



Project Insights Report

# Examining the Outcomes of Zero-Fee Education in Building a Resilient, Inclusive Economy in Rural Alberta



**PARTNERS**

University of Alberta



**LOCATIONS**

Alberta



**INVESTMENT**

\$709,174



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## Executive Summary

The Drayton Valley Zero Fee Tuition (ZFT) program was initiated to counter economic downturns and high unemployment in the region, which has been aggravated by fluctuations in the oil and gas industry. The project aimed to provide free training to underserved populations and build resilience among workers in the community through skills acquisition in the midst of ongoing economic transformation and uncertainty. In particular, the ZFT sought to dismantle the financial barriers to upskilling and re-skilling for residents while improving economic diversification and creating a local culture of education.

While the project was initially designed to provide training support so that oil and gas workers could find employment in other sectors, the participants were not previously employed in oil and gas. The cohort of 58 participants was composed primarily of women (95%), and participants had not previously completed any postsecondary education or training. Many of these women spoke of the challenges they experienced keeping up with unpaid care work and school.

Participants had a wide range of educational options to pursue, but the vast majority chose a locally based training option, i.e., the health care aide program that was taught in person in Drayton Valley. An established education committee identified this program as key training due to a shortage of certified health care aides in the region. All participants who completed that particular program found jobs in their field of study. Many participants reported having plans to pursue further education and viewed the tuition-free program as an important stepping stone in their long-term educational and career goals.

### KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 The program successfully removed financial barriers to re-skilling and training for underserved populations. Nearly all participants (95%) had no previous postsecondary education or training; participants reported that the training would not have been possible without the funding.
- 2 In rural areas, access to local training and local employment opportunities is central to successful participant outcomes. Among those who took in-demand, in-person training within Drayton Valley, 100% found employment. Many viewed the training as a stepping stone to future training and career aspirations.
- 3 Addressing financial barriers is no panacea. Efforts to support underserved populations to begin or restart their career journeys must go beyond providing financial incentives. Many participants, the bulk of whom were women, also faced other barriers to training, such as childcare responsibilities.

## The Issue

The project in Drayton Valley, Alberta was initiated to address the economic vulnerability of the community, which has been significantly impacted by the boom-and-bust cycles of the oil and gas industry. Since 2014, the town has faced a severe recession, marked by an 80% increase in unemployment rates. The situation was aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which further strained the remaining employment sectors. In response, the municipal council introduced a zero-fee postsecondary education initiative that aimed to diversify the local economy and provide residents with accessible educational opportunities to upskill or re-skill. With 41% of the population having attained a high-school education or less, the initiative aimed to remove financial barriers and create tailored educational opportunities to revitalize the town and surrounding region.



## What We Investigated

The project team investigated several questions to understand the feasibility and impact of a zero-fee educational model. The primary questions sought to identify the facilitators and barriers to developing and sustaining such a model; examine how collaboration among various stakeholders could be fostered; assess the initial outcomes of zero-fee education; and identify promising practices that could be shared with other municipalities. Stakeholders involved in this investigation ranged from local government officials and policy-makers to educational institutions, community members and the students themselves.

The project developed partnerships with five postsecondary institutions offering in-demand courses on business and administrative studies, environmental studies, nursing, professional hairstyling and health care aide studies. The methodology incorporated both qualitative and quantitative research techniques. Data collection began in the spring and summer of 2021 and included focus groups, semi-structured interviews with policy-makers and surveys with students. Coordinators conducted five focus groups, 12 individual interviews, and 42 surveys with students participating in the ZFT program. Additionally, coordinators interviewed 32 local youth to gauge their interest in and perspectives on local educational opportunities and the ZFT program specifically.

This approach allowed the research team to gather in-depth insights from a variety of perspectives, ensuring a robust analysis of the zero-fee model's effectiveness and potential sustainability.

## What We're Learning

The ZFT program in Drayton Valley engaged 58 students, of whom 36 completed surveys that contributed to the project coordinators' understanding of the program's effectiveness and areas for improvement.

### **Reducing financial burdens supports women to pursue education**

One of the key achievements of the ZFT program was its ability to significantly reduce financial barriers for participants, which was crucial in a community where economic fluctuations, particularly in the oil and gas sector, have left many without stable employment. The program not only facilitated access to education but also enabled participants to find employment in in-demand sectors. And while financial incentives proved to be necessary, they were also inadequate. Most participants were women who also faced other barriers to training, such as balancing training time (especially in-person training) with childcare. Future efforts to support underserved populations to re-skill must go beyond providing financial incentives and consider other barriers faced by participants.

### **Some stakeholders shared concerns about program sustainability**

While the program clearly incentivized the uptake in training, some raised systems-level concerns about the long-run feasibility of financing such a program. This is partially due, as this project revealed, to some skepticism regarding the use of public funds in this way. The ZFT received funding from the Future Skills Centre, but it also relied on municipal funding and contributions from local businesses and organizations. This skepticism likely reflects a lack of understanding about who benefits (e.g., individuals, the community, governments at all levels, etc.) and how to measure benefits that include but extend well beyond financial metrics (e.g., improved well-being and mental health, etc.).

### **Providing some education and training encourages participants to take more**

The program also demonstrated that small steps can encourage individuals to embark on continuous upskilling. While the vast majority of participants had never engaged in postsecondary education or training, most reported that they now plan to seek out additional training, with the view of further improving their careers. As such, the positive benefits of this approach (and, for that matter, most training programs) accrue over a longer time frame and thus highlight the limitations of short-term evaluations. This likely played a role in the skepticism that prevailed among some stakeholders.

### **The health care aide program was the most popular and met industry needs**

Students had various education options available, including outside Drayton Valley, but the majority opted for a locally based training program—specifically the health care aide program, which was conducted in-person in Drayton Valley. The education committee identified this program as a crucial training need due to a shortage of certified health care aides in the area. It is noteworthy that all participants who completed this program were able to secure employment in their field of study, highlighting the program's effectiveness in meeting both student needs and local workforce demands. Indeed, the education committee, which was composed of community members, educators and government representatives, played a pivotal role in increasing awareness of the ZFT program and aligning educational goals with other local initiatives.

## **Why It Matters**

Small communities are vulnerable to the ongoing and dynamic changes in the world of work. This challenge is exacerbated for certain population groups living in these small, often-remote areas. Effective skills training programs that are aligned with emerging demand in these areas will be central to these communities' abilities to take advantage of emerging technologies and the subsequent shifts in industry demands. The Drayton Valley ZFT program provides a compelling case study on the implementation and impacts of tuition-free education, notably in a rural setting.

One of the key lessons from this project relates to the critical role of local cultural attitudes toward education. In Drayton Valley, a historical lack of emphasis on postsecondary education, due in part to the availability of well-paying jobs in the oil and gas sector that, in some instances, did not require postsecondary education, posed a significant barrier. This underscores the need for policy-makers to consider local cultural factors when designing educational programs, and to work toward shifting these perceptions by demonstrating and placing emphasis on the long-term benefits of training and education. The ZFT experience illustrates the need for patience and sustained commitment to educational programs, as benefits may accrue slowly and are not always immediately quantifiable in economic terms.

The project also identified a lack of resources as a barrier to sustaining the ZFT program. This insight is crucial for other municipalities considering similar initiatives. It suggests that securing diverse funding streams, beyond municipal budgets, is essential. Partnerships with local businesses, government grants and community fundraising could be part of a multi-faceted funding strategy.

From a broader perspective, the ZFT program's approach to creating an inclusive economy by providing free education can serve as a model for other regions looking to diversify their economies and reduce dependency on single industries. The lessons from Drayton Valley could encourage other municipalities to explore how education can play a role in economic transition strategies.

## ► What's Next



### **State of Skills: Innovation in Training, Recruitment and Upskilling for Skilled Trades**

Canada needs to address long standing shortages of skilled tradespeople to advance policy priorities around decarbonization, affordable housing and transforming industry to add more value to what we produce.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

The findings from this research are actively informing ongoing discussions and planning around education policy in Drayton Valley, highlighting both the challenges and successes of implementing a zero-fee tuition system in a rural community.

The project also reinforces the importance of ensuring that employers are actively engaged throughout the life cycle of skills delivery projects. At the same time, there are a number of other valuable lessons from this project that the Future Skills Centre is embedding in its current suite of projects. These include (1) taking a long-run approach to measuring the impacts of our initiatives; (2) ensuring that our output metrics extend beyond employment; (3) assessing different funding models that lead to sustainability; and (4) ensuring that our innovative projects address multiple barriers to training and education, i.e., not just financial.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact [communications@fsc-ccf.ca](mailto:communications@fsc-ccf.ca).

### **How to Cite This Report**

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