

Project Insights Report

Development of Soft Skills in Future Employees



PARTNERS

New Brunswick
Community College



LOCATIONS

New Brunswick



INVESTMENT

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Executive Summary

Employers in New Brunswick have reported a pressing need for enhanced soft skills among workers. Recognizing this, the Collège Communautaire du Nouveau-Brunswick / Community College of New Brunswick (CCNB) launched a project designed to enhance the soft skills of its students.

In particular, CCNB expanded its curriculum to include training in five key areas, including motivation, presentation, teamwork, adaptability and responsibility. The project—a collaborative effort among CCNB faculty, students and employers—aimed to boost the employability and resilience of its graduates. It began with a needs assessment and concluded with the implementation of specific training activities designed to foster the five aforementioned essential skills.

The Employability Skills Assessment Tool was utilized to evaluate student progress in these areas. While the project faced a number of hurdles (e.g., delays in faculty training), students improved their soft skills across all five domains. Moreover, students' scores for each of the five essential skills increased during both the semester and internship phases of the project.

The outcomes of this initiative provided valuable insights into how enhancing soft skills can improve the job readiness of graduates and how educational institutions can better align their programming with changing skill requirements. The project demonstrated the importance of teacher engagement and tested innovative methods for assessing soft skills, all of which will help to guide future educational strategies and policies in this area.

KEY INSIGHTS

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The job readiness of students increased, as demonstrated by marked improvements in adaptability, teamwork, motivation, presentation and responsibility.

- 2 Comprehensive training for all teaching staff was central to the successful integration of these soft skills into existing programming.
- 3 Measuring and validating soft skills is essential to understanding the strengths, weaknesses and progress of students, and might be best integrated within the broader student evaluation framework.

The Issue

In New Brunswick, employers noted that technically proficient job applicants still lacked soft skills. A survey conducted in February 2020, which included responses from 250 local employers, underscored the growing importance of adaptability, teamwork and effective communication. Soft skills have become more important in the region since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which altered workplace dynamics and necessitated employee resilience and adaptability.

Traditionally, CCNB has concentrated on imparting technical skills, placing less emphasis on soft skills. This educational model has proved inadequate, as employers have noted that new graduates—despite being technically capable—were often ill-equipped to handle the complexities of modern workplace environments. This gap led to difficulties retaining employees and maintaining high job performance, highlighting the need for an educational approach that encompasses both technical and soft skills.

In response, a project was launched to remodel the educational offerings at CCNB. The goal was to weave soft skills development into the existing curriculum, aligning educational outcomes more closely with market demands. This initiative marked a significant shift toward a holistic educational model, directly addressing employer feedback and adapting to the broader economic and social changes brought about by changes in the world of work.



What We Investigated

The process began with a needs assessment to pinpoint the specific soft skills employers were looking for. This phase was crucial for tailoring the training activities that would eventually be integrated into the curriculum.

The initiative centred on the design and implementation of pedagogical activities to enhance (in particular) motivation, presentation, teamwork, adaptability and responsibility. These activities were embedded across various programs at the college, allowing all students to benefit from the improved learning opportunities. This approach ensured that the project addressed the needs of a diverse student body across various disciplines at CCNB to better prepare them for the job market demands in New Brunswick.

The initiative sought to answer two main questions: how can soft skills be effectively integrated into existing curriculum, and how does this training affect students' employability? To tackle these questions, the project brought together CCNB faculty, students and employers to create a structured program to develop students' soft skills alongside their technical abilities.

The project utilized the Employability Skills Assessment Tool and other self-reporting methods to measure the development of these skills and how they evolved before and after the training.

What We're Learning

The initiative included 74 students from four different study programs, all of whom benefitted from an updated educational approach that focused on the five soft skills of motivation, presentation, teamwork, adaptability and responsibility.

Throughout the project, students engaged in the soft skills training had their progress meticulously monitored and evaluated. The methodology was thorough, incorporating initial surveys, ongoing feedback and final assessments to determine the impact of the training.

The project showed positive results across the board in terms of skills acquisition. According to student self-assessments, the students improved in all targeted skills by the end of the semester. Teachers' evaluations also confirmed these findings. Employers reported, at mid-internship, having been satisfied with the performance of students in terms of their mastery of soft skills. All of this indicates a consistent enhancement in students' soft skills over time.

However, the project faced a number of challenges, particularly with teacher training and integrating the Employability Skills Assessment Tool. Initial training delays due to the availability of trainers and language barriers impacted the project timeline. Additionally, some teachers expressed a need for further training to better incorporate soft skills teaching strategies into their pedagogical practices.

A key lesson from the project was the critical role of teacher engagement. Despite training, some teachers did not fully participate, which, in some instances, limited the project's potential impact. This highlighted the need for complete commitment from teachers and ongoing support for teachers during the change process. Moreover, while the Employability Skills Assessment Tool provided valuable data on student progress, it also revealed limitations, such as the separation from other academic assessments. Teachers suggested that integrating this tool into existing assessment systems could enhance its usefulness.

In conclusion, the project demonstrated that soft skills development can be effectively integrated into postsecondary education programs to yield measurable student benefits. To maximize the effectiveness of such initiatives, particularly those involving additional layers of technology, it is crucial to ensure full teacher engagement and provide comprehensive support to all participants, especially teachers. These insights can guide future improvements in similar project implementations.

Finally, continued efforts at following participants over time would help to shed light on the potential impacts that improvements in these skills have on labour market outcomes. Establishing robust feedback mechanisms to gather insights from employers about the development and applicability of interns' soft skills is also essential. This feedback will be instrumental in making continuous adjustments to curricula, and will ultimately enhance students' job readiness and success in the workplace.

Why It Matters

Enhancing soft skills among students is crucial for their preparation for the modern workforce, where skills such as adaptability and teamwork are as vital as technical expertise. Indeed, employers increasingly view these complementary skill sets as central to an individual's capacity to navigate complex work environments and adapt to evolving job demands. By developing these skills early, students can better position themselves for career success.

However, education and training institutes will need to evolve to address this growing emphasis on soft skills. By integrating these competencies into existing curricula and adapting teaching methods accordingly, this project helped improve our understanding of how best to blend technical knowledge with soft skills acquisition. Moreover, the lessons learned from the project's implementation—particularly the lessons related to teacher training and integrating assessments and new technologies into standard pedagogical practices—are also vital lessons for policymakers. They underscore the need for effective planning and communication when introducing new technologies or methodologies in education. Furthermore, the experience demonstrates that teacher engagement and related support is essential for the success of such initiatives.

The outcomes of this project at CCNB provide valuable insights for other educational institutions aiming to enhance the employability of their graduates by integrating soft skills training with technical skills training.

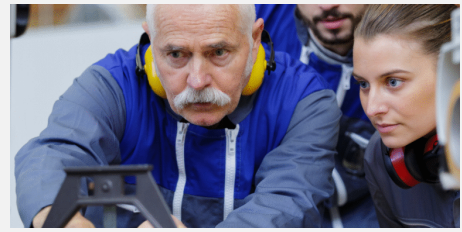
► What's Next

Following this pilot, CCNB has systematically integrated social skills development into each of its study programs as part of its overall effort to enhance student outcomes.

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

How to Cite This Report

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