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An Analysis of a Foundational Learning Program in BC: the Foundations Workplace Skills Program (FWSP) at Douglas College

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“An analysis of a foundational learning program in BC: the *Foundations Workplace Skills Program* (FWSP) at Douglas College”

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Abstract

In this paper, we analyze the workings of a small-scale program involving foundational learning that is targeted at unemployed workers in Surrey, BC by exploiting information contained in the administrative data set that was compiled through its execution. Although this data set contains huge gaps and has a structure that is far from ideal, it contains some information regarding outcomes for the participants and outputs generated by the operations of the program. We investigate three outcomes for the participants of this program, namely i) a return to work, ii) a return to school, and iii) an improvement in the score obtained from a diagnostic test that gauges literacy and essential skills. We also make recommendations in regards to developing a data set that would be suitable for designing and carrying out an evaluation of labour market interventions such as the one covered in this paper.

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Keywords: literacy and essential skills, foundational learning, program evaluation

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Executive Summary

This paper analyzes the workings of the *Foundations Workplace Skills Program* (FWSP), a small-scale intervention providing foundational learning (also known as literacy and essential skills, or LES) that is targeted at unemployed workers situated in Surrey, BC. It involves exploiting information contained in the administrative data set that was compiled through its delivery. The service provider is the training group at Douglas College. The program is delivered at no charge to the participants. The targeted clientele consists of unemployed individuals of any working age, many of whom are immigrants or displaced workers, who are thought to be deficient in essential skills. The program is designed to further develop broadly applicable, general skills - without delivering any formal credentials - with an eye towards preparation for and facilitation of long-term labour force attachment. It is a re-employment service aimed at diagnosing and partially filling gaps in foundational skills in relation to the clients' career aspirations. A key and somewhat rare feature of the treatment is the elaboration of a customized plan to address these gaps at an individualized level.

The stated program objectives are to assist unemployed individuals in:

- developing an awareness, validation, and confirmation of skill levels (literacy, document use and numeracy) with the aid of the standardized *Test of Workplace Essential Skills* (TOWES) to provide direction for planning the appropriate next steps to employment or re-employment
- understanding and articulating their skills in relation to working in the labour market
- acquiring basic essential skills required for success in working, learning, and vocational life
- achieving long-term labour market attachment.

The intervention is structured according to three consecutive phases, each of which is considered to be a separate sub-program, which consist of activities such as:

1. assessing the participants, instilling awareness of the importance of LES, taking the TOWES exam for the first time
2. holding workshops, profiling, auditing, and articulating skills, relating skills to vocational goals, matching skills with job requirements, exposing participants to all nine of the essential and employability skills laid out by the Conference Board of Canada, instilling the notion of transferability of skills

and knowledge, conducting some research and providing some information regarding potential occupations

3. enhancing and developing foundational skills, targeting skills deficits, executing relevant software and internet applications available for career planning, learning how to learn with an eye on establishing a career, learning how to avoid skill loss in the future, providing some supplementary counseling regarding LES, retaking the TOWES exam (in order to assess progress).

Although this data set contains huge gaps and has a structure that is far from ideal for the purposes of empirical analysis, it does contain some information regarding outcomes for the participants and outputs that are generated by the operations of the program. Our analysis of the FWSP is carried out in four steps: 1) assess whether participants who completed the program's three phases and took the TOWES exam for a second time improved their score, 2) investigate whether there are, among these participants, any easily identifiable groups of individuals who seem to exhibit more improvement than others, 3) identify, if any, the types of participants who are more likely to complete (or to exit prematurely) the program, and 4) for each phase, analyze the likely outcomes and their potential determinants.

Out of the 1,625 participants who started phase 1, only 314 remained in the program long enough to complete phase 3 and retake the TOWES exam. For this select group of program participants, post-treatment test scores are significantly higher than their initial scores. The mean improvement for each subject was 51.9, 37.3, and 38.3 percent of a standard deviation for document use, numeracy, and reading, respectively. On the other hand, neither the initial score level nor the degree of improvement that was realized seem to be correlated with the probability of finding a job. It appears that younger participants exhibited greater improvements than did their older counterparts, all other factors held constant. While participants who took the TOWES twice improved their scores, it is impossible (given the data constraints) to know whether this improvement is attributable to the FWSP or simply due to the fact that participants are more familiar with the test the second time that they take it. The empirical patterns that we have uncovered pertaining to phases one and two suggest that the selection process leading up to phase 3, during which the second TOWES test is taken, constitutes a negative selection process in which the remaining participants tend to have lower cognitive skill levels.

We conclude our study by making recommendations in regards to developing a new data set that would be suitable for designing and carrying out a rigorous, scientific, empirical evaluation of labour market interventions like the one that is covered in this paper. In particular, we describe the construction of i) a potential 'control' group, ii) a survey questionnaire containing participant information, and iii) an

administrative data base that would track individuals' participation status and outcomes across phases of the program as well as over chronological time. The objective of all of these research instruments is to conduct a non-experimental evaluation of the benefits of a skills development program. Once credible estimates are attained, they could be related to cost estimates (which are usually much easier to obtain) in order to investigate the net benefits attributed to interventions such as the FWSP.