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The Future Skills Podcast

Season 5: Episode 5

Learning from One Another: Skills, Training, and Workforce Development in Northern Communities

In this episode of the Future Skills Podcast, host Jeremy Strachan explores the complex and evolving landscape of skills development and workforce training in Northern and Indigenous communities. Amanda Thompson from The Conference Board of Canada shares insights from the Learning from One Another project, a multi-year initiative examining labour market trends and training strategies across Yukon, Nunavut, and Northern Ontario. We also hear from Kris Mullaly of the Qikiqtani Inuit Association, who discusses the Q-STEP program and Tuttarvik—community-driven initiatives that are empowering Inuit youth through culturally grounded training and employment supports. Finally, Xina Cowan of EntrepreNorth highlights how entrepreneurship is creating new pathways for economic resilience and self-determination across the North.

Guests

Amanda Thompson, Lead Research Associate, The Conference Board of Canada

Kris Mullaly, Project Manager, Qikiqtani Inuit Association

Xina Cowan, Co-Director, EntrepreNorth

Host

Jeremy Strachan, Senior Research Associate, The Conference Board of Canada

Links

Future Skills Centre Homepage: <https://fsc-ccf.ca/>

Future Skills Centre LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/fsc-ccf>

Future Skills Centre Bluesky: <https://bsky.app/profile/fsc-ccf.bsky.social>

The Conference Board of Canada Homepage: <https://www.conferenceboard.ca/>

The Conference Board of Canada Twitter: <https://twitter.com/ConfBoardofCda>

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Future Skills Centre Insights Page, Learning From One Another: [English](#) | [French](#)

Future Skills Centre, Mapping the Landscape: [English](#) | [French](#)

Future Skills Centre, Luminary Research and Innovation Project: [English](#) | [French](#)

Oshki-Wenjack Homepage: <https://www.oshki.ca/>

Qikiqtani Inuit Association Homepage: <https://www.qia.ca/>

Qikiqtani Inuit Association Q-STEP and Tuttarvik Programs: <https://www.qia.ca/what-we-do/training-and-jobs/>

EntrepreNorth Homepage: <https://www.entreprenorth.ca/>

Transcript

Jeremy: Welcome to Season Five of the Future Skills Podcast, brought to you by the Future Skills Centre. I'm Jeremy Strachan, Senior Research Associate at The Conference Board of Canada, and your host for the season. On the Future Skills Podcast, we explore what matters most to Canadians when it comes to skills, training, and the ever-changing world of work.

Since 2019, the Future Skills Centre has been driving Canada's workforce transformation by funding innovative training solutions, cutting-edge research, and inclusive partnerships to ensure everyone has the skills to thrive in a changing economy.

In this episode, we're turning our attention north—to the unique challenges and opportunities surrounding skills development and training in Canada's Northern and remote communities. While the North is rich in culture, knowledge, and resilience, it also faces persistent barriers to training access, infrastructure, and service delivery.

My first guest is Amanda Thompson from The Conference Board of Canada, who'll walk us through key findings from *Learning from One Another*, a project undertaken in partnership with the Future Skills Centre. Then we'll hear from Kris Mullaly of the Qikiqtani Inuit Association's Q-STEP program—an initiative empowering Inuit youth through skills development rooted in community priorities. Finally, Xina Cowan from EntrepreNorth will share how entrepreneurship training is helping to build economic resilience and self-determination across the North.

Indigenous and Northern communities face challenges in workforce development due to geographic isolation, limited access to education, and underinvestment in infrastructure. These are further compounded by systemic inequities, a lack of culturally relevant programming, and the ongoing legacies of colonialism. Economic opportunities are often tied to resource-based industries, which don't always align with the long-term aspirations of Indigenous youth and communities.

The Future Skills Centre has been supporting Indigenous workforce development through research and partnerships that promote culturally grounded, skills-based education. A report funded by the Future Skills Centre called *Mapping the Landscape*, published in 2020, underscored the urgent need to support the projected 350,000 Indigenous youth entering the workforce between 2016 and 2026. Initiatives like the Luminary Research and Innovation Project furthered this mission by fostering Indigenous-led research and strengthening ties with

post-secondary institutions to help build inclusive, community-driven pathways to economic empowerment. You can find links to both of those in the show notes.

Up first is Amanda Thompson, a Lead Research Associate at The Conference Board of Canada, who's been leading a project in partnership with the Future Skills Centre called Learning from One Another. This is a multi-year analysis of the socio-economic landscape of Canada's North and explores how community-led, culturally grounded approaches to training are making a difference. I've asked Amanda to kick off this episode and share some of the insights from this work.

Amanda, welcome to the podcast. Thanks for joining me today.

Amanda: Thank you. It's a pleasure being here.

Jeremy: Amanda, tell us about Learning from One Another and how the project came together.

Amanda: This was a multi-year labour market project funded by the Future Skills Centre. Its goal was providing the jurisdictions of Northern Ontario, Nunavut, and Yukon with insights into the labour market that could support keeping employment opportunities in the North. These three Northern districts have some of the highest vacancy rates, meaning they have a lot of unfilled jobs in the country, and data shows that across many sectors, there's reliance on fly-in fly-out labour, meaning that money earned in the region is not actually being spent in the region.

We drew partners from across the three regions to work with us, including post-secondary institutions, federal and provincial governments, and Indigenous organizations. Some of these partners did some of the work themselves throughout the project along with guiding the work that we did. And the main goals of the project were identifying some of the challenges in the labour market for attracting and training workers in each region, as well as providing a road map of occupations and skills projected to be in demand over the next 20 years through economic forecasting.

Jeremy: So, Amanda, what are some of the in-demand occupations and skills that you found throughout the course of this project?

Amanda: So, we really relied on two things to kind of identify in-demand occupations and skills. One was the forecasting that we did for each region where we forecasted employment that was in demand across sectors as well as top occupations that would be in demand between 2024 and 2045. And then as I said, we talked to a wide variety of employers across these three regions to find out about certain skills that they saw would be in demand. But what we found from our forecast is that there will be a very significant demand for occupations that require post-secondary skills across all three regions. And the demand will be greatest for most trades, really: Nurses, educators, and business professionals were the main ones that we found.

And then in talking to employers about specific skills sets—they found that as the sectors start to evolve in the North, employers are recognizing more and more that will be greater demand for digital, leadership, business, as well as administrative skills. And then another thing that came up quite frequently was soft skills. One of the big ones that came out was cultural competency as a skill that's really in demand given the large number of Indigenous people living in these regions. And cultural competency is needed in the workplace to support actual cultural safety of workers in the workplace, as well as providing culturally safe care to populations living in these regions.

Jeremy: Amanda, what kinds of training approaches did you find were being used successfully in Northern communities?

Amanda: We found that there was a significant focus on supporting Indigenous learners. Post-secondary institutions and skills and training service providers really were not just focusing on providing skills training—but making sure that the training reflects a supportive learning environment and ensures that the training supports the learner's entry into the labour market once they're done their skills training.

So, these skills service providers were prioritising wraparound services in their training that include incorporating land-based activities into curriculum, as well as Indigenous ways of knowing and doing. And then other things important for these wraparound services include student success teams, that include wellness services, financial and peer support in the training along with, in some cases, childcare and financial support if the learner needs to relocate for training. They also really were focusing on professional development when doing the training with Indigenous learners, which includes promoting different career paths that a learner could use their skills in, as well as supports with resume building and interview preparation. So, really supporting getting that learner into the labour market when they're done that skills training.

Another thing that I would say specific to Northern regions, that's a successful initiative, are efforts to getting training specifically into the community as opposed to having learners having to leave their community to get that training. Oshki-Pimache-O-Win, the Wenjack Training Institute in Northern Ontario, has the Level Up trades training program that brings skills training directly to First Nation communities. But what they do is they outfit tractor trailers into trades training labs that they bring directly into the communities for on-site training for community members. This use of this type of training has brought trades training to several First Nation communities in Northern Ontario. However, I will say, one challenge related to this training is really the increased cost and the fact that funders really need to recognize that while this is a successful mode of training, it does cost more.

Jeremy: Thanks for that, Amanda. And listeners, you'll find a link to the Oshki-Wenjack homepage in the show notes. So, the last thing I want to ask you about as part of our conversation about the Learning from One Another project is: For employers and industry members who are listening, can you talk about some of the strategies they can use to attract and retain skilled labour into Northern communities?

Amanda: One of the things that we heard about was rural and remote education pipelines. This is where post-secondary institutions secure seats and programs for students from Northern rural and remote regions. Research and data does show that these students are the ones that are more likely to return to their communities, although not all do—though advocacy and implementation of these rural remote Northern pipelines is important. This approach has been used by the Northern Ontario School of Medicine to secure more primary care doctors in Northern Ontario, so that's one great example of how these pipelines have been used successfully.

Another strategy focuses on leadership skills with many employers that we talked to in the North talking about the need to grow their own leaders. So, these employers are focused on providing skills training to help support retaining them as well as help grow these people in their careers internally. So, I'd also say that in terms of thinking about how these employers can attract

workers with highly specialised skills to these regions, community welcoming programs have been used successfully to attract workers to take on employment opportunities. But they've also been shown to be helpful to help retain these southern workers. So, here the idea is that employers assign a community member or co-worker to support the new professional in integrating into the Northern community. So, this can include very simple things like guiding them on where to access goods and services, getting them and their families involved in social activities in the community, and even things like helping spouses of these professionals find employment opportunities.

Jeremy: Amanda, I really appreciate you taking the time to tell us about this work. It's a big project and I know that it's going to be an incredible resource for employers and policymakers in Northern labour markets. Congrats again.

Amanda: Perfect. Thanks for having me.

Jeremy: Check out the show notes, where you can find links to all of the reports that are part of the project. These include labour market analyses of Yukon, Nunavut, and Northern Ontario, reports on skills demands and gaps in the North, and economic and labour forecasts for the region.

One of the many partners that we worked with on Learning from One Another was the Qikiqtani Inuit Association, or QIA. In partnership with the Baffin Island Mines Corporation, the Government of Canada, the Government of Nunavut, and Kakivak Association, QIA launched the Q-STEP program to increase Inuit employment through skills, training, and partnerships with employers in the Qikiqtani region of Nunavut. Joining me now is Kris Mullaly, a project manager for regional training initiatives, who's been living in Iqaluit since 2006.

Kris, welcome to the podcast. I'm so glad you could be here.

Kris: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here to help speak to our regional training initiatives.

Jeremy: Kris, can you talk about some of the challenges related to skills training in the region?

Kris: Yeah, thank you, Jeremy. This is something that we think about often here in Nunavut. We are in a remote area. So, a lot of our geography—we face the challenges of, actually, logistics and getting stuff done. So, we live in communities that are rural and remote. It's fly-in and fly-out. There's no roads that connect us, and sometimes there's delivery of things by sea lift. At the end of the day, the costs of doing business are much higher. That's one of the major challenges that we face on an ongoing basis.

And then, also, other challenges have been due to, I guess, colonization and our reconciliation efforts. It was, historically—there's a lot of challenges with having trust and faith that working in today's economy is something that will benefit Inuit, and that's something that is well known as well, through the recent reconciliation efforts. I guess from our perspective here at Qikiqtani Inuit Association, we recognize the challenges and we are seeing it as opportunities to improve, to assist with reconciliation, to provide skills training to Inuit who are interested in starting careers. And that's what our mandate and vision is: To support regional development, to help empower Inuit, and we're doing all this work for future generations.

Jeremy: So, tell us about Q-STEP and how training programs are informed and developed.

Kris: So, Q-STEP was started as a training initiative back in 2017-2018 and Q-STEP stands for Qikiqtani Skills and Training for Employment Partnerships. What we did in those early days was to make partnerships with regional employers so we could identify what kinds of training were needed and how we can get Inuit involved in getting ready to participate in the workforce. A lot of that was focused on mining and construction in the beginning. Recently we've expanded that, so, we're also supporting Inuit who are involved in fisheries, clean energy, more focused work for the economy as it is expanding and developing in our region. So, Q-STEP is an initiative that's been funded by the Government of Canada and Kakivak Association. So, we're very grateful to have that support. It's made a huge difference to how we can help face those challenges I mentioned and how we can develop programs and services for Inuit going forward.

Jeremy: OK, so I'd like to ask you about partnerships with employers—why they're important, how they impact funding, and how they can extend training programs.

Kris: At the root of everything we're trying to do is collaboration and successful partnerships so that the training and employment opportunities that we're offering makes sense for Inuit in our communities. So, that's why we focused on building skills for some of the heavy equipment, operator apprenticeships, work readiness, including financial literacy, because we wanted to help individuals and Inuit get skills that they need. Without these skills, it's very difficult to get into the workforce and get into a career progression. The employment partnerships are a huge part of that because employers want to hire, but they don't always have the capacity or funding available for training programs. So, we're trying to meet employers in the middle by collaborating with them, using Government of Canada funding and helping provide programs for skills development that makes sense for everyone.

Jeremy: One program I wanted to highlight is called Tuttarvik. Tuttarvik is a labour pool database that's designed to provide job seekers in the Qikiqtani region with a range of services related to skills and training, in both English and Inuktitut. It's a mobile app that lets employers post jobs and connect with candidates. And in the future, QIA hopes to extend the resource to other regions in Nunavut. Check out the show notes for a link to the Tuttarvik web page.

Kris: And recently we did some testing for our online curriculum, which is still something being developed. We're trying to experiment with delivering courses online as a part of new skill sets, digital skills, something that appeals to youth. So, we've had some positive developments. And as we move forward with this, we're still learning and still developing how that's going to look going forward.

Jeremy: Oh, that's great to hear that things sound like they're moving in the right direction. I'd like to end by asking you about why a big picture view of training, employment and community is critical, and that was one of the key insights from our Learning from One Another project.

Kris: The big picture, of course, is reconciliation, and we're trying to support the efforts to return to Indigenous prosperity. That's basically the driving factor for our region right now, is, as we develop to do so in a way that is responsible. And is responsive to Inuktitut and Inuit culture. The big picture is that we are behind, like we're trying to catch up on the gap in skills and training and employment. The region has a lot of infrastructure issues and housing and communications and so on and so forth. That's been going on for a number of years. We're trying to catch up as quickly as we can and we want to make sure that Inuit are being represented in the workforce that's being developed. That has impact in future generations, it

has impact for every organization, every community, and it's going to help have healthier communities in the long run.

Jeremy: Kris, what a pleasure it's been speaking with you. Thank you so much.

Kris: Thank you very much, Jeremy. Greatly appreciated.

Jeremy: As we've just heard, supporting Inuit job seekers through community-rooted training programs like Q-STEP is about more than just skills—it's about identity, connection, and long-term empowerment. But the landscape of workforce development in the North is complex, and that's where entrepreneurship can play a powerful role—not just as a career path, but as a tool for self-determination and economic resilience.

Xina Cowan is the Co-Director of EntrepreNorth. Xina's helping lead the way for a new generation of Northern changemakers through business training that's grounded in culture and community.

Xina, welcome to the podcast. It's great to have you here.

Xina: Hi, Jeremy. Thank you so much for having me.

Jeremy: Great. Xina, can you tell us a bit about what EntrepreNorth is, and how it supports Indigenous and Northern entrepreneurs in building skills, businesses, and community impact?

Xina: Absolutely. So, our mission at EntrepreNorth is empowering Indigenous entrepreneurs to build sustainable businesses and livelihoods across Northern Canada. The idea for EntrepreNorth was first seeded in 2017 and then really brought to life in 2018 after a group of Northerners and friends from down South got together and decided that what was really needed was culturally relevant business education, skills development, and programming for Northern Indigenous entrepreneurs to grow and launch businesses in their communities. And from the very beginning, our belief has been that Northern Indigenous entrepreneurs can be catalysts of prosperity and drivers of social change within their own communities. And that the development of sustainable enterprises can create local economic opportunities to help break through poverty, to address social challenges and strengthen Northern ways of life.

Over the last couple of years, our suite of offerings has grown quite a bit. It started with our flagship entrepreneur growth program, which is a cohort-based program, and now we offer a variety of programs, storytelling opportunities, and access to capital as well. But really, you know, at the end of the day, EntrepreNorth wants to be creating a movement of Indigenous entrepreneurship that really uplifts Northern leadership, mobilizes a community of change-makers, empowers the spirit of innovation, and makes financing more equitable for underserved communities. So, those are, sort of, our four directions of impact within the organization.

Jeremy: That's great. Thanks for that. And so, can you tell me a little bit what culturally relevant training looks like for Indigenous learners in the North and how it can better reflect their lived experiences and knowledge systems?

Xina: For sure. So, I'm based in the North. I'm on Kwanlin Dün and Ta'an Kwäch'än territory in Whitehorse, Yukon, and we serve Indigenous entrepreneurs across the Northwest Territories, the Yukon, and Nunavut. And the North is a very unique place because it makes up 40 per cent of Canada's landmass with a total population of 120,000 people. So, I feel both literally and figuratively there's a lot of space up here to be dreaming and innovating new ideas. That said,

the North exhibits a significant lack of economic diversity and local employment opportunities, and that can drive Northerners toward social welfare and poverty. And that has been especially true for Indigenous communities here. And I think that we really need to do better because there is a strong culture of entrepreneurship in the North. So, when we've been thinking about what it means to develop culturally relevant business education for Northern Indigenous learners, it's really about centring the lived experiences of the folks who come through our program and really centring, you know, their assets and their gifts and the unique skills that they bring to the work. And it's those gifts and assets and skills that are behind the businesses that they want to be developing.

There are lots of entrepreneurship resources that are offered to the larger population, the non-Indigenous population, and certainly lots of supports available down South. But we've really tried to offer something that is uniquely tailored to the cultures and the diversity of Indigenous communities across the North. That whole concept of the North all being the same couldn't be less true. When you go to Nunavut, it is a completely different experience with different, sort of, value sets and traditional practices than what you would find in the Yukon. So, being really intentional about place—I mean, with that in mind though, when you bring a group of Indigenous entrepreneurs together from across the North, there is that shared sense of wanting to create something that's rooted in values. So, figuring out how we can be supporting people to develop businesses that really support who they are and where they come from. Many Indigenous entrepreneurs are getting into business not because they want to make millions of dollars or they want to scale to scale. They're doing it because they want to bring value to their communities.

So, it's just a different approach, a decolonized approach for thinking about business development. And with that, honouring that, along with the skills, and the gifts, and the talents, Indigenous entrepreneurs are also showing up carrying the deep impacts of intergenerational trauma as a direct result of colonial violence. So, all of those pieces we keep in our minds as we're developing our programming and our wraparound supports.

Jeremy: So, can you share an example? And I'd love to hear, you know, a success story around some of this and maybe how some of the training and skills are being passed on and uplifting others in the community.

Xina: Someone who comes to mind is Bobbi Rose Koe, who is a Gwich'in tourism operator and certified guide. She is the owner of Dinjii Zhuh Adventures and was a member of EntrepreNorth's tourism cohort. And what Bobbi Rose is doing, through her business, is training and certifying Indigenous young people to become guides so that they can be taking clients out on the water through their traditional territories. And that is really important because there are nowhere near enough Indigenous guides. And we're on Indigenous land up here. And I think a lot of visitors who come to the Yukon, where Bobbi is located, want that experience. And she really sees an opportunity to be uplifting the next generation of guides. So, she's really set up a great program to get Indigenous youth out on the water and develop that training.

Jeremy: So, the last question I have for you, Xina, is around storytelling. And storytelling is a powerful tool for knowledge sharing and also for challenging the colonial narratives that shape our country and shape who we are. And can you tell us a little bit how it's being used to help both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences understand Northern realities more deeply?

Xina: I think what we have seen over the years at EntrepreNorth is storytelling shows other Indigenous people that it is possible to be an entrepreneur in your community in the North, who is in business and doing business in a way that is culturally resonant, and that is possible. I think a lot of Indigenous folks are used to having stories told about them, and I think there's the added layer for Northerners where a lot of people down South have these preconceived ideas of what it means to live in the North, and what life is like in the North. And we really want to be getting away from that and amplifying the perspectives and the voices of Indigenous Northerners who are stepping into business, and who are doing things their way on their terms.

And I think EntrepreNorth has become known for using its platform to do that storytelling. And over the years we've been able to grow this really incredible network of entrepreneurs who all have a story to tell.

Jeremy: Xina, thank you so much for joining me on the Future Skills Podcast. It's been a real pleasure to have this conversation with you and to hear about all of the great work that EntrepreNorth is doing.

Xina: Thanks, Jeremy. Appreciate the opportunity.

Jeremy: In this episode, we've heard how critical it is to be adapting innovating the ways we approach skills and training in Canada's North. The challenges are real—but so are the strengths. And it's those strengths—rooted in culture, community, and resilience—that are shaping new pathways for Northern and Indigenous communities to thrive in a changing world of work.

Thanks again for joining us on the Future Skills Podcast, brought to you by the Future Skills Centre. I'd like to thank my guests Amanda Thompson from The Conference Board of Canada, Kris Mullaly from the Qikiqtani Inuit Association, and Xina Cowan from EntrepreNorth.

You can hear all five seasons of the Future Skills Podcast on your favorite podcast app. Give us a follow if you haven't, and stay tuned for next season. This episode was produced, edited, and hosted by me, Jeremy Strachan. Sound design also by yours truly. Thanks for listening.

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