

Learning What Works

Evidence from SRDC's social experiments and research

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A new chapter for Life After High School

Navigating the maze of postsecondary programs, financing options, and application processes can be daunting for high school students, particularly if few among their families or peers can provide guidance. *Life After High School* is a workshop-based program intended to increase postsecondary program awareness and application rates in high schools with low rates of postsecondary attendance. SRDC previously piloted *Life After High School* in British Columbia and Ontario. The Ontario trial — funded by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities — has entered a new phase to prepare the program for possible wider implementation.

Life After High School (LAHS) is delivered through facilitated workshops using on-line tools for grade 12 students. Participants initially learn about the benefits and costs of postsecondary studies. They are then guided through the process of selecting a postsecondary program, applying for a place in that program, and applying for financial aid.

The current phase of LAHS introduces two innovations. First, based on consultations with program partners, the program will be streamlined to maximize effectiveness and efficiency. Second, the added impact of waiving the fees for either the consolidated university or community college application will be tested.

Like earlier LAHS pilots, this phase is being conducted as a randomized controlled trial. A total of 66 Ontario high schools have been assigned to one of five program groups or to a control group. A total of 28 high schools will be piloting a version of the program. Randomization enables unbiased calculations of program modifications and fee-waiver impacts on subsequent postsecondary application rates, enrolment rates, and financial aid receipt. The final report will be prepared in February 2016.

For more information [contact Reuben Ford](#).

The promises and challenges of social financing for employment and training programs

“The Government of Canada is a very keen partner of the growing and dynamic field of social enterprise, we’re open to your ideas about how we can clear the brush where it exists, where there are barriers to the availability of capital, to creative financing in the non-profit and charitable sectors.”

Jason Kenney, Minister of Employment and Social Development.
Social Enterprise World Forum. October 3, 2013.

Minister Kenney’s speech highlighted the potential of social financing tools to stimulate innovations in the design and delivery of employment programs while also pointing out that the devil would be in the details. These themes echo the conclusions of a research paper SRDC recently completed for Employment and Social Development Canada: *Can social finance improve the outcomes of employment and training programs?*

Social finance refers to methods of financing the delivery of employment or social services that promote both social goals and financial returns for investors and entrepreneurs. It can apply to well-established enterprises like Goodwill Industries or more recent innovations like social impact bonds whose returns are based on the achievement of program goals.

The paper identifies six program and financing models that fit under the social financing umbrella: the employment model, fee-for-service model, financial incentives, social purpose businesses, pay-for-success financing, and public-private partnerships.

The ultimate goal for any social finance model is to scale up proven local innovations to efficiently improve outcomes for disadvantaged groups in society. But the paper notes there is an additional benefit specific to employment and training programs – social finance models by their very nature intensify engagement with employers – something that most commentators agree has been lacking in these programs.

Since some social financing models reward investors and service delivery agencies based on program outcomes and/or government savings, one of the main challenges is to improve the measurement of program outcomes to effectively support such transactions. Such information will also be required to accurately determine which local innovations are primary candidates for broader implementation.

[Read the paper.](#)

Building workplace essential skills for the long run

How durable are the effects of workplace literacy and essential skills (LES) training programs? *Measures of Success* set out to design and test a state-of-the-art evaluation model that addresses this question. The Centre for Literacy of Quebec led the project with funding provided by the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, Employment and Social Development Canada. The evaluation model, developed by SRDC, was implemented in training programs delivered by Workplace Education Manitoba and the Nova Scotia Department of Labour and Advanced Education.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that well-designed workplace literacy and essential skills programs can improve workers' scores on standardized skills tests and workplace-specific performance measures, but very few examined how these results hold up over the long run. *Measures of Success* developed and tested a program model that produced numerous insights on the medium- and longer-run outcomes of workplace essential skills training.

The training program resulted in a range of measured benefits for workers. Participants gained confidence in their ability to apply essential skills in and outside of the workplace. This confidence was supported by increased daily use of literacy skills and coincided with significant improvements in 11 job performance indicators. Participants also reported improvements in other aspects of their lives that may contribute to further skill development: increased job satisfaction, life satisfaction and trust, and expanded personal networks.

Significantly, the results suggest that workplace LES training may work for groups often thought to benefit less from training. Post-training gains were seen among a range of learners, including those with lower education, immigrants with English as a second language, and older workers.

While employers obviously benefit from the increased job performance of program participants, they also reported training-related improvements in a number of workplace outcomes. At least half the employers in the study reported gains in productivity, employee-management relations, learning culture, and work quality that they judged were directly or likely attributable to the training program.

The *Measures of Success* evaluation was based on a framework that accounts for the effects of individual and workplace contexts and the mediating factors on intermediate and long-term outcomes. The study included 18 workplaces and 226 employees in a range of industries in Nova Scotia and Manitoba. The results are based on a non-experimental research design grounded in the theory of change.

[Read the executive summary.](#)

[Read the full report.](#)

New insights on Canada's literacy and essential skills workers

Poor literacy and essential skills are associated with poverty, low-wage work, unemployment, and social exclusion. Literacy and essential skills (LES) workers comprise the front line in efforts to address this social issue, but until now very little was known about this group. The Canadian

Literacy and Learning Network engaged SRDC to conduct the first nation-wide survey of LES practitioners to fill this information gap. The project was funded by the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills of Employment and Social Development Canada. The survey identified several key issues in the sector: the short-term nature of employment contracts, a lack of benefits, a lack of advancement opportunities and skills recognition, and an aging workforce.

Literacy and essential skills workers have much higher levels of educational attainment than the general population. Three quarters have a bachelor's degree and more than half of that group hold a degree, certificate, or diploma beyond the bachelor level. The vast majority have at least some post-secondary training related to education, but less than half held certification directly related to LES. Nevertheless, 85 per cent of respondents reported that LES credentials were important to their jobs.

Almost half of LES jobs are temporary and nearly a third are part-time, yet practitioners are highly committed to their work and report high levels of overall job satisfaction. On the other hand, the majority are not satisfied with certain aspects of their jobs, particularly the lack of advancement opportunities, pensions, benefits, and longer-term job stability.

The report also noted that almost 40 per cent of LES workers were age 55 or older, double the proportion in the workforce at large. This suggests that succession and recruitment could be issues for the profession in the near future.

LES practitioners face diverse service delivery challenges. They work in a variety of delivery settings and serve diverse client groups. Half are employed in either local LES organizations or postsecondary institutions. The other half are distributed among school boards, social service organizations, training and employment service providers, government offices, Aboriginal organizations, or other establishments.

The vast majority of LES practitioners either work in small establishments or smaller work units within larger organizations, where they represent a minority of the workforce. Most perform a range of administrative and other tasks, in addition to instruction, necessitating significant multi-tasking and flexibility. Despite a trend to digital forms of training delivery in other fields, traditional modes of delivery dominate LES instruction.

The survey paints a comprehensive empirical picture of literacy and essential skills practitioners and their human resource needs, and is a key component of a major LES labour market study being conducted by the Canadian Literacy and Learning Network.

Among other recommendations, the report suggests that a network of stakeholders be formed to monitor professional standards and support the development of career pathways by linking standards of practice and certification with training and other professional development opportunities.

The complete survey results will be released in early December 2013 in coordination with the publication of CLLN's labour market study. The report will cover the design and development of the survey; the demographic and educational characteristics of the LES workforce; training and professional development activities; and employer supports, skills recognition, and service delivery resources. It will also include a series of conclusions and policy recommendations.

For more information [contact David Gyarmati](#).

Assessing the manageability of student loan payments

A recent SRDC study, contracted by Alberta Enterprise and Advanced Education, addressed the conceptual and empirical aspects of student debt manageability. The Manageable Student Debt Threshold Research project used a number of methods to understand how debt manageability is conceptualized, measured, and incorporated into lending practices in Canada and other jurisdictions. The study also used Statistics Canada data to estimate the proportions of student borrowers that correspond to the varying definitions of manageability identified.

The study found that a range of concepts are used to gauge the manageability of student debt, from an “8 per cent of income” rule of thumb to more broadly-defined debt servicing ratios to measures based on the postsecondary education earnings premium. These concepts have been built into a variety of payment programs, such as the Canada Student Loans Repayment Assistance Plan, that use income tests to adjust the affordability of loan repayments.

The empirical analysis found that sizable minorities of student borrowers had repayments above most manageability thresholds. This finding was reinforced by the opinions of key informants, many of whom noted a connection between the manageability of student debt and the financial capabilities of borrowers.

[Read the final report.](#)

Extending the horizon of *Future to Discover*

Can well-designed high school programs help more students from low-income families or with less-educated parents enrol in postsecondary studies? That was the key question for the *Future to Discover* demonstration project conducted by SRDC in the provinces of New Brunswick and Manitoba. The project, funded by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, followed two cohorts of grade 10 students through the remainder of their high school careers and two years beyond. SRDC recently reached an agreement with the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to extend the project’s follow-up period by four years.

Future to Discover included two long-term programs delivered in high schools. *Explore Your Horizons* offered students enhanced career planning and detailed information about postsecondary programs through workshops offered in grades 10 to 12. The workshops enabled students to assess the costs and benefits of a postsecondary education and walked them through the application process. *Learning Accounts* provided students from lower-income families with accumulating bursaries based on completion of each of grades 10 through 12, subject to the pursuit of postsecondary studies. The interventions’ outcomes were tested separately and in combination by way of a random control design. Positive impacts on rates of postsecondary enrolment were noted for a number of the targeted groups in New Brunswick.

[Read the Future to Discover Post-secondary Impacts Report.](#)

[Read the Executive Summary.](#)

The new agreement extends the study period to include up to seven years after high school – covering the university, community college, and early working careers of most participants. The extension will thus enable examination of the programs’ effects not only on access to higher education, but also on postsecondary graduation rates and labour market outcomes. The additional data will be collected solely through the linkage of administrative data from postsecondary institutions and government databases, resulting in no further response burden on participants.

Building Foundations for labour market success

Those with low levels of literacy and essential skills are over-represented among social assistance recipients, the unemployed, and low-wage workers. Such individuals often find it difficult to navigate the maze of available programs intended to develop more marketable skills. The *Foundations Workplace Skills Research Project* is a three-year initiative led by the Training Group at Douglas College to test a new model of skill assessment and program delivery focused on the needs of low-skilled job seekers. SRDC developed the evaluation framework and research design for *Foundations*, and will conduct the implementation, impact, and cost-benefit analyses.

Foundations incorporates an initial assessment of core literacy skills, an audit of workplace essential skills, assistance in researching the skill requirements of clients’ target occupations, development of an action plan, and implementation of the plan through off-the-shelf and individually-customized training activities. The program can take up to 12 weeks to complete, depending on the requirements of participants. *Foundations* is being tested at Douglas College in British Columbia, Conestoga College in Ontario, and College of the North Atlantic in Newfoundland.

To support rigorous impact and return-on-investment analyses, *Foundations* is being conducted as a randomized control trial. The 1,000 participants will be randomly assigned to program or control groups. Skill assessments and other participant information will be collected at enrolment and after 12 weeks. A follow-up focusing on longer-term outcomes will be fielded within 12 months.

The multi-site delivery of *Foundations* will contribute to a rigorous implementation evaluation of the program. In addition to a detailed cost analysis, the evaluation will monitor implementation challenges at each site and seek to establish conditions and practices under which the program model can be most effectively delivered.

Information sessions and enrolment for the initial *Foundations* programs are set to begin in the fall of 2013. All follow-ups and evaluations are scheduled to be completed by the summer of 2016.

For more information [contact Boris Palameta](#).

Starting a virtuous cycle for low-skilled service workers

Many service industry workers are caught in a viscous cycle of poor skills, low productivity, and low wages. SRDC recently participated in an innovative program designed to break this cycle by providing essential skills and sector-specific training for retail and tourism workers in British

Columbia. The Workplace Training Program, led by Douglas College and delivered by the BC Consortium for Skills Development, yielded very promising results on a number of fronts.

Participants followed a highly structured curriculum that targeted basic skills like document literacy and numeracy, non-cognitive skills like problem solving and perseverance, and sector-specific skills like customer service and product knowledge. SRDC's evaluation found significant improvements in participants' test scores, attitudes, and self-assessed job performance. Performance improvements were corroborated in interviews with employers that pinpointed their estimates of the business value of the training.

During the study period, 14 colleges delivered the program to over 1,000 employees representing 430 workplaces. The majority of participants lived in low-income households and had low essential skills scores when they entered the program. Improvements in scores were consistent across delivery sites and key participant characteristics, such as education level, immigrant status, and Aboriginal identification.

The Workplace Training Program incorporates a number of elements found to be effective in rigorous evaluations of workforce development programs. In addition to the integration of industry-specific and essential skills training, industry partnerships ensured employers were engaged in the design and delivery of the program. Delivery through British Columbia's colleges made use of existing infrastructure and contributed to the consistent positive results. Participants were also offered a financial incentive of \$500 for finishing the program, resulting in an 88 per cent completion rate.

With funding provided through the Canada–British Columbia Labour Market Agreement, the Workplace Training Program illustrates that sound program design, evidence-based program features, and consistent delivery standards can all contribute to better outcomes for workers and employers.

[Read the outcomes report.](#)

SRDC welcomes Guy Lacroix to its Board of Directors

SRDC is delighted that Guy Lacroix has joined its Board of Directors. Dr. Lacroix is a professor of economics at Université Laval. His research focuses on the application of labour economics and econometric techniques to social assistance, training, and employment programs — key areas of practice for SRDC.

Professor Lacroix is a fellow of the Centre interuniversitaire sur le risque, les politiques économiques et l'emploi; the Center for Interuniversity Research and Analysis of Organizations (CIRANO); and the Institute for the Study of Labor. He is a frequent advisor to the government of Quebec and has worked with SRDC on a number of projects. He has recently published in the Journal of Political Economy, the Economic Journal, the Journal of Public Economics, the Journal of Health Economics, and the Journal of Population Economics.

Dr. Lacroix earned his Ph.D. in Economics at Université Laval and Masters and Honours BA at the University of Ottawa. He also completed postdoctoral studies at Princeton University.

In memoriam: Doug Tattrie

SRDC 1996-2013



Dr. Doug Tattrie, SRDC senior research associate, passed away in the Vancouver General Hospital on October 7, 2013 after a three-and-a-half-year battle with cancer.

Doug has been a key contributor to nearly every major SRDC experiment since joining the organization in 1996. Doug contributed to the design and implementation of large-scale demonstrations and small research projects alike. He made major contributions to the design of several innovative randomized experiments in the areas of welfare-to-work programs, employment insurance, disability supports, education, literacy training in the workplace, and tax policy. He also managed a series of working papers using data from the Self-Sufficiency Project for the federal-provincial symposium, Making Work Pay. Doug chaired an internal SRDC committee related to statistical and technical methodologies and was SRDC's lead adviser on econometric issues.

Doug Tattrie also conducted research on workers' compensation policy at the Workers Compensation Research Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In his prior career as a journalist, he conducted interviews and wrote newspaper articles on a wide variety of important political and social issues.

Dr. Tattrie received his Ph.D. in Economics from Queen's University where he also received his M.A. in Economics; he received his B.A. in Economics from the University of Alberta and a Bachelor of Applied Arts (Journalism) from Ryerson Polytechnic Institute.

Doug was highly regarded by his current and former SRDC colleagues who witnessed his exceptional spirit and wicked sense of humour even at the worst of times during his illness. His presence and the many happy memories that remain have left an indelible mark on all of our lives and his absence will be deeply felt throughout the organization for years to come.

SRDC's board of directors and entire staff convey their sincere condolences to Doug Tattrie's family.

Articles we like

Practical Evaluation Strategies for Building a Body of Proven-Effective Social Programs: Suggestions for Research and Program Funders.

The Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy. October 2013.

The Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy is an American non-profit organization dedicated to increasing government effectiveness by promoting the highest standards of program evaluation. In this brief guide, the Coalition points out that most programs that have been rigorously evaluated have had negligible impacts. Rather than despairing at this situation, the Coalition treats it as a call to arms. They make a series of step-by-step recommendations to maximize the probability that program investments will result in positive returns for participants and the taxpayer:

- Recognize that programs in the design and development phase may not be ready for rigorous evaluation.
- For programs that are ready for evaluation, use random assignment techniques whenever possible, using evaluators experienced in such techniques.
- To reduce costs, embed evaluation principles such as random assignment and outcome measurement into program operations.
- Due to their high cost, comprehensive evaluations should be focused on the most promising and best designed interventions.
- Evaluations should be staged so that long-term outcomes are only evaluated once intermediate impacts have been established.

[Read the article.](#)