

Stakeholder Summary

Some apprentices lack foundational math, reading, document use skills

Some apprentices lack foundational math, reading and document use skills, which might contribute to low apprenticeship completion rates, according to a report from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO).

Amid concerns by college educators about essential skill levels required for in-school and on-the-job success, an online essential skills assessment tool that measures the three skills was examined at three Ontario colleges. Although the study, *Evaluating Essential Skills for Ontario's Tradespeople (ESOT) Project*, experienced low participation rates in several phases, test results in one phase provided some evidence to support educators' concerns.

Project description

The focus of the study was the Essential Skills for Ontario's Tradespeople (ESOT) assessment tool, modeled after a similar tool from British Columbia's Industry Training Authority. The ESOT assesses math, reading and document use skills – providing immediate feedback to the test taker and comparing his or her skills to those needed for any one of the 53 nationally recognized Red Seal trades. Assessment results identify areas for improvement and provide the test-taker with a customized training plan and free learning resources.

Conducted over an 18-month period, the study explored whether the use of ESOT during the first stage of an apprenticeship would result in improved academic performance during subsequent in-school training. Apprentices in Red Seal trades attending level 1 training at Conestoga College (Kitchener), Algonquin College (Ottawa) and Cambrian College (Sudbury) were invited to assess their essential skills at the time of their apprenticeship registration and, if needed, upgrade their skills prior to attending their first level of in-school training. In addition, focus groups were conducted with the three stakeholder groups: apprentices, local staff from the three participating colleges and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, which is responsible for ensuring that the contract between the apprentice, the employer and the Province of Ontario is signed.

Findings

While the study encountered low participation rates and was not able to follow the same cohort of apprentices from registration to their first in-school training period, one phase of the study had higher participation rates and yielded some insights. In this phase, 400 level 1 apprentices from the three colleges were invited to take the ESOT assessment and 106 did so. The test results indicated that one-fifth did not meet the minimum skill levels in reading and document use, and an even larger group did not meet some of the minimum skill levels in math.

Focus group discussions also yielded some insights into the level of preparation of incoming apprentices, the nature and use of existing essential skills training assistance and the usability of the ESOT tool, with participants in all groups strongly recommending mandatory skills assessment at the beginning of the in-school portion of the apprentice's training, at a minimum. The ESOT tool was found to be easy to use and interpret, according to those apprentices who tried the online self-assessment.

Further research

Studies that follow the same apprentices from registration through their in-school training will be required to clearly link the use of the ESOT (or similar) self-assessment tool to in-school success, say the authors. Also needed are strategies to ensure that larger numbers of apprentices agree to participate in the research project. Further, unless the assessment of essential skills is mandatory and/or integrated into the apprenticeship lifecycle, it is unlikely that apprentices will voluntarily take advantage of tools such as ESOT.

The authors of *Evaluating Essential Skills for Ontario's Tradespeople (ESOT) Project* are Bea Clark and Marti Jurmain, College Sector Committee for Adult Upgrading