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Evaluation of the Aboriginal Skills and Training Strategic Investment Fund

Final Report
October 2013

*Evaluation of the
Aboriginal Skills and Training
Strategic Investment Fund*

Final report

*Strategic Evaluation
Evaluation Directorate
Strategic Policy and Research Branch
Employment and Social Development Canada*

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Table of Contents

List of Acronyms	iii
Executive Summary	v
Aboriginal Skills and Training Strategic Investment Fund.....	v
Purpose and Scope of the Evaluation.....	vi
Major Findings and Conclusions	vii
Management Response	xi
1. Introduction.....	1
1.1 Overview of Aboriginal Skills and Training Strategic Investment Fund.....	1
1.2 Program Objectives and Intended Outcomes.....	1
1.3 Targeted Clientele and Delivery Organizations	2
1.4 Application Process	3
1.5 Profile of the Funded Projects.....	3
2. Evaluation Methodology	5
2.1 Evaluation Issues and Questions.....	5
2.2 Data Collection	5
2.3 Data Analysis	7
2.4 Strengths and Limitations	8
3. Success in Assisting Clients	11
3.1 Profile of Participants.....	11
3.2 Success in Addressing Systemic Gaps.....	14
3.3 Training and Employment	18
3.4 Success in Helping Multi-Barriered Clients	22
4. Design and Delivery	29
4.1 Partnerships.....	29
4.2 Leverage.....	31
4.3 Relationship to Other Programming.....	33
4.4 Administrative Costs.....	36
4.5 Performance Measurement	39
4.6 Factors Contributing to and Constraining Aboriginal Skills and Training Strategic Investment Fund Success	45
5. Conclusions.....	49
Appendix 1 – Evaluation Issues, Questions and Data Sources	55

List of Tables

Table 1	Approved ASTSIF projects by type.....	3
Table 2	EI activity during the three reference periods.....	11
Table 3	Incidence of income sources and average incomes	12
Table 4	Incidence of income sources and average income levels amongst men and women.....	13
Table 5	Types of employment interventions by type of project.....	18
Table 6	Participant employment and income outcomes	22
Table 7	Employment status by barrier to employment.....	25
Table 8	Funding leveraged by ASTSIF projects.....	32
Table 9	ASTSIF budget breakdown.....	36
Table 10	Project administration costs as reported by project proponents.....	37
Table 11	Cost per client analysis	38
Table 12	Comparison of average cost per intervention between ASTSIF and AHRDA.....	39
Table 13	Percentage of ASTSIF projects which submitted performance data	41
Exhibit A-1	Evaluation Matrix	55

List of Figures

Figure 1: Status of participants at time of survey	21
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List of Acronyms

ASTSIF	Aboriginal Skills and Training Strategic Investment Fund
AHRDS	Aboriginal Human Resources Development Strategy
APEs	Action Plan Equivalents
ASEP	Aboriginal Skills and Employment Partnership Program
ASETS	Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy
CRA	Canada Revenue Agency
EI	Employment Insurance
GED	General Educational Development
HRSDC*	Human Resources and Skills Development Canada
LPN	Licensed Practical Nurse
SIN	Social Insurance Number

* As of July 2013, the official names of the minister and department are the Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, and the Department of Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC).

The name of the previous department, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), is used in this report in a historical context only.

Executive Summary

Aboriginal Skills and Training Strategic Investment Fund

In the 2009 budget, as part of Canada's Economic Action Plan, the federal government announced \$75 million in funding for the Aboriginal Skills and Training Strategic Investment Fund (ASTSIF) over two years (from April 1, 2009 to March 31, 2011). The Fund provided support for short-term, focused initiatives designed to help Aboriginal Canadians obtain the specific training they require to benefit from employment opportunities.

This initiative was brought forth to provide immediate assistance to Aboriginal Canadians affected by the 2008 economic downturn. This economic context required ASTSIF projects to be designed and delivered quickly. As such, projects were constrained by limited time available to fully carry out their planning, implementation and data collection activities. No project was longer than 18 months in duration and all program activities were finalized by March 31, 2011.

Eighty-six projects were funded including:

- 33 regional training-to-employment projects with a budget of \$32.4 million. Training-to-employment projects provided Aboriginal people with opportunities through which they could gain on-the-job work experience, develop job-specific skills, and obtain counselling and other support.
- 34 regional skills development projects with a budget of \$20.9 million. Skills development projects involved interventions (i.e. essential skills training, employment services, and other services) targeted at clients, particularly youth, facing multiple barriers to employment.
- 7 regional service improvement projects with a budget of \$3.3 million, most commonly aimed at improving delivery of labour market services to Aboriginal people (e.g. through the instruction of trainers or employment counsellors).
- 12 national projects with a budget of \$7.0 million, which were expected to result in the development of tools, delivery of services or development of practices that could enhance existing services. Four of the 12 national projects involved the delivery of services to clients.

All Aboriginal people living either on or off-reserve, including in urban centres, were eligible to participate in ASTSIF. Youth aged 15 to 30 years needing skills upgrading and clients facing multiple barriers to employment were identified as the highest priorities.

Purpose and Scope of the Evaluation

The evaluation was conducted in 2011–2012 and 2012–2013. Although ASTSIF itself has ended, the results of this evaluation will contribute to the development and implementation of other programs and initiatives related to the employment of Aboriginal people. Towards that end, the evaluation has identified lessons and best practices that could be considered in the design of future projects and programs. In addition, the evaluation focused on assessing the impact of the projects on participants as well as on issues related to the design and delivery, particularly the development of partnerships, leveraging, ASTSIF’s relationship to other programming, administrative costs, and performance measurement.

This report presents findings from multiple lines of evidence including:

- A document, file and literature review;
- A detailed assessment, focusing on a sample of ten projects, of the quality and integrity of client administrative data;
- Interviews with 103 key informants including 5 HRSDC representatives, 68 project proponents, and 30 key partners involved in ASTSIF projects;
- Development of a new database and participant profiles based on nearly 5,000 participant records submitted by ASTSIF project proponents;
- A survey of 514 participants in ASTSIF projects; and
- An analysis of the survey data linked to Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) files as well as Employment Insurance (EI) administrative data.

There are some limitations associated with the evaluation. In particular, at the time of the evaluation, very limited post-program CRA and EI data on participants were available. Most ASTSIF participants completed the Program in 2010 or 2011 and the most recent CRA data available for the evaluation was the 2010 calendar year. Similarly post-program EI data were sparse. While EI data from 2012 were available, much of the post-program EI data that was received for the evaluation were preliminary. In addition, there are issues related to the completeness of the administrative data which were collected by project proponents and submitted to HRSDC.

Major Findings and Conclusions

Participant Outcomes

According to ASTSIF participants and proponents of the funded projects, the training provided by ASTSIF resulted in increased skills, credentials, and experience amongst the participants.

- Most participants (91%) participated in training designed to enhance their skills related to a particular job or sector (29%), essential skills (24%), or both essential skills and skills related to a particular job or sector (38%).
- Most participants are satisfied with the services received (average rating of 4.2 out of 5, where 5 is very satisfied), completed the training (88%), and received a certificate or diploma upon completion (79% of those who completed).
- Most proponents and partners interviewed reported that the project was successful in increasing participant skills, education, and experience.
- Most survey participants indicated that they had improved their job-specific skills, that the project provided experience necessary to obtain suitable employment and further developed their essential skills, and that the project increased their confidence that they can obtain employment suitable for their skills.
- Almost one-half of the survey participants received on-the-job training or work experience, of which one-third continued to work with the organization after the program ended.

The increased skills, credentials and experience reported by program participants can improve the ability of participants to find employment or to access further training and education. At the time of the survey, 42% of the ASTSIF participants surveyed were employed full-time, employed part-time, or were operating their own business, and a further 10% were awaiting call-back from a seasonal job. Moreover, an additional 10% were enrolled in an education or training program. Labour force participation among survey respondents was just over 70% and the unemployment rate was approximately 21%. These percentages compare favourably to 2001 Census figures which indicate that the participation among Aboriginals was just over 60% and the unemployment rate was 19%. It thus appears that ASTSIF may have helped avoid further reductions in employment due to the economic downturn.

Most survey participants reported that the ASTSIF programming positively impacted their employment prospects and they were much less likely to identify a lack of education or experience as a barrier to employment than they were prior to participation. For some, however, personal or family issues and a lack of employment opportunities in the community continue to serve as barriers to forming a stronger attachment to the labour force. Participants with multiple barriers to employment, particularly those who reported some type of disability, were somewhat less likely to obtain employment after completion of the program. However, most of these participants still completed their training; were satisfied with the assistance received; and considered it to have helped them to further develop the essential skills needed in life and work. Therefore, the employability of participants appears to have improved due to ASTSIF.

Development of Partnerships and Leveraging of Resources

Projects were successful in establishing partnerships; 121 partner organizations were involved in the design and delivery of the 86 regional and national projects. In addition, ASTSIF projects also collaborated with a wide range of other organizations that contributed to project success but were not directly involved in the design and delivery of the projects.

Projects were also successful in leveraging HRSDC funding to obtain funding from other sources, although not to the level expected. Amongst those projects which reported leveraging data, an additional \$0.31 was leveraged from other sources for every dollar contributed by ASTSIF. This was equal to 63% of the amount expected. The shortfall was mainly attributed to the short timelines available for planning and starting-up the project, a lack of resources for fundraising, and limited interest from the private sector.

Relationship to Other Programming

ASTSIF was complementary to existing funding dedicated to Aboriginal people, particularly HRSDC's Aboriginal Human Resource Development Strategy (AHRDS), which was replaced by the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS) in 2010. To ensure coordination with AHRDS and ASETS, only Aboriginal Human Resource Development Agreement (AHRDA) holders were eligible to apply for ASTSIF regional project funding. ASTSIF provided funding to implement client driven projects and services that AHRDA holders otherwise may not have been able to undertake.

Requiring the involvement of AHRDA holders in regional projects also ensured that ASTSIF was coordinated with the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Partnership (ASEP). ASEP ended in March 2012 and was a targeted Aboriginal skills development program designed to promote employment for Aboriginal people in major economic developments. In all ASEP projects, AHRDAs or AHRDA third-party deliverers participated in the partnerships that developed, implemented and managed the multi-year training agreements.

The support provided by ASTSIF usually formed part of a broader series of interventions in which ASTSIF clients participated. Among survey respondents, 84% of ASTSIF participants also participated in interventions funded under other employment programs. Involvement in other interventions increases sharply in the years leading up to participation in ASTSIF (i.e. from 21% three years prior to 29% two years prior and 38% in the year prior) and during participation (54% annualized) before declining sharply in the year following (21%). Approximately one-third of the ASTSIF participants were involved in interventions supported under AHRDS in the five years prior to participation in ASTSIF and 34% were involved in AHRDS during or near the same time period they were involved in ASTSIF. Few were involved in interventions supported under ASEP.

Performance Measurement

The ASTSIF performance measurement strategy required projects to collect and report data on a wide range of indicators. All ASTSIF projects which served clients were required to collect and report data on individual clients. HRSDC received quarterly and annual reports from ASTSIF projects as required under the contribution agreements. Furthermore, the results of the interviews with the project proponents, supported by the data quality and integrity analysis of a sample of 10 ASTSIF projects, indicated that ASTSIF projects collected comprehensive information on client background, employability, and program participation. However, while comprehensive information was collected, much of that detailed information on characteristics, interventions and outcomes associated with individual clients was never submitted to HRSDC. When requested by HRSDC to submit client information for the purpose of the evaluation, 88% of regional projects and 44% of national projects serving clients eventually submitted client data, but most provided only some of the data which had been collected. All of the participant records which were submitted included participant names and most identified age, gender, disability status, education level, Aboriginal status, SINs, and marital status. However, data on program start date, end dates, completion, and types of interventions were available for only about half of the records. Moreover, all other data elements listed in the contribution agreements were not available for most records (e.g., employment history, employability, and post-program follow-up). Several factors contributed to difficulties in submitting the information collected: most proponents had paper-based information systems and thus very little data had been entered into electronic databases; ASTSIF projects had not been provided with a standard individual client form; and, the request to submit client information came after the ASTSIF program had ended. As such, proponents did not necessarily have the resources to respond or to respond fully to the request.

According to project proponents and HRSDC representatives involved in the ASTSIF, the performance measurement of similar future programs could be improved by allocating greater resources and time to train proponents and support data collection provisions; by ensuring consistency in reporting with other HRSDC programs; by simplifying reporting templates and better defining indicators; and by making outcome evaluations mandatory for larger projects.

Level of Administrative Costs

A limited cost analysis was undertaken which focused on examining administration costs. The ratio of HRSDC operating costs to program expenditures averaged 15% percent over the two years of the program. In addition, ASTSIF projects reported spending less than 17% of their total budget on administration (two-thirds of ASTSIF projects reported spending less than 15%), which for most proponents (70%) was similar to or lower than for other projects implemented by the proponents. Keeping the administrative cost low was one of the requirements highlighted by Service Canada during the application process. During the pre-approval phase, project proponents were instructed to submit a low administrative budget in order to be approved for ASTSIF funding. The main strategy employed by project proponents to keep administrative costs low was to cover some portion of expenditures with

in-kind and financial contributions from other sources including their own organizational resources. Those project proponents who noted above average administrative costs attributed the higher costs to the pilot nature of their project (which often involves higher start-up costs), the short-term nature of the project, the limited time available for planning, or the remoteness of the delivery areas (leading to higher travel costs).

Best Practices and Lessons Learned

A review of the literature suggests that ASTSIF projects are consistent with the types of programming that tend to be most effective in increasing labour market participation amongst Aboriginal people, particularly with respect to the focus on training and education; providing short-term employment training services which incorporate other types of support; and adopting a broad, holistic approach that incorporates culturally appropriate training. While most project proponents and key partners view ASTSIF as successful in addressing some of the systemic gaps that impede employment of Aboriginal workers, it is widely recognized that on-going efforts are required to achieve significant and sustainable progress.

Common attributes of programs that tend to be more successful in helping multi-barriered clients to further develop their skills and find employment are: a flexible design that enables services to be tailored to individual needs; a system to adequately assess participant skills at the beginning of the program; mentoring, coaching, and peer learning.

Some of the factors contributing to the success of the ASTSIF projects were the collaboration and cooperation among various partners, the commitment and skills of project proponents, availability of funding, and service delivery that was consistent with the Aboriginal culture and traditions. Project proponents and key partners also highlighted the importance of allowing sufficient time for planning, providing ongoing support, taking a holistic approach, and better supporting those who relocate for employment. Issues related to limited funding and time available to develop the projects, rigid program requirements, and the multiple and complex barriers faced by Aboriginal people are some of the factors identified as constraining success.

The lessons learned and best practices identified with respect to partnerships focused on the importance of having open communication with partners and stakeholders; allocating sufficient time to build partnerships with industries and employers (especially with non-Aboriginal employers); involving partners in early stages of project development; working with respected and reputable partners; establishing a clear vision and a set of objectives; and using steering committees strategically.

Management Response

Introduction

Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) is pleased to respond to the findings and conclusions of the “Evaluation of the Aboriginal Skills Training and Strategic Investment Fund (ASTSIF)”.

Background

ASTSIF was one of four initiatives of the Canada Skills and Transition Strategy – a component of Budget 2009’s economic stimulus package. At the time, Canada was entering a period of slowing economic activity and expected and ultimately experienced an increase in job losses and unemployment with disproportionate impacts for workers in certain sectors and communities including vulnerable workers with multiple barriers to employment such as Aboriginal Canadians.

The strategy focused primarily on increasing the availability of training. It also focused on assisting those immediately affected by the economic downturn, while also helping address future longer-term skills shortages. Emphasis was given to harnessing partnerships that could contribute to immediate results, developing new and flexible approaches on training workers and providing incentives to encourage workers to gain new and transferable skills that would allow for their full participation in the labour market.

ASTSIF built on existing Aboriginal labour market programming (i.e., the Aboriginal Human Resources Development Program – AHRDP) to fund discrete, short-term, targeted projects. For the first time, HRSDC’s Aboriginal labour programming was separated by streams (i.e., training- to-employment, skills development and service improvement) and was managed both nationally and regionally by two different areas of the department – Aboriginal Affairs Directorate in the Skills Employment Branch and the Aboriginal Program Operations Branch in Program Operations Branch, respectively. Also new to delivery was the short-term nature of the projects and, because of the circumstances, the very short application period.

Response to Evaluation

HRSDC is pleased with the results of ASTSIF. In particular, the evaluation confirmed that ASTSIF programming provided Aboriginal people with more work experience, credentials, skills and income. Program management estimate that ASTSIF served over 5200 clients in an 18 month period of time – exceeding its original target of supporting 4000-5000 Aboriginal workers. Over 600 individuals obtained employment, and as many returned to school.¹

Lessons Learned

HRSDC agrees that partnerships with other federal government departments, provinces and territories, the private sector, and other Aboriginal organizations were established. Although not fully leveraged as expected, the partnerships helped to achieve intended results. A key and important lesson learned is that more can be done, in terms of policy and program design, to increase the value that partnerships bring to this type of programming. For example, in the future, consideration will be given to formalizing partnership contributions in advance of project initiation so that project holders have confidence that the financial and in-kind contribution will be forthcoming. HRSDC will make additional effort in identifying potential partners in regions of skills shortages or in high demand sectors – thereby facilitating and establishing key partnerships.

HRSDC also acknowledges the lessons learned on how to manage short-term initiatives, programs with various funding streams and projects that are managed nationally. In particular, the HRSDC will continue to work with key stakeholders to further address the systemic gaps that impede employment of Aboriginal workers, including supporting projects that are national in focus. HRSDC will also continue to dialogue with the provinces, territories and national Aboriginal organizations to improve the focus and nature of Aboriginal labour market programming. HRSDC will also continue to work with Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training (ASETS) agreement holders as well as other Aboriginal labour market programming funding recipients to encourage and support more flexible program designs and responsive services to individuals faced with multiple barriers. Through facilitating and encouraging the sharing of lessons learned and promising practices, HRSDC will promote the value of ensuring participants are appropriately assessed, and encourage mentoring, coaching and peer learning.

HRSDC will use the department's semi-annual publication – the Aboriginal Labour Market Bulletin – to share lessons learned with respect to partnerships. For example, in the 2013 spring addition of the Bulletin, lessons learned with respect to sound partnership governance practices, supporting a demand-driven approach that focuses on industry needs and focusing on industry specific projects were highlighted. In addition, attention will be given to encouraging open communications among project partners, allocating sufficient time to build partnerships, especially with industry and employers and particularly with

¹ Figures reported in December 2011 Economic Action Plan report to Parliament.

non-Aboriginal employers; involving partners at the early stages of project development; working with respected partners, and establishing and communicating a clear vision, objectives and accountabilities.

With respect to the identified constraints that limited the success of ASTSIF, HRSDC will continue to work with its key stakeholders, particularly ASETS agreement holders and national Aboriginal organizations to find a balance between the need to be flexible and responsive to opportunities as they arise and accountability for results. This is of particular importance for programs that are short-term in nature and may include a limited number of clients. The results of this evaluation reinforce the need to continue with efforts, such as the ASETS' Reduced Reporting Burden Working Group, to ensure that ongoing attention is given to this issue.

Finally, as HRSDC continues to work with organizations that are non-ASETS holders (i.e. Skills and Partnership Fund projects), HRSDC's program area will work to develop tools and processes that will ensure performance measurement information, particularly client data, is captured.

By integrating these lessons, HRSDC aims to increase its capacity to more effectively integrate short-term, targeted initiatives similar to ASTSIF into its ongoing programming. The lessons from ASTSIF will influence Aboriginal labour market programming and design for post-2015.

1. Introduction

This report provides a summary of the findings from the Evaluation of the Aboriginal Skills and Training Strategic Investment Fund (ASTSIF). It draws on qualitative and quantitative technical reports and consists of the following five sections:

- Section 1 provides a description of ASTSIF.
- Section 2 outlines the purpose of the evaluation and presents the methodology used.
- Sections 3 and 4 present the main findings regarding Success in Assisting Clients (Section 3) and Design and Delivery (Section 4).
- Section 5 summarizes the main conclusions, lessons learned and best practices.

1.1 Overview of Aboriginal Skills and Training Strategic Investment Fund

In the 2009 budget, as part of Canada's Economic Action Plan, the federal government announced \$75 million in funding for the Aboriginal Skills and Training Strategic Investment Fund (ASTSIF) over two years (from April 1, 2009 to March 31, 2011). The Fund provided support for short-term, focused initiatives designed to help Aboriginal Canadians obtain the specific training that they require to benefit from employment opportunities. The economic context in which the initiative took place required that the projects be designed and delivered quickly; no project was longer than 18 months in duration and all program activities were finalized by March 31, 2011.

1.2 Program Objectives and Intended Outcomes

ASTSIF focused on three immediate objectives:

- Entering into a number of training-to-employment projects leading to concrete, guaranteed job opportunities by establishing partnerships with small- and medium-sized employers;
- Supporting projects to assist Aboriginal people with barriers to employment, including literacy and essential skills challenges; and
- Supporting projects to test innovative approaches to Aboriginal labour market programming, as well as projects that are national in scope.

The expected intermediate to long-term outcomes of the ASTSIF were as follows:²

Intermediate Outcomes

- Increased Aboriginal participation in labour market programming;
- Improved skills enhancement opportunities; and
- Enhanced collaboration amongst Aboriginal labour market stakeholders.

Long-term Outcomes

- Employers can find and retain skilled Aboriginal workers;
- Increased employability and integration of Aboriginal people into the labour market;
- Increased employability of Aboriginal people facing multiple barriers to employment; and
- Improved integration of Aboriginal labour market programming through improved partnerships.

1.3 Targeted Clientele and Delivery Organizations³

The target population for ASTSIF projects included all Aboriginal peoples (i.e. First Nations, Inuit and Métis) living either on or off-reserve, including in urban centres. Youth (aged 15 to 30 years) needing skills upgrading and clients facing multiple barriers to employment were identified as the highest priorities.

All Aboriginal organizations were eligible to participate in the national component of the ASTSIF. Applications for regional projects, however, were limited to current Aboriginal Human Resources Development Agreement (AHRDA) holders. AHRDA sub-agreement holders and other Aboriginal organizations wishing to apply for regional ASTSIF funding were encouraged to develop applications (either alone or in concert with other partners) which they could submit through their AHRDA holder. Regional projects were expected to incorporate strong partnerships with employers, other Aboriginal organizations, educational institutions or other levels of government and be able to deliver measurable results within the two-year timeframe.

² Aboriginal Skills and Training Strategic Investment Fund: Application Package, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, May 2009.

³ Aboriginal Skills and Training Strategic Investment Fund: Application Package, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, May 2009.

1.4 Application Process⁴

The application process was different for national projects than for regional projects. The national ASTSIF component involved a two-stage process. Applicants were requested to first submit a seven to ten page concept paper. After review, a subset of the national applicants was then invited to submit a full proposal. The application for the regional ASTSIF funding was a one-step process which did not require a concept paper. In order to participate in the program, eligible AHRDAs or Aboriginal organizations had to submit an application package through their AHRDA holders.

1.5 Profile of the Funded Projects

The funded projects can be categorized into four categories: national projects and three categories of regional projects (i.e. skills development, training-to-employment, and service improvement). Up to 90% of project funding was to be targeted to regional projects with the remaining targeted at national projects. Of the \$75 million dedicated to ASTSIF through Canada’s Economic Action Plan, \$63.5 million was allocated to projects, including \$56.6 million for regional projects and \$7.0 million for national projects. As shown in Table 1, over the course of ASTSIF there were 34 skills development projects (with a total budget of \$20.9 million), 33 training-to-employment projects (with a total budget of \$32.4 million), 7 service improvement projects (with a total budget of \$3.3 million), and 12 national projects (with a total budget of \$7.0 million).

Table 1: Approved ASTSIF projects by type						
	Type of project					
	Skills development	Training to employment	Service improvement	Total regional	National projects	Total
Number of projects	34	33	7	74	12	86
ASTSIF funding (\$ million)	\$20.9	\$32.4	\$3.3	\$56.6	\$7	\$63.5
Percent of funding	33%	51%	5%	89%	11%	100%
Source: ASTSIF Files and Documents						

⁴ ASTSIF Regional and National Application forms.

Skills development projects typically involved interventions (e.g. employment services and essential skills assessment) targeted at clients facing multiple barriers to employment, more specifically at youth. These projects usually provided basic literacy and essential skills training⁵ as well as other services addressing the specific needs of these clients to facilitate and expedite their transition to employment. Training-to-employment projects were intended to provide Aboriginal people with opportunities through which they could gain work experience and develop skills, e.g. via job-specific training and apprenticeships, and also offered retention counselling and other supports while on the job, thereby building on the successes of the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Partnerships (ASEP) model.⁶ Service improvement projects were intended to implement innovative business processes to improve the delivery of labour market services to Aboriginal people. Funding for national projects supported initiatives that were national in scope, partnership-based and were expected to result in the development of tools, services or promising practices to enhance the range of client and business services that are provided under the new Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS).

⁵ Essential skills training is a program of instruction designed to enhance one or more essential skills to a level required by the specific job or occupation that the client is seeking. Essential Skills provide the foundation for learning all other skills and enable people to evolve with their jobs and adapt to workplace change.

⁶ Aboriginal Skills and Training Strategic Investment Fund: Application Package, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, May 2009.

2. *Evaluation Methodology*

This section describes the evaluation objectives, issues and methodology used to conduct the evaluation fieldwork.

2.1 Evaluation Issues and Questions

Although Aboriginal Skills and Training Strategic Investment Fund (ASTSIF) itself has ended, the results of this evaluation will contribute to the development and implementation of other programs and initiatives related to the employment of Aboriginal people. Towards that end, the evaluation has identified lessons and best practices that could be considered in the design of future projects and programs. In addition, the evaluation focused on assessing the outcomes of the projects on participants as well as on issues related to the design and delivery of the program and projects, particularly the development of partnerships, resource leveraging, ASTSIF's relationship to other programming, its efficiency and economy, performance measurement, and factors that contributed to and constrained the success of the program. The evaluation issues, questions and data sources are summarized in Appendix 1.

2.2 Data Collection

The evaluation followed a multiple-lines-of-evidence approach which included both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Document, File and Literature Review: The document and file review included a review of ASTSIF application guides; the performance measurement strategy and performance indicators; and project proposals and documents. Data from contribution agreements and project performance reports were compiled to develop a database of project characteristics (nature, type of projects, proponent organizations, and target groups), interventions, and outcomes. The literature review synthesized the key findings of existing research on skills, employment, educational attainment, labour force participation, and income.

Assessment of the Quality and Integrity of Client Administrative Data: The quality and integrity of the collected client and performance administrative data were assessed for a sample of ten ASTSIF funded projects. The projects were selected based on location, size (i.e. funding and clients served), and type. The data from four skills development projects and six training-to-employment projects were assessed. The methodology included a site visit to each location, meetings with project staff, review of the administrative data, and a comparison of electronic records with the paper records, as well as with quarterly and annual reports.

Interviews with Key Informants: Interviews were conducted with 103 key informants, including 5 staff and program directors in the Aboriginal Affairs Directorate and the Aboriginal Program Operations Directorate at HRSDC, 68 proponents of the ASTSIF funded projects, and 30 key partners involved in the design and delivery of the ASTSIF projects.⁷

Development of a Database of ASTSIF Participants: Under the contribution agreements, all funded projects that served clients were required to collect data on client background, employment history, participation details, and contact information. Between August and December 2011, HRSDC requested client databases for all projects and received data from 65 regional projects and 4 national projects⁸ (representing 88% of all regional projects and 33% of national projects). The data, which were often submitted in paper or PDF form at, were then compiled into an Excel database. In the quarterly and annual reports to HRSDC, the 86 ASTSIF projects reported serving 7,161 clients. The 69 client databases which were received for the evaluation contained information on 4,852 participant records, equal to 68% of the clients reported. The resulting database was used for the participant survey and to create a profile of ASTSIF participants.

Survey of ASTSIF Participants: A survey of 514 ASTSIF participants was completed in March 2012. Drawing from the original 4,852 participant records submitted for the evaluation, letters were mailed to all 3,745 participants for whom a postal address was available and emails were sent to 498 participants for whom there was an email address.⁹ Close to 680 individuals were reached, but 165 participants were not eligible to complete the survey questionnaire.¹⁰ The small sample of respondents relative to the original number of records was largely attributable to outdated or incorrect contact information. For example, 563 letters (15%) were returned because the address was no longer valid. To maximize the response rate, at least eight attempts were made to contact each potential respondent who had an active phone number, who had not yet completed the survey and had not formally declined. An online search was conducted to find replacement numbers for participants without an active number. After excluding participants for whom there was no phone number available, the phone number was inactive or incorrect, or the phone number

⁷ The regional distribution of key informants reflects the distribution of ASTSIF projects across Canada.

⁸ In July 2011, HRSDC sent official letters to proponents requesting all funded projects submit program participant data by August 12, 2011. Given the timing of the request (i.e., summer months), the deadline was extended until the end of the calendar year. By December 2011, HRSDC had received databases from 69 ASTSIF projects, of which 30 (43%) were in Excel, 10 (14%) were in hard copy form, and 29 (42%) consisted of scanned PDF documents.

⁹ After keeping only one record for individuals who participated in ASTSIF more than once, a sampling frame of 4,472 participant records was constructed. Among these records 4,076 (91%) included at least some contact information such as telephone number (82% of the participant records), mailing address (81%) and/or email address (11%).

¹⁰ Includes those who did not remember participating in an ASTSIF funded project, were sure that they did not participate, registered but did not attend, or did not get approved to receive services. Note that most ASTSIF funded projects were run through existing Aboriginal Human Resource Development Agreement (AHRDA) holders, thus participants may have been unaware of the source of funds.

was active but the participant no longer resided there (i.e. had moved without a forwarding number or address), the remaining pool of eligible contacts totalled 1,952 participants. The final response rate for the survey was 34.8%.¹¹

Linking of Survey Responses with Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) and Employment Insurance (EI) data: During the survey, each participant was asked permission to link his or her responses with data from the CRA and EI databases. Of the 514 respondents, 452 gave permission for their responses to be linked. The project database included valid Social Insurance Numbers (SINs) for 359 of these participants.¹² After excluding 38 participants who provided permission but had missing start dates (i.e. the precise time period of their participation in ASTSIF could not be determined), analysis of linked data was conducted for 321 participants.

The linked data was analyzed to determine: EI activity in the five years prior to participating, during the year or years of program participation, and in the year after the most recent participation in the program; the participation of ASTSIF clients in other labour market interventions; and the employment income, EI benefits, social assistance, and other income reported for ASTSIF participants in CRA and EI administrative data. The analysis is based on calendar years given that CRA data are available on a calendar year basis only.

2.3 Data Analysis

The data from multiple lines of evidence was collected and summarized to address each evaluation question. A combination of qualitative data analysis and statistical analysis techniques were used. Qualitative data was analyzed to identify common themes in the data. The guidelines used to report the findings of the interviews with key informants included:

- “a few/several/a small number of interviewees” = less than 25 per cent;
- “a minority of interviewees” = 25 to 45 per cent;
- “about half” = 45 to 55 per cent;
- “a majority of interviewees” = 56 to 75 per cent;
- “most interviewees” = over 75 per cent; and
- “almost all interviewees” = 95 per cent or more.

The statistical analysis presented in this report is mainly descriptive with cross-tabulations used to investigate the differences across sub-groups. The significance of cross-tabulations was determined through analysis of variance tests (the threshold for reporting relationships as statistically significant was set as $p < .050$ referring to a 95% rate of assurance).

¹¹ Based on the Empirical Method of Response Rate Calculation Standard as defined by the Market Research and Intelligence Association.

¹² Of the 4,472 unique participants in the database, 3,376 records included a valid Social Insurance Number (SIN).

2.4 Strengths and Limitations

The use of a multiple-lines-of-evidence approach served to validate and strengthen findings by cross-referencing a number of sources and it allowed for the exploration of issues in greater depth. Each key finding and conclusion was based on the examination of two or more lines of evidence to ensure reliability. Key informant interviews were conducted with almost all eligible ASTSIF management and program delivery staff as well as a cross-section of stakeholders and others involved in program delivery. Attempts were made to interview representatives from all ASTSIF funded projects and to contact all ASTSIF participants for whom contact information was available. Despite these steps, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations.

- **Respondent biases.** Project proponents, key partners and HRSDC representatives have a vested interest in the program. Consequently, the findings may be biased towards the reporting of more favourable program outcomes. There is also a potential for possible recall biases in the survey of ASTSIF participants. The survey was conducted between 12 and 36 months after a respondent completed his or her participation in the program. Thus respondents' recall of their income and employment information prior to and after participating in the program may not have been accurate. To mitigate the potential effect of response bias the purpose of the evaluation and the strict confidentiality of responses were communicated clearly to respondents and key informants. In addition, responses were compared across groups and validated with the results of the document and file review, as well as with the administrative data.
- **There is limited post-program Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) and Employment Insurance (EI) data available for participants.** The CRA data available at the time of the evaluation covered the period from 2004 to 2010 and the EI data covered the period from 2004 to 2012.¹³ As most ASTSIF participants completed their intervention in 2010 and 2011, post-program CRA data were available for very few participants. Moreover, much of the post-program EI data (for 2012) were preliminary. As such, for post-program experiences, the evaluation must rely primarily on the survey which was based on participant perceptions and subject to recall bias (participants were surveyed between 12 and 36 months after program completion).
- **Issues with client administrative data.** ASTSIF projects were required to collect data on client background, employability, employment history, program activities, and post-program income and employment status. However, the client administrative data review highlighted issues related to completeness, consistency and accuracy of the data. Client data was collected but typically stored as a hard copy file with only some of the data entered into an electronic database or otherwise submitted to HRSDC. To mitigate this challenge, the survey of ASTSIF participants was designed to fill in gaps in the ASTSIF client data provided to HRSDC for the evaluation.

¹³ The EI data for 2012 available at the time of this evaluation were preliminary and did not cover all EI statistics for 2011.

- **Effects of the extraneous variables.** The income and employment of ASTSIF participants can be affected by factors such as changes in the economic conditions, availability of the jobs, and the impact of other employment support services in the communities. ASTSIF was implemented during an economic downturn, which affected employment and job opportunities in communities. As noted in the report, many ASTSIF participants also received services from other similar programs. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to determine the extent to which changes in participant employment status and income are attributable to ASTSIF.
- **Potential for non-response error.** Non-response error refers to the impact of differences in characteristics of those in the sampling frame and those who completed the survey on average survey responses. To mitigate potential effects, an opportunity to participate was given to all program staff, project proponents, partners and participants for whom there was contact information. At least eight attempts were made to contact participants.

3. *Success in Assisting Clients*

This chapter summarizes the key findings of the evaluation regarding the extent to which the program addressed systemic gaps that impede employment and the extent to which the program provided training-to-employment experiences and essential skills training for multi-barriered clients, thereby facilitating the transition of participants to employment.

3.1 Profile of Participants

Most participants had some previous attachment to the labour force; about two-thirds reported employment income in the year prior to participating and nearly 90% reported employment income at some time in the previous five years. The incidence of employment insurance (EI) activity increased in the years leading up to participation before peaking in the first year of program participation. Of the 321 survey participants for whom survey responses could be linked to other administrative data, the incidence of EI activity increased in the years leading up to participation (from 14.6% three years before participation to 19.9% in each of the two years before) before peaking during program participation (24.3%, see Table 2). Limited post-program data indicate that EI use declined relative to both the pre-program and in-program periods after participation in ASTSIF; however, the 2012 data are preliminary and are thus not conclusive.

Table 2: EI activity during the three reference periods

Period	Year	All participants			Men		Women	
		EI	Weeks	Benefits	EI	Benefits	EI	Benefits
Pre-participation	Year-5	19.0%	19.1	\$5,529	23.4%	\$5,947	14.3%	\$4,787
	Year-4	15.9%	17.8	\$5,098	16.2%	\$5,474	15.6%	\$4,675
	Year-3	14.6%	19.7	\$6,213	16.2%	\$6,745	13.0%	\$5,494
	Year-2	19.9%	17.1	\$5,607	22.2%	\$6,562	17.5%	\$4,298
	Year-1	19.9%	18.9	\$6,166	21.6%	\$7,211	18.2%	\$4,823
In-program	Year 1 (1-3)	21.2% (24.3%)	20.7 (18.3)	\$7,020 (\$6,201)	22.2% (24.6%)	\$7,680 (\$6,585)	20.1% (24.0%)	\$6,232 (\$5,775)
Post-program	Year 1	15.9%	14	\$5,196	21.6%	\$5,294	9.7%	\$4,963

The table also indicates that, during the pre-participation period, incidence of EI activity, number of benefit weeks, and average amount of EI benefits received was consistently higher for men than women. This gap suggests that:

- Men were more likely to have had a sufficiently long attachment to the labour force to be able to qualify for EI benefits;
- Among those who qualified for EI, men had longer average work attachments and therefore could obtain more weeks of benefit entitlement than women;
- Among those who qualified for EI, men had higher average earnings than did women leading to higher benefit rates. These higher rates, combined with longer benefit entitlements, leads to higher average benefit amounts in each year.

Table 3: Incidence of income sources and average incomes

Income sources	Prior five years		Prior year		In-program	
	Incidence ^a	Average	Incidence	Average	Incidence	Average ^b
Wages and salaries	87.9%	\$ 8,626	67.6%	\$9,136	68.6%	\$7,639
Aboriginal earnings	57.3%	\$273	28.0%	\$316	53.7%	\$321
EI benefits	38.9%	\$1,024	19.9%	\$1,229	22.7%	\$1,507
Social assistance benefits	45.2%	\$715	17.1%	\$873	16.0%	\$917
Miscellaneous other income sources	67.6%	\$816	29.6%	\$917	39.7%	\$1,579
Subtotal: income from all sources	94.1%	\$11,453	81.9%	\$12,472	83.6%	\$12,018
No income reported	5.9%	–	18.1%	–	16.4%	–
Total	100%	\$11,453	100%	\$12,472	100%	\$12,018

^a Individual percentages add to more than 100% because participants may report more than one source of income.
^b Income data for in-program period should be treated as preliminary and used with caution CRA in-program income data is incomplete for about 30% of ASTSIF survey participants and no administrative data was available for about 11% of ASTSIF survey participants.

Approximately two-thirds of participants worked during the year prior to participation and 87.9% of participants worked at some time during the five year pre-participation period (see Table 3). Average income was \$12,472 in the year prior to participation and was higher for male participants (\$12,718) than for female participants (\$10,081). Reflecting men's higher wages, salaries and EI benefits which are only partially offset by the higher average social assistance received by women (see Table 4). During their program participation year, the gap between men and women narrows primarily because of a sharp increase in miscellaneous income reported for female participants.

Table 4: Incidence of income sources and average income levels amongst men and women

Income sources	Men				Women			
	Pre-participation		In-program		Pre-participation		In-program	
	Incidence ^a	Average	Incidence	Average	Incidence	Average	Incidence	Average ^b
Wages and salaries	89.8%	\$9,815	72.2%	\$9,032	85.7%	\$7,336	65.0%	\$6,236
Aboriginal earnings	61.1%	\$314	60.4%	\$354	53.2%	\$227	46.9%	\$287
EI benefits	41.9%	\$1,275	22.2%	\$1,617	35.7%	\$751	23.4%	\$1,388
Social assistance benefits	42.5%	\$367	13.9%	\$661	48.1%	\$1,092	18.2%	\$1,175
Miscellaneous other income sources	61.7%	\$946	23.6%	\$850	74.0%	\$674	55.6%	\$2,313
Subtotal: income from all sources	92.8%	\$12,718	82.6%	\$12,416	95.5%	\$10,081	84.6%	\$11,617
No income reported from any source	7.2%	–	17.4%	–	4.5%	–	15.4%	–
Total	100%	\$12,718	100%	\$12,416	100%	\$10,081	100%	\$11,617

^a Individual percentages add to more than 100% because participants may report more than one source of income.

^b Income data for in-program period should therefore be treated as preliminary and use with caution.

3.2 Success in Addressing Systemic Gaps

? Evaluation Question: What are the lessons learned and best practices from the development and the implementation of the ASTSIF projects in terms of addressing systemic gaps that impede employment of Aboriginal workers?

Aboriginal people experience much higher rates of unemployment and lower incomes than the general Canadian population. In 2006, the unemployment rate for Aboriginal people was 14.8%, which was significantly higher than the national average of 6.3%.¹⁴ In addition, the median income for Aboriginal people was 30% lower than the median income for other Canadians.¹⁵ Based on before-tax incomes, more than 36% of Aboriginal women were living in poverty as compared to 17% of non-Aboriginal women.¹⁶ Barriers to employment highlighted in the literature include geographic isolation, low levels of education, prevalence of single parent families, health issues, and employer-related challenges:

- **Geographic isolation.** A significant proportion of the Aboriginal population lives in remote regions with limited access to transportation, social services and the labour market. In 2006, 26% of the Aboriginal population in Canada lived on-reserve.¹⁷ Forty-nine percent of Aboriginal people live in communities outside of urban centres on reserves or in rural areas with limited access to the labour market.¹⁸
- **Lower levels of education.** Only 8% of Aboriginal people have a bachelor's degree or higher level of education as compared to 22% the rest of Canadians. Those without a secondary education constitute 32% of Aboriginal people as compared to 15% all Canadians.¹⁹
- **Family status.** An Aboriginal woman is more likely to be a single parent and an Aboriginal child is more likely to live in a single parent family compared to the non-Aboriginal population. In 2007, 26% of Registered Indian families, 20% of Inuit families and 16% of Métis and other Aboriginal families were headed by a single mother as compared to 12% of Canadian families.²⁰ Approximately 50% of Aboriginal children in larger urban areas live with a single parent, compared with only 17% of non-Aboriginal children.

¹⁴ Indicators of Well-being in Canada. HRSDC. website:
<http://www4.hrsdc.gc.ca/.3ndic.1t.4r@-eng.jsp?iid=16>.

¹⁵ Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. 2010. *The income gap between aboriginal people and the rest of Canada*.

¹⁶ Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada. *Aboriginal Women in Canada: A Statistical Profile from the 2006 Census*.

¹⁷ Source: Statistics Canada, 2006 Census of Population.

¹⁸ Statistics Canada 2003 in Formative Evaluation of the Aboriginal Human Resource Development Agreements Literature Review. 2007.

¹⁹ Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. 2010. *The income gap between aboriginal people and the rest of Canada*.

²⁰ Jeremy Hull. 2006. *Aboriginal Women: A profile from the 2001 Census*.

- **Health issues.** Despite improvements, Aboriginal people rate significantly lower on virtually every measure of health and well-being when compared to the general population.²¹ Life expectancy is 7 years lower for Registered Indians²² and more than 12 years lower for Inuit than the Canadian average of 78 years for males and 83 years for females.²³ Suicide rates among Aboriginal youth are five to seven times higher and suicide rates among Inuit are eleven times higher than the national average.²⁴ There are elevated rates of vaccine preventable diseases, higher incidences of tuberculosis (sporadic outbreaks), and higher rates of HIV/AIDS cases.²⁵ Thirty percent of Aboriginal adults report a disability and the 15 to 34 age group has a disability rate three times the national average.²⁶
- **Employer challenges.** An Indian and Northern Affairs Canada survey found that 77% of employers faced challenges in hiring and retaining Aboriginal employees. Employers cited barriers related to communication, culture, skills, training, and misconceptions.²⁷

ASTSIF supported projects and services specific to the needs of Aboriginal communities, culture and traditions with the aim of overcoming some of these systemic gaps. The characteristics of the projects and services supported through ASTSIF include a focus on education, employment training and related services and a holistic approach incorporating Aboriginal culture and traditions. The characteristics are highlighted in the literature as being successful in increasing Aboriginal participation in the labour market.

A review of the literature suggests that education is the primary factor determining the success of Aboriginal people in the labour market;²⁸ it is argued that low labour market participation rates largely reflect, in part, the failure of the school system to adequately prepare Aboriginal people to compete in the labour market.²⁹ Training and education has been a major focus of the ASTSIF projects; of the 86 funded projects, 55 have provided services to improve participants' essential skills, 31 included training and certification programs related to trades and apprenticeship, 10 helped participants to obtain licensed

²¹ L. Lemchik-Favel and R. Jock. Aboriginal Health Systems in Canada: Nine Case Studies, Journal of Aboriginal Health. January 2004. Pages 28-51. Page 31.

²² <http://www4.hrsdc.gc.ca/.3ndic.1t.4r@-eng.jsp?iid=3>.

²³ Life expectancy in the Inuit-inhabited areas of Canada. 1989 to 2003.

²⁴ United Nations. 2010. State of the World's Indigenous Peoples.

²⁵ Health Canada – Statistical Profile on the Health of First Nations in Canada
<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fniah-spnia/intro-eng.php>.

²⁶ Human Resources and Development Canada. 2002. Future directions to address disability issues for the Government of Canada: Working together for full citizenship.

²⁷ Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. 1995. Aboriginal Peoples in the Workforce: The National Perspective.

²⁸ Formative Evaluation of the Aboriginal Human Resource Development Agreements Literature Review. 2007.

²⁹ S. Sloizides and J. Zieminski. 1998. Employment Prospects for Aboriginal People. Conference Board of Canada.

practical nurse (LPN) training and certification, 5 supported education to obtain general educational development (GED), and 5 helped participants obtain education and certification relevant to the hospitality and tourism industries.

According to the literature, short-term employment training services tend to be most effective when they also incorporate other types of support³⁰ such as mentoring, job preparation, counselling, assistance with work related expenses, and services such as childcare to support adult women. Such programming is able to bridge the gap between job requirements and applicant capacity by providing access to labour market information and training necessary to match participant skills with the available jobs.³¹ These findings are consistent with the services provided through ASTSIF projects.

The literature also indicates that a broad, stable, holistic approach that incorporates respect for cultural values into the training process tends to be most successful.³² Many project proponents and key partners attributed the success of their projects to related factors such as training people in their own communities, having an Elder guide to whom the participants are accountable, involving trainers and staff who have a good understanding of the local community and culture, tailoring services to the specific needs of participants, incorporating a hands-on component to allow participants to apply knowledge, and a flexible delivery that allows participants to complete training while engaging in paid part-time work.

Project proponents and key partners view ASTSIF as successful in addressing some of the systemic gaps that impede employment of Aboriginal workers, although greater efforts will be required to achieve significant and sustainable progress.

When asked how much of an impact ASTSIF activities have had in terms of addressing systemic gaps that impede employment of Aboriginal workers, project proponents and key partners provided an average rating of 3.9 while HRSDC representatives provided an average rating of 3.0 (on a five point scale where 1 is no impact and 5 is a major impact). According to a majority of the project proponents and key partners who provided higher ratings, most mainstream training and education programs do not fit well with Aboriginal culture and traditions which limited the participation of Aboriginal people. An advantage of the ASTSIF projects was to make training and education programs available to Aboriginal people in their own communities in a manner that is consistent with their own culture, traditions and lifestyles. Projects focused on helping Aboriginal participants overcome many of the systemic challenges they face when seeking employment and entering the workforce. Several project proponents and key partners who provided a lower rating noted that their projects were not designed to specifically address systemic gaps or that more

³⁰ Formative Evaluation of the Aboriginal Human Resource Development Agreements Literature Review. 2007.

³¹ C. Ciceri and K. Scott. 2006. The determinants of employment among Aboriginal peoples.

³² Formative Evaluation of the Aboriginal Human Resource Development Agreements Literature Review. 2007.

resources, effort and a greater time commitment are required to make significant progress in addressing gaps that have long been embedded in the Canadian employment system, culture and institutions.

Future programs and projects can build on some of the lessons learned and best practices identified through ASTSIF projects. In particular, project proponents and key partners highlighted the importance of allowing sufficient time for planning, providing ongoing support, taking a holistic approach, and better supporting those who relocate for employment.

Several project proponents and key partners stressed the importance of allowing sufficient time for planning and providing ongoing funding to support innovative projects. It can take considerable time and resources to organize and pilot innovative projects that create new methods, resources, tools and approaches. In particular, it was noted that developing projects in remote and isolated regions with limited infrastructure requires extra planning, efforts, and administration. Continued support is required to encourage innovative projects, sustain and expand successful projects, and communicate the lessons learned.

According to a few other proponents and key partners, programs with the goal of increasing Aboriginal employment need to take a holistic approach and address underlying issues such as poverty, substance abuse, or underdeveloped essential skills. In addition, client outcomes are improved when efforts are made to help employers better understand the Aboriginal culture, address misconceptions and find ways to effectively work with Aboriginal clients.

Several project proponents also stressed the importance of targeting growing labour market sectors (such as health, alternative energy and sustainable development) or other industries that operate in close proximity to Aboriginal communities (e.g. mining and transportation) as well as making long-term support available for those who relocate for employment (recognizing that adapting to new living styles and finding employment can require significant support and time, especially when moving to a larger urban centre and away from their rural home community).

3.3 Training and Employment

? **Evaluation Questions:** To what extent was the training provided specific and appropriate to specific jobs to be filled? To what extent were ASTSIF projects successful in providing training-to-employment that helped participants with securing employment?

Projects funded through ASTSIF provided some form of training-to-employment and skills development interventions to help participants secure employment. As indicated in the following table, interventions under ASTSIF included employment services such as assistance with finding a job (e.g. resume writing, interview preparation, or developing a career or training plan), financial assistance (e.g. wages, tuition fees, living allowance, or day-care costs), individual support (e.g. job coaching, mentorship or counselling), work placements, on-the-job training and apprenticeship, and essential skills assessment and training.

Table 5: Types of employment interventions by type of project

Types of interventions	National	Service improvement	Skills development	Training-to-employment	Total ^a
Total projects	12	7	34	33	86
Employment services	0	0	34	31	65
Financial assistance for participants	0	0	31	32	63
Individual support	0	0	29	33	62
On-the-job training and apprenticeship	0	0	26	33	59
Essential skills assessment	1	0	33	21	55
Training to improve essential skills	1	0	31	20	54
Classroom training in specific trade or industry	1	0	14	32	47
Training of trainers or employment counsellors	3	4	0	0	7

Source: Review of ASTSIF documents and files

^a As each project had multiple employment interventions and services, the sum of each column is more than the total number of projects.

The types of skills development training identified by survey respondents included training in both essential skills and skills related to a particular job or sector (38%), skills related to a particular job or sector only (29%), and training in essential skills only (24%).

Seventy-one percent of the surveyed participants indicated that they received training in skills specifically relevant to a particular sector or job including 49% who received on-the-job training or work experience. One-third of the participants who received on-the-job training or work experience continued to work with the organization after the program ended (a majority were still employed there at the time of the survey). Only 30% of those receiving on-the-job training or work experience believe that they would have been able to obtain this experience without the help of the project.

Most participants noted that they were satisfied with the services and assistance received (average rating of 4.2 out of 5), completed the training (88%), and received a certificate or diploma upon completion (79% of those who completed). In particular, the participants appreciated that the training focused on particular skills they needed, was interactive and hands-on, and was accompanied by other services such as career development and job placement support.

According to project proponents and partners most of the training focused on preparing participants for specific jobs or to work in specific industries.

Sixty percent of project proponents indicated that their project was developed to help clients obtain a specific job in sectors such as construction, health care, mining and energy, fisheries and aquaculture, retail, hospitality and tourism, and the service sector. Of these proponents, 65% reported that the training provided was sufficient and appropriate to prepare clients for the specific job and a further 23% of project proponents reported that the training was somewhat sufficient. Only one proponent noted that the training was not sufficient, indicating more time was needed to prepare clients for the jobs targeted under the project.

Key partners agreed. When asked to rate the impact of their respective projects in providing training appropriate to the requirements of jobs available in the communities, key partners provided an average rating of 4.3 with most providing a rating of 4 or 5. Projects benefited from consulting with local industry, conducting labour market surveys to identify skills and labour needs, and providing participants with proof of newly acquired skills and education in the form of credentials and certifications.

Project proponents, key partners and the participants themselves each reported that ASTSIF was successful in terms of increasing participant skills, education, and experience necessary to secure employment.

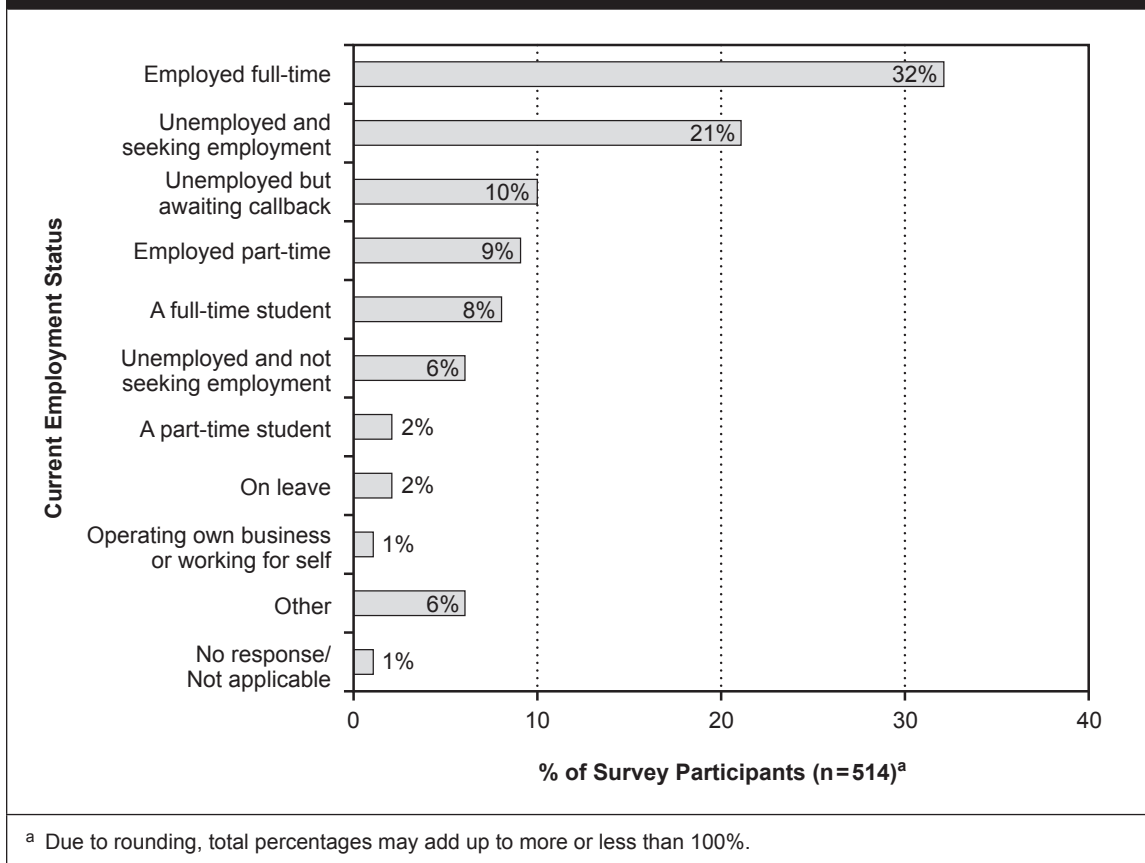
When asked how much of an impact ASTSIF activities had on increasing participant skills, education, and experience necessary to participate in the labour force, both project proponents and key partners provided an average rating of 4.4 out of 5, noting that the interventions have also led to increased self-esteem and employment. According to a majority of project proponents and key partners, participants increased their employability skills, education assessment scores, received either diplomas (e.g., Grade 11, pilot, college, computer, etc.) or certifications (e.g., MEDI, First Aid, trades, CPR, GED, LPN, etc.), and updated their resumes to demonstrate gained skills and experience. The types of skills and experience gained ranged from basic literacy and essential skills to more advanced credentials such as a pilot diploma or licensed practical nurse certification. The average rating provided by proponents was similar across all types of ASTSIF projects (i.e. training-to-employment, skills development, national, and service improvement).

Participants noted a positive impact from taking part in an ASTSIF intervention on their confidence that they can obtain employment suitable for their skills (average rating of 4.0), their skills related to a specific job, occupation or industry (3.8), their acquisition of the experience necessary to obtain suitable employment (3.8), and the further development their essential skills (3.8). Moreover, at the time of the survey, 42% of the ASTSIF participants surveyed were employed full-time or part-time or operated their own business. An additional 10% of participants surveyed were awaiting a callback for a temporary position and 10% were enrolled in an education or training program (see Figure 1).

Prior to the program, most participants surveyed (56%) found it at least somewhat difficult to find suitable employment and attributed this to a lack of education and training (53%), a shortage of available employment opportunities (30%), and/or personal barriers such as a lack of confidence and family or personal issues (22%).

After completion, most survey participants (61%) reported that ASTSIF programming positively impacted their opportunity to find employment and were much less likely to identify a lack of education or experience as a barrier to employment. Some participants (those who were unemployed at the time of the survey) still felt they face barriers to employment. The participants most commonly attributed this to either personal barriers such as a lack of confidence, health, family or personal issues (31%), a lack of employment opportunities in the community (26%), or a lack of education or experience (6%).

Figure 1: Status of participants at time of survey



ASTSIF participants who were employed full-time when surveyed were more likely to have received job specific training (rather than in essential skills) and were less likely to report having had difficulties in obtaining employment prior to participation (average rating of 2.4 versus 3.1 for those not employed full-time at the time of the survey).

Following completion, one-third of the participants surveyed enrolled in a non-ASTSIF related training or education program. The programs identified most commonly included skills training, apprenticeship, or diploma or degree programs (26%) or adult basic education or academic upgrading (16%). Most of these participants indicated that the ASTSIF project helped them to access the further training or education.

The participants surveyed reported that their annual income increased from \$13,915 in the year prior to participating to \$16,863 since completing or otherwise leaving the program.

Participants also reported a marginal decline in the number months receiving employment insurance and social assistance benefits.

Table 6: Participant employment and income outcomes

Income and employment areas	12 months prior to participating (n=403)	Since participation (n=403) ^a	Pro-rated 12 months post program (n=403)
Average months worked per participant	5.2	7.7	5.6
Average number of hours worked per week	35.9	37.6	37.2
Average hourly rate per participant	\$17.14	\$18.95	\$18.67
Average amount earned	\$13,915	\$23,965	\$16,863
Average months – employment insurance	0.7 (n=381)	0.8 (n=383)	0.5 (n=383)
Average number – social assistance	2.5 (n=385)	2.7 (n=384)	1.9 (n=384)

^a On average, it had been about 16 months since participation in the program had ended.

The survey results indicate that, both before and after participating, employment rates tend to be higher amongst men, those with higher levels of education, and those who are married. Participants in projects that provided on-the-job training/work experience and who had attributed their difficulties in obtaining employment prior to participation to a shortage of experience, education, or training were those most satisfied with the training received and most likely to be employed full-time at the time of the survey.

3.4 Success in Helping Multi-Barriered Clients

? **Evaluation Questions:** To what extent did ASTSIF projects provide essential skills training for multi-barriered clients, including youth? Did the ASTSIF facilitate their transition to employment? What are the lessons learned and best practices from the development and the implementation of the ASTSIF projects in terms of programs and services targeting multi-barriered clients including youth?

For the purpose of ASTSIF, participants with multiple barriers to employment were defined as those who had dependants at the time of the program, experienced disabilities, had low educational attainment, or were less than 25 years old. ASTSIF projects provided a wide range of services for multi-barriered participants, including essential skills training.

The document review indicated that a majority of projects involved providing essential skills training to participants. Additionally, most survey respondents reported receiving some form of essential skills training.

Of the 86 projects supported through ASTSIF, 54 of them assessed participant essential skill levels and 55 delivered interventions to improve essential skills (with 24 specifically targeted towards youth). Additionally, 62% of survey respondents reported participating in some form of essential skills training through ASTSIF. Participants in essential skills training were generally satisfied with the assistance received (average rating of 4.2 out of 5, where 5 is very satisfied) and considered it to have helped them to further develop the essential skills needed in life and work (44% provided a rating of 5 out of 5 and 26% provided a rating of 4 out of 5, where 5 is “major impact”).

For clients facing multiple barriers to employment, essential skills training was provided.

Of the 319 survey participants who had participated in essential skills trainings, the majority (79%) were found to have obtained a high school diploma (39%) or less (49%). In addition, at the time of participation, 38% of participants were found to be less than 25 years old, 7% identified themselves as having some type of disability, and 44% had at least one dependent child. While participants in essential skills training generally were satisfied with the training provided, those who reported having a disability tended to be somewhat less satisfied, with a few elaborating that the services provided did not meet their special needs.

Project proponents and key partners felt that essential skills training had a considerable impact on multi-barriered clients including youth.

When asked to rate the impact of ASTSIF funded activities in providing essential skills training for multi-barriered clients and youth, project proponents provided an average rating of 4.2 out of 5 and key partners provided an average rating of 3.8. According to the majority of project proponents and key partners who provided higher ratings, to ease barriers to employment, ASTSIF projects provided numerous services to clients including training in essential skills, literacy, social skills, communication, team work and conflict management, career counselling and mentoring, work placement, financial support, assistance with day-care and transportation, workplace safety education, certification and diploma programs, trade programs, computer skills training, training in financial management, and information and assistance related to job searching techniques and methods, resume writing and criminal record waiving in order to ease the barriers. Several project proponents and key partners who provided a lower rating noted that their projects did not specifically target multi-barriered clients. A few also noted that, although progress was made, longer-term support and complex interventions are needed to help some clients address multiple barriers to employment.

Overall, ASTSIF is viewed by participants as somewhat successful in helping multi-barriered clients and those who attended essential skills training to find employment.

As shown below, 49% of the ASTSIF participants surveyed who attended essential skills training were employed, operating their own business, or awaiting callback at the time of the survey. This percentage was slightly lower for youth (42%) and those with dependents (45%). While pursuing further education was not a direct objective of ASTSIF, approximately 10% of respondents reported being a student at the time of the survey. Combining these outcomes, the proportion of those employed or enrolled in education, was similar across respondents (around 62%) with the exception of two groups facing barriers: those with dependents and those with disabilities. Those with dependents were less likely than others to be employed and slightly less like to be in school. Participants with a disability particularly had more difficulty obtaining employment (25% were employed at the time of the survey) and were more likely to be unemployed (35%) or out of the labour force (17%).³³ To some extent, this is to be expected as, compared to people who do not have disabilities, the working-age population in Canada reporting a disability has a lower employment rate.³⁴ However, the employment rate for ASTSIF participants with disabilities fell below the national average.

³³ Note that only a small number of survey participants reported having a disability, thus the percentage is an approximation.

³⁴ HRSDC, 2010. Evaluation of the Canada-Manitoba Labour Market Agreement for Persons with Disabilities.

Table 7: Employment status by barrier to employment

Employment status	All participants	Essential skills training recipients	With dependants	With disabilities	Under 25	High school or less
Employed full-time	32%	29%	26%	17%	19%	26%
Employed part-time	9%	10%	11%	4%	13%	10%
Operating business/ working for self	1%	2%	2%	0%	1%	2%
Awaiting callback	10%	8%	6%	4%	9%	8%
Sub-total (employed or equivalent)	52%	49%	45%	25%	42%	48%
A full-time student	8%	10%	8%	9%	15%	11%
A part-time student	2%	3%	2%	4%	5%	3%
Sub-total (student)	10%	13%	10%	13%	20%	14%
Sub-total (employed or equivalent, or a student)	62%	62%	55%	38%	62%	62%
On leave	2%	3%	5%	9%	5%	3%
Unemployed not seeking work	6%	8%	9%	17%	7%	9%
Unemployed and seeking work	21%	23%	23%	35%	21%	24%
Other	7%	6%	8%	0%	4%	4%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Impact of ASTSIF in helping them find employment (average rating) ^a	3.4	3.5	3.4	3.0	3.2	3.4

Source: Survey of ASTSIF participants (2012)

^a Participants were asked to rate ASTSIF help in finding employment using a scale 1 to 5, 1 is no impact at all, 3 is somewhat of an impact and 5 is major impact.

On average, each sub-group rated the program as at least somewhat successful in helping them find employment. Furthermore, survey participants who attended essential skills training reported that their income had increased from an average of \$10,840 in the year prior to participating to an annualized average of \$13,858 in the 12 months since leaving the program. Each of the sub-groups reported an increase in income with the exception of those reporting a disability.

Project representatives report that projects that feature a flexible design which allows services to be tailored to individual needs; adequately assess participant skills at the beginning of project; provide mentoring, coaching, and peer learning; and have practical and visual exercises delivered by dedicated staff members over longer periods are those more likely to be successful in helping multi-barriered clients to further develop their skills and find employment.

Key informant interviews with project proponents and key partners, as well as a review of the results from the January 2011 Knowledge Circle discussions with more than 180 ASTSIF stakeholders,³⁵ identified the following lessons learned and best practices with respect to programs and services targeting multi-barriered clients:

- **Basic skills and literacy are building blocks for both career and life success.** Essential skills such as literacy, mathematics, and computer skills are the first step towards developing a strong attachment to the workforce and achieving employment goals.
- **Adequate assessment of participant skills and needs is extremely important at the beginning of the project to develop appropriate interventions and achieve successful results.** The ability to define client needs in the early stages of project activities enables service providers to develop proper interventions to target those needs.
- **Mentoring, job shadowing and coaching are effective ways to support client employment.** Several project proponents and key partners attributed the success of their projects specifically to the mentoring and coaching that they provided to clients.
- **Essential skills training should include practical and visual exercises in addition to classroom sessions.** According to few project proponents and key partners, their projects succeeded because the programming incorporated practical components such as giving participants specific hands-on tasks and visual demonstrations. This approach was especially successful with multi-barriered youth.
- **Facilitating peer learning can help to produce desired results.** According to a few project proponents and key partners, their projects were successful because project proponents were able to create a positive learning environment by facilitating group learning in which students supported each other and learned from each other's experience.
- **Projects need to be flexible in order to adapt to client needs.** Rigid delivery structures may not work well with clients who face multiple barriers in securing employment. The services need to be flexible enough to accommodate intervention plans for each client based on their individual needs.
- **More time and effort is required for multi-barriered clients to succeed.** Even an eighteen month period is not sufficient to enable many of the multi-barriered clients to succeed. Clients with multiple barriers to employment require a holistic approach involving multiple interventions delivered over a longer time period.

³⁵ This was organized by HRSDC.

- **Some potential clients have significant barriers that keep them from participating in essential skills training.** Several project proponents noted that some of their clients did not succeed in the essential skills training due to issues with substance abuse, drug addiction and many other obstacles. Concern was raised that due to ASTSIF's strict focus on employment results, some Aboriginal people with multiple barriers may have not been accepted into the program as they were expected to fail. Programs that give preference to potential clients with fewer barriers may have higher rate of success in helping clients to obtain employment. However, focusing heavily on program outcomes could make it increasingly difficult for multi-barriered clients to participate in similar skills development and employment programs in the future.
- **Support for participants should continue after successful graduation from the programs.** A key lesson learned was that most clients, especially multi-barriered clients, require some form of on-going support after graduating from projects to continue with their efforts to find employment.
- **The positive outcomes of the projects should be shared so that communities understand the benefits of local projects.** Community support is essential for the success of any project. However, to obtain community support, the projects need to be promoted among the members of communities.
- **Dedicated staff committed to making positive change in participant lives is a key factor for success.** Dedication and commitment are important factors in making projects succeed. When staff is committed to helping clients succeed, then clients also demonstrate more commitment and discipline.

4. *Design and Delivery*

This chapter summarizes the key findings of the evaluation with respect to the success of projects in building partnerships and leveraging funds from other sources, the level of overlap with other programs, administrative cost of the program, performance measurement, and factors contributing to and constraining the success of projects.

4.1 Partnerships

? **Evaluation Questions: To what extent were the ASTSIF projects successful in establishing partnerships with employers, stakeholders and federal, provincial and territorial governments? What are the lessons learned and best practices from the development and the implementation of the ASTSIF projects in terms of establishing partnerships with employers, stakeholders, other federal government departments and agencies, and provinces and territories?**

The establishment of partnerships was a central premise of the ASTSIF. In the ASTSIF application form, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizations were encouraged to develop and submit funding applications in partnership with AHRDA holders. To be considered for funding, all skills development type regional projects were required to demonstrate new approaches and broad-based partnerships. Service improvement projects were required to facilitate collaboration (e.g. among federal, provincial and private sector partners) and coordination (e.g. among AHRDAs, sub-agreements, points of service, etc.). Training-to-employment projects required partnerships with small- and medium-sized employers, and sharing of project costs with the private sector/major employers, the provincial or territorial government and Aboriginal groups. The national projects were also required to be developed and implemented in partnership with other organizations.

The document review demonstrated that projects funded through ASTSIF were able to build partnerships with a wide range of private sector companies, industry groups and sector councils, colleges and educational institutions, Aboriginal organizations and provincial/territorial governments.

One hundred twenty-one key partner organizations were involved in the design and delivery of the 86 regional and national projects funded through ASTSIF. Project partners included private sector companies, industry groups and sector councils, unions and employee organizations, service delivery agencies at the community level, universities and colleges, other educational organizations and school boards, provincial governments, health authorities and health centres, correctional services, and Aboriginal organizations and governments. In addition to key partners, ASTSIF projects also collaborated with a wide range of other organizations that contributed to project success but were not directly involved in the design and delivery of the projects.

Both HRSDC representatives and key partners indicated that ASTSIF was successful in increasing collaboration, cooperation and partnerships amongst AHRDAs, Aboriginal groups, employers, government representatives and other stakeholders.

When asked to rate the impact of ASTSIF projects in increasing collaboration, cooperation and partnership amongst AHRDAs, Aboriginal groups, employers, government representatives and other stakeholders, project proponents and key partners provided average ratings between 4.0 and 4.2. Key informants noted cooperation and coordination among AHRDA/ASET holders, Aboriginal communities and organizations, employers, education and training institutions, other employment service delivery organizations, other levels of government, and non-profit groups. Proponents and key partners worked with employers to organize work placements and apprenticeships for Aboriginal clients; they worked with governments to partner in delivering project activities, leverage funding, and access services for clients; they worked with educators and training institutions to develop and deliver training, workshops, certification programs and various tools and resources; they worked with non-profit organizations, Aboriginal organizations and community agencies to organize and deliver various services for clients and referrals; and with industry groups and consulting organizations to develop tools and resources to improve skills needed to gain employment.

The key lessons learned regarding partnerships related to the importance of long-term commitments, involving partners at an early stage, maintaining open communication, having a clear vision and objectives for cooperation, using committees strategically to make decisions, and securing involvement and support of community leaders.

Interviews with project proponents and key partners, as well as a review of the results of the Knowledge Circle discussions, identified the following lessons and best practices:

- **Open communication is a key to successful partnerships.** Partnering is welcomed by all groups, including Aboriginal communities, when the objectives are openly communicated and the needs identified. Communication needs to be continuous and take various forms (e.g. in-person, email, telephone, etc.).
- **Partnership with industry and employers is important to secure employment for project participants.** Successful employment of program participants, particularly those with multiple barriers, was realized mostly through partnerships with employers. Establishing relationships with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal employers and enlisting their strong commitment increases the availability of training and job opportunities for Aboriginal clients.
- **Building successful partnerships is a long-term process.** Developing partnerships can take considerable time and, at times, may meet resistance; project partners must be passionate yet professional in their pursuit of goals. To build a partnership, participants need to identify the goals and objectives of their partnership, define roles and responsibilities, and engage in ongoing communication.
- **Involve partners and key players during the early stages of project implementation to ensure their adequate support and ownership of the project.**

- **Steering and/or advisory committees are an important vehicle for facilitating cooperation and partnership and can contribute to achieving successful outcomes.** A few project proponents noted that the steering committees created to oversee project activities played a critical role in the success of the project. The committees brought project stakeholders under one umbrella, which facilitated discussion and the development of strategies and action plans. Sharing successful practices and tools with others facilitates learning and improvements to the current and future projects.
- **Obtaining support and commitment from community leaders contributes to project success.** Their involvement helps to raise the profile of the program and increases awareness and credibility amongst clients, partners, employers and others.
- **The partnership needs to have a clear vision and objectives.** For any partnership to be successful, clear goals and objectives must be established, well-communicated and understood by all stakeholders.

4.2 Leverage

- ? Evaluation Questions: What is the leveraging effect of the ASTSIF projects (additional funding that resulted from the established partnerships)? Did planned contributions from the private and public sector materialize? What are the lessons learned and best practices in terms of leveraging funds from the private and public sector?**

ASTSIF projects were designed to leverage substantial amounts of financial and in-kind contributions from partner organizations.

While ASTSIF projects obtained substantial financial and in-kind contributions from the private and public sectors, a review of ASTSIF files and documents combined with interviews with project proponents indicates that the degree of leverage was less than what was initially planned.

Of the 68 proponents interviewed, 58 reported the financial contributions leveraged from other sources and 47 of those were able to estimate the value of in-kind contributions (11 proponents were not able to estimate). HRSDC allocated \$40.2 million for these 58 projects and expected them to leverage \$19.4 million from other sources. Proponents reported that these projects actually leveraged an additional \$12.3 million (see table 8). Therefore, for every ASTSIF project dollar, an additional \$0.31 was leveraged from other sources. The service improvement projects, skills development projects, and national projects met or exceeded targets. However, the training-to-employment projects generated \$4.8 million in in-kind and financial contributions as compared to the targeted \$13.6 million.

Table 8: Funding leveraged by ASTSIF projects

Project type	Projects reporting	As per contribution agreements (\$ millions)		Reported by proponents (\$ millions)		
		HRSDC funds	Leverage expected	Financial	In-kind	Total
Service improvement	5	\$2.1	\$0.2	\$0.2	\$0.9	\$1.1
Skills development	26	\$15.4	\$5.7	\$1.4	\$4.1	\$5.6
Training-to-employment	17	\$16.5	\$13.6	\$3.8	\$0.9	\$4.7
National	10	\$6.3	\$0.0	\$0.7	\$0.2	\$0.9
Total	58	\$40.2	\$19.4	\$6.2	\$6.1	\$12.3

The in-kind support provided by partners consisted of facilities and sites, training and workshop materials/kits (such as booklets and CDs, computers and equipment), and expertise and professional time. The financial support included salary contributions for project staff, teachers, instructors, and contractors as well as student allowances, social assistance and EI support for participants. Project proponents and key partners attributed the mixed results in leveraging funds from the private and public sectors to short timelines, a lack of resources for fundraising, and limited interest from the private sector.

The funding provided by HRSDC, past relationships with other funders, and a well-defined plan supports leveraging of funds.

Cooperation, partnerships and building on established relationships are key aspects to leveraging funds from other sources. A majority of project proponents and key partners who provided higher ratings noted that contributions most commonly came from organizations with a history of working with the proponent. HRSDC funding helps to provide a base of funding and credibility to a project, which helps to attract other partners. It was also noted that a clear plan for achieving the objectives of the project is needed to gain support from partners.

A few proponents and key partners also highlighted the importance of being able to build on the success of a project. If continued funding is not available, the benefits generated by the projects will not be maintained. Furthermore, it may become more difficult to engage partners in the future if they believe that projects will not be sustained.

4.3 Relationship to Other Programming

? Evaluation Question: To what extent were ASTSIF funds complementary to existing funds dedicated to Aboriginal people (AHRDS, ASEP)?

There are other programs and initiatives in Canada that work towards increasing income and employment for Aboriginal communities, some of which may have complemented activities of the program.

ASTSIF was complementary to existing funding dedicated to Aboriginal people, particularly HRSDC's Aboriginal Human Resource Development Strategy (AHRDS) and its successor, the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS).

ASTSIF complemented HRSDC's other major Aboriginal programs, most notably the AHRDS and ASETS as well as the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Partnership (ASEP) Program. AHRDS was launched as a five year labour market strategy in 1999 and was renewed in 2004 for another five-year period. Working through Aboriginal Human Resources Development Agreements (AHRDA) holders, AHRDS assisted over 480,000 Aboriginal people to develop career-focused employment action plans, it helped approximately 155,000 Aboriginal clients to return to work, and it supported 51,000 clients in returning to school for training. In 2009, HRSDC announced ASETS as a successor strategy to AHRDS.

To ensure coordination with these programs, only AHRDA holders were eligible to apply for ASTSIF funding for regional projects. ASTSIF provided funding to implement client driven projects and services that AHRDA holders otherwise may not have been able to undertake. For example, a minority of project proponents noted that ASTSIF enabled them to implement projects that they had considered implementing in the past but could not due to a lack of required funding. As a short-term initiative designed to help Aboriginal communities during the economic downturn that started in 2008, ASTSIF enabled these AHRDA holders to implement off-reserve projects and target other Aboriginal groups which were not eligible under ASETS. In addition, the focus of ASTSIF offered a new approach and enhanced the capacity of AHRDA holders to deliver results-oriented services.

Requiring the involvement of AHRDA holders in regional projects also ensured that ASTSIF was coordinated with ASEP. ASEP was a targeted Aboriginal skills development program designed to promote employment for Aboriginal people on major economic developments. It focused on increasing the participation of Aboriginal people in major economic developments in resource-based sectors including mining, forestry, oil and gas, hydro development, fishery, and construction. The program supported multi-year training strategies developed by Aboriginal organizations and industry employers, leading to long-term skilled jobs for Aboriginal people. In all ASEP projects, AHRDAs or AHRDA third-party deliverers participated in the partnerships that developed, implemented and managed the multi-year training agreements.

A small number of project proponents and approximately 75% of HRSDC representatives viewed ASTSIF as complementary to the Aboriginal Skills and Partnerships Fund (ASPF) which was developed based on experience and lessons learned from ASTSIF.

While there are other HRSDC programs that share similar objectives with ASTSIF, most differ in their focus, target groups, strategies and/or scope. For example, programming such as the Pan Canadian Innovation Initiative, the Labour Market Development Agreements, Youth Employment Strategy, and the Targeted Initiative for Older Workers have more broadly defined target groups. Many economic development programs targeted at Aboriginal communities such as the First Nations Forestry Program by Natural Resources Canada, the Community Economic Development Program and Community Economic Opportunities Program by INAC and Business Development Programs by ACOA were complementary to ASTSIF in terms of developing business and economic opportunities and creating employment opportunities in the Aboriginal communities.

Provincial and Territorial governments are not involved extensively in delivering Aboriginal employment and skills development programs as such services fall largely under federal jurisdiction. Most provincial and territorial government employment and skills development programs are designed to serve all residents and do not necessarily address the barriers to employment facing Aboriginal people. A few examples of related programs include the Ontario Works program; the Labrador Aboriginal Training Partnership; Advanced Education; and the New Brunswick Aboriginal Workplace Essential Skills Project.

While most project proponents view ASTSIF as complementing other programming, a few proponents noted that they would have preferred to have only one HRSDC training and employment initiative that combines all the sources of funding allocated to employment programming for Aboriginal people. When the funding is divided among several programs, Aboriginal organizations are required to work with each program separately. Combining funding under one program could streamline funding, administration and reporting processes.

The support provided by ASTSIF usually formed part of a broader series of interventions in which ASTSIF clients participated. Participant survey data linked to administrative data indicated that most ASTSIF participants (84%) participated in interventions funded under other programs. The incidence increases sharply in the years leading up to participation in ASTSIF and during participation before declining sharply in the year following.

HRSDC administrative data was linked to the survey data and used to develop a profile of other labour market interventions in which the ASTSIF participants were involved. For each participant, these other labour market interventions were grouped into “Action Plan Equivalents” (APEs), which may consist of a series of component interventions selected to complement and reinforce one another as part an overall action plan.³⁶

Among the 321 survey participants, 84% of ASTSIF participants were associated with APEs at some time during the pre-participation, in program, or post-participation periods including 62% who were associated with APEs at some time in the five years prior to participating. Involvement in other interventions increased from 21% of participants three years prior to 29% two years prior, 38% in the year prior and 54% during participation (annualized) before declining to 21% in the year following participation.

One-third of these ASTSIF participants (33%) participated in interventions supported under AHRDA, 3% participated in interventions supported under ASEP, and 44% participated in interventions supported under other programs (percentages add to more than 62% because an APE can involve interventions supported under more than one program).

In comparison to the last year of the pre-participation period, the in-program period is characterized by a significant increase in the percent of ASTSIF clients participating in skills development (17% versus 31%) and EAS interventions (16% versus 11%), particularly interventions supported under AHRDA (34% versus 18% in the year previous). Of the 21% of ASTSIF participants associated with APEs in the post-participation year, 12% participated in interventions supported under AHRDA, 2% participated in interventions supported under ASEP, and 7% participated in interventions supported under other programs.

³⁶ In the HRSDC database, component interventions are not linked to a particular action plan. A convention has been adopted that attempts to recreate action plans based on the temporal proximity of interventions. The currently accepted rule assigns all interventions that occur within 183 days of one another into a single APE.

4.4 Administrative Costs

? Evaluation Questions: How does the level of administration costs compare to other Grants and Contribution programs? For ASTSIF projects focused on delivery of programs and services to participants, what proportion of funding was dedicated to participants? How does the average cost of interventions under ASTSIF compare to the average cost of similar programs and services?

To determine how the level of administration costs compares to other Grants and Contribution programs, a limited cost analysis was undertaken, which focused on examining administration costs.

The ratio of operating costs to program expenditures averaged fifteen percent over the two years of the program.

As indicated in Table 9, of the total \$75 million allocated to ASTSIF through the Economic Action Plan, \$8.6 million was spent on overhead expenditures including salary and non-salary administration. In 2009–2010 fiscal year, 23.13 full-time employees (7.5 full-time employees at National Headquarters and 15.63 full-time employees in the regions) were involved in the design and delivery of ASTSIF activities. The number of full-time employees increased to 27.75 for the 2010–2011 fiscal year. The ratio of overhead cost to program expenditures was 15% for the duration of the entire program.

Table 9: ASTSIF budget breakdown

Fiscal year	Total budget	Salary	Non salary admin and employee benefit plan	Total operating	Grants and contributions	Actual expenditures ^a	Ratio
2009–2010	\$25,000,000	\$1,577,000	\$2,165,000	\$3,742,000	\$21,258,000	\$21,036,705	16%
2010–2011	\$50,000,000	\$1,892,000	\$2,967,800	\$4,859,800	\$45,140,200	\$42,452,492	15%
Total	\$75,000,000	\$3,469,000	\$5,132,800	\$8,601,800	\$66,398,200	\$63,489,197	15%

Source: HRSDC

^a Of the \$66,398,200 allocated for grants and contributions, a total \$2,909,003 was lapsed (\$221,295 in fiscal year 2009–2010 and \$2,687,708 in fiscal year 2010–2011) and returned to HRSDC.

Two-thirds of ASTSIF projects reported spending less than 15% of their total budget on administration.

The exact percentage of the budget spent on administrative expenditures by the projects funded through ASTSIF is not available as the proponents were not required to report these numbers to HRSDC. However, during the key informant interviews, project proponents were asked to indicate administrative costs of their projects.

Table 10: Project administration costs as reported by project proponents

Project administration costs as a percentage of the total budget	% of respondents
Less than 5%	18%
5-10%	29%
10-15%	21%
More than 15%	32%

Eighteen percent of project proponents indicated that their project administration cost was less than 5% of the total project budget, 29% indicated that their administrative cost was between 5% and 10% of the total budget, and 21% indicated that their administrative cost was between 10% and 15% of their total budget. Overall, 68% of project proponents indicated that their project administration cost was 15% or less; the average percentage reported by the project proponents was 17%. On average, proponents of service improvement projects reported higher administrative costs compared to proponents of other types of projects possibly due to the focus on innovation in service provision.

The administrative cost associated with ASTSIF projects as well as ASTSIF overall was similar or lower than for other projects implemented by the ASTSIF signatories.

According to most project proponents (70%), the project administrative cost was approximately equal or less than the costs for other similar projects implemented by their organization. Only 15% of project proponents indicated that ASTSIF project administrative costs were higher. One of the four HRSDC representatives interviewed also indicated that the administrative cost for ASTSIF was higher than other programs. The project proponents who noted that the administrative costs were higher for their projects attributed this to the pilot nature of the project (which involved higher start-up costs), the short-term nature of the project, the limited time available for planning, and/or the remoteness of the delivery areas (which contributed to higher travel costs).

Based on the total budget, the average cost per client for the ASTSIF programming was \$10,343.

As indicated in Table 11, ASTSIF spent \$10,343 for every registered client, \$20,313 for every client who completed the program, and \$33,738 for every client who obtained employment or decided to pursue further training or education after completing the program.

Table 11: Cost per client analysis^a

Performance results	#	Cost per unit		Program cost based on project types			
		Based on expenditures	Based on budget	Skills dev.	Service improv.	Training to employment	National
Total Expenditures/Budget	–	\$63,489,197	\$75,000,000	\$20,811,280	\$3,320,493	\$32,398,428	\$6,958,996
Per registered client	7,251	\$8,756	\$10,343	\$1,778	\$9,430	\$14,470	\$8,216
Per completed action plan	3,692	\$17,196	\$20,314	\$7,462	\$15,899	\$27,044	\$9,857
Per client action plan with a return to school result	927	\$68,489	\$80,906	\$11,692	\$58,623	\$117,386	–
Per client action plan with employment result	1,296	\$48,989	\$57,870	\$16,686	\$39,641	\$57,958	–
Per client with school or employment results	2,223	\$28,560	\$33,738	\$6,875	\$23,649	\$38,801	–

^a The table does not include cost per intervention analysis. The methodologies that were used to define and report interventions differed significantly across projects.

Training-to-employment projects involved more resource intensive programming. According to planning documents, for each registered client targeted, the budget was \$6,830 higher for training-to-employment projects than for skills development projects; (the budget was an average of \$10,350 higher for each completed action plan and \$7,949 higher for each client who gained employment). Under ASTSIF, nine training-to-employment projects received HRSDC funds greater than \$1 million as compared to four skills development projects. The costs of the training-to-employment projects were higher but they were also more likely to lead to employment; amongst the clients surveyed, 42% of the participants in the training-to-employment projects were employed full-time at the time of the survey as compared to 27% of participants in the skills development projects.

The average cost per completed action plan for skills development projects appears to be lower than the average cost of interventions under other similar programs, while the average cost per action plan for training-to-employment projects appears significantly higher.

The following table presents a comparative review of the average cost per completed action plan for participants in ASTSIF projects and for clients who received various types of services under Aboriginal Human Resources Development Agreements (AHRDA). Recognizing some differences in the methodology used to calculate average cost,³⁷

³⁷ The AHRDA evaluation calculated costs based on action plan equivalents (APEs) that contain at least one intervention administered under AHRDA during the six month period. Participants were divided into active employment insurance claimants, former employment insurance claimants and non-claimants. Data is not available on ASTSIF interventions which could be used to construct APEs or type of claimant.

the average cost of completing a skills development action plan under ASTSIF was lower than the cost under AHRDA. However, the average cost of training-to-employment action plans was significantly higher under ASTSIF than under AHRDA.

Table 12: Comparison of average cost per intervention between ASTSIF and AHRDA				
	Skills development	Targeted wage subsidies	Job-creation partnership	Employment assistance services
Average total cost of AHRDA action plan equivalent by program activity areas and client types				
Active EI claimant	\$15,584	\$12,257	\$16,663	\$1,311
Former EI claimant	\$12,775	\$10,322	\$16,338	\$1,313
Non-claimant	\$12,443	\$8,516	\$15,007	\$1,295
Average cost per ASTSIF client who completed action plan or training				
All clients	\$7,462	\$27,044		

The higher cost of delivering training-to-employment services under ASTSIF can be explained mainly by the types of projects funded. ASTSIF projects focused on clients with multiple barriers to employment, which required a complex set of services. Along with general employment services (e.g. workshops or counselling on finding a job, advice or assistance with resume writing, interview preparation or practice interviewing, and assistance in developing career or training plans), all 33 funded training-to-employment projects provided job coaching, mentoring types of support, work placement and on-the-job training, 32 projects provided classroom training designed for specific sectors or trades, and 32 projects provided job subsidies. Projects helped participants gain various diplomas and certificates (such as registered nurse, pilot, police officer, and interpreter) and work in specific trades and industries such as marine, aquaculture, and construction.

4.5 Performance Measurement

? Evaluation Question: To what extent were the data collection and performance measurement provisions implemented?

The ASTSIF performance measurement strategy required projects to collect and report data on a wide range of indicators, some of which were new and innovative in nature. Regional projects were required to submit data on clients, activities and outcomes as well as quarterly reports (which included a narrative description of progress towards project milestones as well as a performance section which indicated the progress towards meeting

performance targets) and two annual reports which contained information on partnerships, rates of client retention and completion, progress made in addressing the needs of clients with multiple barriers, and success stories.³⁸

While national projects submitted quarterly financial reports, which included a section on activities implemented and milestones accomplished, they did not have to report quarterly on performance indicators. In addition, due to a late start, the national projects submitted only one annual report. The national projects which served clients were also required to collect client background information.

The Program used a number of innovative measures, which enhanced the effectiveness of performance measurement strategy and increased reporting.

According to most HRSDC representatives, several innovative aspects were incorporated into the ASTSIF performance measurement system to increase its effectiveness. The aspects are summarized as follows:

- **Client background and program participation data collection.** All ASTSIF projects which served clients were required to collect and report background and program participation data for each participant, which was not the case with similar initiatives previously implemented by HRSDC where proponents only submitted summary (roll-up) reports. In particular, ASTSIF required information on client background (name, contact, and SIN), employability, employment history, program participation, and status post-program.
- **Client success stories.** As part of the annual reports, projects were required to submit client success stories to illustrate the outcomes of clients, which was not the case with similar initiatives previously implemented by HRSDC. The purpose of success stories was to build capacity of the projects to understand and communicate client progress in the project.
- **New performance indicators.** ASTSIF incorporated several new performance indicators (e.g. number of clients registered, level of completion, completed interventions, percentage of clients employed or enrolled in school as a result, number of clients who did not complete the program due to various reasons, and level of retention) to measure the success of the projects.

In addition, HRSDC representatives noted that the ASTSIF had strict rules about reporting. All projects had to submit regular reports and performance data to be eligible for funding.

³⁸ Schedule F and Appendix A of Contribution Agreements.

A review of ASTSIF files and documents indicates that data were collected and reports were submitted. HRSDC was able to collect quarterly and annual reports from all projects and at least some client background and program participation data were eventually obtained from most projects.

As demonstrated in Table 13, all regional and national projects submitted quarterly and annual reports. As discussed in the section on evaluation methodology, 88% of regional projects and 44% of national projects which served clients eventually submitted client background and program participation data to HRSDC (which was used to develop a database of ASTSIF participants); HRSDC had to make multiple requests to achieve that response rate and extended the deadline several times (from the original deadline of August 12, 2011 to the final date of December 31, 2011).

Table 13: Percentage of ASTSIF projects which submitted performance data				
	Regional projects		National projects	
	#	%	#	%
Quarterly reports	74	100%	n/a	n/a
Annual reports	74	100%	12	100%
Client background and program participation data	65	88%	4	44%

Most (81%) of the 68 project proponents interviewed viewed the data collection and reporting requirements as reasonable. Those project proponents who believed that the reporting requirements under the program were unreasonable noted that they experienced difficulties in understanding some of the reporting elements and did not receive enough guidance and support from HRSDC when requested. They also noted that quarterly reporting was too frequent considering the short project time frame and the level of effort required to produce the reports. In some cases, reports duplicated each other. For example, the information reported in the final quarterly report was almost identical to the annual report. Another area of concern is that funding under the program ended on March 31, 2011 but the contribution agreements still required proponents to conduct client follow-ups three, six and twelve months after program completion as well as prepare final annual reports beyond that date.

The results of the interviews with the project proponents, supported by the data quality and integrity analysis of a sample of 10 ASTSIF projects, suggest that ASTSIF projects collected comprehensive information on client background, employability, and program participation, as well as follow-up information as required by Schedule F of the contribution agreements signed with HRSDC. More specifically, the site visits and the data quality and integrity analysis of 10 projects confirmed that those project proponents collected comprehensive client background information and that most conducted some type of client follow-up (although only three of the ten projects used a standard form in conducting these follow-ups). Generally, the follow-up information included current client employment

status, type of job, name of employer, and reasons for unemployment if the client was not employed. Despite the positive data quality and integrity check for these 10 projects, the data received by HRSDC for the evaluation were missing a fair amount of client background information.

While the interviews with project proponents and the data analysis of 10 projects indicated that ASTSIF projects collected detailed information on characteristics, interventions and outcomes associated with individual clients, much of the information was not submitted to HRSDC. Factors that contributed to difficulties in submitting the information collected included: that most of the proponents relied primarily on paper files with very little data entered electronically, and that no standard individual client forms were used, resulting in no consistency across projects. Additionally, proponents had difficulty submitting client information to HRSDC for the evaluation, indicating that this was due to the program having ended and they did not have the resources to respond or to fully respond to the request. Eventually, 69 of the 83 projects provided client information; however, the information was generally provided in paper form (scanned or photocopied) and included only some of the data which had been collected. Of the 4,852 participant records submitted by 69 project proponents, all records included participant names, project and organization name, and type of project. Data on age, gender, disability status, education level, Aboriginal status, SINS, and marital status were available for most records (ranging from 62% for information on number of dependants to 87% for gender). Data on program start date, end dates program completion, and types of interventions or certification received were available for approximately half of the records. All other data, such as history of employment in the 12 month period prior to participating, program cost per participant, income support, occupational skills, accessibility, and post program employment were not available for most records and was insufficient to create a profile of participants.

In terms of validity and reliability of the data that were collected and shared with HRSDC, a review of the client databases, documents and administrative files concluded that there was reliable data for most of the performance indicators, with the exception of the number of interventions per client. Additionally, HRSDC representatives and project proponents expressed some reservations about the data's quality due to time constraints during project implementation and because adequate training and guidance were not provided to project proponents regarding how to collect, store and report performance data. Project proponents were unfamiliar with many of the new components incorporated in the ASTSIF performance measurement strategy, which created some problems in their work. Finally, the methodologies used to define and report interventions differed significantly across projects.

According to project proponents and HRSDC representatives involved in the ASTSIF, the performance measurement system for similar programs in the future could be improved by allocating greater resources and time to train proponents and support data collection provisions, ensuring consistency in reporting with other HRSDC programs, simplifying reporting templates, better defining indicators, and making formal outcome evaluations mandatory for larger projects.

According to HRSDC representatives, the performance measurement system for similar initiatives could be improved by:

- **Allocating greater resources to train and support project proponents on data collection and reporting.** According to one HRSDC representative, the short-term nature of the programming did not allow ASTSIF to provide sufficient support to projects and train project proponents on how to collect and report performance data.
- **Making formal outcome evaluations at the project level mandatory for larger (e.g. national) projects.** Two of the four HRSDC representatives interviewed noted that programs such as ASTSIF should provide funding and make it mandatory for larger projects to conduct formal project evaluations. This approach will ensure reliable evidence is obtained on project performance and provide a mechanism to document and communicate the lessons learned.

According to the project proponents, the reporting requirements and guidance for similar initiatives could be improved by:

- **Further streamlining reporting.** A few project proponents experienced difficulties in understanding some of the indicators and requirements in the reporting template. The proponents noted that HRSDC should streamline the reporting, simplify the reporting templates, provide a glossary of terms, and create a guide explaining how to fill out reports. In particular, quarterly reports should be replaced with semi-annual reporting to reduce the reporting burden and annual reports should also be further simplified.
- **Allow more flexibility regarding the transfer of funds between budget items.** A few project proponents noted that they experienced difficulties in completing financial reports due to rigid requirements for the transfer of funding between project activities. Flexibility around the transfer of funds would facilitate project implementation and simplify reporting.
- **Avoiding delays in sending reporting templates and provide guidance and support from the early stages of project implementation.** A few project proponents noted that they received reporting templates very close to reporting deadlines, which did not provide adequate time to plan for data collection and prepare the reports. The templates should be provided at an early stage of project implementation and be accompanied by adequate guidance and support from the HRSDC regional office.

- **Increasing consistency in reporting across HRSDC programs.** A few project proponents noted that the reporting templates and process should be consistent with those of other programs and initiatives implemented by HRSDC. Most proponents receive funding from several HRSDC programs and the reporting burden would be reduced if all programs use the same or similar reporting processes and templates.
- **Better defining terminology and indicators.** A few proponents experienced difficulties in understanding and interpreting the terminology used for describing the indicators and the reporting requirements. ASTSIF should provide further explanations and a glossary of terms to ensure that proponents understand the requirements for their reports.
- **Providing feedback on the reports so that the quality of reporting can be improved.** A few proponents noted that HRSDC did not provide them with feedback regarding the reports they have submitted. Providing continuous feedback would help improve reporting.
- **Allowing more flexibility regarding the transfer of funds between budget items.** A few proponents noted that they experienced difficulties in completing financial reports due to rigid requirements governing the transfer of funding between project activities. Flexibility around the transfer of funds would facilitate project implementation and simplify reporting.
- **Adopting a fiscal year consistent with other programs.** The ASTSIF approach for defining quarters was different from the standard quarters, which created confusion among some proponents. A few proponents recommended that all programs should adopt the standard Government of Canada definition of a quarter.³⁹
- **Avoiding contacting clients multiple times to collect the same information.** A few proponents expressed concerns regarding the contacting of Aboriginal clients multiple times to collect follow-up information. Under ASTSIF, each project was expected to conduct three follow-ups with participants (over a three, six and twelve month period). In addition, ASTSIF participants were surveyed as part of this evaluation. It was suggested that contacting clients multiple times may reduce participation rates and create dissatisfaction and irritation among some clients.

³⁹ According to *Federal-Provincial Fiscal Arrangements Act*, the Government of Canada defines a fiscal year from the period beginning on April 1 in one year and ending on March 31 in the next year. Every three months starting as of April 1 is considered a quarter (e.g. the 1st quarter is from April 1st to June 30th). However, due to various reasons (e.g. projects starting implementation in different dates), ASTSIF projects used different time periods to prepare and submit their quarterly reports.

4.6 Factors Contributing to and Constraining Aboriginal Skills and Training Strategic Investment Fund Success

Various factors were identified by key informants, by program participants, and through the document review as contributing to and constraining the success of the ASTSIF projects and recommendations were provided for consideration in the design of any similar program in the future.

Collaboration and cooperation among various partners, the commitment and skills of project proponents, availability of funding, and service delivery that was consistent with the Aboriginal culture and traditions were the main factors contributing to the success of the ASTSIF projects.

The key factors that were identified as contributing to the success of the ASTSIF projects included:

- **Collaboration, cooperation and partnerships with various groups of stakeholders and their commitments to the success of the projects.** About half of the project proponents noted that partnerships and cooperation were required and contributed significantly to project success. Projects were implemented in partnership with other government representatives, community organizations, Aboriginal groups and the private sector. Partners were involved in all aspects of project implementation from design to delivery and follow-ups. Projects also leveraged significant amounts of in-kind and financial contributions from partners. Collaboration enabled projects to attract more funding, generate referrals, access additional resources and services for their clients, reach out to various Aboriginal groups, and access the expertise necessary to produce high quality outputs.
- **Staff and contractor commitment, expertise and professionalism.** Several project proponents noted that the involvement of highly capable staff members who were committed to achieving the goals contributed to the success of their projects. In addition, some projects involved professional contractors and consultants in the design and delivery of project activities as well as the development of resources, which played a role generating high quality outcomes.
- **Availability of funding from ASTSIF.** A few project partners noted that the availability of ASTSIF funding enabled them to design and implement project activities as well as leverage additional funding from other sources. Without the funding from ASTSIF, the project would not have proceeded.
- **Involvement of stakeholders in project implementation.** A few projects involved representatives of communities and other interested organizations in the design and delivery of project activities through project advisory committees. The involvement of stakeholders ensured the projects addressed stakeholder needs and were supported by community representatives.

- **Organizational expertise in the field.** A few project proponents noted that their expertise and experience in providing employment services to Aboriginal communities played a critical role in the success of the project. Experience gained over the years enabled the proponents to deliver professional services that were well received.
- **Culturally appropriate programming.** A few project proponents noted that some of their success can be attributed to understanding and incorporating Aboriginal culture into their programming. Projects were tailored to meet the specific needs of Aboriginal people and were appropriate to Aboriginal lifestyles and culture. Such programming incorporated flexible schedules, involved Aboriginal elders in program delivery, respected the culture, and established employment partnerships with Aboriginal organizations.

Issues related to limited funding and time available to develop the projects, rigid requirements, and the multiple and complex barriers faced by Aboriginal people are some of the factors identified as constraining the success of ASTSIF programming.

The key factors that were identified as constraining to the success of the ASTSIF projects included:

- **Time limitations and funding delays.** Several project proponents noted that the main limitation of their projects was time constraints associated with strict start and closing dates set by ASTSIF and delays in receiving funding. The ASTSIF projects were approved during September to October 2009 and had to be finalized by March 31, 2011, which gave a maximum of 18 months for implementation. In addition, a few projects experienced delays in receiving funds after initial approvals. A short timeframe did not allow some projects to invest adequate time and efforts for planning and implementation, which reduced the quality of project outputs and constrained achievement of the intended outcomes. A few project proponents also noted that the limited funding available affected the success of their projects.
- **Systemic issues in Aboriginal communities and Canadian society.** Systemic barriers faced by Aboriginal people in finding employment are prevalent across Canada. The target groups for most ASTSIF projects reside in geographically remote and isolated communities where fewer job opportunities exist and the communities experience higher rates of substance abuse, poverty, and illiteracy. These issues negatively affected the success of the project. A few projects experienced higher than normal dropout rates and a lack of commitment from participants. In addition, stereotypes, prejudices and racism against Aboriginal people in Canada as well as systemic issues such as a lack of clarity in the juridical division of responsibilities between provincial and federal governments over Aboriginal affairs constrained success.
- **Lack of qualified staff and contractors to design and deliver project activities and services.** Three regional projects, all serving clients in remote regions, experienced difficulties in hiring qualified staff members and contractors. Geographical isolation as well as the temporary nature of positions created challenges in recruiting staff members and increased staff turnover. Consequently, some project activities were cancelled, postponed, delayed, or implemented less effectively than they otherwise may have been.

- **Organizational and planning issues.** Several projects experienced challenges related to management and implementation of project activities such as lack of coordination with and commitment from key partners as well as difficulties in involving employers.
- **Rigid rules and slow response from HRSDC.** ASTSIF set strict rules over the use of funding which restricted the ability to transfer funds between project activities. If projects needed to reallocate some of the unused funding to other project activities, they needed to obtain approval from the HRSDC regional offices. According to several project proponents, the time it took for HRSDC to approve relocation of funding was sometimes long which added to the time constraints in implementing activities. Given the short time period for project implementation, such delays created challenges to successful implementation of project activities.
- **Economic downturn.** Some project activities were implemented during the times of economic downturn or slow economic recovery, which reduced the chances of participants finding employment.

Project proponents, HRSDC representatives and key partners provided a variety of suggestions and recommendations with respect to how future programs similar to ASTSIF could be improved.

These are summarized below:

- Extend the length of future project-based programming. Not enough time was allocated under ASTSIF for the design and implementation of such complex projects (17 project proponents, 7 key partners and 2 HRSDC representatives).
- Provide funding to continue the successful projects so that the activities, outputs, outcomes and momentum generated by the ASTSIF projects can be maintained (15 project proponents, 7 key partners and 1 HRSDC representative).
- Incorporate the requirement for partnerships into other programs and provide more incentives to encourage partnerships (4 key partners and 1 project proponent).
- Streamline the data collection and reporting process (e.g. simplify reports, provide better guidance and support with preparing financial and narrative reports, and change the quarterly reporting into semi-annual reporting) (3 project proponents, 2 HRSDC representatives and 1 key partner).
- Allow more flexibility to transfer funds between project activities or find ways to approve amendments faster (4 project proponents).
- Develop mechanisms to transfer knowledge, skills and experience between projects to ensure innovations are utilized by other ASET holders (2 project proponents, 1 HRSDC representative, and 1 key partner).
- Develop a better, more efficient reimbursement system and provide some of the funding up-front (2 project proponents).
- Streamline the application process and simplify proposals to reduce the time and efforts required (2 project proponents).

5. *Conclusions*

The key conclusions that arise from the evaluation of ASTSIF are as follows:

1. The characteristics of the projects and services supported through ASTSIF are consistent with characteristics highlighted in the literature as successful in increasing Aboriginal participation in the labour market.

Aboriginal people experience much higher rates of unemployment and lower incomes than the general population. Barriers to employment highlighted in the literature include geographic isolation, low levels of education, prevalence of single parent families, health issues, and employer-related challenges. A review of the literature suggests that ASTSIF projects are consistent with the types of programming that tend to be most effective in increasing labour market participation amongst Aboriginal people, particularly with respect to the focus on training and education; providing short-term employment training services which incorporate other types of support such as mentoring, job preparation, counselling, assistance with work related expenses, and services such as childcare; and adopting a broad, holistic approach that incorporates culturally appropriate training. While most project proponents and key partners view ASTSIF as successful in addressing some of the systemic gaps that impede employment of Aboriginal workers, it is widely recognized that on-going efforts are required to achieve significant and sustainable progress.

2. The training provided by ASTSIF was perceived positively in increasing skills, credentials, and experience of program participants.

Most clients (91%) participated in training designed to enhance their skills related to a particular job or sector, essential skills, or both essential skills and skills related to a particular job or sector. Most participants were also satisfied with the services received (average rating of 4.2 where 5 is very satisfied), completed the training (88%), and received a certificate or diploma upon completion (79% of those who completed). Most proponents and partners reported that the training in which they were involved was successful in increasing participant skills, education, and experience. Most participants indicated that the project increased their confidence that they can obtain employment suitable for their skills; improved their skills related to a specific job, occupation or industry; provided them with the experience necessary to obtain suitable employment; and further developed their essential skills. Almost one-half of the participants surveyed received on-the-job training or work experience, and one-third of these participants continued to work with the organization after the program ended.

3. According to ASTSIF participants, the increased skills, credentials and experience enhanced their ability to find employment or to access further training and education. For some, however, personal or family issues and a lack of employment opportunities in their community continued to serve as barriers to forming a stronger attachment to the labour force.

At the time of the survey, 42% of the ASTSIF participants surveyed were employed full-time or part-time or operated their own business and 10% were awaiting callback from a seasonal job. Most survey participants reported that the ASTSIF programming enhanced their opportunity to find employment and they were much less likely to identify a lack of education or experience as a barrier to employment than they were prior to participation. The surveyed participants also reported that their income increased from \$13,915 in the year prior to participating to \$16,863 (both expressed on an annualized basis) since completing or otherwise leaving the program.

Another positive outcome of ASTSIF was that for some participation led to further training. Given that participants completed an essential skills intervention, it is not surprising that they may have needed further training. In fact, one-third of the participants enrolled in another training or education program after ASTSIF, including 10% were enrolled in an education or training program at the time of the survey. The programs identified most commonly included skills training, apprenticeship, or diploma or degree programs, and adult basic education or academic upgrading.

Participants who were unemployed at the time of the survey most commonly attributed unemployment to personal barriers such as a lack of confidence, health, family or personal issues (31%) or a lack of employment opportunities in their community (26%).

Participants with multiple barriers to employment, particularly those who reported some type of disability, were less likely to obtain employment after completion of the program. However, most of these participants still completed their training, were satisfied with the assistance received, and considered it to have helped them to further develop the essential skills needed in life and work.

4. Projects were successful in establishing partnerships and leveraging HRSDC funding from other sources, although not to the level expected.

One hundred and twenty-one key partner organizations were involved in the design and delivery of the 86 regional and national projects including private sector companies, industry groups and sector councils, unions and employee organizations, service delivery agencies, educational organizations, provincial governments, health authorities, and Aboriginal organizations. In addition to these partners, ASTSIF projects also collaborated with a wide range of other organizations that contributed to project success but were not directly involved in the design and delivery of the projects.

Of the 68 proponents interviewed, 58 reported financial contributions leveraged from other sources and 47 were able to estimate the value of in-kind contributions. For every dollar contributed by ASTSIF to the 58 projects, an additional \$0.31 was leveraged from other sources. The degree of leveraging was somewhat less than expected, HRSDC allocated \$40.2 million for these 58 projects and expected the contribution to lead

to an investment of \$19.4 million from other sources; instead the projects leveraged \$12.3 million (63% of the amount expected). The shortfall was attributed to the short timelines available for planning and starting-up the project, a lack of resources for fundraising, and limited interest from the private sector.

5. ASTSIF was complementary to existing funding dedicated to Aboriginal people, particularly HRSDC's AHRDS (which was replaced by ASETS) and ASEP.

Restricting eligibility for regional ASTSIF funding to Aboriginal Human Resources Development Agreement (AHRDA) holders helped ensure coordination with Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (AHRDS) and Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS). Moreover, requiring the involvement of AHRDA holders in regional projects also ensured that ASTSIF was coordinated with Aboriginal Skills and Employment Partnership (ASEP). ASTSIF provided funding to implement client driven projects and services that AHRDA holders otherwise may not have been able to undertake.

The support provided by ASTSIF usually formed part of a broader series of interventions in which ASTSIF clients participated. Among survey respondents 84% participated in interventions funded under other programs. The involvement in other interventions increased sharply in the years leading up to participation in ASTSIF (i.e. from 21% three years prior to 29% two years prior and 38% in the year prior) and during participation (54%, annualized) before declining sharply in the year following (21%). Approximately one-third of the ASTSIF participants were involved in interventions supported under AHRDS in the five years prior to participation in ASTSIF and 34% were involved in AHRDS in the same year they were involved in ASTSIF. Few ASTSIF participants were involved in interventions supported under ASEP.

6. The administrative costs associated with ASTSIF are similar to those associated with other comparable programs.

The ratio of HRSDC operating costs to program expenditures averaged 15% over the two years of the program.

When examined at the project level, ASTSIF projects reported spending, on average, less than 17% of their total budget on administration, with two-thirds of the projects reporting spending less than 15%. Keeping the administrative cost low was one of the requirements highlighted by Service Canada during the application process. The project proponents were instructed to submit a low administrative budget in order to be approved for ASTSIF funding. The main strategy employed by project proponents to keep administrative costs low was to cover some portion of expenditures with in-kind and financial contributions from other sources including their own organizational resources. Those project proponents who reported higher than average administrative costs, attributed the additional costs to the pilot nature of the project, the short-term nature of the project, the limited time available for planning, or the remoteness of the delivery areas.

Based on the total budget, the average cost of the ASTSIF programming was \$10,343 per registered client, \$20,313 for every client who completed the program, and \$33,738 for every client who obtained employment or decided to pursue further training or education after completing the program. While the training-to-employment projects were the most resource intensive type of programming, they were also the type most likely to lead to employment; amongst the clients surveyed, 42% of the participants in the training-to-employment projects were employed full-time at the time of the survey as compared to 27% of participants in the skills development projects.

7. HRSDC obtained the quarterly and annual reports from ASTSIF projects as required under the contribution agreements. However, much of the detailed information on characteristics, interventions and outcomes associated with individual clients was never submitted.

The ASTSIF performance measurement strategy required projects to collect and report data on a wide range of indicators, some of which were new and innovative in nature. All ASTSIF projects which served clients were required to collect and report data on individual clients. The results of the interviews with the project proponents, supported by the data quality and integrity analysis of a sample of 10 ASTSIF projects, indicates that ASTSIF projects collected comprehensive information on client background, employability, and program participation.

However, when requested to submit the client information, only 88% of regional projects and 44% of national projects which served clients eventually did so and only some of the data which had been collected were included. All of the participant records which were submitted included participant names and most identified age, gender, disability status, education level, Aboriginal status, SINs, and marital status. However, data on program start date, end date, completion, and types of interventions was available for only about half of the records and all other required data (e.g., employment history or employability) were not available for most records. Factors which reduced the information available for this evaluation include the fact that most proponents had rudimentary paper-based information systems, very little data had been entered electronically, no standard individual client forms were prepared for ASTSIF, and the request to submit client information came after the ASTSIF program had ended and the project was over; as such, proponents did not necessarily have the resources to respond or to respond fully to the request.

The performance measurement system for similar programs in the future could be improved by allocating greater resources and time to train proponents and support data collection provisions, ensuring consistency in reporting with other HRSDC programs, simplifying reporting templates, better defining indicators, and making formal outcome evaluations mandatory for larger projects.

8. A number of key lessons and best practices were identified through implementation of the ASTSIF projects.

Collaboration and cooperation among various partners, the commitment and skills of project proponents, availability of funding, and service delivery that was consistent with the Aboriginal culture and traditions were the main factors contributing to the success of the ASTSIF projects.

Innovation takes considerable time and resources. Project proponents and key partners highlighted the importance of allowing sufficient time for planning, organizing and testing innovative pilot projects. While creating new methods, resources, tools and approaches is always time consuming, developing projects in remote and isolated regions with limited infrastructure requires extra planning, efforts and administration. Developing successful partnerships requires considerable time and project proponents and key partners identified that this need is heightened when attempting to engage non-aboriginal organizations who may not have previous experience or understanding of aboriginal communities. Continued support is required to encourage innovative projects, sustain and expand successful projects, and communicate the lessons learned. Additionally, project proponents and key partners noted that the 18-month period was not long enough for many of the multi-barriered clients to succeed because a holistic approach with multiple interventions requires additional time and resources. The quick implementation and time-limited nature of ASTSIF may have limited the outcomes, scope and innovative nature of the projects that were implemented.

Projects that feature a flexible design which enables services to be tailored to individual needs; adequately assesses participant skills at the beginning of project; provide mentoring, coaching, and peer learning; and have practical and visual exercises delivered by dedicated staff members over longer periods are those more likely to be successful in helping multi-barriered clients to further develop their skills and find employment.

Project proponents and key partners also highlighted the importance of allowing sufficient time for planning, providing ongoing support, taking a holistic approach, and better supporting those who relocate for employment. Issues related to limited funding and time available to develop the projects, rigid program requirements, and the multiple and complex barriers faced by Aboriginal people are some of the factors identified as constraining success.

The lessons learned and best practices identified with respect to partnerships focused on the importance of having open communication with partners and stakeholders; allocating sufficient time to build partnerships with industries and employers (especially with non-Aboriginal employers); involving partners in early stages of project development; working with respected and reputable partners; establishing a clear vision and a set of objectives; and using steering committees strategically.

Appendix 1 – Evaluation Issues, Questions and Data Sources

Exhibit A-1: Evaluation Matrix							
Issue	Question	Document & file review	Literature review	Key informant interviews	Participant surveys	EI & CRC data review	Data quality assessment
Design and delivery	Q1 What are the lessons learned and best practices from the development and the implementation of ASTSIF projects in terms of:						
	Q1.1 Establishing partnerships with employers, stakeholders, other Federal government departments and agencies, and provinces and territories?	x		x			
	Q1.2 Leveraging funds from private and public sectors?	x		x			
	Q1.3 Programs and services targeting multi-barriered clients, including youth?	x		x			
	Q1.4 Addressing systemic gaps that impede employment of Aboriginal workers?	x	x	x			
	Q2 To what extent were the data collection and performance measurement provisions implemented?	x		x			x
Achievement of desired results	Q3 To what extent were the ASTSIF projects successful in establishing partnerships with employers, stakeholders and Federal, Provincial and Territorial (F/P/T) governments?	x		x			
	Q4 What is the leveraging effect of the projects (additional funding that resulted from the established partnerships)? Did planned contributions from the private and public sector materialize?	x		x			
	Q5 To what extent did ASTSIF projects provide essential skills training for multi-barriered clients, including youth? Did the ASTSIF facilitate their transition to employment?	x		x	x	x	

Exhibit A-1: Evaluation Matrix

Issue	Question	Document & file review	Literature review	Key informant interviews	Participant surveys	EI & CRC data review	Data quality assessment
	Q6 To what extent were ASTSIF projects successful in providing training to employment that helped participants with securing employment?	x		x	x	x	
	Q7 To what extent was the training provided specific and appropriate to specific jobs to be filled?	x		x	x		
Demonstration of efficiency and economy	Q8 To what extent were ASTSIF funds complementary to existing funds dedicated to Aboriginal people (AHRDS, ASEP)?	x	x	x			
	Q9 How does the level of administration cost compare to other Grants and Contribution programs? For ASTSIF projects focused on the delivery of programs and services to participants, what proportion of funding was dedicated to participants? How do the average cost of interventions under ASTSIF compare to the average cost of similar programs and services?	x	x	x			