**PROJECT REPORT SUMMARY**

**Adult ESL Class Online (AECO)**

Agreement #: 095223549
Funded by Alberta Labour
Innovative Projects – Language for Workforce Attachment (E-Learning)

**Overview**
From February 1st, 2017 to April 16th, 2018, the Calgary Immigrant Educational Society (CIES) in Calgary, Alberta developed and delivered an e-learning pilot project around English language training for job search skills and workforce attachment. This project, Adult ESL Class Online (AECO), was designed to address the growing need for Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) English language training and digital literacy support, specifically to find employment opportunities in Alberta. CIES had also identified that many clients are prevented from attending in-person trainings due to limiting barriers such as: lack of childcare, disability / health problems, transportation, conflicting work schedules, or office hours / training schedules. To meet this need, CIES proposed the combination of its Drop-In ESL Curriculum and CIES|Learn Learning Management System (LMS) to create short, interactive online language lessons for learners of CLB 3-4. During this 30-hour course, AECO would provide students with a weekly instructional webinar, teacher support, and self-directed learning activities.

Following an 8-month development cycle, AECO offered two delivery cohorts (intended 14 clients each). Following the delivery period, the full AECO courseware was packaged into an open-educational resource (OER) which is available to all instructors and immigrant-serving organizations to utilize, edit, copy, and improve upon to further their own capacity building and e-learning services.

This report summary is intended to share some of the knowledge and insights gleaned from the project and is intended to serve as a public report. Access to the project materials can be made by going to <https://www.immigrant-education.ca/CIESLearn/> and by contacting CIES for log-in assistance.

# **Development & Delivery**

The development process addressed the likelihood that many students of CLB 3-4 would start at entry-level jobs. As such, the learning framework was made to reflect 12 sets of themed-outcomes pertaining to: the Canadian job market, job advertisements, applications, hidden opportunities, networking, resume writing, cover letters, pre-and-post interview strategies, follow-up, and workplace situations / workplace behaviour. Considering these needs, the development team formed 12 units of interactive activities which utilized an assortment of slides, media, forums, and assessment tasks that were supported by the weekly instructor webinar and one-to-one guidance.

Over the project timeline, AECO conducted intake activities for 75 clients and increased its intake to address possible student retention rates and “start-stop” drop-outs. As such, a total of 39 clients were deemed “eligible” and received direct service rather than the initially estimated 28.

# **Results**

Cohort 1 served 19 clients with 69% having completed all the necessary course materials and passed *or* exited the project early having found employment or enrollment in another e-learning project. Cohort 2 served 20 clients with 30% completing/exiting under the same metric.

We understand that the completion rate during the delivery stage was lower than anticipated. This was due to numerous reasons including medical/maternity leave, poor attendance, and deciding not to pursue future employment. These reasons indicate that there are multiple barriers for student completion. The second indicator of these lower completion rates that would be useful to observe in future projects is that synchronous learning needs to be enhanced for greater retention and completion for those who struggle with e-learning as a model.

Student feedback was collected in a post-course survey and follow-up project survey and the results were largely positive. 94% replied that they had increased their English communications skills as a result of the project and 75% replied that AECO had helped them improve their digital literacy and computer skills. We are proud to report that 88% had increased their knowledge of job search & career advancement skills and 66% said that they had found employment following the course (100% stating that they’d used the lessons in AECO to do so) compared to 17% who had stopped looking, and 17% that said that they were still looking.

## **Lessons Learned**

Over the course of the project the AECO team received valuable capacity-building lessons in the following categories.

* With ever-evolving technology and different LMS platforms, the formation of an e-learning team inevitably requires professional development support. In our experience, this can be best accomplished if: (a) staff have the resources to experiment and upgrade their skills, (b) staff have a strong IT and design support on-hand to assist, (c) an advisory council of other e-learning professionals who can review development and provide insight at critical points.
* Leaving forums to the end of a unit frequently resulted in clients treating them as an afterthought. To foster engagement between students, it is recommended to move forum activities to the middle/beginning of a unit *and* to sign up students for email-notifications when posts are made to encourage engagement.
* Many students have not participated in an e-learning class before, and as such may not have developed habits of self-study. This flexibility can result in procrastination, so we suggest establishing specific calendar deadlines to avoid a “last-minute surge” of activity submissions before the next week’s teacher-interaction.
* The importance of a clear navigation menu cannot be understated. In the future we would suggest changing text navigation into icons and making use of more visual aids. The ability to do so is limited by technical/design constraints, and would require accompanying legends, but can better direct clients (especially during asynchronous activities). This increased emphasis on navigation design carriers over to prominent “contact” blocks where clients can contact the office for assistance, or are reminded of how to get in touch with their instructor.
* To better assist students with higher levels of listening and speaking (compared to reading and writing) we learned that the inclusion of audio recordings *with* text instructions can better support students with different sets of strengths.
* The most successful learning activities have been those that support real-world skills in ways that motivate learners by helping them craft materials such as resumes and cover letters. This transference of outputs presents students with not only an ability to improve their communication skills, but a way to help them connect with prospective job markets.
* Orientation materials are mandatory to provide students with the expectations regarding e-learning. AECO provided video materials for orientation and would recommend future projects dedicate time to the design of these materials as they also serve as an introduction to digital literacy skills required for the course.
* During an asynchronous method of delivery, student progression rates operate in isolation rather than a combined learning environment. As such, we suggest the future e-learning projects place a larger emphasis on the one-on-one integration of e-learning, rather than classroom-based activities. This can also be seen in the “gating” of content that can either hold students back, or keep students from advancing quickly.
* The format of an Open Educational Resource (OER) invites many challenges, notably ensuring consistency when the materials are shared. Linking to supplementary resources outside of the LMS are not encouraged, and hosting all materials by the curriculum development team are preferred to put less strain on service providers or instructors looking to adopt an OER.
* Based on repeated outcomes in client retention rates, we would predict that future projects similar to AECO could expect a minimum 25% drop-out rate from enrolment due to difficulties with e-learning and decisions that their goals had changed since joining the project. The former would be a significant barrier to address, as it can be better prevented by increases in pre-entry orientation, digital literacy training, and ongoing support.

## **Recognition**

AECO was made possible thanks to the funding support of Alberta Labour’s Innovative Projects - Language for Workforce Attachment (E-Learning) and the guidance of an Advisory Committee members from NorQuest College, The Centre for Education and Training, and Columbia College.