

Looking Into the Future of Indigenous Labour Market Programming

Summary Report of the National ASETS Meeting

Engagement 2016

Introduction

The National Aboriginal Skill and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS) Meeting took place in Gatineau, QC from June 27-29, 2016. The purpose of the meeting was to hear views and perspectives on future policy and program approaches to Indigenous labour market programs from ASETS agreement holders' staff and leadership. A discussion guide was developed by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) officials and shared in advance with participants to help guide the meeting and provide opportunity for participants to prepare. This three day meeting was held as a series of plenary and breakout sessions, where First Nations, Métis, Inuit and urban ASETS agreement holders gathered in smaller groups to discuss ideas and then presented their ideas in a plenary session.

This report summarizes the views and perspectives heard over the course of the meeting. It is a beginning to engagement about what is working, what could be improved upon, and what a future strategy on Indigenous labour market programming could entail. This summary report captures initial views on the future of Indigenous labour market programs, but these are not considered complete or final positions from stakeholders, and consensus was not sought on points raised. Further engagement with ASETS agreement holders, Indigenous leadership, and other stakeholders will be ongoing for a number of months to contribute to the way forward.

In total, 176 participants attended the meeting, 146 of whom were representatives of ASETS agreement holders. 11 participants represented Modern Treaties. Overall, 66 of 84 ASETS agreement holders from all provinces and territories except Prince Edward Island, and from all Indigenous groups and urban ASETS agreement holders, participated in the meeting. Representatives from the Assembly of First Nations, Inuit Tapariit Kanatami, Métis National Council, Native Women's Association of Canada, Indigenous Peoples Assembly of Canada, and the National Aboriginal Friendship Centres attended as well. Staff from ESDC's Aboriginal Affairs Directorate, Aboriginal Program Operations Directorate, and Service Canada also attended.

Participants were asked to outline the strengths of the current program, challenges they face, what they considered to be meaningful outcomes and future operational considerations.

Strengths of the current program

Overwhelmingly, participants stated that the primary strength of ASETS is the experienced staff. They are a dedicated, resourceful and knowledgeable group who work hard to improve the lives of people in their communities. ASETS and its predecessor programs have produced strong results and positively affected the lives of thousands of Indigenous people, demonstrating that it is a successful program.

Further identified strengths included the support agreement holders provide one another through sharing information and best practices, and partnerships with industry and institutions,

as it helps clients find and keep jobs in their communities, and has assisted ASETS agreement holders in training clients and helping them find and maintain employment. In addition, the ability to pay for clients' wages for the probation period of a new job has also proven useful in keeping clients employed. Regional committees of ASETS agreement holders have also been beneficial because it keeps service delivery organizations informed on local labour market trends, partners to work with, and how to work together to train clients.

Flexibility within the agreement holder's budget, and not having separate youth and disabilities funds, for example, helps to ensure the budget can be used within a fiscal year. The ability to carry forward funding from the Consolidated Revenue Fund is also beneficial, as well as the ability to move funds within the budget to refocus priorities. Splitting funding between core and administration also helps in maximizing an agreement holder's budget.

Challenges with the current program

Services for Clients

A lack of child care spaces and funding was continuously raised as a challenge. Parents who require training in their community or elsewhere do not always have access to a child care centre, and may not have trusted individuals who can care for their children. Participants stated that in some parts of Canada, child care for children under age two is non-existent. It was recommended that child care services funded through the ASETS agreement should be considered for all Métis and urban Indigenous people and not only for on-reserve First Nations and Inuit.

The provision of cultural teachings are an integral service for clients. Cultural competency can increase an individual's esteem so they are able to acquire strength and confidence, which helps in gaining employment. For this reason, it was recommended that cultural teachings should be a recognized component of a future program.

Job coaching and mentorship are very helpful to clients participating with the transition from training to a job site, and with employment retention. However it was felt that it is not always clear if this is an eligible expense, and that eligibility varies by region, where some regions consider it as an eligible expense and some do not. Participants stated that consistency is needed on whether this is an eligible expense, especially because it is an important support that greatly assists clients.

Additionally, participants recommended that a stronger educational component could be explored for the next program. Given the need for some form of post-secondary education for most jobs, ASETS could pay for more education for clients as it helps a client find meaningful employment. ASETS staff could also start working with high-school aged clients to encourage

them to finish high school, a key prerequisite for continuing on to post-secondary education and also for finding employment.

Funding

Participants stated that many clients lack essential skills and require academic upgrading and longer-term interventions before they can go onto training and be ready for employment. Providing training for these individuals takes a lot of time and resources. The amount of funding provided to ASETS agreement holders is not always reflective of the reality of a client's starting point in many parts of Canada, especially in remote areas where a client may need to travel and live away from their community to receive training. Additional funding is needed but also funding that is indexed to inflation and updated regularly according to demographic changes.

Some participants felt that the amount of funding for administration, representing 15% of total funding, is inadequate in more rural and remote areas where the cost of doing business and the cost of travel are much higher. More flexibility in how much can be spent on administering the program should be considered given that the amount required to administer ASETS varies drastically by region.

A 3% increase in funding for 2017-2018 is desired in addition to the 3% received this year. Participants stated a funding allocation model that reflects growth in the population is needed to address funding pressures experienced by ASETS service delivery organizations. Another suggestion was to have one agreement for all federal labour market programs, such as combining the ASETS and the Youth Employment Strategy contribution agreements. Having multiple agreements with federal departments and provincial/territorial governments requires a considerable amount of staff time and resources with respect to reporting and liaising with federal departments.

Partnerships

Some participants recommended partnerships with provincial and territorial governments and labour market agreements, particularly through the Labour Market Development Agreements (LMDAs) be explored, with the possible use of tripartite working groups. Currently provincial and territorial governments do not communicate with ASETS agreement holders which can cause conflict or duplication of programs.

Although some agreement holders have successful partnerships with local businesses and industry, others find that local businesses are not willing to partner or provide employment to Indigenous clients. More incentives for businesses to employ Indigenous people, such as tax incentives, could be explored.

Program Administration

Participants re-iterated that the administration of ASETS agreements is overly complicated, bureaucratic and time consuming, in their opinion. From their perspective, the department should not be approving the Annual Operating Plan or the Strategic Business Plan, but should only be aware of what agreement holders are striving to do. These plans should also be allowed to be updated according to local labour market shifts.

Some noted that planning documents are useful but are overly complicated. ESDC's Reducing the Reporting Burden Working Group has suggested ways to simplify reporting and planning documents. These suggestions should be implemented in the next iteration of programming.

Pre-approval requirements for operational activities should be removed. These activities should be done without needing approval as they are necessary for operating within the program. In addition, the difference between carry forward and slippage of funds should be clearly explained.

Submitting and reviewing claims by Service Canada is too frequent and should be done bi-annually. In addition, a mid-year dialogue may not be necessary because if any issue arises, ASETS technicians should speak with their Service Delivery Officer as soon as possible to rectify the issue, and not wait until the mid-year dialogue occurs.

Clear guidelines on what is an eligible and ineligible activity should be noted in the contribution agreement so everyone is aware and is receiving the same information. Requirements to deliver programming should not be changing throughout the lifespan of the program. This would lead to transparency in information and a decreased likelihood of ineligible spending that is assumed to be eligible.

Salaries for staff of ASETS agreement holders are often lower than other similar organizations due to a cap on administration. This has resulted in a large amount of staff turn-over in some organizations, and an inability to serve clients if it takes a lot of time to find new staff. This can greatly affect the results an agreement holder is able to achieve.

It would also be beneficial to agreement holders if more funding was provided in advance. This would allow for the ability to react to different training/employment opportunities that may arise with minimal notice that could be beneficial to clients. It also demonstrates trust and the willingness to engage in a different relationship than the current relationship between ESDC and agreement holders.

Relationship between ESDC, Service Canada and ASETS

Participants noted that there should be improved co-operation and communication between policy and program operations at ESDC and Service Canada. It was suggested that the decision-making framework at Service Canada and ESDC be re-aligned to have fewer levels and players

involved. This could bring clarity to the different roles and may result in fewer instances of different rules or procedures that currently exist in different regions. A lack of consistency among Service Delivery Officers (SDOs) was also noted as an issue. Improved communication and co-operation within the entire department may increase consistency among SDOs. Participants also noted that previously the department was more of a partner with agreement holders and that this has changed in the last 10 years. Now the relationship is seen more as intrusion into agreement holders' management of their contribution agreements and programming. A shift to more autonomy by agreement holders was called for.

Relevance of ASETS Program Outcomes

An output that could be tracked under a new program is increased cultural awareness, as learning about one's culture can greatly help a client's overall well-being. Another outcome is gaining a driver's license because for many it is key to getting a job. For those from remote communities, it is difficult to go to the nearest centre to take the driving test, and to have to re-take the test, which is a large expense for some.

The performance measurement strategy needs to review and capture other statistics and successes besides getting a job or returning to school. An additional indicator could be the number of clients that complete an intervention, to show small gains in a client's progression towards employment. How to capture long-term vs short-term interventions should be explored, given that a client's Action Plan may be open longer than normal to complete long-term interventions.

Heading Forward

What is Needed in a New Agreement

Participants desire a long-term agreement of at least five years; preferably 10 years. An ongoing agreement without a sunset clause would be beneficial to keep providing programming well into the last year of a program, and could be explored. Entering into transfer payments or block funding with ASETS, like other federal programs, is also desired and would better reflect a renewed relationship, and that ASETS service delivery organizations have control over programming.

A new funding formula is needed to ensure population growth is recognized and that ASETS agreement holders receive the necessary funding to provide training to a young and growing population. A new agreement could also include funding for capacity building for staff. Child care is a key program that should continue to be delivered and should receive additional

funding. A new agreement could also distribute other departmental/federal programs through the same agreement (e.g. Youth Employment Strategy).

It was suggested that a working group be established this fall and winter to work on the above issues and how they can be addressed in a new agreement. Another suggestion is to start a joint steering committee to manage program and policy development and implementation, and contribution agreement development.

One-year Extension vs Implementation of a New Program Starting April 1, 2017

There was considerable discussion on the benefits of an extension year for 2017-2018 and the benefits of implementing a new program starting April 1, 2017. This was the result of noting how long approvals take for a new program, and the need to decide on the new program in early fall for it to be ready to be implemented on April 1, 2017. Some feedback was that the changes needed to the agreement were not difficult to do and that a new program starting on April 1, 2017 could be realistically achieved. However the majority thought that a one-year extension, with some changes to how the program is administered and an additional 3% in funding, is necessary to allow for more fulsome engagement with multiple stakeholders including Indigenous leadership, and time to carefully consider implementation instead of trying to rush implementation.

Next Steps

This summary reflects the views and perspectives expressed by participants at the National Meeting. These comments are only a portion of those expected to be received by ASETS agreement holders and Indigenous leadership on what is working and what could be improved for future Indigenous labour market programming.

Engagement is continuing over summer and fall 2016. Those who prefer formal written comments can find the discussion guide developed for the National ASETS Meeting online at http://www.esdc.gc.ca/en/consultations/aboriginal_skills_employment_training.page