx.

SURVEY FINDINGS

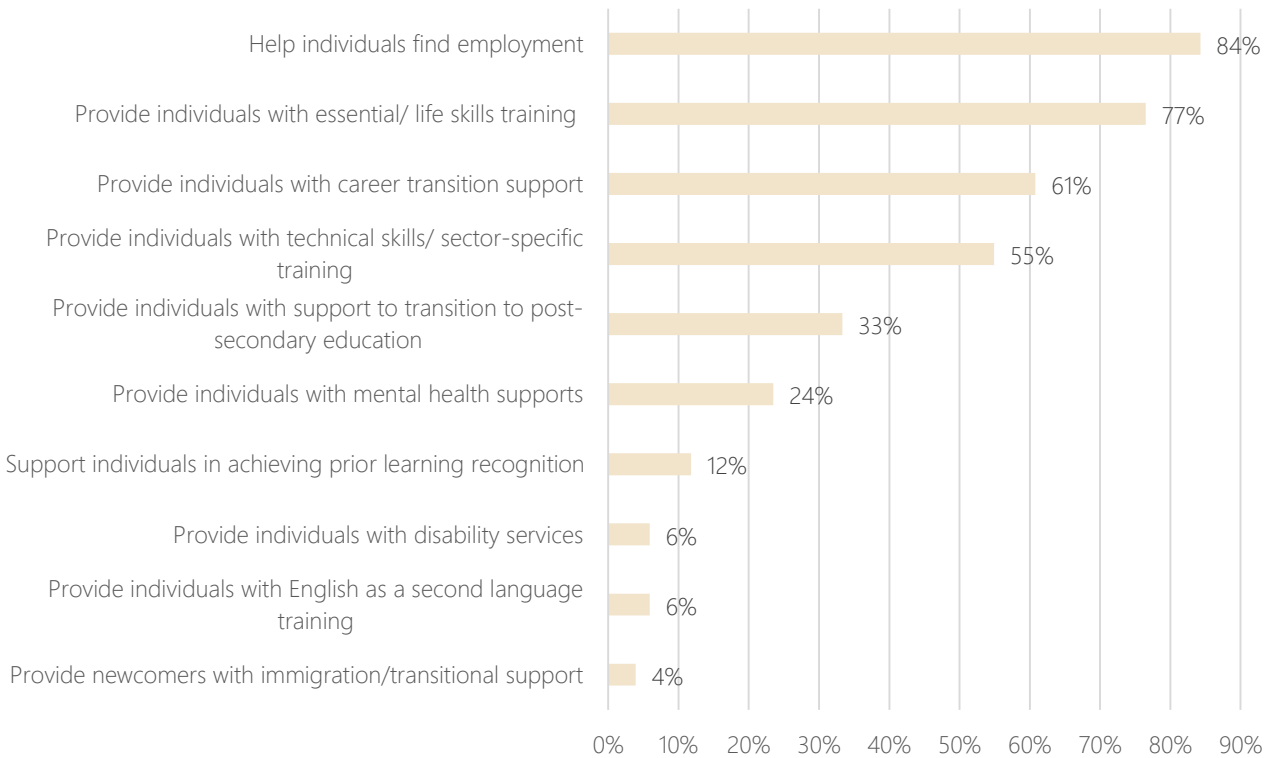
Respondents to our survey provided information about their organization, program(s), and how they use ESAT, which is summarized below.

Program purpose

The most common program purpose selected by respondents was to support participants to obtain employment (84 percent of programs) or develop essential/life skills (77 percent). Other common responses include supporting a career transition and supporting the development of technical skills. See Figure 1 for more details.

FIGURE 1 | Program purpose by percentage of responses

Question: *What is the purpose of your program? Select all that apply.*



Program reach

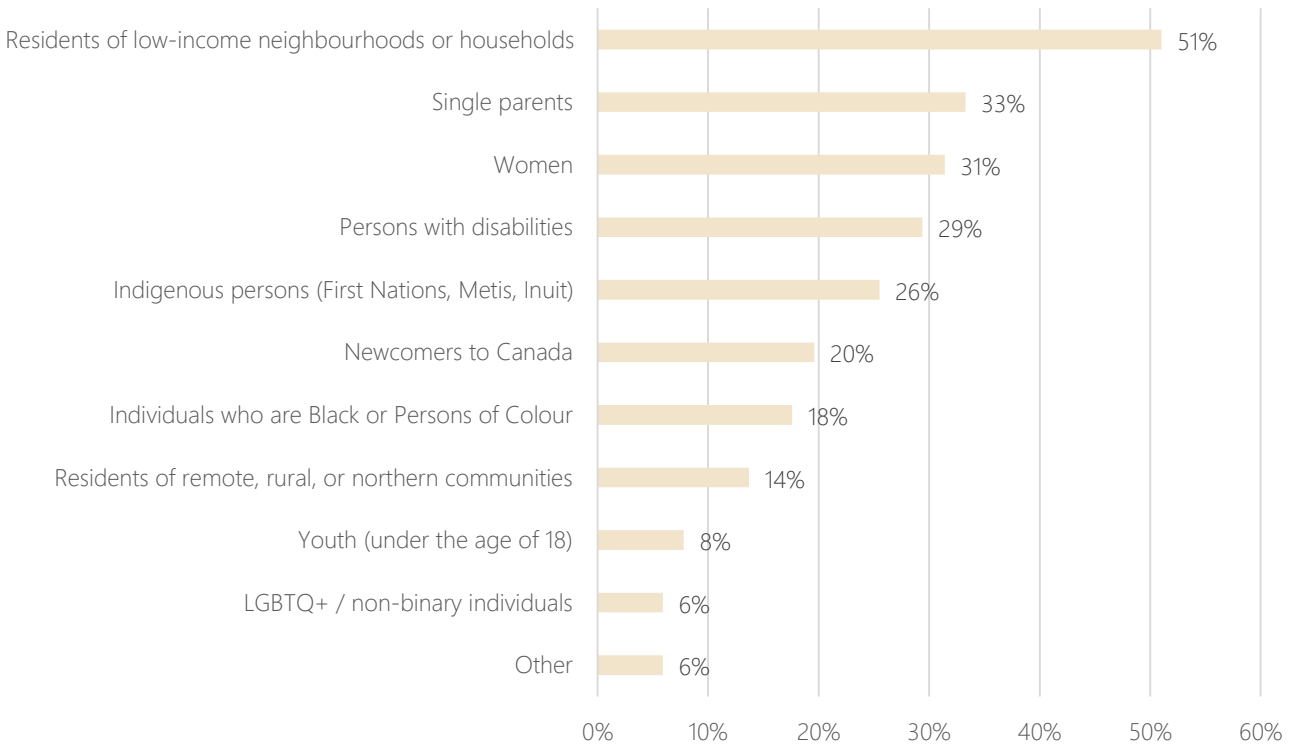
ESAT-using programs reach a range of different population groups, that is, a number of different population groups make up a significant proportion (one-third or more) of participants of ESAT-using programs. Many programs reach multiple groups. Overall, survey responses found 84 percent of programs reach people with less than high school education. We also found the following:

- 51 percent reach individuals with low incomes
- 33 percent reach single parents
- 29 percent reach persons with disabilities
- 26 percent reach Indigenous individuals

See Figure 2 for more details.

FIGURE 2 | Program reach by percentage of responses

Question: On average, does a significant portion of your program participants typically belong to any of the following groups? By "significant portion", we mean approximately one-third or more of participants. Check all that apply.



Program duration and intensity

There is wide variability in the duration of ESAT-using programs, ranging from five weeks to three years, with an average of approximately six months (see Figure 3). In terms of program intensity, approximately 20 percent are less than 10 hours per week and approximately 30 percent of programs are 30 or more hours per week. These findings indicate that there appears to be alignment with Futureworx's recommended duration of programs using ESAT, which is a minimum of three weeks and ideally six months. There is no recommended level of program intensity.

FIGURE 3 | Program duration

Question: *What is the typical duration of your program in weeks? [numerical response]*

Duration (weeks)	Response
0-5	0%
5-9	10%
10-14	24%
15-19	10%
20-24	22%
25-29	4%
30-34	18%
35-39	0%
40-44	8%
45-49	0%
50-54	4%
3 years	2%

Cohort size

Cohort size varies significantly across programs (see Figure 4). While the majority of programs (62 percent) have fewer than 15 participants per cohort, 38 percent of programs have cohorts with 15 or more participants. Futureworx does not indicate a recommended cohort size.

FIGURE 4 | Program cohort size by number of participants

Question: *What is the average cohort size of your program? [numerical response]*

Cohort size range	Response
1-4	8%
5-9	22%
10-14	32%
15-19	16%
20-24	8%
25-29	6%
30-35	0%
35+	8%

Number of staff involved

On average, approximately three staff are involved in assessing participants, which aligns with Futureworx’s recommended number of staff involved, which is a minimum of two and maximum of eight staff. Notably, one-fifth of programs have only one staff assess participants, suggesting that not all programs are able to follow Futureworx’s guidelines for ideal implementation (see Figure 5 for more details).

Futureworx indicates that a minimum of two and maximum of eight staff should be involved to assess participants.

FIGURE 5 | Number of staff involved

Question: About how many staff are typically involved in doing ESAT assessments for participants as part of your program? [numerical answer]

Number of staff assessors	Response
1	20%
2	16%
3	37%
4	8%
5	4%
6	8%
7-10	8%

Employer involvement

Employers are involved in approximately one-third (35 percent) of programs, in capacities such as observing or assessing participants. One respondent indicated that if students agree, employers often ask to see their progress on their radar plots. Employers assess participants using ESAT in approximately 15 percent of all programs (see Figure 6 for more details). Futureworx recommends some employer involvement.

FIGURE 6 | Employer involvement

Question: Are employers involved in using ESAT for your program? Check all that apply [Yes: they were involved in customizing ESAT for the program/Yes: they observe participants/Yes: they assess participants/Other]

Ways in which employers are involved in using ESAT	Response
Employers are involved in some way	35%
<i>Employers involved in customizing ESAT for the program</i>	0%
<i>Employers observe participants</i>	24%
<i>Employers assess participants</i>	16%
<i>Other: Employers review radar plots</i>	6%
Employers are not involved	65%

Number of assessments

The average number of staff assessments is 2.5 over the course of a program, and never more than six staff assessments. The average number of participant self-assessments is 2.3, and never more than four self-assessments, and 20 percent of programs only use one self-assessment. This shows that the average number of assessments is lower than the minimum of three staff and self-assessments recommended by Futureworx, again suggesting that not all programs are able to follow ideal implementation guidelines (see Figure 7 and Figure 8 for more details).

FIGURE 7 | Number of times staff do assessments during a program

Question: How many times throughout your program do staff complete assessments of participants? [Numerical answer]

Number of times staff do assessments during a program	Response
0	2%
1	20%
2	25%
3	37%
4	12%
5 or 6	4%

FIGURE 8 | Number of times participants do self-assessments during a program

Question: *How many times do participants typically complete an ESAT self-assessment?*
[Once/twice/three times/four times/five or more times]

Number of times participants do self-assessments during a program	Response
1	20%
2	37%
3	33%
4	10%
Five or more times	0%

Use of ESAT results

ESAT results are used by all programs to inform conversation with participants about employability, and by approximately three-quarters of programs to make decisions about next steps for participants. The other ways that ESAT results might be used were only applicable for approximately 10 percent of respondents. These included: helping determine participants' program grades and supporting the decision to issue qualifications or credentials. Futureworx does not have a specific recommendation for how ESAT results should be used.

INTERVIEWS FINDINGS

The interviews we held confirmed and added greater detail to our survey findings. In particular, we learned that the way programs use ESAT varies broadly. We summarize our findings below.

Staff assessments

The majority of the staff we spoke to assessed all participants two or three times over the course of their program (note that Futureworx's recommendation is at least three). Two of the programs we heard about through our interviews undertake four staff assessments over the course of the program, which was the highest number of staff assessments in any of the programs we discussed. One program used to do two staff assessments, but now does one because they caused anxiety for participants, who perceived them as formal testing. In one program, the employer, rather than any staff, does the assessments based on the program work placement.

For some programs, there is time built in to the program for staff to do assessments, as well as other tasks involved in delivering ESAT. For other programs, staff find it more challenging to fit in ESAT, either because it is one of many tools and activities they use, or because their role does not

specifically include time to do the observations, assessments, and other tasks associated with administering ESAT.

Self-assessments

Of the programs we discussed with staff, the majority have participants do two or three self-assessments., which is almost, but not quite consistent with the recommended three assessments.

One program has participants do self-assessments, but self-assessed scores are dramatically different from staff-assessed scores to the point of making staff think that the self-assessed scores are for a completely different person than the individual they have observed. Because of this, self-assessed scores are considered inaccurate and not meaningfully used.

Staff from just under half of the organizations we spoke to indicated that the self-assessment questions are difficult for participants to understand or focus on to complete, due to the language level of the self-assessment questions or the degree of reading, focus, or digital navigation required to answer them, and that participants require assistance.

Employer involvement

Employers are involved in doing assessments in programs at three of the organizations we spoke to. Additionally, one program has staff who act as employers for students on placements (i.e., the program operates a social enterprise which employs participants supervised by staff), and another organization involves employers by asking for input on the skills assessed, but does not have employers assess participants.

In general, staff indicated that having employers do assessments is often challenging due to the amount of time required. Staff from one organization shared that they sit with employers and have them dictate their assessment to the staff, who fill it into the data system, to make it faster and less burdensome for employers.

Consensus meetings

Three of ten organizations we spoke to indicated that they hold consensus meetings, with staff noting that these meetings are highly valuable to their team, by helping each staff understand how the participant performs and is viewed in other parts of the program. This is notable, since holding consensus meetings is a core component of how Futureworx indicates that ESAT should be used.

Interviewees' rationale for not having a consensus meeting varied, including the following reasons:

- Staff of one organization indicated that the staff assessment scores are so similar that it is not worth meeting to discuss the scores

- For four organizations, a consensus meeting is not warranted because only one staff (or in one case, no staff) assess participants
- At one organization, all individual staff assessment scores are given to coaches who raise key points with participants in debrief sessions
- Staff from one organization shared that program staff have limited buy-in to the process, so having them commit time to completing the assessments and meeting to discuss them is challenging

Participant debriefs

Staff from eight of ten organizations we spoke with indicated that debrief meetings with participants were a valuable, or even essential, part of the ESAT process. However, staff from two programs shared that debriefs do not take place. For the first program, holding debrief meetings is optional for participants, and many choose not to participate. In the other program, the lack of individual debriefs is due to insufficient time and large cohort size, which was related their application of ESAT within a large post-secondary program. As an alternative to individual debriefs, this program conducted debriefs as a group with the cohort as a whole.

Employability skills content in program curriculum and components

The majority of programs we discussed included some amount of employability skills content in the curriculum. A few program staff we spoke with emphasized that they include significant content about employability skills in the curriculum, and throughout all program components. For one program, there is limited buy-in to the importance of employability skills, so beyond the presence of ESAT, they are not discussed in the curriculum or program components.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings related to this question demonstrate that there is ample variability in the types of programs that use ESAT and that the ways in which ESAT is being implemented vary widely. We also learned that once ESAT is implemented, it becomes highly interconnected with other program components.

The implications of these findings for future research suggest that careful consideration will have to be given to separate the role of ESAT from the role of other program components when assessing the effect of ESAT on outcomes. This finding also sheds light on the model for ESAT implementation that should be followed by programs being considered for the next phase of research. While Futureworx's ESAT User Guide already outlines recommended implementation guidelines, it is now apparent that a rigorous study design would require a more specific understanding of the

implementation guidelines for the base case. This will mean articulating minimum implementation conditions for ESAT, such as the minimum number of rounds of assessment, the number of staff involved in staff assessments, and the duration of ESAT-using programs, and tracking programs against them to identify and analyze adaptations.

2. What early evidence is there for ESAT's outcomes?

We used all three lines of inquiry to approach this question. We present our findings below, based on each line of inquiry.

KEY FINDINGS

From our analysis of ESAT data, we found that:

- Overall, staff assessments of participants' employability skills increase over the course of programs, which may suggest participant skill increases
- Overall, staff- and self-assessment scores align over the course of programs, which may suggest increases in participant self-awareness of their skills

Surveys and interviews with staff indicated that:

- Staff perceive that participants using ESAT increase their employability skills and wellbeing, and improve in their self-awareness of their employability skills
- Staff perceive that ESAT helps provide staff with a common language with which to discuss employability skills amongst themselves and with participants

ESAT ASSESSMENT DATA ANALYSIS FINDINGS

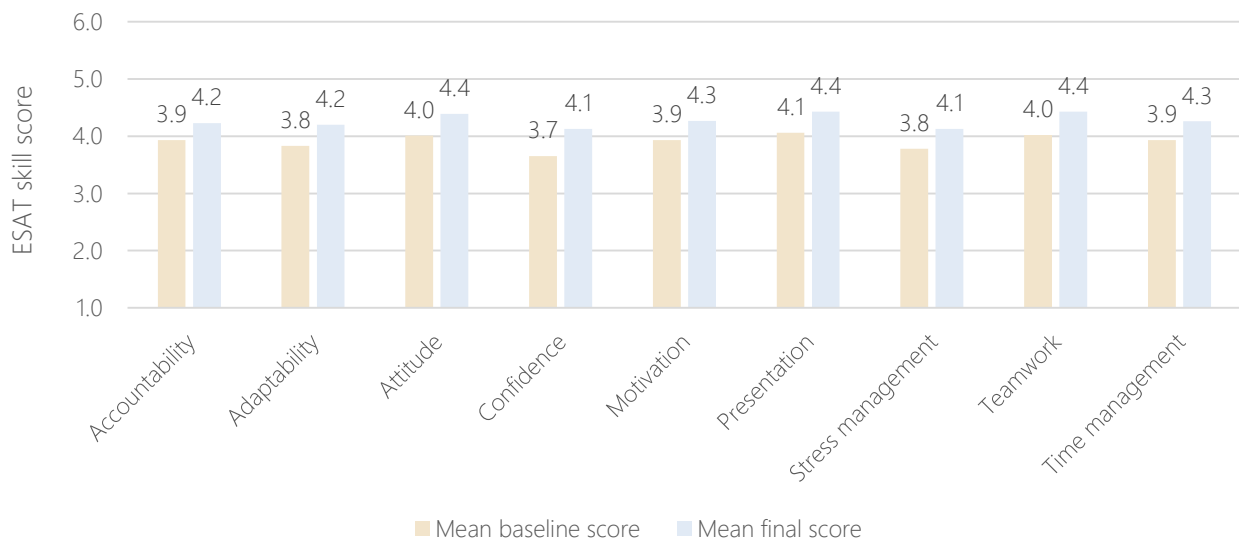
Using ESAT assessment data, we explored whether staff-assessed employability skills increase over the course of a program to understand whether ESAT's outcomes include participant skills gains. We also explored whether staff-assessed scores become more similar to participant self-assessed scores over the course of a program, to understand whether participants appear to begin to give themselves more accurate scores as their understanding of employability skills and self-awareness increases.

To understand whether participant employability skill scores increase over the course of a program, we used the data from each consenting organization, and subtracted the mean final staff consensus assessments score from the mean baseline staff consensus assessments score for each skill. Programs that only do one staff assessment were not included in this analysis. This allowed us to see the

difference between the first and last consensus score to identify how the score has changed over the course of the program. We used consensus scores for simplicity rather than the individual scores of multiple different staff.

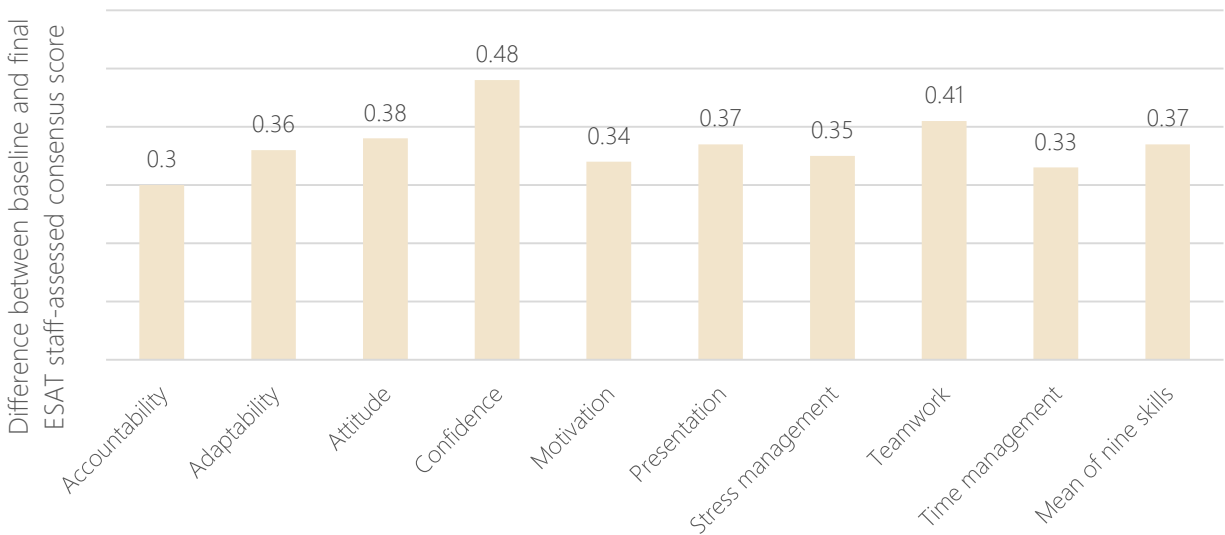
We found that on average, staff-assessed skills ratings increased between the first and last assessments. This is illustrated in Figure 9, below. ESAT uses a six-point score rating, and on average over the course of programs, staff-assessed scores increased by 0.37 (see Figure 10).¹ We found that the ESAT skill that increased the most was confidence (by 0.48 points), followed by teamwork (0.41 points).

FIGURE 9 | Baseline and final staff-assessed consensus scores



¹ We can also express this increase in standard deviations, which some readers will find useful for providing a sense of the magnitude of this change. The standard deviation of ESAT scores is roughly 1, so the increase is roughly 0.37 standard deviations.

FIGURE 10 | Increase in staff-assessed consensus scores between baseline and final assessment

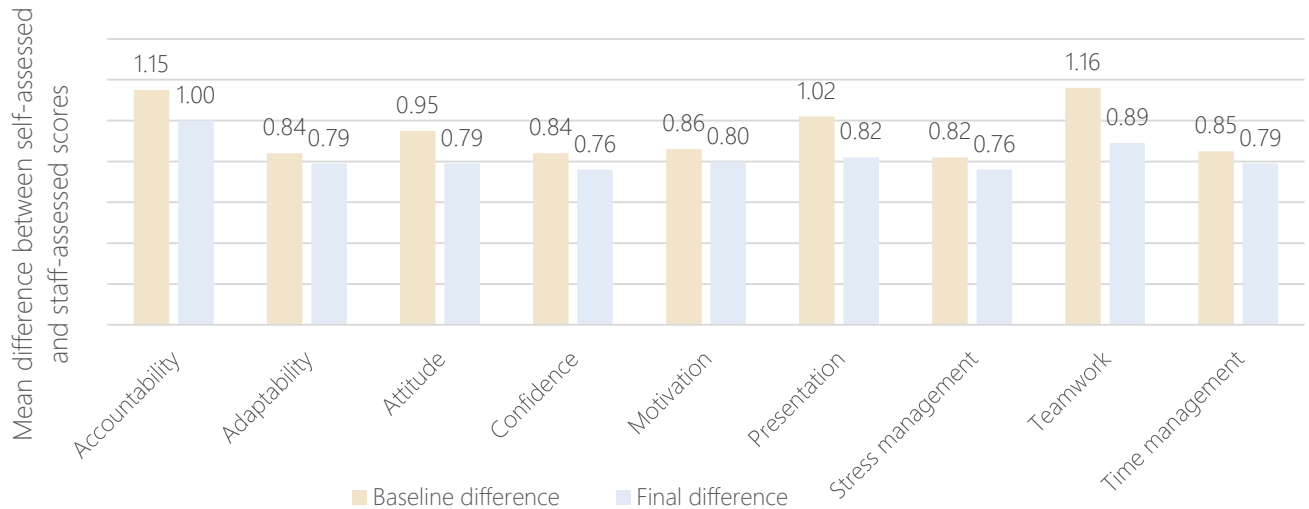


We also found that self-assessed and staff-assessed skills ratings became more similar over time.² We measured the initial dissimilarity of self- and staff-assessments for each participant as the absolute difference in scores between first self-assessment score and the first staff-assessment score. Similarly, we measured the final dissimilarity as the absolute difference between self- and staff-assessed scores for the final self- and staff assessments. In other words, we compared the difference between the *initial* participant self-assessed and staff-assessed scores to the difference between the *final* staff-assessed and self-assessed scores.

Figure 11 illustrates that between the first assessment and last assessment, the difference between skills ratings decreases. Overall, we found that the change in the difference between staff and participant assessed scores from the baseline to final assessment was an average of 0.12.

² Staff- and self-assessments were designed so that staff- and self-assessed scores would be comparable. But staff- and self-assessment procedures are not identical (self-assessments use a questionnaire and staff use behaviour observation), so our results may over- or understate the increase in alignment in assessed skills.

FIGURE 11 | Difference between self- and staff-assessed skills ratings from first to final assessment



SURVEY FINDINGS

Using the staff survey, we asked staff to indicate the degree to which they agreed that ESAT was associated with a set of possible participant and staff outcomes.

For participant outcomes, we asked staff if they thought that ESAT leads to increases in participant self-awareness of employability skills, comfort discussing employability skills with staff, employability skills themselves, employment outcomes, performance in other components of the program, and social and emotional well-being.

For staff outcomes, we asked about use of a common language to talk about employability skills, comfort talking about employability skills with participants, ability to assess participants' employability skills, ability to coach participants in improving their employability skills, teamwork between staff members who are working with the same participants, and understanding of the importance of employability skills for employment success.

Overall, we found that for participant outcomes:

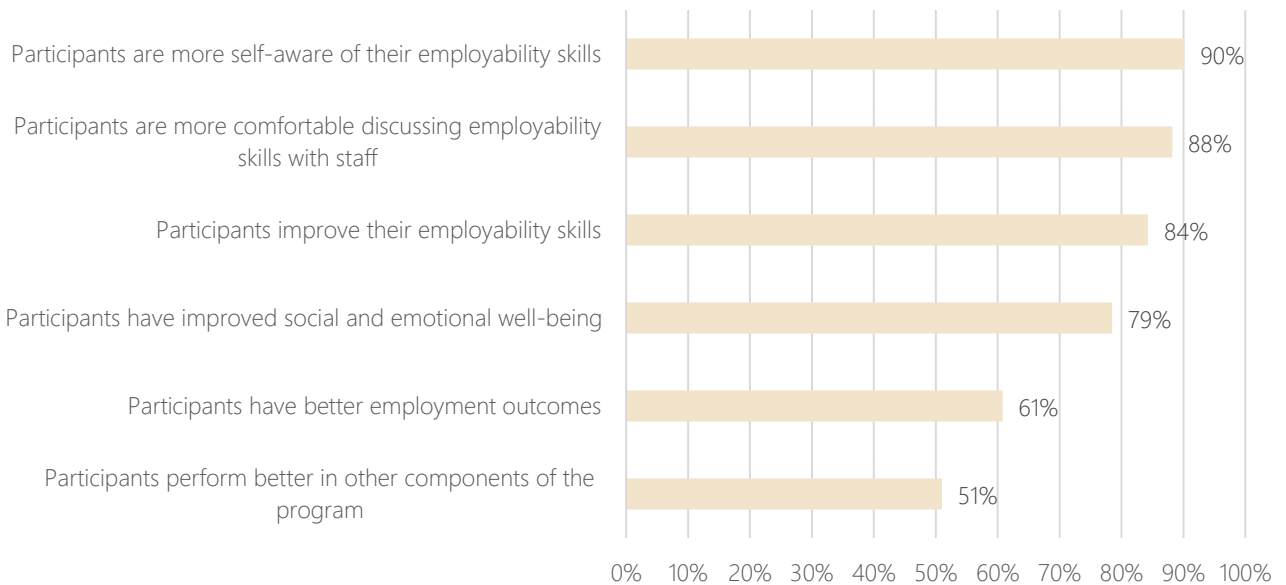
- The highest number of staff respondents agreed that participants of ESAT-using programs saw their self-awareness and comfort discussing employability skills with staff increase (90 percent and 88 percent respectively)
- A significant number of staff respondents agreed that participants of ESAT-using programs saw their employability skills and wellbeing increase (84 percent and 79 percent, respectively)

- Fewer staff respondents than the above categories, but still a majority, agreed that participants of ESAT-using programs saw improved employment outcomes or performance in other parts of the program (61 percent and 51 percent respectively). It is important to note that staff respondents may not collect information to know if there are improvements in these areas.

These findings are illustrated in Figure 12, below.

FIGURE 12 | Staff perceptions of participant outcomes in ESAT-using programs (percent who agreed or strongly agreed)

Question: How much do you agree with the following statement? Because of ESAT...



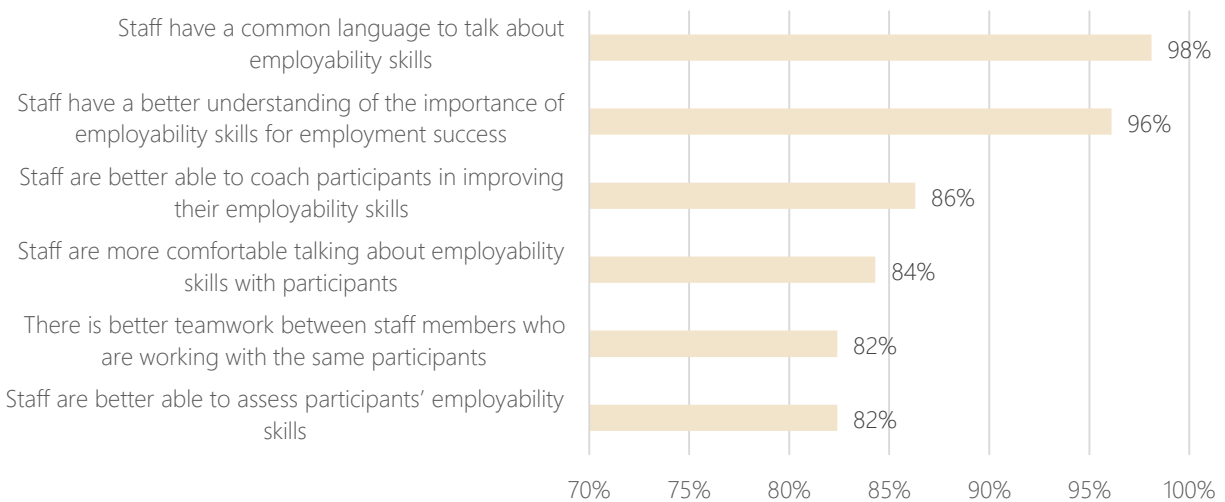
In regard to staff outcomes, the survey identified the following:

- Almost all staff respondents agreed that ESAT provides a common language for staff and increases staff understanding of the importance of employability skills (98 percent and 96 percent, respectively)
- A significant number of staff respondents agreed that ESAT increases staff ability to coach participants (86 percent), increases their comfort discussing employability skills with participants (84 percent), increases teamwork across staff (82 percent), and increases their ability to assess skills (82 percent)

These findings are illustrated in Figure 13, below.

FIGURE 13 | Staff perceptions of staff outcomes in ESAT-using programs (percent who agreed or strongly agreed)

Question: How much do you agree with the following statement? Because of ESAT...



INTERVIEW FINDINGS

We asked staff from a sample of ten organizations about the outcomes associated with using ESAT in interviews by revisiting their survey response and asking them to expand.

We heard from staff that the way they integrate ESAT into programming is highly variable, which makes it difficult to isolate the role of ESAT from the role of other program components in contributing to specific outcomes. Nonetheless, they did share their perceptions on the outcomes that they observed among participants and among themselves and fellow staff in their programs.

Employment outcomes

Most staff were unsure about the impact of ESAT on employment outcomes. A few received anecdotal positive feedback from employers who hired graduates of their programs, but the majority do not collect this information.

Staff from two programs indicated that their participants faced significant barriers to employment, and while participating in a program that uses ESAT does not necessarily increase their likelihood of obtaining work, staff thought it helps participants advance in their employment journey, even if in smaller increments.

One exception to staff's inability to comment on employment outcomes is an organization that specifically performed research in this area. This organization tracked participant employment

outcomes and compared them with ESAT scores, finding a positive relationship between ESAT scores and job attainment and retention. This organization found that if participants' scores averaged 3.84 or higher (especially for time management, adaptability, and stress management), the likelihood of retaining employment after six months was higher than participants who scored lower. Moreover, the organization found that participants whose scores increased over the course of the program had higher employment retention rates compared to those who started with high scores but did not see growth over the course of the program. The organization has now adapted their processes to pay more attention to participants with low baseline scores in time management, adaptability, and stress management to help enhance their employment outcomes.

Other participant outcomes

Regarding participant outcomes other than employment outcomes, the majority of staff from the ten organizations we spoke to shared that program participants appeared to experience improvements in the following:

- Self-awareness of participant's own employability skills and areas for improvement (identified by the majority of organizations interviewed)
- Understanding of what employability skills are and their importance (identified by half of the organizations interviewed)

The following outcomes were raised by some of the staff we spoke to:

- Confidence in employability skills (identified by one-third of the organizations interviewed)
- Ability to receive feedback and adapt behaviours (identified by one-third of the organizations interviewed)
- Normalizing the fact that individuals will face challenges related to social and emotional skills in the workplace and that they can be overcome (identified once)
- Understanding that skills must be developed in an ongoing manner, over the course of one's lifetime (identified once)

Staff outcomes

Reflecting on the outcomes of delivering ESAT within their program for themselves and their coworkers, many of the staff we spoke to shared that they perceived the following improvements:

- The use of a common language for employability skills and tangible examples of behaviours (identified by more than half of the organizations interviewed)

- Greater understanding of employability skills and their importance among staff and occasionally at an institutional level (identified by one-third of the organizations interviewed)

Other staff outcomes less commonly highlighted in interviews included:

- The ability to make more informed decisions about participants' readiness for employment or work placements (raised by one-fifth of the organizations interviewed)
- Team building for staff involved in the consensus process (raised once)

IMPLICATIONS

Our research activities demonstrate that staff perceive positive outcomes for participants, especially related to improvements in self-awareness of employability skills, employability skills, and wellbeing. Staff-assessed ESAT scores demonstrate consistency with these perceptions, indicating that participants' employability skills increase, and that participants become more self-aware of their employability skills (based on increased alignment between participant self-assessed and staff-assessed scores).

Though these perceptions of positive outcomes are promising as preliminary results, the fact that these outcomes are exclusively based on staff perceptions warrants further investigation using externally-generated data. Our findings also highlight that current data sources are insufficient to answer the question of whether the use of ESAT in a program is associated with positive employment outcomes. A subsequent phase of research could address these gaps by following participants into the labour market as a form of externally-generated outcomes. Program staff could also use an alternative employability skills measurement tool alongside ESAT to compare participants' skill levels.

3. What implementation factors are associated with positive outcomes?

In order to answer this question, we had planned to link survey response data about individual programs with ESAT assessment data from the same programs. However, the overlap between the programs for which we had both survey data and ESAT assessment data was very small, so it is very difficult to draw conclusions about what implementation factors are associated with positive outcomes. Instead, we focused on staff's perceptions of effective implementation factors.

KEY FINDINGS

Interviews with staff found that many staff believe that to use ESAT to its full potential, staff must buy in to the importance of teaching employability skills and must have enough time within their role to undertake ESAT-related activities.

Staff also emphasised how important the debriefing sessions with participants are in order for ESAT to lead to positive outcomes for the participants. Some staff also shared that they believe including more than one staff in the process and integrating information about employability skills and their importance across programming are also important for achieving positive outcomes with ESAT.

INTERVIEW FINDINGS

In our interviews, staff identified several implementation factors for ESAT that they perceived to be particularly effective. We outline these below.

Staff buy-in to the importance of teaching, coaching, and assessing employability skills

Approximately a quarter of the staff we spoke to indicated that they were very familiar with employability skills and convinced of the importance of teaching them, which they believed made it easier for them to become familiar with how ESAT works and effectively implement it in their program. For one program that focuses more significantly on technical skills, staff had less buy-in to the importance and relevance of employability skills, and were less willing to do assessments. One interviewee in a position of management suggested that this lack of buy-in means that the organization is not using ESAT to its full potential, and this may be limiting its ability to achieve greater outcomes.

Dedicated time for staff to undertake ESAT-related activities within a program

Among the staff we spoke to, approximately half had time built in to their role for activities such as making notes on participant behaviour, completing assessments, participating in consensus meetings, and holding participant debrief meetings. Other staff, often from post-secondary institutions, did not have time specifically built in to their role to complete these tasks, so finding time to complete them was challenging. These staff shared that the insufficient time to complete these activities meant that they were not using ESAT to its full potential, which may not be achieving the strongest outcomes possible.

Including more than one staff in the process

Staff from approximately a quarter of programs indicated that participants find it valuable to receive feedback from several different staff with whom they have different kinds of relationships, such as

both an instructor and a counsellor or coach. One staff shared that the fact that participants are debriefed by a different staff than the staff who observes the participant is particularly helpful, and means that the debrief conversation is more objective and less charged, especially if the score is low or if a challenging employability skill-related incident took place with the staff observer.

Integrating information about employability skills and their importance across programming

Several staff shared that they integrate content about employability skills into many program components, which constantly reinforces the importance and relevance of employability skills to participants. For example, one staff shared that she brings in employers as guests to explain why they believe employability skills are important for their employees. Another staff indicated that every time an employability skill comes up in the program, he ties it back to the curriculum content on employability skills presented at the beginning of the program. These staff suggested that this reinforcement helps participants understand that employability skills are important and relevant, and to take them as seriously as technical skills.

Debriefing results

Almost all of the staff we spoke to emphasized that debriefing participants about assessment results was a critical part of seeing positive outcomes from using ESAT. The staff shared that these meetings allow participants to receive feedback and understand how their behaviour is perceived and develop strategies for behaviour change. Many staff emphasized the particular strength of the radar plot and distanced travelled plot, which give participants the ability to visually see their progress over time and compare their self-perceptions to those of staff. Staff perceived that this process contributes to increasing participants' confidence in their skills. Of the few staff we spoke to who do not hold debrief meetings, they agreed that debrief meetings would be beneficial, but that time constraints prevent them from holding them.

Participant suitability

Some of the staff we spoke to had perspectives on the participants for whom ESAT may be particularly effective. A few staff indicated that ability for participants to self-reflect plays a role in determining how effective ESAT can be. Specifically, staff indicated that participants with developmental or cognitive disabilities, or facing significant barriers, may not have the capacity to reflect on their behaviour and understand how to change it, which poses a challenge for using ESAT to coach behaviour change. Additionally, one staff noted that ESAT is particularly useful for participants who struggle with job retention (i.e., did not have challenges obtaining jobs but struggled to keep them), because it allowed them to self-reflect on the factors that may lead to job loss.

IMPLICATIONS

The research activities described in this section suggest that staff across ten organizations identified several common implementation factors that were key to their success. These implementation factors, all of which aligned with Futureworx's Integrated Program Model and ESAT User Guide, include: having staff buy in to the importance of employability skills and assessment, resourcing additional capacity for staff to dedicate the necessary time towards ESAT use, including more than one perspective in the staff assessment process, integrating employability skills content across programming, and debriefing results with participants.

While it was extremely beneficial to understand which implementation factors are considered most important by staff, the data produced by this phase did not allow us to draw conclusions about how these factors relate to outcomes. A future phase of research could explore the relationship between different implementation factors and externally-generated outcomes data. With a large enough sample of ESAT-using programs and sufficient data about participant outcomes, it might be possible to identify the implementation factors associated with positive participant outcomes.

4. What do staff perceive as the greatest strengths and challenges of using ESAT, and opportunities for strengthening ESAT?

We gathered staff perceptions of strengths, challenges, and opportunities to strengthen ESAT through the staff survey and staff interviews. We outline our findings below.

KEY FINDINGS

Overall, the staff we engaged shared the following about strengths, challenges, and opportunities:

- **Strengths:** ESAT is easy to use, helps staff establish a common language around employability skills, and helps make potentially difficult conversations with participants more objective and professional, particularly thanks to the radar plot.
- **Challenges:** Some staff shared that participants find the self-assessment questions unclear, and a significant number shared that the amount of time required of staff to complete ESAT activities is challenging.

- **Opportunities:** There are opportunities to increase the ESAT platform's ease of use, including adding specific features that would help staff in their work, and to amend self-assessment question language to use more plain language.

STRENGTHS

In our interviews, all staff agreed that ESAT is a valuable tool. They provided specific examples through both our survey and in interviews, including the following.

Ease of use

In our interviews, the majority of staff indicated that the ESAT platform is generally easy to use, and its flexibility and customizability are helpful. Through the survey, 10 percent of comments regarding the strengths of ESAT were about the platform ease of use and user-friendly nature.

Establishes consistency and clarity about employability skills across a program or organization

A significant number of staff highlighted the benefit of a clear and common language, definitions, and approach provided by ESAT within a program or organization, through both the survey (30 percent of comments) and in interviews (the vast majority of interviewees). Many staff shared that ESAT helped staff understand employability skills in a consistent way through clear examples and a common language, have consistent expectations for participant behaviour, and have a consistent framework and approach for coaching and measuring skills.

Supports staff in coaching participants' employability skills

From both the survey and the interviews, we heard that ESAT helps staff coach participants' employability skills. In particular, staff shared that ESAT helps them build a relationship with participants, explain how to improve employability skills, and support participant self-awareness. Approximately a quarter of the staff we spoke to reflected that while before using ESAT they did some employability skills coaching with participants, ESAT has helped formalize a coaching approach and establish a consistent structure for coaching conversations.

The majority of the staff indicated, through both the survey and in interviews, that ESAT is particularly helpful in facilitating more objective conversations with participants. These staff outlined that while conversations about employability skills can be difficult and feel personal, the focus on self- and staff-assessed scores and the visual output shift the focus away from the personal towards what staff perceive as objective, less biased observations of behaviour.

One staff shared the benefit of debriefs taking place at specific intervals rather than after specific behavioural incidents, which means that participants are less likely to be emotionally charged and therefore more prepared to discuss their behaviour and develop strategies for improving their behaviour.

Produces a helpful visual output

From our interviews, the majority of staff referenced the benefit of the radar plot generated by ESAT. Some of these staff explained that the graph helps guide a coaching conversation, as a visual aid to refer to and generate probing questions. The majority highlighted that the graph is particularly helpful in allowing participants to visually see their progress over time, which enhances their confidence in their skills.

Approximately 20 percent of the comments received from the staff survey were about the visual output. While one comment indicated that some participants find the graph confusing, all other comments emphasized its benefit, and one stated that it is ESAT's greatest strength. One staff commented that having a visual is much more effective in helping participants identify what they need to work on compared to explaining this verbally.

Emphasizes the importance and relevance of employability skills

Almost half of the staff we interviewed shared that using ESAT helped emphasize the importance of employability skills to participants, and their relevance for employment.

From the survey, approximately 15 percent of comments were about the benefit of ESAT in emphasizing the importance and relevance of employability skills for work. One staff commented that it helps make the link between employer needs and employability skills.

Incorporates multiple perspectives into one output

From our interviews, approximately a quarter of staff highlighted that one benefit of ESAT is its ability to integrate assessments from multiple staff and/or employers into a single output. This allowed participants to receive feedback from those who see them in different circumstances.

CHALLENGES

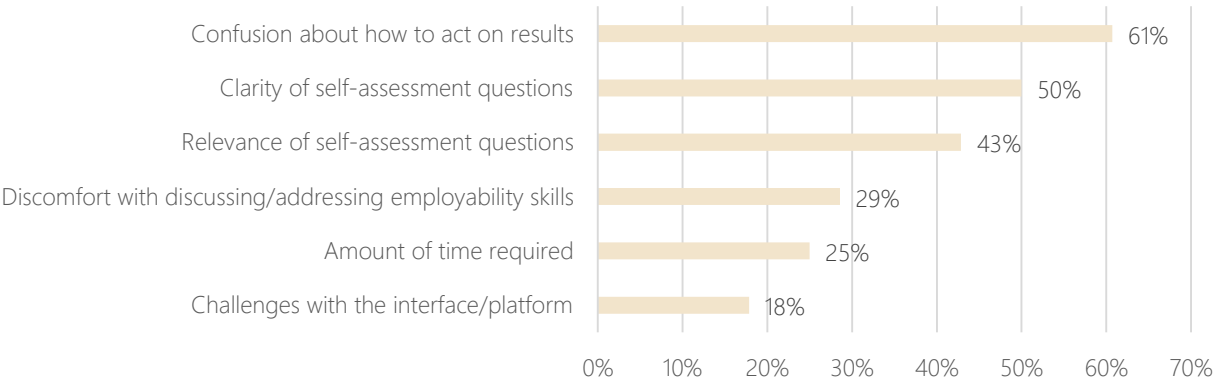
In our survey, we asked staff about challenges participants faced in using ESAT, and challenges face by staff. For participants, staff perceive that challenges include, most commonly, confusion about how to act on results (61 percent of respondents), followed by clarity of the self-assessment questions (50 percent of respondents). Relevance of the self-assessment questions was also common (43 percent of respondents). Discomfort with discussing or addressing employability skills (29 percent), the amount

of time required to complete assessments (25 percent), and challenges with the platform or interface (18 percent) were less commonly selected. These findings are illustrated in Figure 14.

Approximately one-third of the staff we interviewed shared that some participants who are new to Canada may have a limited understanding of employability skills and the Canadian employment culture, which may pose a challenge in understanding the self-assessment questions.

FIGURE 14 | Staff perception of participant challenges with ESAT, by percent of responses

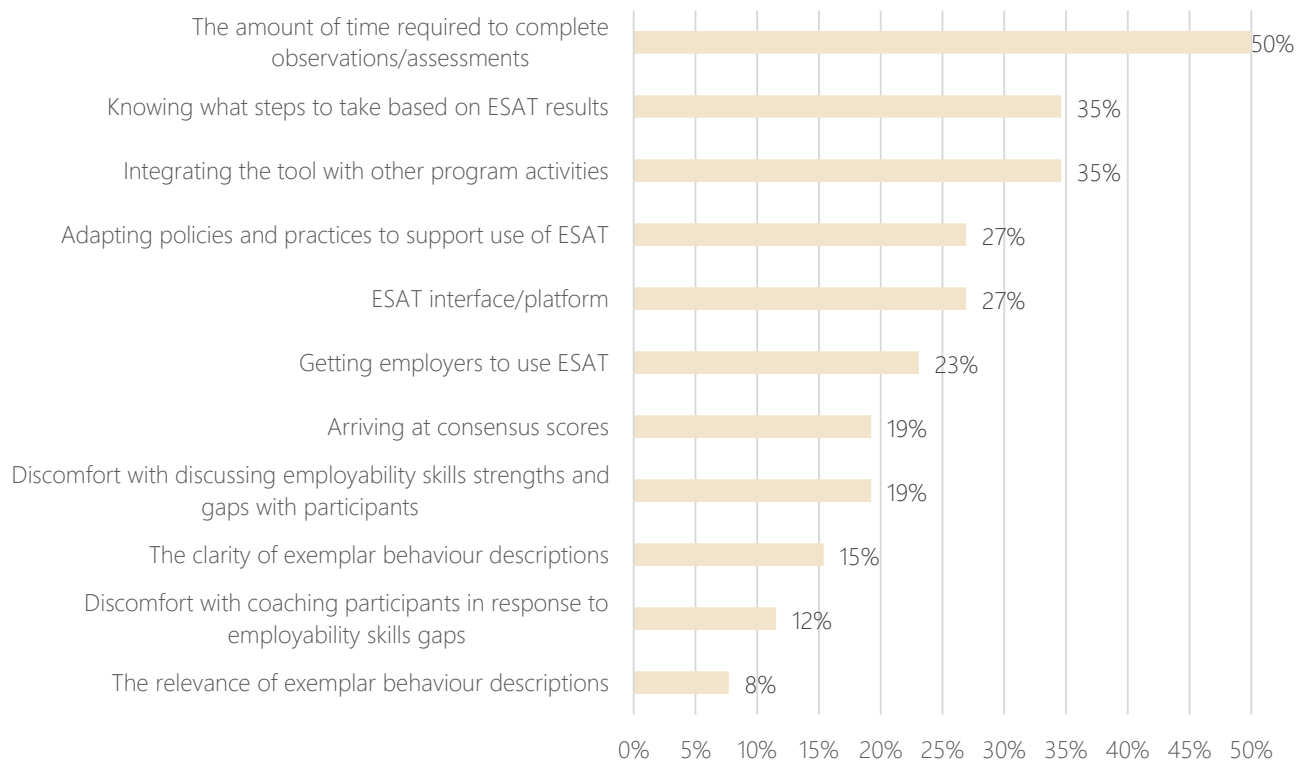
Question: What do program participants find challenging about the ESAT process? Check all that apply.



Regarding staff challenges, the amount of time required to deliver ESAT was selected the most times among survey respondents (50 percent of responses). Knowing what steps to take based on ESAT results and integrating the tool with other program activities were the second most common challenges selected (35 percent of responses each), followed by adapting policies and practices to support use of ESAT, and the ESAT platform/interface (27 percent of responses each). Several additional challenges were raised less frequently, as illustrated by Figure 15 below.

FIGURE 15 | Staff challenges with ESAT, by percent of responses

Question: What challenges do you or other program staff experience with the ESAT process? Check all that apply.



Of these challenges identified by staff respondents, several were raised in interviews as well. The amount of time required to deliver ESAT was raised by approximately half of the staff we interviewed, particularly those from post-secondary institutions who tend to serve large cohorts. These staff did recognize, however, that this challenge was related to employability skills assessments in general rather than an inherent problem of the ESAT.

Reaching consensus was also raised as a challenge by two staff in interviews. One staff shared that when program staff see participants in very different contexts, they may have very different perspectives on their skill levels. When consensus cannot be reached, it makes moving forward very challenging.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

In both surveys and interviews, staff raised opportunities to improve ESAT, the majority of which were about improving the user-friendliness of the platform, and providing guidance on how to generate buy-in more broadly across organizations or with employers.

The suggestions for technical improvements with the database and platform largely focused on increasing opportunity for customization, such as:

- Increasing the efficiency of the notes and search functions
- Suggesting the use of ESAT via an app
- Adding the ability to edit a score after inputting them
- Adding the ability to see archived participants
- Adding the ability to export radar plots
- Adding the ability to send notifications
- Removing the necessity for participants to distinguish skills between “at home” and “at work” on the self-assessment

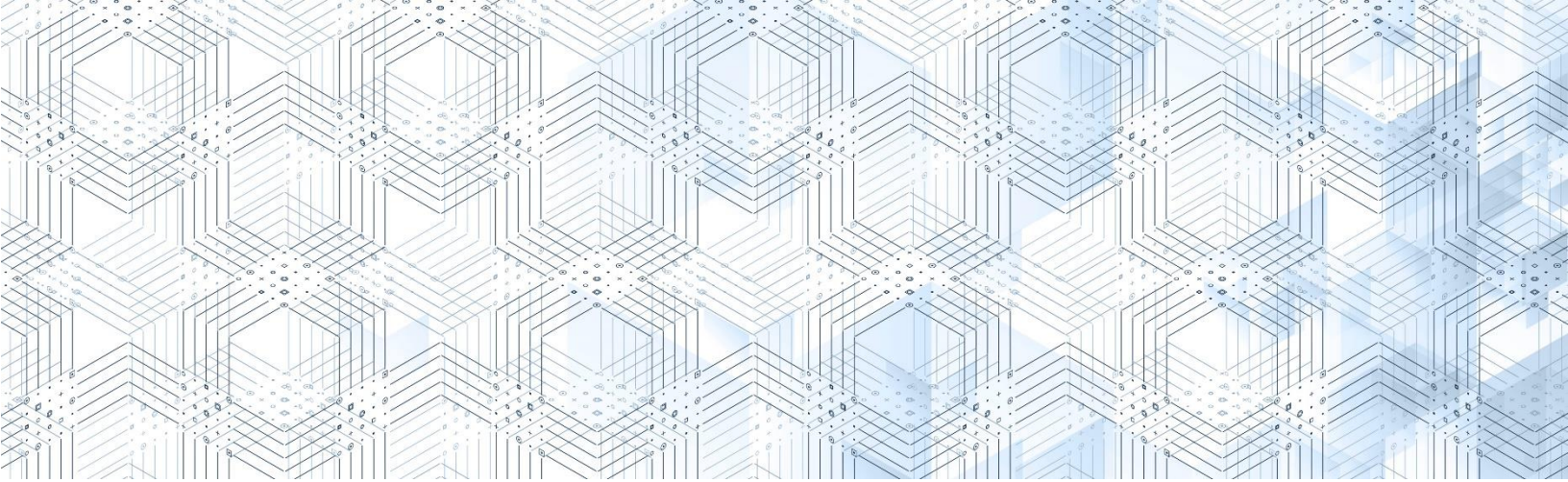
Just under half of the staff we spoke to in interviews indicated that the clarity of the self-assessment questions could be improved by increasing plain language, lowering the language level, removing double negatives and clarifying the Likert scale. Some staff noted that participants with low reading levels needed support while using the self-assessment, and suggested that the tool be customizable for different reading levels.

One organization reflected that additional resources to support the teaching of employability skills would be a helpful complement to ESAT, such as workbooks, posters, materials, videos demonstrating behaviour for participants. Another staff suggested that additional guidance on how to engage employers to use ESAT and how to work with leadership to better integrate ESAT across business practices would be helpful.

IMPLICATIONS

Overall, the staff we engaged through our survey and interviews agreed upon many of the key strengths and challenges of ESAT. In terms of strengths, staff agreed that ESAT is easy to use, helps staff establish a common language around employability skills, and eases tension during potentially difficult conversations with participants. For challenges, staff agreed that some participants find the self-assessment questions unclear, that ESAT use often requires more time than is feasible, and that opportunities exist to improve the platform’s ease of use and customizability.

In response to this finding, a next phase of work could begin by revisiting the ESAT self-assessment questions to improve clarity and adjust for plain language so that questions are easier to understand by participants. It is anticipated that this step would likely require few resources yet could lead to a high payoff in both results and satisfaction.



Recommended design for next phase of research

Overview

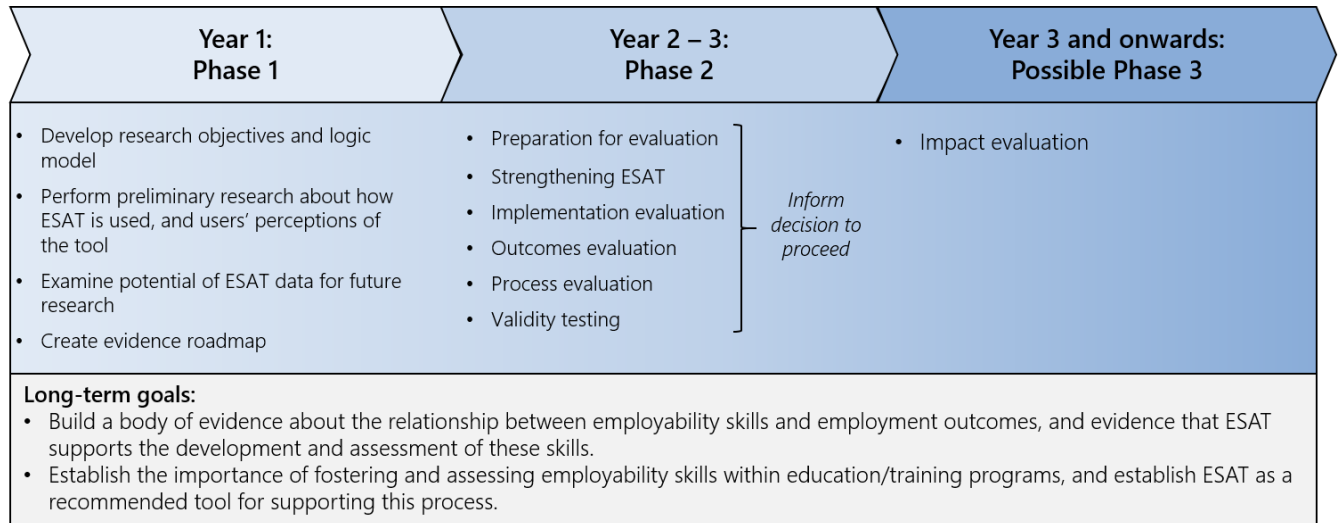
The research described in the first section of this report allowed us to better understand how ESAT is used, how it is perceived, and the types of outcomes that would be expected and could feasibly be measured among ESAT users. However, while this research found that staff had very positive perceptions of the tool and its *potential* to affect outcomes, the study did not gather externally-generated evidence for the outcomes associated with ESAT. Further research is necessary to explore this and other learning objectives.

Blueprint recommends an incremental approach to further research that would enable Futureworx to work toward its short- and long-term learning and evidence goals, which were identified collaboratively with Blueprint at the beginning of Phase 1. These goals³ include considerations about: whether high or improved ESAT scores are associated with positive outcomes; the tool's validity – that is, its ability to accurately measure the employability skills it is intended to measure; whether certain implementation factors are associated with positive outcomes; and whether the use of ESAT *impacts* participant outcomes, compared to outcomes of participants in non-ESAT-using programs.

Building on findings from the initial phase of research ("Phase 1"), Blueprint recommends that Futureworx consider a multi-phased approach to continued research on ESAT, with each activity laying the groundwork for more robust activities to follow. This Evidence Generation Road-Map is summarized in Figure 16.

³ A full list of Futureworx's long-term research goals are listed in Appendix 2.

FIGURE 16 | Evidence Generation Road-Map



PHASE 2: OUTCOMES, VALIDITY, AND IMPLEMENTATION FACTORS

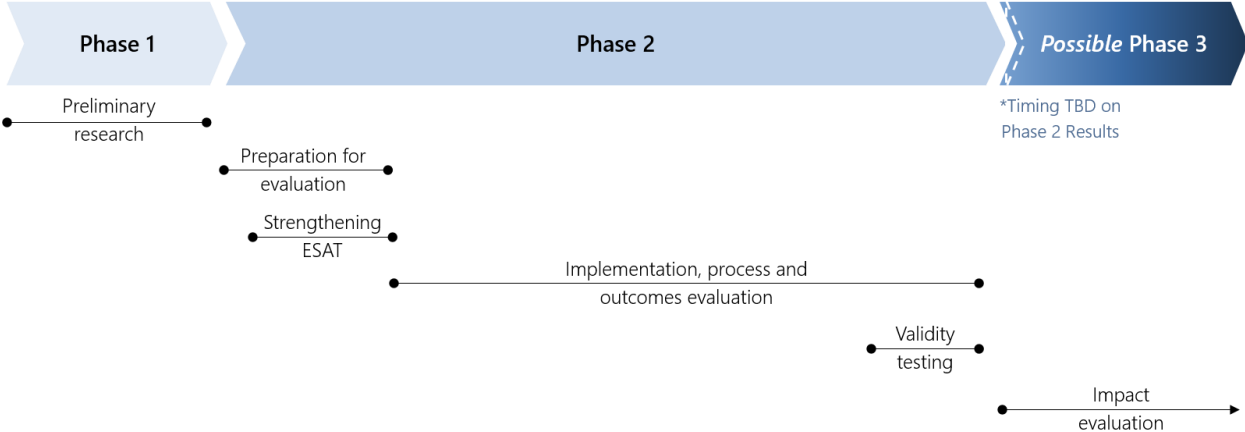
In the next phase of research (“Phase 2”), we propose focusing on gathering externally-generated data about participant outcomes to investigate whether high or improved ESAT scores are in fact associated with positive outcomes, as staff perceive them to be. As part of this phase, we also recommend investigating the tool’s validity, and whether certain implementation factors are required for positive outcomes.

To do this, we propose the following activities, each of which is described in detail in the remainder of this section:

- **Part A – Prepare for evaluation:** Clearly define minimum implementation conditions, and ensure selected partners are able to participate in the research activities and that the evaluation plan is updated accordingly.
- **Part B – Strengthen ESAT:** Apply lessons learned from Phase 1 alongside some light-touch validity testing using existing ESAT data to make revisions to ESAT self-assessment questions and exemplar behaviours.
- **Part C – Evaluate ESAT:** Explore the implementation, processes, and outcomes associated with the revised version of ESAT with a large sample of programs across as many organizations as possible.
- **Part D – Validity testing:** Analyze whether ESAT measures employability skills well based on results of the evaluation.

Overall, this phase will help Futureworx apply preliminary findings to improve ESAT, and then collect detailed information on the implementation, outcomes and validity of the revised version of the tool across many organizations. By building this evidence about ESAT within a variety of different contexts, we can understand whether ESAT scores are positively correlated with outcomes, and whether the context of implementation is associated with different outcomes. Suggested sequencing for this phase is visualized in Figure 17.

FIGURE 17 | Recommended Subsequent Phases



PHASE 3: IMPACT STUDY

If both Futureworx and the researchers find that ESAT is indeed associated with positive results from Phase 2, this would lay the groundwork for Futureworx to progress to a third phase of research. Phase 3 would investigate the more rigorous question of whether participating in a training program that integrates ESAT leads to better outcomes for participants, as compared to a program that does not use ESAT. This impact study design would require measuring outcomes for participants in both ESAT-using programs and in non-ESAT-using comparison programs that are otherwise identical. This study would require a large sample of participants, and forming the comparison programs would likely entail alterations to some existing ESAT-using programs, making it a resource-intensive endeavor. For this reason, we recommend that Phase 3 be undertaken only if Phase 2 shows evidence that the use of ESAT is indeed associated with positive results. Some examples of such evidence would include:

- **Positive results from the implementation evaluation:** The majority of participating partners are able to deliver a high-quality and consistent version of the ESAT model as part of their programming, while meeting most of the recommended conditions for implementation.
- **Positive results from the outcomes evaluation:** High ESAT scores or growth in ESAT scores are strongly correlated to positive externally-generated participant outcomes (e.g.,

improvements in self-reflection, ability to accept feedback, employment outcomes, training outcomes, etc.).

- **Positive results from the process evaluation:** High ratings of satisfaction from participants, staff, and employers (if applicable), as well as promising results from a cost-analysis that suggests feasibility at scale.
- **Positive results from validity testing:** ESAT demonstrates good results for validity, in that scores are predictive of outcomes, in alignment with results from another employability skills assessments, and consistent within each construct.
- **Promising scale required for an impact design:** Futureworx is able to demonstrate its ability to recruit large enough samples of participants to meet the sample sizes that would be required for reaching significant results during an impact evaluation.

The details of a research design for Phase 3 would be more thoroughly developed at a later time, to leverage and build upon on the findings from Phase 2.

Part A: Preparing for evaluation

The approach to evaluation proposed for Phase 2 has several components (i.e., implementation, processes, outcomes), and will therefore involve a significant amount of preparation before evaluation activities can begin. It is anticipated that this phase would take place over the first several months of the project, alongside activities to strengthen the tool (see Part B).

ACTIVITIES

1. **Clearly define ideal conditions for implementation.** Building on the ESAT User Guide, and the description of the Integrated Program Model, we recommend that Futureworx clearly outline the *minimum* implementation conditions to inform the selection of ESAT-using organizations to participate in the evaluation. This will ensure that the core elements of ESAT and the Integrated Program Model will be the main focus of the evaluation, while also allowing consideration of the many adaptations and customizations to ESAT implementation. The description of conditions for implementation should also include a clear description of all the tasks expected of staff delivering ESAT.

Examples of implementation conditions⁴ that Futureworx might specify include:

- The conditions required for an organization to be considered “ready” for ESAT implementation⁵ (e.g., staff buy-in for teaching and assessing employability skills, capacity of program staff to take on additional work, etc.)
- The minimum duration of a program within which ESAT is integrated (e.g., 3 weeks)
- The minimum number of rounds of self-assessment and observer assessment within a program (e.g., 3)
- The minimum number of observers completing the assessment for each participant (e.g., 2)
- The minimum amount of time after starting the program before which a participant can first be assessed by an observer (e.g., 2 weeks)
- The expectation for program staff to host an introductory session to explain the purpose of ESAT and how it works to participants
- The expectation for program staff to host debrief sessions with each participant to review ESAT scores and discuss next steps
- The expectation for program staff to make notes on participants’ behaviours that stand out as key strengths/gaps, to refer to in debrief meetings

2. **Partner Onboarding.** We recommend that Futureworx seek ESAT-using organizations to participate in Phase 2 based on the following conditions:

- Each partner organization should be delivering ESAT as part of at least one program, and should meet most of the minimum implementation conditions for ESAT as outlined above. For some programs, this may require some adaptations to how ESAT is currently used, and they could receive support for this from an implementation consultant (see Part C.1 for more information).

⁴ The examples of minimum implementation conditions in brackets are taken from the ESAT User Guide, and may be revisited by Futureworx and the research partner based on the Theory of Change.

⁵ Readiness conditions should be informed by findings from the Phase 1, as well as a Theory of Change (see Part B), and can be co-developed by Futureworx, the research partner, and an implementation consultant (see Part C.1).

- Each partner organization must be able to deliver at least one full program cycle within the timeline of the Phase 2 evaluation, i.e., its program duration cannot exceed the length of the research phase.
- Collectively, partner organizations should represent breadth and diversity in:
 - Program purpose (e.g., general employability skills development vs. industry-specific training)
 - Organization type (e.g., employment services provider, post-secondary institution)
 - Target population (e.g., age, race, gender, language ability, disability status, newcomer status, etc.)
 - Program duration
- Programs should include as many participants as possible over the course of the evaluation period. A sample size below 500 will limit the ability to draw statistically significant findings.
- As many programs as possible⁶ should include an in-program work placement, so that employer experiences using ESAT as well as their perspectives on participant skills can be included as part of the evaluation. Employers can be offered an incentive for their participation in research activities.
- Each partner should confirm their capacity and willingness to participate in evaluation activities, for which they will be compensated. Though it is ideal for each partner to be willing to participate in all research activities, we recognize that certain activities may not be feasible for some sites, necessitating some flexibility. Examples are summarized here and described in detail below.
 - Provide data about participant program completion and achievement of key milestones (e.g., work placement completion)

⁶ Depending on the number of partner sites that include employers in their programming, Futureworx may consider alternative approaches to understanding employers' perspectives on ESAT, whether built out as an additional component for this project, or integrated within research pertaining to their workplace-specific assessment tool, RESET.

- Deliver an *essential skills* assessment to participants, to separate the moderating effect of essential skills gains from employability skills gains (for more information, see Part C.2)
 - Deliver an alternative *employability skills* assessment to participants, to allow for comparison with ESAT results for concurrent validity testing (for more information, see Part D)
 - Support gathering of participant sociodemographic data
 - Support researchers in communications with participants and employers (if applicable) to coordinate research activities (e.g., surveys, interviews)
 - Support researchers in administering surveys to participants and employers (if applicable), providing some in-class time for participants to complete surveys
 - Engage with researchers in interviews as part of the implementation and process evaluation components of the project (includes both front-line staff and organizational leaders)
 - Agree to allow researchers to ask participants for consent to link their sociodemographic data with tax data to support tracking of employment outcomes (see Part C.2 for more details)
3. **Refining evaluation plan.** Once partners are onboarded, Futureworx and the research team can work with partners to understand their contexts and capabilities so that the evaluation plan laid out below can be adapted accordingly. For instance, factors such as the number of partners selected, the length of their programs, the types of programs, and the number and diversity of program participants will all have implications for research activities and the overall approach to the evaluation.

Part B: Strengthening ESAT

Before ESAT is used for the first round of evaluation, we recommend that some content revisions are made. This step will apply the lessons learned from Phase 1 alongside some preliminary light-touch validity testing to improve self-assessment questions and exemplar descriptions before proceeding with the evaluation. It is anticipated that this phase would take place over the first several months of the project, alongside several of the other preparation activities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This part of the work would be guided by the research questions:

- Does ESAT *appear* to measure participants' employability skills well?
- What opportunities exist to strengthen ESAT?

ACTIVITIES

We propose the following activities for this part of the work:

1. **Build a Theory of Change (TOC).** TOCs are graphic or narrative representations of components of a program or model that illustrate a *causal* pathway of change. Building a TOC for ESAT can strengthen the theoretical foundation for this approach. Unlike Logic Models, which are fairly standardized and *describe* program components (e.g. inputs, activities, and outputs), TOCs indicate *how* the components of a program/model lead to outcomes. The purpose of a TOC is to justify *with evidence* the assumptions or theories that underlie the components of a program, and the way that they work together to produce outcomes, as well as to define what success looks like at every step of the way.

We recommend that Futureworx and their research partner co-create a TOC that integrates findings from Phase 1 and includes both ESAT and the IPM. This should include identification of the most common barriers (i.e., obstacles) and facilitators (i.e., success factors) facing ESAT implementation, which will be foundational for providing organizations with implementation supports (see Part C.1). Building a TOC will also help ensure that the theories and assumptions underlying ESAT and the IPM are used to strengthen the content of the tool, as well as research activities for the evaluation.

2. **Conduct preliminary light-touch validity testing.** To understand whether ESAT appears to assess employability skills well, and to inform improvements to the tool before proceeding with the evaluation, we suggest two types of validity testing at this stage:
 - a. **Inter-item reliability testing:** Analysis of ESAT self-assessment scores from existing data to determine the correlation between individual questions (or “items”) for each skill. This would be undertaken to ensure that each question is aligned with the skill it seeks to assess.
 - b. **Face-validity testing:** Review of self-assessment questions and exemplar behaviour descriptions to assess whether these appear to measure the employability skills they are meant to, and to identify opportunities to strengthen content and simplify language. This activity should be informed by knowledge of existing frameworks, definitions and constructs used for employability skills elsewhere in Canada.
3. **Revise content of ESAT self-assessment questions and exemplar behaviours.** Based on findings from preliminary validity testing as well as recommendations from ESAT users interviewed during Phase 1, Futureworx and a research partner could make recommended revisions to the content of the self-assessment questions and exemplar behaviours. These revisions could include simplifying language, shifting self-assessment questions between skills (depending on the correlations between items), and/or adding new questions (e.g., to replace items that show limited correlation with other items).

Part C: Evaluation

The following three components of the evaluation will happen in tandem over the course of Phase 2, and will likely take 1.5 - 2 years.

Part C.1: Implementation supports and evaluation

To support the implementation component of this research project, we recommend that Futureworx and the research partner engage an external consultant with expertise in implementation science. This consultant would support organizations in tackling the delicate balance between delivering the program according to implementation requirements (i.e., fidelity of the model) and adaptations that are required for their context. Implementation supports should begin at the outset of the project, and can provide several benefits:

- **Tailored adaptations:** Given that organizations will deliver ESAT within their programs in alignment with the minimum implementation conditions described above, some modifications to their approaches may be necessary to take part in the evaluation. Assisting each organization to identify strengths in their context that can be leveraged, as well as gaps that can be proactively managed or addressed can help programs tailor approaches for adapting the model to their needs. Having an external consultant focused on implementation across all program sites gives a cross-sectional perspective to differences and similarities that would not be noticed by individual program staff, but could be leveraged when applying lessons learned across contexts.
- **Greater outcomes:** Providing implementation supports proactively can pave the way for higher-quality implementation down the road, and in turn, is expected to lead to better post-program outcomes.
- **Higher-quality evaluation:** High-quality implementation is foundational to a strong evaluation as it promotes greater confidence in evaluation results, allows for more nuanced interpretations of a model's generalizability and scalability, and helps build evidence that's required for a model to progress towards impact evaluation.

Implementation supports will begin from the very outset of the project, and will continue along the entire duration of the outcomes evaluation as applicable.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This proposed part of the work will be guided by these research questions:

- How well do participating organizations meet readiness factors defined as part of the minimum implementation conditions for ESAT? How does an organization's readiness affect program outcomes for participants?
- What are the barriers (i.e., obstacles) and facilitators (i.e., success factors) to implementing ESAT? What supports could be provided to help overcome common barriers and leverage common facilitators? To what extent do organizations face barriers and facilitators described in the TOC? Are there any new or unanticipated barriers or facilitators?
- How does ESAT's implementation fidelity vary across organizations? When adaptations to implementation are made, what is the rationale for doing so and how do these affect outcomes? Is there any difference between anticipated vs. actual adaptations?

ACTIVITIES

We propose the following activities for this part of the work:

1. **Readiness Assessment.** Building on readiness factors defined during the preparation activities (i.e., co-developed by Futureworx and the implementation consultant), the implementation consultant can then assess these factors from organizations taking part in the evaluation through whatever means deemed appropriate (e.g., observation, survey, interviews, informal conversations with staff). These factors may be re-assessed at specific intervals (e.g., 6 months) throughout an implementation project, especially when sites are experiencing high rates of change in programming, or staff turnover. Such assessment(s) will help the implementation consultant understand how their expertise could be most useful in supporting implementation that is high-quality but also uniquely tailored to each organizations' needs. Even if some gaps in readiness cannot necessarily be addressed in the short-term, awareness of these factors will still be beneficial for the evaluation and capacity-building overall. Depending on an organization's experience delivering ESAT, the implementation consultant may opt to skip this step for some sites (e.g., if the organization has several years of experience delivering ESAT in alignment with the minimum implementation conditions).
2. **Barriers and Facilitators Assessment.** In addition to factors that affect an organization's readiness for implementing ESAT, there will be several other factors that affect the fidelity of implementation throughout the duration of a program:
 - Barriers: factors that pose challenges or impede people, organizations or systems from delivering ESAT. E.g., lack of knowledge, negative social influence, low motivation.
 - Facilitators: factors that support successful delivery of ESAT. E.g., strong leadership, champions of the initiative, good availability of resources.

Building on the above factors that were identified by Futureworx and research partners during the development of the TOC, we recommend that the implementation consultant works with individual organizations to understand whether those anticipated factors align with the actual barriers and facilitators they faced during implementation. This information can be collected via whatever means deemed appropriate (e.g., survey, interviews, informal conversations with staff), and will then be used to inform recommendations for how Futureworx and/or ESAT users might adapt day-to-day activities to ensure that implementation strategies help overcome identified barriers and leverage identified facilitators. This process would aim both

to support high-quality implementation for the purposes of evaluation, as well as to build capacity of Futureworx staff in supporting ESAT implementation outside of this project.

3. **Tracking Fidelity and Adaptations.** In an attempt to get a full picture of each organization's implementation context, we recommend that information be collected about each organization's fidelity to the implementation guidelines, as well as adaptations of the model. Though several details on fidelity will be captured within the ESAT platform (e.g., number of assessments, number of assessors, length of time between assessments), adaptations made to program design, or the process of ESAT implementation should be understood in more detail from program staff. Information should be collected on what was adapted, how it was adapted, why it was adapted, and what the anticipated outcomes of the adaptation were. This information will most often be collected through self-reports from staff rather than observation, such as through a survey or interview. Some examples of adaptations might include:

- Program design was changed to alter the emphasis on employability skills throughout the program
- A certain feature of ESAT (e.g., self-assessment, entering of staff notes, debrief process) was altered or discontinued

Part C.2: Outcomes evaluation

The next recommended component of the evaluation will help answer the question of what outcomes are achieved by participants of each ESAT-using program, and whether there is a relationship between ESAT scores and outcomes.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This proposed part of the work will be guided by the following research questions:

- What outcomes are achieved by participants in ESAT-using programs? Are higher ESAT scores, or growth in ESAT scores, positively related to outcomes for participants?
- Are different ways of implementing ESAT, and using ESAT with different participants, associated with different outcomes?

ACTIVITIES

The following steps are proposed for this part of the work:

1. **Define all outcomes of interest.** Building on the Logic Models established for ESAT during Phase 1 and the TOC developed earlier in Phase 2, we recommend that Futureworx and its research partner develop an exhaustive list of all anticipated outcomes for participants from ESAT-using programs. In the next step, this list will be narrowed down based on the outcomes that are most important and that can be most feasibly tracked. Based on what was learned in Phase 1, these outcomes will likely include participants':
 - Employability skills
 - Self-awareness of skills strengths and gaps
 - Ability to accept feedback and self-reflect on behaviours
 - Employment outcomes
 - Education and training outcomes
2. **Design data collection strategy for outcomes data.** Building on the outcomes defined in step 1, we recommend creating a data collection strategy for collecting all the outcomes data. The process of developing this plan will help to narrow in on which outcomes are most important and feasible to measure. A detailed measurement framework can then be created to determine indicators and data sources for each outcome and research question, and a timeline can be used to lay out the sequencing for data collection activities. We include a sample measurement framework with a few key outcomes below (Figure 18).
3. **Design data collection strategy for moderating factors and validity testing.** In addition to the outcomes of interest, a plan should also be developed to gather data that will be controlled for in the outcomes evaluation analysis, such as moderating factors and information required for testing validity. Some examples might include: program details, participant sociodemographic data, participant's essential skills levels, and participants' scores on alternative employability skills assessments. Some of these examples have also been included in Figure 18.
4. **Deploy data collection strategy.** Following development of the data collection strategy, measurement framework, and timeline, the data collection tools and approaches can be designed and deployed. We recommend Futureworx work with their research partner to develop a data system – such as Salesforce – to gather and store the data that is not captured in the ESAT data system. Some examples of this data may include program details not captured in ESAT (e.g., purpose, duration, target population, etc.), completion of surveys, and transactions for research incentives.

5. **Analyze data.** At this stage, all data will be examined to understand the relationship between ESAT scores, implementation factors, and outcomes (during and post-program).

FIGURE 18 | Sample Measurement Framework.

Factors to Measure	Indicators	Data sources
Participants' employability skills	Raw ESAT scores Change in ESAT scores over time	ESAT platform
Participants' self-awareness of skills strengths and gaps	Participants' perceptions of skills and skills gains Difference between self-assessed and observer-assessed ESAT scores	Participant exit interview
Participants' employment outcomes	Participant employment status Participant employment satisfaction Employer satisfaction with graduates from ESAT-using programs	Participant follow-up survey Participant tax data Employer interviews or survey
Moderating Factors	Program details	ESAT platform Research database
	Participant socio-demographics	Research database
	Participant essential skills levels	Essential skills assessment

Part C.3: Process evaluation

The final recommended component of the evaluation will help understand ESAT users' experience with the tool. Given that Phase 1 of this research focussed heavily on understanding program staff's perceptions of ESAT, this phase will focus more on the perceptions of participants and employers, as well as those staff members who were not interviewed during Phase 1.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This proposed part of the work will be guided by the research questions:

- Are participants, staff, and employers satisfied with their experience with ESAT? What do participants, staff, and employers see as the strengths and areas of improvement? How does satisfaction vary among different populations of participants?
- What are the staff time-related costs associated with the implementation of ESAT?

ACTIVITIES

The following steps are proposed for this part of the work:

1. **Design and deploy a data collection strategy for gathering feedback from ESAT users.** We recommend doing interviews at the end of the program with (a) staff and organizational leaders that were not interviewed as part of Phase 1, (b) a subset of participants, sampled from across all participating sites, and (c) if possible, employers, who either engage directly with participants through work-placements within ESAT-using programs and/or have hired graduates from ESAT-using programs. These interviews would focus on answering all the research questions outlined above, such as by exploring the experience of each individual in terms of satisfaction and perceptions, as well as understanding the amount of time they spend on all processes related to using ESAT. Information about the time-related costs associated with ESAT might also come from the research activities undertaken for the implementation evaluation (see Part C.1), and could be used to inform a cost-analysis of ESAT delivery.
2. **Analyze data.** Information collected about users' experiences with ESAT will be examined to understand overall perceptions of the tool, whether satisfaction varies among different populations of participants, and whether the time-related costs of the tool suggest potential for scalability.

Part D: Validity testing

The final component of Phase 2 involves a second, more robust round of validity testing for the revised version of ESAT. The data that must be collected for validity testing will happen as part of the evaluation, which will provide information on the necessary outcomes and alternative skills measures to make inferences about validity.

RESEARCH QUESTION

At this stage, validity testing would aim to answer the question:

- Is the revised version of ESAT a valid measure of participants' employability skills?

ACTIVITIES

We recommend concurrent validity testing, predictive validity testing, and a second round of inter-item reliability testing.

- **Concurrent validity testing:** Testing concurrent validity would mean testing the extent to which ESAT is related to an existing, previously validated measure. This should be tested by simultaneously assessing participants' employability skills using both ESAT and another employability skills assessment tool. This would mean that partner organizations would deliver the second employability skills assessment tool alongside ESAT as part of programming. Depending on the nature of the selected tool, this may be delivered twice (at the start and end of the program) or just once at the end of the program. The research partner would collect these results throughout the evaluation, and then compare results to assess similarity.
- **Predictive validity:** Predictive validity tests the degree to which scores or test results accurately predict related measurements, such as desired outcomes. Testing predictive validity in this context could be done by comparing the relationship between ESAT scores with employment outcomes - such as job attainment or retention – which are already being collected throughout the outcomes evaluation.
- **Inter-item reliability testing:** Since changes will have been made to ESAT self-assessment questions and exemplar descriptions since the initial inter-item reliability test, conducting this testing again will assess whether each revised question is aligned with the skill it seeks to measure. These results will be collected via the ESAT platform within the evaluation, and will be examined by the research partner at the end of the study.

Summary

We have described our recommendation for a next phase of work along Futureworx's evidence generation roadmap. We gave an overview of the following components:

- **Part A – Prepare for evaluation:** Clearly defining minimum implementation conditions, and ensuring selected partners are able to participate in the research activities and that the evaluation plan is updated accordingly.
- **Part B – Strengthen ESAT:** Applying lessons learned from Phase 1 alongside some light-touch validity testing using existing ESAT data to make revisions to ESAT self-assessment questions and exemplar behaviours.
- **Part C – Evaluate ESAT:** Exploring the implementation, processes, and outcomes associated with the revised version of ESAT with a large sample of programs across as many organizations as possible.
- **Part D – Validity testing:** Analyzing whether ESAT measures employability skills well based on results of the evaluation.

As this phase unfolds, Futureworx and its research partner can keep an eye to longer-term goals from the evidence generation roadmap. If positive results such as those described in the overview section are achieved, researchers and Futureworx may then feel confident to proceed to an impact evaluation. The details for such a research design can be more thoroughly developed later on, to leverage and build on the findings from Phase 2.

Appendix 1: ESAT Logic Models

Logic Model: Learner Experience with ESAT

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Moderating Factors
Organization Delivering ESAT Organization Staff Learners Employers Work placement opportunities Futurework support staff ESAT Program curriculum	Engages in integrated programming Learns about importance of ES for workplace Practices demonstration of ES in low-stakes environments Self-assesses ES throughout program, using ESAT Debriefs on ESAT results with program staff to discuss strengths and gaps Applies ES within work placements (if applicable)	ESAT results Behavioural action plan (e.g., IPP, CC) Career action plan, with ES reflected Program completion Participant workplace placements	<p>Short/ Medium-term Outcomes</p> Improvements in self-awareness of ES Improvements in articulation of ES Improvements in ES <p>Long-term Outcomes</p> Effective application of ES within employment contexts Improvements in labour market outcomes (employment status, earnings, job satisfaction, career advancement, etc.) Improvements in social and emotional well-being (e.g. increased self-esteem, reduced anxiety) Employer satisfaction with program graduates as employees	<p>Learner factors</p> Baseline skill levels Life circumstances (e.g., barriers, success factors) Socioeconomic and demographic factors Satisfaction with programming Participation in other programs Motivation (i.e., intrinsic vs. extrinsic) <p>Staff/ Program factors</p> Staff's experience teaching/ assessing ES Resource availability Programming approach <p>Structural factors</p> Labour market and economic context Covid-19 and other unforeseen crises

Note: 'ES' is use to mean Employability skills, or skills which allow a person to interact with other individuals or groups in workplaces, at home or within social settings (e.g., Motivation; Teamwork; Adaptability; Accountability; Confidence, etc.). These skills are often named differently across contexts; e.g., soft skills, human skills, non-cognitive skills, etc.

Logic Model: Organizations' Experience with the Integrated Program Model

Inputs	Activities	Outcomes	Moderating Factors
<p>Organization Delivering ESAT Organization Staff Learners Employers Work placement opportunities Futureworx support staff ESAT Program curriculum Integrated program model</p>	<p><i>Integrated Program Model Initiation</i> Onboarding discussions and defining of context-specific ES Employer engagement (i.e., for needs assessment, curriculum design, etc.)</p> <p><i>ESAT Initiation</i> ESAT is customized for agency needs Agency staff are trained to use the ESAT</p> <p><i>ESAT Implementation</i> Staff teach ES alongside technical and essential skills Staff observe participants and rate ES Staff oversee learners' completion of ESAT</p>	<p><i>Short-/ Medium-term Outcomes for Staff</i> Improved understanding of common language for ES, as well as role of programming and assessment in improving ES Improved comfort discussing ES with learners Improved ability to assess and coach learners' ES Improved collaboration and sense of teamwork with other staff members</p> <p><i>Long-term Outcomes for Staff</i> Improved understanding of importance of ES for employment success Reflections on one's professional practice to better support learners' ES development Contribution to agency's effort to improve integration of ES in programming</p>	<p><i>Learner factors</i> Average baseline skill levels and characteristics Satisfaction with programming Participation in other programs</p> <p><i>Staff/ Program factors</i> Buy-in about the importance of ES Capacity to take on ES work Experience teaching/ assessing ES Flexibility of program design Ability to engage employers Resource availability</p>
<p>Outputs</p> <p>ES embedded within program design Improvements to staff behaviours to incorporate ES Program completion by learners</p>	<p>Staff meet to determine consensus scores and identify a debrief strategy Staff meet with learners to discuss strengths and gaps in ES, and next steps Staff support learners in realizing behavioural change Staff make decisions about learners' progression to other training/ employment opportunities Staff may revisit program design or the implementation process to improve integration of ES</p>	<p><i>Long-term Outcomes for Futureworx</i> Incorporation of lessons learned from each agency for the continued improvement of the Integrated Programming Approach and the ESAT Dissemination of lessons learned with others in the sector, to help better prepare all Canadians with ES for success in the labour market</p>	<p><i>Structural factors</i> Labour market and economic context Covid-19 and other unforeseen crises</p>

Appendix 2: Long-term research and evidence goals for ESAT

We worked with Futureworx staff to identify the following questions as part of long-term research and evidence goals for ESAT. We used these questions to inform the development of our recommended Phase 2 and Phase 3 research designs.

Stakeholder-specific Long-term Goals		
Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the minimum requirements for successful implementation? • How can the ESAT improve programming? • Does ESAT improve teamwork (e.g. communication / breaking down silos) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does ESAT improve awareness of the pivotal, paramount, foundational importance of social and emotional skills? • How important is Futureworx training?
Program Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can the ESAT improve one's professional practice? Does ESAT give program staff the language they need to talk about soft skills? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does ESAT improve clients' trust?
Learner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the ESAT a good use of time? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is ESAT the right intervention for addressing clients' needs?
Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are ESAT "grads" better employees? • Does ESAT help employers address soft skills within their organisation? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does ESAT/RESET help reduce turnover and employee performance issues?
Futureworx	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does flexibility of implementation affect outcomes? • How does the context of implementation affect outcomes? • Are some skills a better fit for the model than others? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can the model can be improved? • How is the model used to improve program design? • How can research findings be disseminated across the sector?

Common Long-term Goals	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do learners improve their self-awareness of their employability skills and social and emotional skills? • Do learners' employability skills and social and emotional skills improve? And do these improvements persist over time? • Do learners have positive labour market outcomes, in comparison to non-ESAT users? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the ESAT clear/intuitive/user-friendly and enjoyable/worthwhile to use? • In which contexts are ESAT scores most valid or reliable (within that group)? • Do learners improve their social/emotional well-being? • What are the challenges in implementing ESAT?