

Essential Skills and the Labour Movement

A Research Report

prepared by

the Canadian Labour Congress

for

**Essential Skills Human Resources Partnerships
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We would like to thank all those who agreed to be interviewed for this project, as well as those who participated in the CLC Labour Forum on Essential Skills that took place on April 5, 2005 in Ottawa. Many of the participants are members of CLC committees and working groups on literacy, training and technology, and apprenticeship.

Thanks to Donna Doyle, Manager, Essential Skills, and Karen Jackson, Assistant Deputy Minister, Workplace Skills Branch, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada for their support for this project.

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Executive Summary

I. Introduction

(Please note: In this report, “essential skills” is capitalized in some instances and not in others. When capitalized, the reference is to the official HRSDC project.¹ When the term is not capitalized, it refers to other ways that people are using the term essential skills.)

The goal of this research project is to look at labour’s involvement and experience with essential skills. For the first time, an attempt is being made to capture the range of experience, uptake, and opinion from a labour perspective on essential skills.

Hopefully, the research will be a basis for HRSDC taking labour’s experience and views into account as the Department moves forward in developing policy and programming on essential skills. We also hope it will stimulate discussion within labour and provide direction to our future policy development on workplace education and training.

Thirty-nine respondents from across the Canadian labour movement and organizations that work with labour participated in interviews for this research. In addition to the interviews, twenty-eight labour representatives participated in a focus group discussion as part of a day-long CLC Labour Forum on Essential Skills that took place in Ottawa on April 5, 2005. The research consultant presented a summary of the interview findings at the Forum. The labour representatives at the meeting validated the preliminary summary of the data.

¹ The Essential Skills Research Project (ESRP), examined how essential skills were used in various jobs. More than 3,000 interviews have been conducted across Canada for over 200 occupations. The HRSDC Essential Skills Reader’s Guide describes Essential Skills as the everyday skills needed to carry out a variety of life and work tasks. The Guide says that these skills are not technical skills for a specific occupation but skills that can be applied across all occupations. The federal government has validated nine Essential Skills: Reading Text, Document Use, Numeracy, Writing, Oral Communication, Working with Others, Continuous Learning, Thinking Skills, and Computer Use. Levels of complexity from one to five are used to measure the difficulty of these skills in different occupations.

Seventy-five percent of the research participants are members of CLC Training and Apprenticeship Committees and the CLC Literacy Working Group, bringing decades of experience in union education, training and literacy. Some participants coordinate literacy work on a full-time basis. Others work in education or research departments of their unions or federations of labour where literacy is part of their work. Still others do hands-on union training as part of their work. Participants are in staff positions, elected positions or are rank and file members.

This research used a qualitative research methodology through an open-ended interview process to understand the range of knowledge and experience related to essential skills across a broad cross-section of the labour movement.

II. Findings

It is clear from the Findings that there was a range of responses in terms of how the labour movement is defining and using essential skills. At the same time, the Findings illustrate that there are some common themes and pervasive concerns about the HRSDC Essential Skills Framework.

Definitions and understandings

There are four different ways that interview respondents define and think about essential skills. They 1) use their own definition, 2) adapt the official HRSDC definition to their own context, 3) use the official HRSDC definition, or 4) do not use the term at all.

How labour respondents define essential skills and how they see literacy in relation to essential skills is related to a number of important factors. These factors include labour values for literacy and education, sectors involved, geographical region of Canada, audience and partners, and involvement with projects that use the HRSDC Essential Skills Framework.

There also appears to be evidence of the use of the term essential skills in funding applications as this is becoming more of a requirement for both provincial and federal funding. The language of Essential Skills has come into broader use. In this research, many participants emphasized that they have been advised officially or unofficially to use the term Essential Skills to be in touch with the current policy climate.

Familiarity and experience

Familiarity with the Essential Skills Framework

The Findings show that research participants talk about essential skills in a variety of ways. The range of response spans from using the term with reference to union education work in a way that is not connected to the official HRSDC Framework to using the Essential Skills Framework with its varying components in union projects that are developing training and tools for assessment and the recognition of skills.

The majority of labour representatives in the research are at least somewhat familiar with, and knowledgeable about the HRSDC project through the web-site and a variety of sessions and workshops offered through conferences and other forums over the years. Informally, some unions are using essential skills to talk about their projects and their work in a way that is not connected to the HRSDC definition. Instead, their work reflects the holistic definitions embraced by labour organizations.

Even with some familiarity around Essential Skills, most labour organizations have not taken up the HRSDC Framework based on the nine components and five complexity levels for jobs. They have not taken up the HRSDC Framework because they have concerns that the HRSDC Framework 1) has not involved labour in its development, 2) reflects a management orientation and 3) does not reflect labour principles. They may also see the Essential Skills Framework as not relevant to the work they do.

The few labour organizations that have taken up the Essential Skills Framework said they have found it useful in developing their own diagnostic assessment tools and have used it, or expect to use it, to shape training in the future.

Experience with the Essential Skills Framework

This research shows that presently the Framework has been used more to develop and use different kinds of assessment tools than to develop and deliver actual training programs. For example, some unions have used Essential Skills profiles to develop their own diagnostic and self-assessment tools. They have also participated in Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES)². Some of these unions are involved in the development of training, or intend to develop training as the next step, but a description of actual training based on the Framework was rare. In one case where the HRSDC Framework was used to recognize skills so that workers could move to other jobs, workers still did not have access to training for the skills they needed.

Generally, the profiles, as one tool among many that have come out of the Essential Skills Framework, have been better accepted than initiatives like TOWES. Research participants who have used the profiles to develop their own assessment tools feel the profiles have been useful and they have had success. The profiles are generally seen as a positive way to recognize people, especially in the trades, for the job skills they already have and to see what other job skills they need to work on.

² According to the TOWES web-site, TOWES is a newly developed test of workplace essential skills with a bank of test items that, collectively, form an assessment tool to measure essential skills in workplace settings. It is described as different from other literacy tests because test content is based on workplace documents. Individuals who take the test are required to process information contained in these documents to complete a task. TOWES assesses competencies in three of HRSDC's nine Essential Skills: Reading Text, Document Use, and Numeracy. TOWES results are correlated to both the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and Essential Skills rating scales.

The great majority of research participants from labour with experience or knowledge about TOWES view it negatively. The tendency was for labour organizations in the research to be wary of TOWES and not to use it. The assessment of those who have experience with TOWES is that it is culturally biased, doesn't measure all of what a person knows, could be detrimental to members and could be used as a screening tool by employers. In addition, it doesn't produce a diagnostic for the test taker and doesn't lead to a training plan. TOWES is seen as not respecting labour principles for literacy such as confidentiality, giving workers more control over their lives and jobs, using a holistic approach to learning, involving workers in decision-making about programs, and creating access to equitable training. Moreover, it recreates negative aspects of school that were often at the root of the problem in the first place. For these reasons, most labour respondents do not recommend that labour endorse or use TOWES.

Views on Essential Skills Framework and policy

Views on the Essential Skills Framework

Although there are some research participants who use and support the Essential Skills Framework, the overriding view from labour about the Framework is one of dissatisfaction and concern. This concern was expressed through individual interviews and was more strongly reconfirmed at the CLC Labour Forum on Essential Skills. Respondents had a tendency to see the Essential Skills Framework as a "corporate agenda", one that does not espouse labour values, and has not included labour in its development. There is concern that the Framework promotes a narrow and simplistic view of literacy, education and skills that is in direct contradiction to the broad approach to literacy and education that labour has developed, articulated, and implemented in its work.

Views on Essential Skills policy

This research indicates that labour is concerned about a move towards a narrowing of the space for a labour approach to literacy through present HRSDC policy. Labour representatives observe that the focus is moving

to support only learning that people need at work as opposed to their broad needs for participation in society as citizens. This concern was repeatedly articulated in interviews with research participants and emphasized again at the CLC Labour Forum on Essential Skills.

Respondents indicated that the signs that point to this narrowing include more emphasis from funders on essential skills. There is also more control from HRSDC on how to do Essential Skills, and little room for dialogue or critique on the present Framework in forums sponsored by HRSDC.

Moreover, according to respondents involved in these forums, the focus is on individual responsibility for training and there is an absence of language that respects labour and workers as partners in Essential Skills. Language such as employers, employees, and individuals implicitly blames workers for not having the skills they should and places the onus on them rather than on society or employers for getting the skills.

Along with an approach that seems to be growing narrower, the other major concern is that there is an increasing emphasis on assessment with no equivalent commitment to training interventions and supporting dollars from government or employers. Both those interviewed and participants at the CLC Labour Forum on Essential Skills said that Essential Skills was still another way to avoid talking about the need for a national training strategy.

Overall, research participants' comments show that Essential Skills is not about opportunities for learning for workers but more about testing opportunities for the employer. Participants report that there is a lack of opportunity and coherent policy with respect to training and education. Participants at the Forum stressed that Essential Skills is synonymous with piecemeal funding and that it has not led to any more training money. They also emphasized the lack of commitment to training dollars by government and employers. With this lack of commitment, the question was raised: "If tomorrow's workforce is already in the workplace, what opportunity do workers get to upgrade their basic skills and respond to change?"

It is clear from research respondents that essential skills, whether self-defined or defined by HRSDC, will only lead to effective skills development work when it responds to a recognized need by all partners, when it follows good labour and adult education principles, and when it meets needs in a sectoral and geographical context.

There are indications that labour could accept Essential Skills as one alternative among several as long as it stands up to the test of labour values and principles.

III. Recommendations to HRSDC

As a result of the findings from this research, the CLC recommends that:

1. HRSDC representatives meet with the CLC to discuss this research report and to look for ways to use its findings to enhance dialogue with the labour movement on Essential Skills and future workplace learning policies and programs.
2. HRSDC work with the CLC to address labour's concerns around Essential Skills.
3. HRSDC support the CLC to:
 - develop a set of labour principles for essential skills in a similar way to the principles that have been developed and articulated for labour literacy.
 - develop a set of principles and guidelines for workplace skills assessment, including the needs of equality-seeking groups, with a focus on strategies to illuminate worker assets as well as their learning needs, and include recommendations to address the problems identified in the current uses of TOWES.
 - conduct more in-depth research through a case study approach with several unions where the Essential Skills Profiles are currently being used or adapted. This research would analyze the elements that contribute to 1) successful outcomes, and 2) problems or barriers. It would look at these issues from the point of view of all stakeholders in these research sites, with particular attention to equality-seeking groups.
4. HRSDC undertake a joint dialogue with business and labour about policies that ensure a better link between workplace skills assessment and the provision of opportunities for new skills development.

I. Introduction and Background

This section provides an overview of the Canadian Labour Congress' interest in essential skills and the importance of this research project for the labour movement. It includes the goals and objectives of the project.

An overview of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada's (HRSDC) Essential Skills Research Project and Workplace Skills Strategy is also presented to provide some context and background for the research.

In this report, "essential skills" is capitalized in some instances and not in others. When capitalized, the reference is to the official HRSDC project. When the term is not capitalized, it refers to other ways that people are using the term essential skills.

A. Labour and essential skills

i) Rationale for the research

Creating learning opportunities for workers is an area that unions have been involved in for many years. The work around learning in which unions have been involved has been variously labelled literacy, basic skills, adult basic education, foundation skills, or essential skills. What it is called is often shaped by the region of the country, the union, or the various funding arrangements involved. Regardless of what the learning is called, what is important is that it empowers workers, develops the skills and confidence of individuals within a union context, builds collective skills and strengthens the union at the same time. This kind of learning can be a critical foundation for further training and education. Along with measures to address barriers for equality-seeking groups and a clear language approach to communications and programming, this kind of learning is an important vehicle for inclusion, participation, and ultimately, renewal.

The labour movement is, therefore, interested in finding out how unions are using and defining essential skills and using or not using the HRSDC Essential Skills Framework in their work. Labour is interested in knowing what impact “essential skills” is having on its education work.

As a result of these questions and other interests, the CLC initiated this research project in February 2005 with funding from Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

ii) Goals and objectives of the research

The goal of this research project is to look at labour’s involvement and experience with essential skills. This project has attempted to capture the range of experience, uptake, and opinion within labour on essential skills for the first time.

The research will be a basis for stimulating discussion within labour and providing direction to future policy development on workplace education and training.

B. HRSDC’s Essential Skills Research Project and Workplace Skills Strategy

i) Workplace Skills Strategy (WSS)

The HRSDC web-site provides an overview of the federal government’s Workplace Skills Strategy (WSS). The overview provided by HRSDC states that the strategy is aimed “at helping Canadians become the best trained most highly skilled workers in the world, as well as, ensuring that employers’ needs are met”. Moreover, HRSDC states that the WSS is aimed at giving Canada a competitive advantage globally.

In her presentation to the CLC Labour Forum on Essential Skills, Karen Jackson, Assistant Deputy Minister at HRSDC, confirmed these goals. She reported that, in 2004, the federal government saw a need for a Workplace Skills Strategy (WSS) to ensure that there was a skilled work force that is adaptable and resilient and a labour market that works effectively. She emphasized that the goal of the WSS is to work in partnership with business, unions, and sector councils to ensure that barriers are reduced for groups in the workplace and that workplaces are productive and efficient. She acknowledged the growing importance to the work force of immigrants.

In her presentation, Jackson emphasized the importance of literacy and other Essential Skills as a critical component of skills development. She noted that research indicates that increased literacy rates will increase productivity. As such, the federal government has decided to invest in literacy and Essential Skills. Jackson also stated that \$30 million over three years in new money was committed to the National Literacy Secretariat in the 2005 federal budget for fostering awareness about learning in the workplace.

ii) Essential Skills Research Project

Background to the ESRP

In 1994, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada initiated a national research study, the Essential Skills Research Project (ESRP), to examine how essential skills were used in various jobs. More than 3,000 interviews have been conducted across Canada for over 200 occupations, focusing initially on occupations requiring secondary school or less.

The rationale for the HRSDC project was that it was important to describe differences in essential skills for different jobs so that people would know if they had the skills to do the jobs they wanted to do. The ESRP adapted scales from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and the Canadian Language Benchmarks as a way to talk about these skills.

Definition of HRSDC's Essential Skills

The HRSDC Essential Skills Reader's Guide describes Essential Skills as the everyday skills needed to carry out a variety of life and work tasks. The Guide says that these skills are not technical skills for a specific occupation but skills that can be applied across all occupations. The federal government has validated nine Essential Skills: Reading Text, Document Use, Numeracy, Writing, Oral Communication, Working with Others, Continuous Learning, Thinking Skills, and Computer Use. Levels of complexity from one to five are used to measure the difficulty of these skills in different occupations.

Essential Skills Profiles

Essential Skills Profiles describe how workers in a particular occupation use each of the nine Essential Skills. Over the past several years, the Government of Canada has developed 200 Essential Skills profiles. Profiles include a description of the occupation, the most important Essential Skills, examples of tasks that use the Essential Skills, complexity ratings from 1 to 5, physical aspects and attitudes needed for the job, as well as future trends.

Other uses of the ESRP

The HRSDC Essential Skills web-site describes other uses of the ESRP. One use is the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES). According to the TOWES web-site, TOWES is a newly developed test of workplace essential skills with a bank of test items that, collectively, form an assessment tool to measure essential skills in workplace settings. It is described as different from other literacy tests because test content is based on workplace documents. Individuals who take the test are required to process information contained in these documents to complete a task. TOWES assesses competencies in three of HRSDC's nine Essential Skills: Reading Text, Document Use, and Numeracy. TOWES results are correlated to both the IALS and Essential Skills rating scales.

Another use of the ESRP is through *Applications of Working and Learning* (AWAL). AWAL is a national program that works with Canadian educators and employers to make connections between the knowledge and skills acquired in classrooms and how to apply them to succeed in the workplace.

The HRSDC Essential Skills web-site also includes samples of authentic workplace materials.

II. Research Methodology

The research for this paper uses a qualitative research methodology through an open-ended interview process with research participants rather than a formal survey method. As such, the intention of the research is to understand the range of knowledge and experience related to essential skills in a broad cross-section of the labour movement.

This type of study design is exploratory and “purposive” and does not lend itself to statistical analysis. A “purposive” sample is one where respondents are carefully chosen, in this case to represent a wide range of thinking in the labour movement. Although the study does not establish statistically the precise distribution of each type of experience or point of view, their presence in this sample suggests they are likely to be found in other related settings in the labour movement. This type of informed anticipation is called “soft generalisability” and is outlined in many textbooks dealing with the policy relevance of qualitative study designs.

A. Project reference group

A small project reference group has guided and provided direction to this research project throughout. Members of the project reference group are Tamara Levine, CLC; Brigid Hayes, Canadian Labour and Business Centre; and Nancy Jackson, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. The reference group provided guidance and direction on all aspects of the project including the development of the research framework, the research questions, identification of participants

for the research, data analysis and the framework for the research report.

B. Research questions

The research consultant, with the reference group, designed a set of questions (see Appendix 1) to use in interviews with research participants. The questions were developed to cover a wide range of thinking and experience around essential skills in the labour movement. The questions addressed the following topics:

- how essential skills come up in research participants' work
- how research participants understand the meaning of essential skills and whether they see the term as similar to or different from terms like literacy and basic skills
- familiarity with the HRSDC Essential Skills Research Project and connected projects
- involvement in, and description of Essential Skills projects
- experience in using HRSDC Essential Skills materials.

C. Research participants

The reference group chose the research participants with care to represent a wide range of thinking and experience on essential skills from national, provincial and local organizations in the Canadian labour movement and other organizations working with labour.

Seventy-five percent of the research participants are members of CLC Training and Apprenticeship Committees and the CLC Literacy Working Groups, bringing decades of experience in union education, training and literacy. Some participants coordinate literacy work on a full-time basis. Others work in education or research departments of their unions or federations of labour where literacy is part of their work. Still others do hands-on union training as part of their work. Participants are in staff positions, elected positions or are rank and file members.

i) Interviews with research participants

Most participants in the research were interviewed by phone. In Winnipeg, Halifax, and Charlottetown, the researcher had face-to-face meetings with research participants. In total, thirty-nine people participated in telephone interviews and face-to-face meetings. Telephone interviews were approximately one hour. Face-to-face meetings tended to be between one to one and a half hours.

Participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity, which meant that both their names and the names of their organizations would not appear in the findings. This gave participants the opportunity to speak openly. Each person interviewed agreed to have his or her name and organization stand in the report appendices. Research informants are from national unions and the Canadian Labour Congress, provincial federations of labour and other provincial labour bodies, union locals, and other organizations that work with labour. The chart below represents a breakdown of the research participants.

| National Labour Organizations | Provincial / Territorial Labour Organizations | Union Locals | Regional Representation | Organizations that work with labour |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| 10 | 15 | 3 | 2 | 11 |

ii) Focus group from the CLC Labour Forum on Essential Skills

In addition to the interviews, twenty-eight labour representatives participated in a focus group discussion. These participants, from CLC Apprenticeship and Training and Technology Committees as well as the CLC Literacy Working Group³, attended a day-long Labour Forum on Essential Skills on April 5, 2005 sponsored by the CLC. Some of these participants had also been interviewed individually for this research paper. The purpose of the meeting was to get feedback on the research-

³ The CLC Literacy Working Group brings together representatives of national unions and provincial and territorial federations of labour to share information and resources and to engage skills development and strategic planning.

in-progress on *Essential Skills and the Labour Movement* and to discuss the HRSDC Essential Skills Framework.

The research consultant presented a summary of the interview findings at the meeting followed by a focus group discussion. The labour representatives at the meeting validated this preliminary summary of the data as representing their experience and added further information in response to the research questions.

Karen Jackson, Assistant Deputy Minister, Workplace Skills Branch, HRSDC and Donna Doyle, Manager of Essential Skills, HRSDC, attended part of the meeting. They presented on the federal government's Workplace Skills Strategy and the Essential Skills Research Project at the meeting. A question and answer period followed the presentation.

III. Findings

Introduction

The Findings present a summary and analysis of participants' responses to the research questions from both interviews and the CLC Labour Forum on Essential Skills focus group.

The Findings represent the views and experience of essential skills and the official HRSDC Essential Skills Framework from a solid cross-section of the labour movement in Canada. The Findings broadly cover:

- how research participants define essential skills
- whether participants see essential skills as the same as literacy and basic skills or different
- participants' familiarity with HRSDC's Essential Skills Framework
- participants' experiences with HRSDC's Essential Skills Framework
- participants' experiences with essential skills projects that do not use the HRSDC Essential Skills Framework
- participants' views on HRSDC's Essential Skills Framework and policy.

A. Definitions and understandings

*In my definition, essential skills is not just work but social conscience; where you fit in society, ability to understand systems, respect for differences, working as a community -- these are all essential skills - **labour respondent***

This section reports on the different ways research respondents understand the meaning of essential skills, and whether or not they use terms like essential skills and literacy interchangeably.

i) Defining essential skills

There are four different ways that interview respondents define and think about essential skills. They 1) use their own definition, 2) adapt the official HRSDC definition to their own context, 3) use the official HRSDC definition, or 4) do not use the term at all.

Some people said that they were not clear about what essential skills really meant. In other cases, respondents reported that currently there is not a clear definition of essential skills in the labour movement.

Use own or adapted definitions

The most common ways that research participants define essential skills is that 1) they use their own definitions, or 2) they adapt the official HRSDC definition to suit their own context. In the case of using their own definitions, respondents do so both with and without awareness of the HRSDC definition of Essential Skills.

Participants' own definitions are broad, holistic and focus on workplace, union, community and home life. For example, essential skills could be used to help their children with homework or computers. Definitions in this category are related to:

- the make-up of the union membership
- the workplace change that union members might be experiencing
- overall members' needs
- other issues in a geographical area
- respondents' labour values.

For example, one person saw essential skills as a tool box for all aspects of people's lives: communication, reading, understanding, critical thought and numerical competence.

Respondents' Comments:

- *Essential skills is whatever you need to learn for what you need. It's a moving target. It's not just about the workplace. It's taking part in union meetings, playing Trivial Pursuit, doing things in the community.*
- *Essential skills has a lot of different meanings. Essential skills are the minimum requirements for the job by the employer. But in my work in literacy, essential skills means reading, writing, and math to get a Grade 12 or understanding essential skills so you can move forward to do other things like computers in the future. The average worker wouldn't understand the official definition. It's too high end.*
- *Essential skills are the skills necessary to participate in life...take a bus, make a cake...everything. The definition needs to be broader if labour is involved.*
- *An essential skill for young people entering the construction trades is attitude and the ability to adjust to the realities of working in the trades.*

Research participants who use the official definition broadly with adaptation refer to essential skills as skills for more than jobs. For example, they use the term to refer to work-related topics, the union, home, and community too.

Respondents' Comments:

- *There are other essential skills that aren't there. I don't limit myself. What about exam writing skills, life skills or coping skills?*
- *We use the nine categories the government does but not for efficiency or profit. (In this case, the term essential skills was used in the context of broad community development).*
- *I see them not a whole lot different from the standard government list but I see them used in a union context. What are the skills you need to navigate through your collective agreement?*

Use the official HRSDC definition

Some participants define essential skills using the official HRSDC definition with the nine components that refer to skills needed for jobs. The people who used this definition said that they use the official definition and consider that the nine components of Essential Skills were the foundation skills to do a job. This was among the least frequent ways that people would refer to essential skills.

Research participants using this definition included those who 1) were involved in the development of the ESRP, 2) were working with Essential Skills as a provincial government framework, 3) were using the official definition in specific projects, and 4) had had specific training on profiling, and 5) were working on essential skills projects in the apprenticeship trades.

Respondents' Comments:

- *When I talk about Essential Skills, I am referring to the HRSDC research definitions. Literacy doesn't work in my industry. Nor does basic skills. Essential Skills is more useful because you can talk about complexity on a scale of 1-5 and measurability. You can identify benchmarks and it's better than grade levels.*
- *When we met with Essential Skills, HRSDC for funding we realized there were nine essential skills and profiles. We learned about Essential Skills for the first time. We needed to dovetail with the HRSDC's Essential Skills. We knew they would be more interested in funding us if we used their template.*
- *There are two categories in HRSDC's Essential Skills. The first category is prose literacy, document use, and numeracy. These are the fundamentals of the fundamentals. These are the focus. The second category is everything else.*

Do not use the term Essential Skills

In a few cases, research participants indicated that they do not use the term at all. There are several reasons why they do not use the term. One reason people said that they do not use the term is because it is not what they do, and they do not want to be associated with the

government's definition. In other cases, it is not part of their union's discourse. In addition, the term may not be understood by the audiences being addressed.

Respondents' Comments:

- *We talk about basic skills, English as a Second language and critical thinking. It doesn't have anything to do with the government definition of Essential Skills. The problem with essential skills is that labour and employers have different definitions. One employer argued that there were ten...the tenth being attitude, work ethic and attendance. We are far apart. We know a great number of Canadians have trouble with reading and writing. How often do we have to re-brand this?*
- *As a teacher, I don't tend to use the term essential skills. I talk about the baseline skills, like reading and writing, to do a job. And soft skills like public relations.*

ii) Interchangeability of the term essential skills with literacy and other terms

Roughly two-thirds of research participants interviewed commented on the interchangeability of the term literacy and essentials skills. About half the people who commented believe that these terms can be used interchangeably while the other half think that essential skills and literacy are different. Those who see these terms as different tend to have two different points of view. Some see literacy as the umbrella with essential skills as a sub-component. Others see essential skills as the umbrella with literacy as a sub-component. Some participants have moved away from using the term literacy and see essential skills as a more positive, acceptable term, at least in its generic sense.

Literacy and essential skills are interchangeable terms

Those who use the terms interchangeably tend to have broad definitions of literacy and essential skills that go beyond the workplace, and further than reading and writing. Some people felt that even though they use the terms interchangeably they are not sure that they are the same. One

person said: “I tend to lump them together but I am not sure that they are the same. They are part of the same puzzle but life doesn’t break down the way it does in the profiles.”

Literacy and essential skills are not the same

A second idea reported by research participants is that the terms are not the same. Over half the people in this category saw literacy and basic skills as a subset of essential skills. Some people indicated that reading and writing were part of essential skills or that you needed literacy to have essential skills. One person noted that literacy is not a component of essential skills in that in the world of essential skills you could be illiterate but be a genius in numeracy or computers.

Fewer than half the people in this category saw essential skills as a subset of literacy and basic skills. Those who saw essential skills as a subset of literacy said that the government’s definition of essential skills was narrower than labour’s definition of literacy. One person said essential skills were fundamental skills packaged for jobs and that many aspects of a person’s life were not included. Another person commented that in the past literacy was the umbrella with community literacy and workplace literacy beneath it. Now workplace literacy has been replaced by essential skills and is getting massive funding. What’s left aside is non-workplace, community and labour literacy.

Respondents’ Comments:

- *The government definition is narrower than my definition because of the tie-in with jobs. It lacks the broader definition that labour literacy espouses...to be a better parent, trade unionist, and citizen.*
- *I don’t use essential skills as a synonym for literacy because it is too narrow and limited. I only use it to refer to the official HRSDC framework.*

A number of research participants commented that the term literacy was negative and deficit-oriented and have thus moved away from using it. They said that the term literacy pigeon-holes people and suggests they are stupid. Several people indicated that literacy is a word that does not

have currency in Western Canada, where essential skills was used instead of workplace literacy even before the ESRP.

Some people indicated that the term essential skills is more inclusive and does not sound like a worker deficit. Some respondents have been using it for years, others use it because they see it as a better term than literacy, and others use it with specific audiences. One person said that talking about essential skills goes over better in union circles when people have not been involved in education. He notes that you can say that people do not have essential skills because they weren't offered them and deserve an opportunity to acquire them. Once his audience becomes more aware of the skills issue, this person can then shift to talking about literacy. Conversely, another research participant thought that essential skills did have negative connotations especially if journeypersons are taking an Essential Skills Test. They might think that if they fail they will lose their jobs because the skills are essential.

Another person emphasized the benefits of using the concept of essential skills in joint work with employers. He noted it is a term accepted by both business and labour in Western Canada. In Aboriginal circles, one person reflected, Essential Skills is seen as a way to combat colonialism. The broadness of Essential Skills, in that it includes decision-making, oral communication, and working with others, is seen as more "culture friendly." Others saw essential skills as a way for Aboriginal people to find better jobs.

Respondents' Comments:

- *At first we called it workplace skills and then we called it Essential Skills for HRSDC funding. Essential Skills is not just a word, it's a living. A lot of people do not have essential skills. They ask if it will jeopardize their livelihood.*
- *We called it essential skills even before the HRSDC research project. We called it that because it doesn't look like a social welfare issue, it plays to business and labour, it includes work, home and community and it doesn't put blame on the school system.*

- *The provincial government wants me to talk about Essential Skills. They say, "We can get more money if you talk about Essential Skills." That's how they define it. They are very pro-business.*

The study does not attempt to cover Quebec exhaustively. The one Quebec informant said that the labour movement in Quebec does not use the HRSDC Essential Skills framework. She also said it would not be necessary to interview others in the labour movement in Quebec on the topic of essential skills.

The respondent representing the labour movement in Quebec indicated that it is more useful to talk about essential skills (in French, the term *compétence générique* is used) than just literacy, which in French refers only to the most basic reading and writing skills. Otherwise, "*formation de base*" is used. Essential skills refers to what workers need to be more comfortable in society and the workplace. Essential skills is more than reading, writing, and math. It is all the skills you need such as computers, communication, and working in teams. It includes French as a Second Language, "the brother of literacy", because both are essential to participation in Quebec society.

In Quebec, the labour movement finds that it is easier to talk about all the skills for education, not just literacy. Unions negotiate with the employer for literacy and essential skills. Labour is involved in all aspects of programming to make sure that the needs of workers are met. Upon review of the HRSDC web-site at the researcher's urging, the respondent thought that it could be a useful tool for information and awareness.

iii) How the term essential skills comes up in interview respondents' work

The notion of essential skills comes up in people's work in several different ways, according to research participants. One way the term comes up is as a federal government initiative as a means for government branding. Another way it comes up is in union literacy projects. In union literacy, it comes up informally where unions define essential skills in their own way. It also comes up formally where union projects

are using the HRSDC Essential Skills Framework. Some labour organizations are involved in specific Essential Skills projects. Specific projects focus on assessment, membership training, worker certification, apprenticeship training, and upgrading for journeypersons. The topic of essential skills also comes up in discussions at the CLC Literacy Working Group. Essential skills is used in joint programs or associations with the employer, especially in Western Canada. In three provinces, it comes up as a provincial government-funding framework. Labour organizations that apply for funding are often asked to use the term in their funding applications. Finally, it comes up in terms of training on how to do profiling, especially with other groups that work with labour.

B. Familiarity and experience

This section explores the familiarity, experience, and views of research participants with respect to all aspects of the Essential Skills Framework. The term “framework” refers to the Essential Skills definition, profiles, the philosophy of Essential Skills and projects related to Essential Skills such as TOWES.

i) Overall familiarity with the Essential Skills Framework

Among interview respondents, there is a range of familiarity and experience with the HRSDC Essential Skills Framework that goes from *not that familiar* to *very familiar*.

There are a few participants in the research who said they do not know anything about the HRSDC Essential Skills Framework. These tended to be labour people at the provincial or local union level. At a minimum, most people have looked at the Essential Skills web-site, profiles or had discussions within the CLC Literacy Working Group. Many people have attended workshops and heard presentations at conferences over the years on some aspect of the Essential Skills project, including spin-offs such as the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES). Others have used resources that are based on the Essential Skills Research Project such as Skillplan’s *Document Use at Work* and *Numeracy at Work*. Two

labour representatives said they served on the advisory committee for TOWES in the early days when it was first being developed.

A few people have attended forums on Essential Skills organized by HRSDC both at the national and provincial levels. Several people have taken training on Essential Skills Profiling, mostly those who work with labour. A few people said they are involved in Essential Skills projects that use the HRSDC framework. A few others are involved in essential skills projects that do not use the government framework. Three provincial government representatives said that they use the Essential Skills Framework in their provincial work in literacy. Two people interviewed said they had been involved in the development of the ESRP over the years.

There are several reasons why unions did not go further with the Essential Skills Framework once they attended workshops, looked at profiles, or had experience with TOWES through presentations, workshops, or trying it out. These reasons included lack of interest and inability to see the relevance of Essential Skills to their work. People also expressed several concerns. These concerns focused on the lack of labour involvement in the development of the Essential Skills Framework, its management orientation, and the belief that resources for training, not a framework for Essential Skills, should be the starting point. Most research participants were also concerned that TOWES was not holistic, did not follow labour principles, and would be detrimental to their members.

Respondents' Comments:

- *I didn't have a use for the profiles. I was concerned about lack of union involvement. I think there is a natural hesitation. I don't want to expose people with respect to education they do not have and make life more difficult for them.*
- *I look at Essential Skills as government jargon with not a lot to do with my life. It's something you have to say to get money. There's a gap between the official government definition and what happens on the ground.*

ii) Experience with the Essential Skills Framework

This section describes the experiences of research participants with the Essential Skills Framework.

Essential Skills Profiles

About half the people interviewed, a combination of labour representatives and those who work with labour, have worked with profiles in some way. For those who have used profiles for specific projects, the tendency is to develop their own profiles because the profiles were not on the HRSDC web-site, or were they not appropriate or specific enough.

Assessment tools

Several respondents have used profiles to develop assessment tools that will assess a person's strengths and weaknesses for specific occupations. They stress that any assessment has to be followed by a training intervention that will lead to opportunities to upgrade skills. These research participants said they have used and developed profiles successfully in order to develop different kinds of assessment tools. This includes both diagnostic assessment, and self-assessment tools.

In two examples, diagnostic assessment tools were being developed for apprenticeship training in the building trades. In both cases, the diagnostic tools determined the areas that an apprentice needed to work on. Then training would be developed and/or offered to meet identified needs. In one instance, the assessment tool would be used with journeypersons who wished to upgrade their skills in a changing work environment as well. In both cases, the respondents said they did not use all of the nine Essential Skills. They used only the main ones that applied. This was similar in both instances and included reading text, document use, numeracy, writing and thinking skills or logic.

In other cases, profiles are used to develop self-assessment tools. In one case, the union wants its members to be able to go on-line and do a self-assessment for specific occupations covered by the union. Union members can then show that they have the skills to do specific jobs, or they can come to the union to get training for the skills they need. In another example, apprentices can take the self-assessment to find out where they need help with Essential Skills. The focus is mainly on text and document literacy, and math and thinking skills as they apply to math. One respondent said that the self-assessment instrument she uses is quite accurate compared to the interactive hands-on diagnostic assessment that apprentices take.

One respondent said that her organization had developed a self-assessment tool on the Internet based on the Essential Skills Framework. Anybody can go on the site and find out whether they have the Essential Skills for forty different occupations. There are more than one hundred activity sets based on workplace documents that address reading text, document use, and numeracy. The activities are aligned with TOWES.

Respondents' Comments:

-We wanted to end up with a diagnostic tool using multiple choice and hands-on activities that would give us a reading on prose literacy, document use, numeracy, oral communication, writing, and logic. We didn't use the other categories.

-We don't like testing. But we thought that we would develop our own self-assessment test where members can go on a web-site and self assess for different jobs. Then they can come to the union for training and guidance on where to get skills. This will also help in bringing validity to someone's skills during arbitration when the company picks one employee over another.

Learning and training programs

According to research participants who use or who are thinking about using the profiles to develop programming, the profiles help to develop learning or training that will assist union members to:

- (1) prepare for a job through apprenticeship training,
- (2) improve in their job, or
- (3) get a better job.

One way the profiles are used is as a starting point for research on jobs to develop learning programs for participants. For example, instructors who use profiles said that they would go to the HRSDC web-site and look up profiles for specific jobs of the learners they were working with or for programs they were developing. These respondents emphasized that the profiles were only one tool among many to help them develop learning materials in their programs.

Common themes from respondents working with the construction trades from across the country were the high failure rate for apprentices, the need to incorporate and upgrade essential skills and the failure of some colleges to meet training needs for apprentices.

In the following example, one respondent explains how profiles are used as a framework for integrating Essential Skills into technical training to try to increase the success rate for apprentices.

In this example, the first goal is to find out where people are at in their Essential Skills in terms of text and document literacy, math and writing. These skills are pulled from the Essential Skills profiles and the National Occupation Analysis (NOA) for the trade. Often the NOA does not include all the reading, writing, and math needed. The Essential Skills are listed on a fact sheet for the apprentice and the instructor. Then apprentices take an Essential Skills self-assessment to see where they might need help. Next is an interactive assessment where they do a set of trade specific activities. There is no mark and the learner gets feedback on areas of strength and weaknesses in the form of a learning plan that shows where upgrading would be beneficial.

The biggest problem for people dropping out is at Level 1 in technical training. A large contributing issue is the literacy and numeracy requirement of the training. In this case, a pre-Level 1 course has been developed. Apprentices get up to 110 hours of trade math, document navigation, and study skills along with trade projects that reflect the skills they are learning. Essential Skills will also be dealt with two weeks before each level of technical training. The Essential Skills focus on what they need for that level. Essential Skills at each level are being cross-referenced against the mature student high school curriculum so that potentially, at the end of their apprenticeship, apprentices would not only get their Red Seal trade certifications but their high school diplomas.

In another example, a respondent described a situation where the province funded thirty Essential Skills projects through its labour force development board. A call went out to employers and unions. Projects integrated Essential Skills into whatever people wanted to learn. One project focused on Essential Skills for farmers. The program included writing, navigating documents, and computer skills. In another example, there was a program for mothers and daughters who were interested in selling Tupperware. Program content included math, problem solving, and setting up a bank account. Organizations that applied for project funding did not have to apply with the official Essential Skills Framework; they simply had to address needs in their community. Partnerships had to include business, unions/workers, and a public partner.

Respondents' Comments:

- *I use the profiles a bit when I am tutoring people. If I am working with a student in a certain job or aspiring to a job, I'll pull materials from anywhere and everywhere. They might bring something in or I might pull from different programs. I tend to use provincial literacy guidelines as a guide. The HRSDC site is helpful for job specific materials and the profiles could be used more but they get lost in the shuffle. The profiles are a reference to anchor me for specific jobs.*
- *I look up a profile to make sure that someone didn't forget something about their job. But I also talk to a committee - supervisors and union reps. I then go back and do my own stuff. My work is customized...I don't follow the book from A to Z. I use the profiles as a check, not a gospel. I rely on my own experience. Essential skills are not new. It's not like we weren't doing this before.*
- *We said, "Here's what the Essential Skills are. Come up with a project that will work in your community."*

Sometimes, there are more useful tools or ways to develop a program than using the profiles. For example, one respondent said that she had to develop a 40-hour government-mandated program for a specific occupation. Although she looked at the profiles for the particular occupation, she mainly used the program outline with outcomes and other programs already developed by her project committee. Her rationale was that it was important to build and maintain a relationship with the project committee that represented the occupation by following their outline and building on their programs. She also found that there were no authentic materials for the occupation she was focusing on and that this is one area where she might have been able to use HRSDC materials had they been there.

Prior learning, assessment, and recognition

Some respondents noted that profiles have been used in workplaces to document people's skills and give them credit for what they can do so they can move into different jobs in their workplace or elsewhere. For example, at one plant, workers had multiple layoffs. They could only get

called back for certain jobs even though there were hundreds of different jobs in the plant. The issue was that workers had to demonstrate they could do these jobs. The jobs were profiled and it was found that many of the skills across jobs were the same. A Skills Passport was developed and workers got their skills validated by the supervisor. The Skills Passport showed the skills that people have. People were then able to be move within the plant.

There was concern expressed by participants at the CLC Labour Forum on Essential Skills that too often “the activity stops here” with no opportunity for training or upgrading the skills they do have. Furthermore, the employer now had this data and workers were left feeling vulnerable. A connected issue raised by one of the participants was the fact that the union was often left out of contractual arrangements with HRSDC at the workplace.

Profiling course

A few people, mostly from groups who work with labour, said they had taken the profiling course. In these cases, respondents said they found the course useful. In one case, the rationale for taking the course was to better understand the profiles, especially what the complexity ratings meant, in order to use profiles at a deeper level. In another case, it was to understand how profiles might be used to assess the skills people have so they could move into other jobs in their workplace or get training for the skills they needed instead of having to get a diploma or certificate. Similarly, one person said she wanted to find out what kinds of options could be presented to employers for developing skills that would be an alternative to Grade 12 credits.

Experience with TOWES

Almost half of the people interviewed have had some experience with TOWES, either as a workshop participant at a conference, by taking the test themselves, reading the TOWES web-site, or by being involved in a project with TOWES.

The main tendency was for labour organizations in the research to be concerned about TOWES and not to use it. In a few cases, TOWES was used by a union or a union was considering using the test. Research participants were asked to report on their experience in using TOWES.

Cases where labour organizations were involved with TOWES

This section outlines five different examples where labour organizations used, were involved in, or were considering using TOWES with their members.

EXAMPLE 1:

A research participant reported he used TOWES with students who have English as a Second Language. He described how the students who took the test were traumatized. The instructors tried to tell people it wasn't a test but students left the TOWES session weeping. As a result, there was a lot of damage control that needed to be done and this respondent would not use the test in the future. This person felt the test was culturally biased, nor was it testing ability to read but rather the understanding of workplace terminology. He noted that students do not have the chance to use the compensatory strategies as they do at work with co-workers during TOWES. He said that the test does not represent the whole of an individual because the test excludes the real situations that individuals would find themselves in.

He found that TOWES was not a diagnostic test that shows where people's strengths and weaknesses lie; instead, there's just a score. He was concerned that the test was a gate-keeping tool because it was not part of a larger intake strategy with learner interviews. He stated that that the test was being used by companies to screen people when they hire and that employers only look at the scores. He was concerned that TOWES does not use local assessors and is scored off-site. He thought it would be impossible to develop a curriculum from TOWES because the only people who can interpret the results are at Bow Valley College, and they would need to be hired, this being costly and restrictive. This respondent felt that there needed to be a tighter loop between assessing the person, interpreting results, and developing an intervention. He

emphasized the need to go back to the principles of adult education as a checkpoint.

EXAMPLE 2:

A union said it would use TOWES in its funding proposal to HRSDC even though it was not familiar with the test. The union was interested in finding a way that members could assess their strengths and areas for skills development for occupations under the jurisdiction of the union. The union decided to have one of its top instructors take the test and evaluate it for suitability with the membership. The person taking the test was a high performing worker who had been in her job for twenty years. She did not do well on the test. She evaluated it for the union and concluded that:

- 1) it would be detrimental to members,
- 2) it could be used as a screening test and labelling and categorizing could result;
- 3) it was not clear that confidentiality was assured and whether or not employers would see the results;
- 4) the test score seemed to become more important than the skills, and
- 5) there is no explanation provided of what the test taker needs.

As a result of this assessment, the union said it took another route.

EXAMPLE 3:

TOWES was used to assess workers who would be facing testing for mandatory certification in their occupation to determine where their needs were. Respondents who reported on this situation noted that TOWES is the only test that uses authentic workplace documents. They reported that funders want numbers and that in this case, in order to get funding, they needed to use TOWES.

They described the test as long. People were not allowed to leave the room or talk during the test. When the test was administered, a great deal of time was spent talking about who would see the results.

Respondents reported that the administrators tried to say it was not a test when workers felt that was exactly what it was. One person said that the upside of the test is that it is reliable and does test for document literacy. The downside is that all a person receives is a score. In addition, it doesn't test for the other six Essential Skills. Also, you cannot develop a curriculum from TOWES. You have to get Bow Valley College to develop the curriculum. It is just one tool. It's necessary to talk to people and do a self assessment as well. In addition, it costs a lot, needs experts, focuses on the individual rather than the collective context and it is set apart from people's lives.

EXAMPLE 4:

According to one research participant, TOWES was endorsed by labour as being a useful tool in his regional context. This respondent emphasized that TOWES must be used in tandem with other things and that people have abilities not reflected in TOWES. Therefore, there must also be a way to recognize the skills that people do have. In this case, TOWES is used mostly with laid-off workers and those not yet in the workforce, especially Aboriginal people. In some cases, it was voluntary and administered by peers. This person expressed the idea that since TOWES uses authentic material, it is more effective than tests based on grade level. The purpose of using TOWES is to determine what people need so that they can get upgrading and training for the good jobs that are available in the region. He noted that there are many barriers for Aboriginal people including childcare issues, lack of access to training and negative perceptions of employers.

EXAMPLE 5:

One person gave the example in her work as a labour representative on a multi-stakeholder, multi-union committee. In this case, Bow Valley College brought TOWES in through the employer into a workplace that was going to set up a workplace program. From a union point of view, the intention of the project was to address the learning needs of the whole person. However, the employer had a different idea. The idea was to test everyone to determine their skill level. This respondent said, "It's frightening. I know the resistance to testing. Members feel vulnerable.

When we started the project, workers were excited. They wanted to read their collective agreement. I wonder what happened.”

Respondents' Comments:

- *An Aboriginal person might not be able to read instructions for a snowmobile but could easily take it apart and put it back together. These attributes have to be recognized. Also, a lot of immigrants do not have the English comprehension skills to do the test.*
- *Why shouldn't it be okay for us to use TOWES in a way that we want to use it? If I see what a person is doing, I know what they need. An assessment should always lead to a learning plan.*
- *In our assessment, the person does math. They might do all the steps and get the wrong answer. In TOWES, you only see whether the answer is right or wrong. I need a more holistic picture.*

Experience of research participants who took the TOWES

A few research participants have taken TOWES or participated in a demonstration. Some see opportunities for the test and others have concerns about it. This section provides a snapshot of the experiences of people who took TOWES. It is important to make an overall reminder that all research respondents are functioning in responsible positions in unions or other organizations.

One person said he took the test when he was exhausted and the documents were not familiar. This person concluded that people could fail the test regardless of their skill level. He wondered if the test was “too sharp” an instrument where something “more blunt” would be better. He questioned whether such an instrument would be a good measure of whether or not people can learn and transfer skills and function at the workplace. He was also concerned that there was no diagnostic.

Another person in a responsible position in a provincial federation of labour who took the test felt that it was difficult and made her wonder about her own skills. She decided that the test was not something that she would use or endorse.

A third person took the test and came out weak in document use even though this was something she had been doing for 20 years. She saw these results as an opportunity to overcome challenges. Her assessment of TOWES was that it was useful and easy to administer. She noted that TOWES should not be used with English as Second Language learners and that it is only one of many benchmarks that could contribute to developing a curriculum.

Provincial government use of Essential Skills and/or TOWES

Research participants described instances where three provinces are using the ESRP as a framework for their work. These examples are significant because all three provinces have some form of a tripartite committee that involves labour as a partner. This section describes both the rationale and the ways the three provinces use Essential Skills as a framework as described by research participants.

Manitoba

In Manitoba, Essential Skills is a unifying force across industry-based literacy, Essential Skills and Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR). In this case, the Essential Skills Framework is used both as a framework and a basis for an implementation plan. In the implementation plan, the province uses the nine skills in the ESRP but recognizes that there are other important skills as well. Life skills are referred to as transitional skills. In order to get funding for PLAR, organizations have to include Essential Skills.

The rationale for using HRSDC's Essential Skills Framework was described as strategic. First, there was concern that the existing system does not prepare people for the workplace because the focus is on Grade 12 and Adult Basic Education. Second, there was no common definition across government for these sorts of skills. Using the Essential Skills

Framework creates a common definition across government where there was none before. Third, using the Essential Skills Framework creates an additional funding base from HRSDC.

This model is seen to provide workers with portable, transferable skills that they can take to other workplaces. On the ground, in partnerships where labour is involved, partnership agreements are considered situation by situation. Projects that are not appropriate or not endorsed by labour are not undertaken. TOWES is not used for several reasons. Some partners do not find it suitable and there is concern that it is used as a blocking mechanism. There is a score but no diagnostic. A question was raised about whether people should be tested on their ability to do the job before they are actually in the job. In addition, the province saw the test as costly.

Prince Edward Island

In Prince Edward Island, workplace education is managed by a separate organization, Workplace Education PEI. Workplace Education PEI is a partnership of government, business and labour. Workplace Education PEI is in transition, moving from literacy to Essential Skills. Essential Skills provides the framework for the work that Workplace Education PEI does. Research participants said that Workplace Education PEI uses the official HRSDC definition to create a common language across the province. They noted that literacy is not a term that goes over well with employers and employees. They don't want literacy to disappear, they just want it to be more visible. Essential Skills is a more acceptable way to talk about literacy and get people to see it more broadly.

One way Workplace Education PEI uses the Essential Skills Framework is in the design of the Organizational Needs Assessments (ONA) it conducts in workplaces. Profiles of the occupations in a particular workplace are researched and the ONA questionnaire is designed from this research. The nine Essential Skills provide a framework for questions and responses in the ONA. After the ONA, instructors use profiles to develop curriculum for programming. A reading assessment is also used as part of an Individual Needs Assessment conducted by the instructor.

The Essential Skills Framework is also used as a marketing tool. Profiles give a picture of the trends and industries of the future. The fact that the Essential Skills come from HRSDC provides credibility and shows employers that the skills must be valuable. It shows employers something better than Grade 12 and illustrates to them the skills of the job through the profiles. According to people in PEI though, it is still difficult to get employers on board to think about long-term training and investment in employees.

Profiles are also used in developing a framework for PLAR. Tasks from profiles are used in the framework along with their complexity level. This tool is used to help people with career planning. People can do a self-assessment to find out what they know and what they need to learn. They also set short, medium, and long-term goals as part of their planning.

The provincial community college has the contract to provide TOWES in PEI. To this point, employers have not used TOWES. They have their own tests and assessments that they are familiar with.

One of the research participants said that labour has not been involved in Essential Skills a great deal up to this point. She hopes that labour will become more involved in the future.

Nova Scotia

In Nova Scotia, Essential Skills is talked about in ways that define it more broadly than the other two provinces as the skills needed to participate in life. This includes work, community, and home. Essential Skills refers to everyday tasks that people have to do. The respondent from this province said that there is a need to define skills more broadly when labour is a partner. The government incorporated Essential Skills into its framework as a way to be aligned with the federal government's policy framework around Essential Skills. Essential Skills seems to be high on the federal government's agenda. The provincial government works with the federal government through a joint federal-provincial committee to access funding dollars.

Profiles are seen as important as a potential way for employers to consider alternatives to requiring Grade 12. With profiles it is possible to see, for example, the math required for a specific job. It is then possible to develop an assessment to find out what Essential Skills people need to develop for that job.

TOWES has been used in this province as a screening tool for jobs but not in any noteworthy way. The research respondent commenting on TOWES considers TOWES a better option than other screening tools such as the GED.

Profiles have also been one of many tools used to develop Essential Skills in trades training and assessment of needs. Some people in apprenticeship training have not had success in the training because of reading, writing and math difficulties. There is also a high failure rate on exams for the same reasons.

On projects on the ground, labour is a partner in a committee approach for workplace initiatives.

iii) Experience with essential skills projects that do not use the official HRSDC framework

In several instances at the local and provincial levels, respondents described educational or training programs that use the term essential skills but do not have anything to do with the official framework. In fact, the respondents who describe these programs knew very little about the HRSDC Essential Skills Framework. In one case, the respondent described a workplace program that was set up a number of years ago to respond to changes on the production floor, especially around new technology, new equipment and changing roles for production workers. Officially, the program is referred to as essential skills. The program started with a one-on-one tutoring program that focuses on reading, writing, and life skills for home and the workplace. Then the program expanded to include GED⁴ and computers, and now a communication course is being developed. As a result of the program, workers have built

⁴ The General Education Development (GED) diploma is recognized and widely accepted as meeting high school graduation requirements for purposes of employment and further education.

their confidence and are getting better paying jobs inside and outside this workplace. Others have gone back to school or into apprenticeships.

Several research participants from the construction trades commented on the need for essential skills for both journeypersons and supervisors. They said that often people have their tickets but according to the contractors still do not have all the reading, writing and math skills. They noted there was a great need for essential skills for supervisors such as dealing with others, scheduling, estimating and understanding complex documents like building codes.

One person described a three-day essential skills course for supervisors that his trade had developed. The course includes an industry overview, team building, labour relations, verbal communication, planning and scheduling and estimating costs.

C. Views on the Essential Skills Framework and policy

It's quite clear [with Essential Skills] we are dealing with contested terrain at the policy, practical and political levels. - labour respondent

In this section, the Essential Skills Framework refers to the definition of Essential Skills, Essential Skills profiles and related projects that are based on the ESRP such as TOWES. Some of the people interviewed who use and support the Essential Skills Framework found it useful to go back to the beginning when it all started. There are common themes from research participants who view the framework as useful. There are also common themes that come from respondents who have concerns about it. This section examines research participants' support and rationale for the Essential Skills Framework as well as their concerns. It includes views expressed through interviews and confirmed during the focus group at CLC Labour Forum on Essential Skills.

i) Views of research participants who support the Essential Skills Framework

Some research participants commented on their understanding of the origins of essential skills. They said that the term essential skills started being used even before the HRSDC Essential Skills project in Western Canada where the term literacy didn't have currency. Essential skills had validity because it was seen as a term that was better than "basic". Also, respondents favoured the idea that a person could move beyond what they have and that essential skills applies to everyone. The official framework is based on IALS and this meant a continuum of skills. Essential Skills can describe and measure jobs against IALS. Before that everybody was just saying "nobody could read."

One respondent explained that literacy and basic skills did not work to describe some of the high level skills that workers do use like trigonometry in the construction trades. It was not a case of not being literate. Essential Skills was more useful than literacy because one could talk about complexity and measurability. This was better than grade level and it was also useful that the Essential Skills Framework was tied to IALS. Most people are at IALS Levels 2-3 and there are more than 200 jobs out there that align with Levels 2-3. This consistency is helpful in developing curriculum. Many people already have Grade 12 and so the profiles give a context for developing transferable skills.

According to some respondents, even TOWES, which came out of the Essential Skills Framework, was not meant to be the be all and end all. It was supposed to be a reliable tool that measured people against a standard - IALS - using authentic workplace materials. In the early stages of development, it was meant to be broad and show that workers could do jobs. Before TOWES, there was no workplace tool to show where people were at, especially in high stakes scenarios like hiring. Other tests had no relation to workplace realities. The next natural step after profiling a job using the IALS levels of complexity was to see where people were at. The need for a test like TOWES came from practitioners. TOWES was seen a more reliable indicator of training success than other standardized tests that were not based in the workplace.

Some respondents suggested that workplace literacy was a deficit model where Essential Skills is more inclusive. Essential Skills can take the disenfranchised and make them “pros”. For example, trades people can finally get recognized for their high-level skills. In interviews, respondents who were involved in apprenticeship and occupation-specific training said that the HRSDC Framework, especially the profiles, was useful in helping them develop diagnostic and self-assessment tools and prepare Essential Skills training to address identified needs. Instructors and practitioners said they found the profiles and the framework to be useful tools among many materials that they use in developing learning and training. Provincial government representatives noted that it was strategic to use the Essential Skills Framework in their provincial work. They saw important benefits of using the framework including providing:

- (1) a common definition across the province,
- (2) an effective way to assess and meet workplace needs, and
- (3) a way to get the attention of employers and convince them of alternatives to the Grade 12 requirement.

They reported that the Framework also provides a way to assess and recognize the skills that people already have.

Some found the notion of Essential Skills attractive in that Essential Skills focus on foundation, not job skills, and are developmental and portable. Another attractive element is the broad range of foundational skills that Essential Skills includes. On the other hand, the problem with Essential Skills is that employers and unions have different definitions. Another issue is that it is only document use, prose literacy, and numeracy that are being developed systematically. One person involved in developing learning outcomes for the nine Essential Skills for his project noted that it was easy to do it for document use, prose literacy and numeracy but very difficult for the other six skills.

One participant at the CLC Labour Forum on Essential Skills noted that the original need for Essential Skills came from apprenticeship and the need for workers to make transitions. He suggested that it was important “not to throw the baby out with the bathwater” and to figure out where to use Essential Skills effectively.

Respondents' Comments:

- *People have misunderstood Essential Skills because it has not been communicated well.*
- *Unfortunately HRSDC's focus is on the workforce. That's why it looks employer-driven. There is the potential for a national common language describing people and jobs, and PLAR to show that people can do the jobs.*
- *When we got into our work, literacy and numeracy were the easy stuff. Measuring the other skills was hard. Some of the stuff is 'airy fairy.' We struggled with it. However, we did zero in on a couple of things I'm pleased about.*

ii) Views of research participants who have concerns about the Essential Skills Framework

Based on both interviews and the CLC Labour Forum on Essential Skills focus group, it is clear that the majority of labour respondents familiar with the framework, and some others who work with labour, had concerns about the nature of the Essential Skills Framework. Even research participants who see useful applications and use the Framework had some concerns.

One of the main concerns people had is that the Framework does not espouse a broad labour vision and principles, and that unions and workers are left out of the equation. Some people said that Essential Skills is being promoted by government, consultants and those employers they can convince to utilise it. At the CLC Labour Forum on Essential Skills, the emphasis from participants was that Essential Skills represents a corporate agenda. Many people believe that the framework will lead to a narrowing of the education work that is important to labour.

Labour is generally concerned that the Essential Skills Framework objectifies and deconstructs skills as human capital and is external to workers' lives. The point was made in interviews and at the forum that standards like Essential Skills exclude people and do not reflect what the

job really needs. Essential Skills is more about what people cannot do than what they can do.

Another major uneasiness was that the Framework tends to break things down into their smallest bits and then try to make a program from those bits. People said this is mechanistic, simple and deficit based. They also emphasized that Essential Skills does not address the complexities of workplace education. One person noted that it is the web between the bits that's important and that knowledge is social - it does not just reside in the individual. Another person said it is like taking the bumble bee apart, putting it back together and learning that it cannot fly. Another suggested that it is like cutting people into fractions and looking at the barest minimum a person can do at a workplace. Still another said it is a shopping list for the employer that they can test against.

One respondent acknowledged that some materials rooted in the workplace are good but that there is a need to be careful. In class, people might want to deal with politics, health care, or other concerns in their lives that employers would not recognize but unions would see as relevant.

Participants raise race and class issues with respect to the profiles. Another issue for some is that the profiles, which are integral to the framework, represent an idealized profile from an urban, white, middle class perspective. Profiles are developed from a subset of what is essential from this perspective. There was concern about Aboriginal people. Coping is an essential skill. For example, how does an Aboriginal person work for a white supervisor?

Although a few people said they favour TOWES, most of those interviewed based on their experience and knowledge have serious concerns about the test. These concerns were reinforced at the CLC Labour Forum on Essential Skills. They see the test as detrimental to workers. The issues raised include the fact that employers get the scores, TOWES does not measure what people know, and there is no diagnostic. Other concerns raised were the need to hire Bow Valley College to get a diagnostic and the fact that the test uses materials that are biased in favour of the employer. Some people also stated that they

do not agree with the fact that workers are not allowed to talk or leave the room during the test. Others noted that TOWES is getting currency as a silver bullet and in one province was a requirement of funding. Some of those interviewed suggested that rather than testing workers, people should be able to demonstrate they can do a job.

Respondents' Comments:

- *It's extremely difficult to shape a union agenda. What does it mean to have a joint program, a union curriculum...to be able to talk about benefits and employment standards, for example?*
- *The number one issue is where workers get training. There's a balance. If we can get the money [through Essential Skills projects] then our membership will be better off.*
- *Labour means "us teaching us". There's no "us" in TOWES. It's all me sitting here all alone. It doesn't have solidarity.*
- *From my perspective, TOWES is clearly a management tool.*
- *I am aware that there are a lot of bad tests out there and that there was an interest in developing a test that was more relevant. Maybe TOWES is marginally better than other employer tests, but I think the resources should be put into learning rather than testing.*

iii) Views on HRSDC policy on Essential Skills

A second topic that came out of interviews with people was around HRSDC policy on Essential Skills: i.e. where is it going and what does it mean for labour? There were several key ideas that came up around the policy conversation.

One theme was that HRSDC is exerting more control over how Essential Skills is being done. This is particularly apparent since people with history with Essential Skills have left government. Several people noted that when they went to HRSDC think tanks, forums and consultations it was not a real discussion of ideas but rather a rubber-stamping and validation of what had already been developed. These respondents noted

that there was no chance to talk about whether the present Framework was the right direction or not. One person said that there was the feeling of “come, but don’t have a dissenting opinion.” There was the sense from some people who attended these forums that there was pressure to talk about how good the Essential Skills Framework was so the higher-ups in government would support it.

Another important theme raised in interviews and at the CLC Labour Forum on Essential Skills Forum was that HRSDC policy on Essential Skills represented a corporate agenda, served the needs of employers, and excluded labour. One person noted that at the HRSDC symposium on Essential Skills she attended, there was no mention of labour or workers. Instead, the words used were employers, employees, and individuals. She emphasized that this language implicitly blames workers for not having the skills they should and places the onus on them rather than on society or employers for getting the skills. Another person suggested that Essential Skills is a change from a focus on the citizen to a focus on the workplace and the worker.

This emphasis by the government on individual responsibility for training and education at the workplace was highlighted as a concern by participants at the CLC Labour Forum on Essential Skills.

In interviews and at the CLC Labour Forum on Essential Skills, people also expressed concern that HRSDC was favouring a narrow view rather than a holistic one. They stressed that Essential Skills only deals with jobs rather than the needs of the whole person to focus on union, family, and community. For example, if Essential Skills confines and excludes other possibilities, it is a disservice to union members as it is too narrow and limited. Participants at the CLC Forum expressed concern that now Essential Skills is being incorporated into the school system through initiatives like Applications of Working and Learning (AWAL). Some people expressed fear that Essential Skills will migrate to the Workplace Skills Strategy and that there is no strong role for labour.

Another theme raised in some interviews and highlighted by participants at the CLC Labour Forum on Essential Skills was that Essential Skills is still another way to avoid talking about the need for a national training strategy. Overall, research participants' comments show that Essential Skills is not about opportunities for learning but about testing opportunities for the employer. Participants report that there is a lack of opportunity and coherent policy with respect to training and education. Participants at the Forum stressed that Essential Skills is synonymous with piecemeal funding and that it has not led to any more training money. They also emphasized the lack of commitment to training dollars by government and employers.

One interview respondent said, "If we started with what the problem is in the system and then found a way to address the problem, it wouldn't lead to nine Essential Skills. It would lead to an intervention that works. If tomorrow's workforce is already in the workforce, how do we develop their reading, writing, and math? How do we prepare people for change?"

Another theme was that there appears to be pressure for people to use the term Essential Skills both at the federal and provincial level to get funding. The language of Essential Skills has come into broader use. In this research, many participants emphasized that they have been advised officially or unofficially to use the term essential Skills to be in touch with the current policy climate.

On the issue of federal funding, a point was made that it is not clear how the National Literacy Secretariat connects with the WSS and ESRP. Where Essential Skills has focused on jobs, the NLS focus has tended to be more holistic. There is also a lack of clarity about how money from the NLS and Essential Skills is allocated to projects and what the rationale has been for certain allocations, especially around labour projects.

Some people suggested what might work is if Essential Skills was one alternative among many under an umbrella that includes several other alternatives. At the same time, as with any kind of learning, labour would need to ensure that Essential Skills meets all the worker-centred principles that apply.

Respondents' Comments:

- *If the high school curriculum is to be based on Essential Skills, then it is not education in a broad sense. Do we want students to talk like supervisors?*
- *Government is no longer assisting people. They are assisting corporations to make profits and to make the workers more specific, not more portable.*

IV. Recommendations

As a result of the findings from this research, the CLC recommends that:

1. HRSDC representatives meet with the CLC to discuss this research report and to look for ways to use its findings to enhance dialogue with the labour movement on Essential Skills and future workplace learning policies and programs.
2. HRSDC work with the CLC to address labour's concerns around Essential Skills.
3. HRSDC support the CLC to:
 - develop a set of labour principles for essential skills in a similar way to the principles that have been developed and articulated for labour literacy.
 - develop a set of principles and guidelines for workplace skills assessment, including the needs of equality-seeking groups, with a focus on strategies to illuminate worker assets as well as their learning needs, and include recommendations to address the problems identified in the current uses of TOWES.
 - conduct more in-depth research through a case study approach with several unions where the Essential Skills Profiles are currently being used or adapted. This research would analyze the elements that contribute to 1) successful outcomes, and 2) problems or barriers. It would look at these issues from the point of view of all stakeholders in these research sites, with particular attention to equality-seeking groups.
4. HRSDC undertake a joint dialogue with business and labour about policies that ensure a better link between workplace skills assessment and the provision of opportunities for new skills development.

Appendix 1: Interview Questions

Interview Questions for CLC Essential Skills Research

1. Are you encountering the term “essential skills” in your work? If yes, please tell me the different ways it comes up in your work?
2. What does the term “essential skills” mean to you? Do you use the term in your own work? If so, under what circumstances do you use it? How do you see Essential Skills as different from or similar to other related words (like literacy, basic skills, foundation skills, etc.)? Do you use Essential Skills interchangeably with some of these related words or do you see them as something separate and distinct with their own definitions?
3. Are you familiar with the HRSDC Essential Skills (ES) research project? If so, in what ways are you aware (e.g. know about the ES profiles, have used the profiles, have developed/used curriculum based on the profiles, used the TOWES test)?
4. In what kinds of projects that explicitly use the term “essential skills” or which employ the HRSDC definitions has your union been involved? Why did you undertake these projects and what were their objectives? Why did you use the term essential skills or the HRSDC Essential Skills framework? Who was involved? What was your experience doing the project(s)? What particular successes or challenges did you experience when doing the project? Please be very specific. How helpful or not was the use of the term Essential Skills or of any of the HRSDC materials and profiles to the project?
5. If you haven’t had a specific project, have you used any Essential Skills materials to date? If yes, what attracted you to the materials? If no, why have you not used them (framework / profiles / materials, etc.)?
6. If yes, how did you find out about the Essential Skills materials? How have you used them? How long have you been using them? Please tell me the ways in detail.
7. What was your experience using them? How helpful were they? What particular successes or challenges did you experience when using them? Please be very specific. Did you adapt these materials in any way to fit your needs, or did you use them as is?
8. If there anything else you would like to say about your experience with Essential Skills that we have not talked about?

Appendix 2: Interview Respondents

Interview Respondents

Barbara Byers
Canadian Labour Congress (CLC)

Karen Chandler
Workplace Education PEI

Gloria Charsley
Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE)
Atlantic Regional Office

Leo Cheverie
PEI Federation of Labour (PEIFL)

Paul Chiasson
PEI Federation of Labour (PEIFL)

Jean Connon Unda
Educator
Toronto

Graham Dowdell
Manitoba Government and General Employees'
Union (MGEU)

Lynda Fownes
B.C. Construction Industry Skills Improvement
Council Skillplan

Naomi Frankel
Educator
Regina

Steve Graves
President
Mainland Building Trades, Nova Scotia

Robert Hatfield
Communication, Energy & Paper Workers
Union of Canada (CEP)
National Office, Ottawa

Brigid Hayes
Canadian Labour and Business Centre (CLBC)

Sandi Howell
Workplace Education Manitoba
Manitoba Advanced Education and Training

Nancy Jackson
Ontario Institute for Studies in
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University of Toronto

Irene Jansen
Canadian Union of Public Employees
(CUPE)
National Office, Ottawa

Heather Grant Jury
United Food and Commercial Workers
(UFCW)
Local 832 Training Centre, Winnipeg

Karen Kennedy
Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL)

Nancy Langille
Canadian Auto Workers (CAW)
Local 1944 Nova Scotia

Tamara Levine
Canadian Labour Congress (CLC)

Gaelyne MacAulay
Workplace Education PEI

Barbara MacNutt
Workplace Education PEI

Tom McKinnon
International Union of Painters and
Allied Trades
District Council 39 (NB & NS)

Louise Miller
Fédération des travailleurs du Québec
(FTQ)

Irma Mohamed
BC Federation of Labour (BCFL)

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Canadian Office, Toronto

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Blair Penny
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Steve Peterson
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Judy Purcell
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Carl Pursey
PEI Federation of Labour (PEIFL)

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Canadian Auto Workers Canada (CAW)
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Dave Robertson
Canadian Auto Workers Canada (CAW)
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Margerit Roger
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