

Project Insights Report

Professional Practice Certificate: Propelling Careers through Essential Workplace Skills



PARTNERS

Eeyou Istchee College of Science and Technology



LOCATIONS

Quebec



INVESTMENT

\$1,136,131



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Executive Summary

Colleges are critical access points for Indigenous learners in Canada seeking postsecondary education. Yet Northern Indigenous communities continue to face barriers to access due to geographic isolation, colonial legacies and limited local infrastructure. In the James Bay region of Quebec, colleges or universities have typically been accessible only by plane or through lengthy travel. This limitation has constrained skills development, workforce readiness and economic capacity in the population. Cree job seekers often struggle to enter the labour market, and to advance into supervisory and professional roles. Employers face persistent skills shortages and thus rely on external labour.

To address these challenges, Eeyou Istchee College of Science and Technology (EICST) was established in Chisasibi, Quebec in 2025 as a Cree-governed, community-led postsecondary institution. From May to October 2025, EICST delivered a locally designed Professional Practice Certificate. It was designed for working adults, co-developed with regional employers and supported by wraparound services, with funding from the Future Skills Centre. The certificate focused on essential workplace skills, including digital literacy, business communication, accounting fundamentals, teamwork and client relations. It was delivered flexibly to accommodate participants who were working.

An evaluation of the certificate program showed that it was effective and relevant for both employee participants and employers. Employee participants self-reported gains in digital skills, writing, accounting literacy, presentations, teamwork and overall confidence. Employers reported immediate improvements in employee job performance, professionalism and collaboration, as well as strong satisfaction with the program's relevance, efficiency and local delivery. Importantly, the project showed that Indigenous-led, employer-driven and culturally grounded programs delivered through a local anchor institution can produce sustainable workforce outcomes.

This project offers a scalable and replicable model that has the potential to close long-standing education and skills gaps in Northern and Indigenous communities. It shows that when training is delivered locally, aligned with employer needs and embedded in Indigenous institutions, it can strengthen local capacity, support economic resilience and advance Reconciliation through equitable and effective workforce development.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 Almost all employees self-reported that the Professional Practice Certificate program improved their digital literacy (100%), basic accounting (94%), writing (100%) and communication skills (94%).
- 2 Because EICST collaborated with employers as it developed its training courses, the employers reported that the training met their needs for employee upskilling and re-skilling.
- 3 By the end of the program, both the employers and employees reported gains in confidence. Employees were more comfortable using computers, writing emails and reports, working with graphs, interacting with clients and colleagues, and delivering presentations.

The Issue

Half of Indigenous people (versus 37% of non-Indigenous people) starting postsecondary education in Canada begin with college. Colleges are key access points to higher education for Indigenous communities, yet Indigenous communities in the North, in particular, have limited access to colleges and other forms of higher education. The James Bay region of Quebec has historically lacked postsecondary institutions and access to educational opportunities. The closest cégep and university are only accessible by plane or a 15-hour drive.

The lack of access impedes skills development, workforce readiness and regional economic capacity. Cree job seekers in the region face barriers to entering the labour market, and to advancing into supervisory and professional roles, as they often must compete with non-Indigenous applicants who have had greater access to formal education and skills training.

Chisasibi, with a population of approximately 5,200, is the largest Cree community in the James Bay region. Employers in the region consistently struggle to find skilled employees. The community's local workforce could benefit from upskilling in essential competencies, including digital literacy, numeracy, business communication, organizational and customer service skills. Small and midsize enterprises (SMEs) facing skills shortages are often forced to rely on short-term, imported skilled labour, which contributes to higher training costs, workforce instability and labour market inequities.

Indigenous learners are more likely to succeed if they have access to colleges that offer flexible, adaptable and culturally responsible outreach and partnerships. Indigenous-led and employer-led training initiatives hosted through local colleges, such as the Professional Practice Certificate, have the potential to build capacity in remote, Northern and Indigenous communities while developing local economies.



What We Investigated

To address these challenges, EICST was established in Chisasibi in 2025. It is a Cree-governed, community-led, Indigenous postsecondary not-for-profit institution. EICST provides locally delivered, flexible and culturally responsive education and training aligned with community and employer priorities. From May to September 2025, EICST delivered a six-month in-person Professional Practice Certificate that had been developed with regional employers. The certificate program offered seven courses in digital literacy, communication, accounting literacy, client relations, teamwork, project and event coordination, and self-management. It also offered participants and their families wraparound support from tutors, an Elder, a psychotherapist and a life coach.

The project explored the following:

1. How effectively did EICST collaborate with community employers in designing and delivering the certificate program?
2. To what extent did the courses equip participants with essential workplace skills and competencies required by their employers?
3. To what extent did the wraparound supports facilitate participants' personal and professional growth?
4. To what extent did the project support the goals of equity, diversity, inclusion and Reconciliation?

The evaluation was designed to support Reconciliation. Evaluators used a flexible and responsive approach to data collection that respected the relationships between EICST and participants. The evaluators used evaluation tools to identify best practices that would allow EICST to serve the needs of the community. They integrated culturally sensitive methods of evidence-gathering that aligned with community needs and priorities.

The evaluation included interviews with HR and employer representatives, employee surveys, program data, employer roundtables and focus groups with program participants.

The evaluation also assessed the effectiveness of EICST's intermediation process to aggregate and coordinate training for local employers in Chisasibi. Evaluators sought program participants' perspectives on how well the training and wraparound supports met their needs as Indigenous people or as members of other equity-deserving populations. Community members and participating employees were asked about the program's effectiveness in serving employer needs.

The project aimed to have 70 participants complete the Professional Practice Certificate, and to strengthen ties between EICST and local employers. The project also aimed to recommend Indigenous-led approaches for future initiatives.

What We're Learning

The project had 64 participants, most of whom were Indigenous, female and over 35 years of age, which reflects the demographics of Chisasibi. A post-program survey showed that 91% identified as First Nations or First Nations and Inuit, with the remainder identifying as members of other equity-deserving groups. Most participants had limited prior access to postsecondary education, but the women were more likely than the men to have had previous postsecondary experience. Program participants worked across diverse sectors and roles but shared common gaps in essential digital skills.

Employer collaboration led to training courses that met employers' collective upskilling and re-skilling needs

Overall, employers were satisfied with the development and design of the certificate program. Employers reported that the training was highly relevant. It helped employees, and sometimes managers, develop skills that could be immediately applied, and boosted their confidence. Employers credited regular communication and EICST orientation presentations for building strong relationships and supporting program participation. In the interviews and roundtable, all employers indicated that the program met or exceeded their expectations, and that they would recommend it to other employers.

Both employers and employees reported improvements in writing, digital literacy and customer service skills

Employees showed greater confidence and proficiency in written communication and computer use, with many adopting digital tools that they previously avoided. Employers observed stronger client interactions and more professional correspondence. Employees reported improvements in presentation and basic accounting skills, as well as in the use of PowerPoint and Excel. Employers observed notable improvements in data analysis and presentation delivery even though some employees reported they felt less confident in public speaking. Both employers and employees (76%) reported significant improvements in teamwork. Most employees said they had stronger group work skills, and employers observed more peer support in the workplace. Both employers and employees reported gains in confidence. Employees felt more capable in their jobs and in learning. Employers noted increased confidence in writing, computer use, client interactions and presentations.

Wraparound supports had low uptake but provided high satisfaction

At mid-program, 66% of employees had not used the available wraparound supports. The reasons cited were lack of need (30%), lack of awareness (15%) or uncertainty about access (11%). Those who did access support reported high satisfaction, with 37% very satisfied and 33% somewhat satisfied. Evaluators did not seek individual feedback on Elders, coaches or tutors for cultural and privacy reasons.

Participants reported that the program respected relationship-building and their culture

At mid-program, 89% of employees (n=54) felt welcomed, 74% said instructors respected their culture, and 56% strongly agreed that examples reflected their culture. In a discussion at program end, participants (n=30) reported that they felt comfortable with the program, developed strong relationships with instructors and found the program culturally appropriate. Some suggested more region-specific content and Cree-language instruction in the future.

★ Why It Matters

This project shows the importance of Indigenous institutions in creating the foundational infrastructure to offer local, culturally grounded and employer-driven training. These anchor institutions and the infrastructure they provide are important for Indigenous communities to fully benefit from Canada's economic priorities, including defence, critical minerals, energy, housing and other major projects. At the same time, these institutions are also able to aggregate demand across SMEs in the region, reducing reliance on fly-in labour and offering local employment opportunities.



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The lessons from this project are relevant not only to James Bay but point to a scalable alternative to conventional skills training for other rural and remote regions. The lessons are relevant to policymakers, funders, Indigenous governments, postsecondary institutions and workforce development organizations. The results provide another example of how to design inclusive, effective and place-based workforce systems that respond to both labour market needs and the lived realities of Indigenous Peoples.

Northern SMEs and entrepreneurs are often excluded from mainstream training and business services due to remoteness. This project shows the effectiveness of aggregating employer demand through a trusted local Indigenous college. Participating employers and employees reported high levels of satisfaction with the design, relevance and results of the program. Beyond training outcomes, the project shows how employer-led intermediation models rooted in Northern and Indigenous anchor institutions can strengthen regional workforce systems.

To build a resilient workforce that is able to respond to and adapt to changing labour markets, whether due to unpredictable disruptions or longer-term transitions, we need a range of training and upskilling pathways that equip people with the skills they need to enter, advance, transition and return to dynamic labour markets.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

► What's Next

Building on the project's success, EICST will develop a scalable delivery model that can be replicated in other communities across the James Bay region. EICST plans to adapt and extend the Professional Practice Certificate program into the communities of Wemindji and Whapmagoostui.

Other next steps identified by EICST include refining the curriculum to support field-based and operational workers, such as public works employees, security personnel and tradespeople; increasing emphasis on digital literacy, workplace technology and applied writing skills; strengthening the teaching capacity of Cree residents to allow them to serve as instructors; and improving pre-program diagnostics, evaluation frameworks and course evaluations to support continuous improvement and accountability.

The project has also begun to attract new independent investments from regional partners. EICST has been in discussions with the Cree Nation to collaborate on job opportunities at EICST that would directly support the hiring of the Cree operational staff required to sustain and expand programming in communities such as Wemindji, Whapmagoostui and Chisasibi.

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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