
The Formative Evaluation of the Community Skills Centres

Overview Report of Findings
and Evaluative Conclusions

**Evaluation and Data Development Branch
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Context of the Evaluation and Terms of reference

The federal government announced the Strategic Initiatives Program in the budget of February 22, 1994. In British Columbia the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training partnered with the federal government through the province's *Skills Now* program to establish Community Skills Centres (CSCs). The first phase of a three-phase evaluation of the CSC initiative has been completed and this is the summary of the Overview Report, which followed on the full-scale draft report (the "Technical Report"). The objectives of the evaluation as a whole were to:

- determine the extent to which the CSC initiative meets its original objectives;
- assess whether funding for CSCs is used effectively;
- assess the degree to which CSCs have developed new and innovative approaches to meet community needs;
- assess the degree to which the federal/provincial/community partnerships have assisted the CSC initiative in meeting the above objectives;
- collect data on CSC activities and operations.

Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation is a formative one. The evaluation research draws on five main categories of data, with appropriate data collection methods. These data sources and collection strategies are:

1. **Case Studies (8):**¹ Interviews with staff, clients, and community partners, document review;
2. **Non-Case Studies (13):** Interviews with staff, smaller number of partners;
3. **Key Respondents at Province- and Program-wide Levels (13):** Interviews with representatives from federal and provincial ministries and agencies, public sector training associations, etc.

1 These are: North Island (Port Hardy, Port McNeill, Port Alice), North Cariboo (Quesnel), North Coast (Prince Rupert), Sparwood, Revelstoke, Vancouver East, Prince George, Peace (Dawson Creek)

4. **Document/Administrative Data Review at the Program-wide Level:**

Review of program-wide and project-specific documents and administrative data provided by the individual CSCs and by the Evaluation Working Group/Ministry program directors. Includes business and training plans, contracts with MoEST, correspondence, activity reports, etc.

5. **Telephone Survey of Past Participants:** 306 completed interviews, respondents drawn from the eight case study CSCs.

In all, 222 key respondents and 306 past participants were interviewed. The results were analyzed, using content analysis of both interview and administrative/document data. The draft report was then prepared, and subsequently this overview report was developed, with the original draft produced as a separate Technical Report.

Evaluative Findings of the Evaluation

The overview report and the much larger Technical Report provided extensive documentation of the CSC program's structure, operations, and objectives achievement at the community level. For the purposes of this executive summary, we will present a précis of the evaluative findings alone. These will be organized in terms of the four objectives set out by program management and then in terms of the larger program-wide evaluative issues of program rationale, impacts and effects, objectives achievement and alternatives for improved programming.

A. Evaluative Findings on Objectives Achievement by the CSCs

Objective 1

To act as a focal point... to increase access to training and to bridge ... to new training opportunities; adding values...; providing an access point for labour market information ...and ...address the training needs of targeted client groups.

While it is always necessary to keep in mind the different stages of development of the CSCs across the province, as well as the different environments in which they operate, it seems clear to the evaluators that on the whole the CSCs are making substantial progress in achieving Objective 1. Many do function as a

focal point for community efforts to increase training opportunities. Most boards and staff are very aware of the importance of not duplicating existing training or competing with public or private sector training providers. Where the CSCs do offer training that is *provided* by other sources, it is not *available* from these sources in a location, format or schedule that meets the needs of the trainee group that the CSC is serving in the particular situation.

The CSCs as a group play a minor role as an access point for labour market information. The collection and analysis of LMI is usually not an area of staff expertise. In terms of targeting services, the CSCs as a group have been very effective at identifying training needs, especially those that are revenue generating, and meeting these needs. Of all the factors that shape service targeting, the most influential one is the potential for cost recovery. If there is a potential to generate revenue by serving a particular group -- employed or not -- that tends to be the direction in which the CSC will go in its programming.

Objective 2

To increase community input and decision-making regarding training and adjustment issues by developing CSC training plans; assessing community environment; and establishing consultation and decision-making processes.

This objective has been addressed by the CSCs, but much remains to be done to move more closely toward achievement of this objective. Most CSCs are committed to achieving this objective, but the realities of the demands on the time of board and staff, and the varied expertise and interests of both tend to limit the ability of CSCs to carry out extensive, systematic community consultation and involvement in decision-making. It is thus the board that functions as the source of community input.

Objective 3

To increase competitiveness ...in the global marketplace ...by providing services to encourage the use of technology; participating in inter-connected province wide network ...; and building on and collaborating with existing technology services, groups, and individuals in local communities.

It may be asking too much of a local CSC to affect global competitiveness, though there are examples of CSC training helping a branch of an international company upgrade the skills of its workforce. With reference to the use of

electronic technologies, the CSCs have made excellent use of their technology base. They use it in their own training and they partner regularly with local, national, and international training providers in the private and public sector. They regularly include the community in the use of technologies through various orientation sessions and other events. In our view, this is the objective that the CSCs are most effectively meeting at this time.

Objective 4

To achieve financial independence from government funding of operational costs by generating revenue and leveraging private sector funds; creating partnerships and collaborating with the community; and administering funds responsibly.

Virtually all of the CSCs are firmly committed to achieving the maximum degree of financial independence possible. However, being committed to this ideal and being able to achieve it are two different things. There must be appropriate local conditions to make this possible and many of the communities do not have these conditions (strong industry base interested in using CSC training resources, sufficient number of trainees whose training is funded and thus can be revenue generating, etc.). With one or two exceptions the CSCs are making as much progress toward this objective as could be expected at their respective stages of development. Staff as a group possess a combination of expertise in business, training, and community economic development. They are very good at creating partnerships and collaborating with community stakeholders. However, we believe that this objective is not realistic for each and every one of the CSCs and that this must be taken into account in future policy and program development.

As for the administration of funds, the evaluation research indicates that many of the CSCs still are finding their way in terms of keeping complete and up-to-date financial records. It is a difficult task, given the range of funding sources, types of contracts, and array of individuals served, but there definitely is room for improvement in this area.

B. Evaluative Conclusions on the CSC as a Program

Program Rationale

The CSC program as a whole fits completely within the goals of federal, provincial, and community partners. Each wishes to strengthen the employability

of individuals and to enhance the economic strength of communities. Training is an essential tool to achieve that goal. Hence, the focus of the CSC initiative on facilitating training at the community level entirely supports the rationale for the program.

Also, the rationale for the CSC initiative, as implemented as a whole in the province, is fully justified in terms of community training needs and the rationale is clearly supported by the CSC program's design, processes and structure. The CSCs do not jeopardize local training services nor do they duplicate them, in that the CSCs ability to add value to local programming largely precludes strict duplication. However, given the lack of clarity in many communities about what "competition" and "duplication" mean, conceptually and in practice, it would be very useful for the respective governments to clarify their own working definitions of these concepts and then communicate them fully to all concerned.

Impacts and Effects of Program

The CSCs have actively identified needs and have striven with some success to meet these needs. They rely heavily upon their own technological base to do so. There have been strains between the CSCs and the public and private sector trainers in a number of communities. However, in many of these, the CSCs have developed effective partnerships that have reduced or resolved these strains.

Thus, the impacts and effects of the CSC program on the local training culture and on those who use the training and related services can be seen as positive. The training provision is generally highly focused on identified needs and the quality of service seems to be fully adequate to the meet these needs.

Program Objectives Achievement

The CSC program as a whole has largely met the four program objectives set out for it, as noted above. Those who are employed tend to have remained employed and some 30% of those who were unemployed at the time of training have found employment since then. It is clear that employed trainees feel themselves to be more likely to retain employment and a substantial proportion of those unemployed at the time of training expect their training to increase the likelihood of their finding employment in the future. Thus, the program has achieved a range of objectives. The quality of service is generally good and the outcome is positive. The one objective that may have an inherent limitation in some communities is that of full financial independence in an economically vulnerable environment.

Alternatives for Improved Programming

The rationale of the CSC program is sound, the goals and objectives fit within federal and provincial policies and priorities, and they take into account

community needs for increased economic well-being. The structure and processes of the CSC program as a whole are appropriate for achieving its goals and objectives. Thus, the evaluators do not see a need for substantial change to the program nor to developing alternate ways of achieving these program goals.

MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

The Ministry of Education, Skills and Training and Human Resources Development Canada recently released a report entitled, *The Formative Evaluation of Community Skills Centres*, as part of the Strategic Initiatives Agreement. The formative evaluation report assesses the Community Skills Centre (CSC) initiative's rationale, impacts and effects, and objectives achievement. In addition, the report identifies a number of recommendations, which focus on policy development and CSC operations, to address management challenges for the CSC initiative. A management response to each of these recommendations is provided below.

Policy Development

A. CSC Mandate/Objectives

Evaluation Recommendation

Federal and provincial governments should clarify the CSC mandate and objectives in relation to those of public and private sector training providers in order to eliminate actual or potential inconsistencies concerning duplication, competition, the right of first refusal, and certain CSC objectives.

Management Response

CSCs are mandated to identify training needs in their respective communities and work in partnership with public and private training providers to meet these needs. The Ministry of Education, Skills and Training is currently reviewing the mandate and objectives of CSCs and will communicate any policy changes to key stakeholders of the CSC initiative.

B. Selection of Future CSC Sites

Evaluation Recommendation

Federal and provincial governments should ensure that an “arm’s length” local needs assessment is completed and reviewed prior to selecting future sites.

Management Response

At this time, there are no plans to establish any new Community Skills Centres during the 1997/98 fiscal year.

CSC Operations

A. Funding Arrangements

Evaluation Recommendation

Both governments should clarify and communicate their funding commitments to CSCs and indicate whether they will assist CSCs in upgrading their electronic technologies.

Management Response

Human Resources Development Canada and the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training will each contribute \$20.13 million to CSCs over the duration of the five year Strategic Initiatives Agreement (1994-99), pending the availability of funds and receipt of the necessary budget approvals. Both governments communicate their annual funding commitments for CSCs at CSC Board and Consortium meetings. As well, both governments are committed to provide the necessary funds to keep CSC technologies current.

B. CSC Communications

Evaluation Recommendation

The federal and provincial governments should clarify the status of the Consortium and communicate it in writing to CSCs.

Management Response

Human Resources Development Canada and the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training support the CSC Consortium's role in establishing and maintaining effective contacts and working relationships with CSCs, public and private sector organizations in order to help develop and promote the services of CSCs. Both governments have committed a total of \$124,200 to support the operations of the CSC Consortium in fiscal 1997-98.

Evaluation Recommendation

Both governments should support periodic working meetings or video conferences that promote the sharing of expertise and information among CSCs.

Management Response

The CSC Consortium has primary responsibility for enhancing communication among individual CSCs. Moreover, the federal and provincial governments have and will continue to support meetings, such as Consortium Annual General Meetings and Consortium Executive Meetings, which promote the sharing of information and expertise among CSCs.

C. CSC Board Development

Evaluation Recommendation

Human Resources Development Canada and the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training should make funds available on a periodic basis for board development activities.

Management Response

Both governments have provided the CSC Consortium with funds to develop a policy manual that addresses board development and operational issues and will sponsor board development activities through the Consortium in fiscal 1997-98.

We hope that this letter clarifies the commitment of both governments to help ensure the effective operation of CSCs. Should you require any further information, please contact Dawn McKay of the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training at (250) 356-7700 or Myrna Partridge of Human Resources Development Canada at (604) 666-9555.

THE FORMATIVE EVALUATION OF THE COMMUNITY SKILLS CENTRES

The evaluation of the Community Skills Centres was a large-scale, intensive project and the report of findings was commensurately lengthy and detailed. After the draft report was delivered, it was decided that it would be useful to have an "overview report" of the findings which would be more easily accessible to a wide range of readers. The report below is the response to that decision. It encompasses all of the main points of the full report, but focuses on highlights of both the descriptive findings and the evaluative conclusions. The complete draft report is provided as the Technical Report, which is not attached to this overview.

I. Introduction: Rationale For The Evaluation And Terms Of Reference

The federal government announced the Strategic Initiatives Program in the budget of February 22, 1994. In British Columbia the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training partnered with the federal government through the province's *Skills Now* program to establish Community Skills Centres (CSCs). The first phase of a three-phase evaluation of the CSC initiative has been completed. The objectives of the evaluation as a whole were to:

- determine the extent to which the CSC initiative meets its original objectives;
- assess whether funding for CSCs is used effectively;
- assess the degree to which CSCs have developed new and innovative approaches to meet community needs;
- assess the degree to which the federal/provincial/community partnerships have assisted the CSC initiative in meeting the above objectives;
- collect data on CSC activities and operations.

II. Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation is a formative one, in that this is the method of choice for "...improving a specific program, policy, group or staff (in a personnel evaluation), or product."² The evaluation research draws on five main categories of data, with

2 Patton, Michael, *Designing Qualitative Studies*, Sage Publications, 1990, pg.156.

appropriate data collection methods. These data sources and collection strategies are:

1. **Case Studies (8):**³ An intensive, on-site program of interviews with the CSC manager, staff, current trainees where available, board chair and members, other community stakeholders (i.e., business, labour, community economic development groups, First Nations, representatives from relevant ministries, municipal government; average of 15 individuals interviewed)
2. **Non-Case Studies (13):** All remaining CSCs, with phone interviews with: Manager, board chair and/or selected members, key community stakeholders (as suggested by Manager/board chair; often the local Human Resources Centre manager, Ministry of Education, Skills and Training Skills Now area manager, or key business representative), approximately 4 in total for each.
3. **Key Respondents at Province-and Program-wide Levels (13):** Eight occupy senior positions in Human Resources Development Canada and the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training, the federal and provincial government ministries involved in the CSC. One is a Resources Jobs Commissioner, and four are individuals at the director level from the College-Institute Educators' Association of B.C., the Advanced Education Council of B.C., the labour co-chair of the B.C. Labour Force Development Board, and the Open Learning Agency.
4. **Document/Administrative Data Review at the Program-wide Level:** Review of program-wide and project-specific documents and administrative data provided by the individual CSCs and by the Evaluation Working Group/Ministry program directors. Includes business and training plans, contracts with MoEST, correspondence, activity reports, etc. These findings appear at the beginning of each case study and in Appendix A for the non-case study CSCs.
5. **Telephone Survey of Past Participants:** 306 completed interviews, respondents drawn from the eight case study CSCs.

In all, 222 key respondents and 306 past participants were interviewed. The results were analyzed, using content analysis of both interview and administrative/document data. The draft report was then prepared, and subsequently this overview report was developed.

3 These are: North Island (Port Hardy, Port McNeill, Port Alice), North Cariboo (Quesnel), North Coast (Prince Rupert), Sparwood, Revelstoke, Vancouver East, Prince George, Peace (Dawson Creek)

III. Findings Of The Evaluation

The findings of the evaluation of the CSC are organized in two parts -- the descriptive and evaluative findings. It may be useful to make clear what is meant by "descriptive" findings in comparison to "evaluative" findings. Descriptive findings provide a summary of the operations and impacts of the program from the viewpoint of those involved, and from the review of program documents and statistics. This substantial amount of data, collected by various means, was systematically analyzed by the evaluators to yield a comprehensive description of what was undertaken through the CSC program -- at a province-wide and community level. Along with describing what went on, based on interviews and the document reviews, this analysis included an exploration of how the many stakeholders viewed the CSC, from whatever vantage point they experienced it. This could be senior government staff, CSC staff, community leaders, or individuals who have used CSC services. The reader must have a clear picture of the program's goals, objectives, operations, and effects, in order to understand and assess the evaluative findings that follow.

The evaluative findings are the evaluators' assessment of how well the program worked -- what were its strong points, what worked well and what did not, what should be done in future. Thus, the evaluative findings rely upon the descriptive findings as a basis from which to answer larger questions about the quality and future of the program as a whole. We will be presenting our evaluative findings from two levels of analysis. The first is in terms of the achievement of the four objectives for the program as set out by program management. The data collection was designed around these four objectives. They focused on the CSCs being a focal point of meeting community training needs, facilitating community involvement in decision-making, enhancing use of electronic technologies for training, and becoming financially independent of government funding.

After the evaluative assessment of the achievement of these four objectives, we will turn to our evaluative conclusions at the level of the CSC program *as a whole*. It is here that we address the evaluation issues of the strength of the program's rationale, its impacts and effects, objectives achievement, and alternatives for enhancement of future programming. These two levels of evaluative assessment require an arms' length relationship to the program, and the systematic application of evaluation research principles to the descriptive findings.

We begin with the overview of descriptive findings on the CSCs across British Columbia. First will be a brief description of the degree of implementation of the CSC at the community level. Then we turn to an examination of the findings in relation to the four objectives which frame its operations. The findings at the community level are based on the analysis of the results of the intensive data

collection program in the eight case studies, the other interviews and document review of the remaining non-case study CSCs, and where relevant to a given objective, the findings from the phone survey of past participants in CSC services. The findings from all operational CSCs are aggregated here and thus are somewhat generalized. For each of the four objectives we will set out first the perspectives from the CSCs and their community partners and stakeholders and then the perspectives of key respondents who have a program-wide view of the initiative as a whole. As part of the description of the CSCs at the local level, we will also provide selected findings from the phone survey of past participants where relevant.

The review of the CSC as experienced at the local CSC level provides an important perspective on its operations and effects. But in order to have a comprehensive and balanced account of the CSC initiative it is equally important to bring in the views of those who have experienced the development and implementation of the CSC **as a program**. It is a province-wide effort of the provincial and federal governments to "...reduce the negative impacts of labour market adjustment and unemployment in communities through the enhancement of local programs...[with] the end result being the attainment or retainment of employment for residents in those communities."

Interviews with the 13 key respondents from various federal and provincial ministries, associations of public educators, labour, etc., followed much the same format as those in the case study and non-case study communities. They focussed on the respondent's assessment of objectives achievement of the CSC as an initiative. Because of the respondents' program-wide vantage point, they were asked to comment on the CSC and its objectives achievement from a policy and program design level, and then to comment upon implementation at the community level.

Finally, the highlights of findings from the telephone survey of 306 past participant trainees are presented.

A. Descriptive Findings of the Evaluation of the CSCs

Degree of Implementation of the CSC Initiative at Community Level

The CSCs vary considerably in their degree of implementation as of the time of the evaluation data collection period (July - October, 1996). The variation is accounted for in part by the length of time they have been open, the history of their development, and the approach that management and board have taken to implementation.

The CSCs engage in many kinds of training-related activities as they strive to help individuals and communities to meet the challenges of economic change. All engage to one degree or another in brokering and bridging training. Some CSCs also have developed their own training programs which are delivered by their staff or by a team of staff and contracted trainers. The CSCs work to enhance the community's understanding of and comfort with new training technologies. Many hold free community orientation sessions about the technology resources they offer (e.g., the "Internet Cafe," a drop-in lunch time activity, demonstrations of video-conferencing). As part of their revenue generation they rent space or time on their equipment to community groups, businesses, government, and independent trainers (private or public sector).

Objectives Achievement by the CSCs

Objective 1

To act as a focal point... to increase access to training and to bridge ... to new training opportunities; adding values...; providing an access point for labour market information ...and ...address the training needs of targeted client groups.

First, drawing on the responses at the local **CSC level**, most respondents feel that there is a real need in their community for the kinds of activities this objective addresses. Whether a community is rich or poor in training resources, there can be a need for coordination of efforts. Respondents often say that there is also a need for more flexible, responsive training that meets the content, learning style, and scheduling challenges of the adult learner trying to maintain or regain employment. The majority of respondents believe that the CSCs are well-placed to perform this function.

Most of the CSCs engage in a wide range of partnering activities and they offer and/or broker quite an array of training opportunities in their communities. Most offer Adult Basic Education training through the use of computer-based resources such as PLATO. Because the CSCs cannot confer certification of this training, they provide it in partnership with either the local school district or community college. Some CSCs have contracts with either the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training or the local Human Resources Canada Centre office to deliver career counselling and/or job preparation training. Some provide training under contract for Self-Employment Assistance clients. A frequent training offering is basic or more advanced computer skills, as well as training in specific software packages.

There is an increasing use of electronic technology to offer courses on the Internet. There are several examples of a CSC purchasing Internet-based skills training and providing it on a contract basis to local industry. Video-conferencing is used to bring in courses and workshops from a distance. Examples include management seminars from internationally known figures, and training in commodities pricing from the mid-western United States.

The majority of the CSCs add value to existing training resources by providing access to the CSCs electronic technology, by helping to market partnered courses, or through being open for use in the evenings or weekends. The courses offered may be the same (ABE or adult Dogwood), but the availability at non-traditional hours and in a comfortable, adult-oriented environment are often spoken of as important values added by the CSC to the local training milieu.

In terms of being an access point for labour market information, seven of the CSCs play a significant role in their community in this activity, in large part because they are under contract to the local HRCC to deliver these services. These services include access to Job Banks, operating Job Market kiosks, Job Boards, providing career counselling, and services to persons on Employment Insurance. In a number of other communities the respondents felt that this is not something which the CSCs can or should do in a significant degree. These respondents said that there are other sources of this information in the community and that the CSCs can draw on it and make it more available. They do not see the CSCs as having the time, money, or expertise to develop and maintain current, local LMI.

The targeting of client groups varies considerably from CSC to CSC. The targeting priorities are set by the boards, but respondents often note that the requirement of becoming financially independent within five years shapes decision-making to a great degree and sometimes in ways that are counter to the goals of the CSC. That is, there is a strong incentive to focus on providing services that are revenue-producing. This can be training for persons who are being supported by their employer for skills upgrading, or those sponsored for training while on EI, or those on various adjustment programs, funded through mechanisms such as Forest Renewal B.C. or the Industrial Adjustment Services. This emphasis on revenue generation leads in some cases to the CSC not targeting services to those who are not somehow sponsored or who do not have sufficient income of their own to purchase training.

Interviews with staff and boards, as well as the findings from the **telephone survey of past trainees** tend to confirm that there is an emphasis on the sponsored/employed client. We have noted in the introduction to the phone survey analysis in the appendix that the sample cannot be seen as representative, due to the way that names could be made available to us by the CSCs. Bearing in mind these limitations to the generalizability of the phone data, the results of the phone survey show that of the 306 past participants surveyed,

the training of 42.5 percent was paid for by the employers, 20.9 percent by the individual trainee, and another 11.4 percent by EI. In other words, just under 75 percent were sponsored or had their own funding resources. Also, 61.8 percent of the phone survey respondents were employed full-time at the time of training and another 10.1 percent were employed part-time. The remaining 28.1 percent were unemployed when they received training.

There was relatively little change in employment status between the time of training and the time of the interview for those who were employed. Employed people stayed employed, but the majority of them reported that their training will help them remain employed in future, because they are able to keep up with demand for increased technological skills.

However, there were definite changes in the employment status of those 86 respondents who were *unemployed* at the time they were involved in CSC training. No matter how representative these respondents may be of the proportion of unemployed in the total number served by CSCs, the fact is that by the time of the interview, 30.2 percent had found full or part-time employment. Furthermore, when these respondents were asked if the CSC services had helped them find new work, the vast majority of these respondents said that the training had indeed helped. The majority of those who had been unemployed at the time of training expected that their training would be very helpful in finding employment in the future -- whether it be any type of employment at all or employment in their field. Thus, the CSCs are seen as playing an important role in improving the employability of both employed and unemployed persons -- even if the latter are a minority of those served.

Returning to the CSC and community respondents, they persistently commented on the lack of clarity of the CSCs mandate. That is, some respondents are concerned about whether the CSCs are in some cases duplicating services or are in direct competition with both private and public training providers. There is considerable variation in opinion among respondents about whether the CSCs actually constitute competition for other training providers. But no matter what the respondent's perspective on the subject of competition, partnering, bridging or brokering training, there is a strong interest among most respondents in clarification of government policies and regulations on this issue.

Almost all of the **key respondents at the program-wide level** felt Objective 1 was appropriate for CSCs. There are communities with many different training resources and which often lack coordination among these resources. There also are communities with few resources and it can be beneficial to have an organization such as a CSC to act as a focal point for the community to work together to enhance its training resources. Those few respondents that dissented from this view said that Objective 1 was appropriate only as long as the CSCs confined themselves to *brokering* training and not *delivering* it. There was also a comment that it would have been better for the government to create

a community outreach component within the college system to take on this function.

Though acting as a focal point was largely seen as appropriate, a number of the key respondents felt that it was not realistic to expect that all CSCs could succeed in this role. In the view of respondents, CSCs that are successful tended to have a combination of excellent management, a representative and active board, and a clear and mutually accepted version of the mandate of the CSC. It was also seen as beneficial for the community to have a history of collaboration among local stakeholders, and a clear recognition in the community of the potential benefits of this focal point function. While a number of communities did have many of these enabling conditions, some did not and thus it might be expecting too much that they could achieve this element of Objective 1, in the view of some respondents.

As for adding value to existing programs, all of those key respondents who commented felt it was an appropriate objective for CSCs. They felt that in many cases the CSCs play an important role in providing access to new courses, enhancing course content and delivery through technology, being available for training at non-traditional hours and in a comfortable, adult-oriented environment. Where communities had a range of training resources that could be built upon in these ways, and where the CSC was able to create a positive, collaborative relationship among training providers, this was seen as a realistic expectation of the CSCs. Where there were few training resources in a community, the CSC could help fill training gaps. It was noted by one respondent that in some cases the concept of adding value had been interpreted by those who oppose the establishment of CSCs as meaning that CSCs were not to deliver training themselves. They saw CSCs as intended to enhance the value of *existing* training only, and hence the CSCs would be precluded from providing training even in alternate formats (e.g., computer-based and self-paced, at night, to small groups, etc.)

With reference to being an access point for labour market information, all key respondents said that it was an appropriate role for the CSC, because there is a definite need in communities for this function. In part this is because of the diminution of the federal presence in this field and in part because of a need to know in detail the immediate and longer term LMI needs of a *particular* community. Yet, as with many of the components of this objective, there were qualifications about its practicality. These reservations focussed on the particular skills it takes to develop and maintain high quality LMI. There was a sense that local CSC staff tended not to have the expertise, time, or budget to do so. However, they did feel that the CSC could play an important role in communicating existing LMI data to the community, especially through the use of its technology and through career counselling activities.

Considering all of the elements of Objective 1, the majority of key respondents see it as appropriate but having mixed potential for full achievement. Respondents seem to be confident that the majority of CSCs are doing all that can be done, but they feel that there are some significant obstacles to full achievement arising out of such factors as an ambiguous mandate or the role of the CSCs, in relation to other training providers. They also said that there are some inherent contradictions between Objectives 1 and 4 (financial independence).

Objective 2

To increase community input and decision-making regarding training and adjustment issues by developing CSC training plans; assessing community environment; and establishing consultation and decision-making processes.

All **CSC and community respondents** noted that the primary mechanism for achieving this objective is the board. Boards are expected to be representative of the various stakeholder groups in the community and to bring their own expertise to the decision-making process. They are also to act as communicators to the community about the activities and resources of the CSC. In general the respondents feel that the boards are quite effective in this role, but there is frequent mention of the need to assure that boards are truly representative of the full spectrum of community interests, including equity representation. In some communities the boards may be seen to be more heavily weighted toward public sector training representation, and in others they may be more (or less) representative of the business sector. Whatever the situation, if there is imbalance, from the respondents' view, efforts should be made to establish a balance so that the CSC is genuinely representative. Respondents also noted that it is essential that boards be truly working boards. Because so many CSCs are still developing their policies, procedures, and activities, respondents noted that the demands of being on CSC boards are unusually heavy. Because these are volunteer boards, it can be difficult at times to ensure the level of participation that is called for.

A number of CSCs have carried out community training needs assessments and a number are planning these. These are used to guide decision-making. However, several CSCs would like to be able to do more systematic and complete assessments. They have found that constraints of time, money and expertise make this difficult to accomplish.

All of those **program-wide key respondents** who gave their views on Objective 2 feel that it is both appropriate and realistic, though there is some unevenness among CSCs to date in implementing it. The respondents focussed on the role

of the board in achieving this objective. A representative, active board is the key to achieving this objective. When there was a credible, active and "balanced" board, there tended to be "buy-in" from the various sectors of the community. Some CSCs were seen as having such a board. Respondents also mentioned a few examples of CSCs where the board was not fully representative or where it had made decisions about priorities and activities of the CSC that were not consistent with the goals of the CSC initiative as a whole (e.g., not fully committed to achieving financial independence).

Several key respondents noted that because staffing levels were modest in CSCs, the demands on boards are considerable. This was seen as limiting the ability of CSCs to consult with the community as fully as it might wish. Neither board nor staff may have the time to develop these consultative processes.

Objective 3

To increase competitiveness ...in the global marketplace ...by providing services to encourage the use of technology; participating in inter-connected province wide network ...; and building on and collaborating with existing technology services, groups, and individuals in local communities.

The **CSC and community respondents** addressed this objective on two levels. There is a sense that to ask CSCs to affect global competitiveness may be a somewhat lofty goal -- and one that is very difficult to measure. But respondents said that if it can be assumed that a more skilled work force does make business more competitive, then the CSCs can be seen to be contributing toward the achievement of this goal. There were, however, several specific examples where a CSC did increase the competitiveness of local industry, and this industry is a player in the global market. The CSC worked with the company to define training needs that would allow the company to make a major upgrade, in order to keep up with sweeping technological change. In turn, the company is able to stay in the community and to be competitive in an emerging market.

At the more prosaic level, the majority of CSCs are well on the way to making use of their technology for training purposes. Those which are located in smaller, more remote communities are usually the only source of such technology, and they also are the most accessible, even in communities which already have the technology in other settings. Much of the training the CSCs offer is computer-based, whether directly themselves or in partnership with public education, business, or government. Where video-conferencing and Internet are operational there is increasing use of these as well. Video-conferencing is used for training, for meetings, and for interviewing candidates for jobs when companies or agencies cannot afford travel costs. The Internet is used for public

orientation, for labour market information access, and for high-level technical training and skills upgrading.

The technology is often an integral element of partnering or of adding value to existing training resources. For example, there were a number of cases where private trainers were able to enhance the quality of their service because they could use CSC facilities and the electronic technology. This has had a substantial impact on the expansion of their business. The computer-based training at the ABE level is reported by current trainees to be very effective in helping them meet their educational goals. They find it to be a flexible, comfortable way to learn, and they very much appreciate the professional, adult-oriented learning environment that CSCs provide.

All but two of the **program-wide key respondents** felt that this was an appropriate objective for CSCs. They also thought it was realistic, though there were a few who cautioned that the "global marketplace" aspect of the objective might be somewhat of a tall order. The respondents were very positive about the value of the CSCs technology for upgrading the technological capacity of smaller remote communities and for facilitating educational upgrading for those who need it most.

As for participating in inter-connected networks, a number of key respondents said that this was an appropriate goal but one that is still hampered by technical difficulties in many communities. Some cannot field video-conferencing and the Internet yet. Also, there were comments that the Wide Area Network wasn't functional (or was functioning but not being used -- there was mixed opinion on its status), and that the Provincial Learning Network would not be up and running until 1997.

Those few key respondents who did not feel Objective 3 was appropriate or realistic for CSCs gave two main reasons for this. One comment was that the funding support would have been better placed by upgrading existing service providers (e.g., colleges). The second comment was that there is not a demonstrated link between technological training and economic competitiveness, so it could be unrealistic to expect CSCs to be able to achieve that link.

Objective 4

To achieve financial independence from government funding of operational costs by generating revenue and leveraging private sector funds; creating partnerships and collaborating with the community; and administering funds responsibly.

Most of the **respondents at the local CSC level** feel that this is an appropriate objective, and about one-quarter feel that it is indeed achievable. Those who take this position have a local industry base that is fairly stable and is receptive to training. They also have highly entrepreneurial management and staff, who have been able to forge strong links with local industry. They have been able to work with industry to identify its training needs and then have developed or accessed programming that meets those needs. In addition, they have been able to set aside funds while they are still receiving government support that will assist them in their transition to financial independence.

Approximately one-half of CSCs share the belief that this is an appropriate objective, but they do not think that it is fully realizable. They believe that the government will need to develop some kind of measurement of relative success, based on local conditions. That is, some communities simply do not have the industry base to generate sufficient training funds. Additionally, if a CSC is very heavily involved in brokering training, in partnering with public training providers or private sector trainers, and in serving high-need clientele, these activities are not substantial revenue generators. There is not a resistance to this objective, but there are definite reservations about its practicality.

About a quarter of the CSCs do not envision any appreciable degree of financial independence. They felt it would not be possible to meet this objective because of the difficult local economic circumstances and because so many of the activities that they wish to provide -- to a large proportion of high-need clients -- will not allow them to approach achieving this objective. Only one CSC is viewed by the majority of the respondents interviewed as not being committed to financial independence. Most of these respondents believe that this CSC board sees their highest priority as serving very high-need clients and that the responsibility for supporting these efforts does not reside in the CSC, but with government.

The issue of financial independence involved a great deal of discussion at the local level about what is seen as a basic contradiction between objectives 1 and 4. This goes again to issues of mandate, competition, and targeting priorities. There is very mixed opinion on these issues, with many respondents expressing the wish that there should be some clarification of the policies, practices, and regulations at the relevant provincial and federal levels.

As a whole, **program-wide key respondents** said that they support the ideal of the CSCs becoming financially independent, but they see a basic contradiction in being able to do so -- given the needs of the communities most are to serve. That is, the CSCs were to be placed where there were the considerable training needs and where the community does not have many training resources. Respondents said that the CSCs are there to help communities whose workforce is facing major adjustment problems, and the communities are mostly small and fairly remote. The majority of the workforce in these communities is

undereducated. The communities are reliant on a very few major industries and otherwise much of the economic activity comes from small businesses.

Given this, there were questions raised about whether the large, under-educated group needing training has sufficient income or other sources of support to pay enough for training to make a major contribution to a CSCs becoming financially independent. They pointed out that on an overhead of 15 percent, a CSC would have to do about a million dollars of business a year to support its facility and staff. There were also questions about whether these economically vulnerable communities would have a sufficiently large industry base, and one that is sufficiently committed to training its employees through a CSC, to help make full financial independence possible. Finally, there were questions raised about the role of the CSCs -- are they to be government-based services or incipient private enterprises? This returns the respondents to issues of duplication of services, competition between government and the private sector, or the CSCs and public training providers.

Key respondents were aware of some CSCs which were making substantial gains in revenue generation, but they also felt that there were definite limitations to what could be achieved in many local situations. There were suggestions that some flexibility in this objective might have to be developed by funders.

Another issue raised by key respondents was what they felt to be an inconsistency in federal and provincial policies as to using the training services of CSCs. In some communities there are strong partnerships between the HRCC's or Skills Development offices, with training being purchased on a regular basis. In other communities, the CSC is precluded from consideration for providing these services. Respondents discussing this issue would like to see each level of government clarify its policy and have the results of that clarification applied consistently across the province.

In sum, most the key respondents feel that the total of what CSCs offer in a community is needed in the community and is of value to it. They feel that the CSCs should do all that can be done to recover costs, but that there are limitations to what can be expected, given the overall context in which most CSCs operate.

Directions for the Future/Alternative Programming Models

At the conclusion of the interview, all respondents were asked what they saw as the strengths of the CSC program that contribute most to meeting its objectives, and what suggestions they would have for improvements in the future. Finally, they were asked if there was an alternative model of programming that might be preferable for achieving the same goals.

Taking together the data from both CSC and community and program-wide respondents, virtually all of them said that the strengths of the CSC model were its community base and the flexibility and responsiveness to training needs. They felt that the addition of the training and communications technologies were a decided asset to communities. Because there is an expectation that there will be more and more distance and distributed learning in the future, the CSCs will be well-positioned to take a lead role in this, to the benefit of communities.

As for suggestions for improving the effectiveness of CSCs in future, there were four themes. These were:

- Re-assess the objective of achieving financial independence, both in terms of what can be expected of CSCs (given the varying contexts in which they operate), and how to resolve the issues of mandate, competition, and degree and consistency of support by both levels of government;
- As part of support needed from government, they suggest that one way to do this would be by utilizing CSC technology services (e.g., video-conferencing) as an integral part of government operations;
- Clarify the objectives of the CSC initiative, assess compliance with the objectives, and establish or discontinue local CSCs in accordance with these clarified objectives;
- Enhance marketing of CSCs province-wide to increase the use of the services and technology in distance education as it develops in the future;
- Provide more support and guidance to CSC boards; i.e., increase representativeness, expertise, and participation to make sure that boards are fully committed to and capable of carrying out their work, given its centrality to objectives achievement.

There were no full-fledged alternatives to the CSC model proposed. Two respondents did say that it would have been preferable to place the CSCs directly within the college system and/or to create an outreach function like that of the CSC within the college system.

B. Evaluative Findings at the CSC Level

In this section we return to the achievement of each of the CSC program objectives, to report on the assessment of the degree to which the CSCs themselves meet these objectives. In the next section we will present our evaluative conclusions on the program as a whole.

Evaluative Findings on Objectives Achievement by the CSCs

Objective 1

To act as a focal point... to increase access to training and to bridge ... to new training opportunities; adding values...; providing an access point for labour market information ...and ...address the training needs of targeted client groups.

While it is always necessary to keep in mind the different stages of development of the CSCs across the province, as well as the different environments in which they operate, it seems clear to the evaluators that on the whole the CSCs are making substantial progress in achieving Objective 1. Many do function as a focal point for community efforts to increase training opportunities. In general, boards and staff are very aware of the importance of not duplicating existing training or competing with public or private sector training providers. They actively and systematically include those other training resources into the training services offered through the CSC, wherever feasible and appropriate. There is not always agreement in the community on whether the CSCs limit themselves to adding value to existing training services or whether they duplicate or compete with local training resources. However, it is the evaluator's view that for the most part where the CSCs do offer training that is *provided* by other sources, it is not *available* from these sources in a location, format or schedule that meets the needs of the trainee group that the CSC is serving in the particular situation.

The CSCs as a group play a minor role as an access point for labour market information. The provision of LMI is very much in a state of flux at this time in the province, with Human Resources Development Canada having reduced substantially the capacities of its Human Resource Centre LMI services across the province. There has been as of yet no full-scale replacement of this function at the provincial level. The CSCs in some communities do work closely with HRCC's, and thus there is information sharing. And some CSCs have themselves assisted employers or community groups to identify employment trends or to carry out skills inventories or training needs assessments. However, local CSCs may not find this a necessary or appropriate activity. In any case, the collection and analysis of LMI is usually not an area of staff expertise. Thus, LMI services are localized activities that are not carried out by enough CSCs to say that the program as a whole is achieving this element of Objective 1.

In speaking of the "target group" of the CSCs, it should be noted that each CSC identifies its own target clients, according to a number of factors. These include an assessment of local needs, of how the CSC can best meet the objective of financial independence, and the nature of networks and working relationships

with community stakeholders. The description of the CSC program as provided in the Strategic Initiatives information for the Request for Proposals said that the CSCs were designed to "...provide [services] that ...meet local needs for workforce training and skills updating..." There was not a statement of priority groups; i.e., employed, under-employed, or unemployed persons. Thus, there are CSCs whose primary target group is employed workers in the major industry of the region and there are others which have targeted unemployed workers from the same industry elsewhere. There are CSCs which have targeted social assistance recipients and others who have focused on retail owners, managers, and staff.

It appears to the evaluators that of all the factors that shaped service targeting, the most influential one was the potential for cost recovery. If there was a potential to generate revenue by training a group of employed workers to help a company upgrade its workforce, or if there was the possibility of having the contract to counsel and upgrade unemployed workers supported through various government training programs, then the CSC programmed accordingly. The relationships with local stakeholders also played a role, particularly in the case of EI recipients. In some communities the CSC held contracts to deliver job search and related services. In other communities, the local HRCC or MoEST staff may have felt that these services should not be delivered by the Centres, because the CSCs already receive government funding for their operations. In these communities, the CSC did not have the option of tendering its services for these clients.

Given this range of target groups that are served by CSCs, the evaluative question is not *which* groups were served, but whether the CSC *identified local needs* and then *moved effectively* to meet these needs. In general, it appears that the CSCs have made substantial progress in meeting this objective. The findings from the past participants indicate this, and so do the findings from the CSC-based and program-wide respondents. Some CSCs have been more effective, due to factors such as a strong entrepreneurial bent to management, or a business and industry base that is receptive to the kinds of training services the CSCs can provide. And in some cases, there is direct use of CSC services by the local HRCC or MoEST Training Consultants. Those CSCs that are less effective at meeting this element of the Objective 1 tend to be early in their development, lacking local industry leaders on their board, or -- in one or two cases -- seemingly they are not fully committed to the objective of financial independence.

Objective 2

To increase community input and decision-making regarding training and adjustment issues by developing CSC training plans; assessing community environment; and establishing consultation and decision-making processes.

This objective has been addressed by the CSCs, but much remains to be done to move more closely toward achievement of this objective. We believe that most CSCs are committed to these processes and activities, but that it is asking too much of a volunteer board to undertake -- and be effective in -- all of these activities. In part, the newness of the CSCs means that they have not been able to extend their networks and consultative processes much beyond board membership. Board membership is not always as diverse as expected, board and staff members are very busy and do not always have the assessment and planning skills that the CSC needs. Also, community-wide consultation takes a great deal of time and very particular skills. As well, there are often other organizations in the community, such as Community Futures or Chambers of Commerce which may already be taking the lead in this kind of consultation. The CSCs may not feel a strong impetus to develop consultation processes outside of the informal ones provided through the board and informal networking in the community. Thus, while progress has been made, the CSCs have tended to be more re-active than pro-active in their efforts to meet this objective. We would expect that over time, however, the CSCs will strengthen their ability to meet this objective more fully.

Objective 3

To increase competitiveness ...in the global marketplace ...by providing services to encourage the use of technology; participating in inter-connected province wide network ...; and building on and collaborating with existing technology services, groups, and individuals in local communities.

We concur with the respondents who said that asking local CSCs to increase the competitiveness of companies and communities in the global marketplace is expecting rather a lot. However, there have been instances where CSC services have strengthened companies that do trade globally. It also seems reasonable to accept the argument that upgrading of worker skills and education makes for a more competitive workforce in general. So it can be said that the CSCs have contributed toward meeting these elements of Objective 3.

On a more specific level, however, it is clear that the CSCs do indeed encourage the use of electronic technologies for training and educational upgrading.

Virtually all have orientation programs for the community at large. They are using their video-conferencing to a greater degree, though there have been some mechanical difficulties to be resolved. Their training programs are mostly computer-based, and they are making increasing use of the national and international training resources available on the Internet. They often are the only readily available source of both video-conferencing and Internet training in the community. (There may be other sources of these, but the CSCs seem to be the most easily accessible, in terms of scheduling, location, and cost.) Though there have been some strains about duplication of services or competition with other training providers, there also are examples of the CSCs enhancing the capacity of existing technology services and groups. Thus, in our view, this is the objective that the CSCs are most effectively meeting at this time.

Objective 4

To achieve financial independence from government funding of operational costs by generating revenue and leveraging private sector funds; creating partnerships and collaborating with the community; and administering funds responsibly.

Virtually all of the CSCs are firmly committed to achieving the maximum degree of financial independence possible. However, being committed to this ideal and being able to achieve it are two different things. There must be appropriate local conditions to make this possible. At the most basic level there must be a sufficiently robust "market" for the distinctive services of the CSC. We say *distinctive* because it is not within the mandate of the CSCs to replicate existing services and simply out-compete them in order to become financially independent. There must be enough demand for what the CSCs uniquely provide, even if it is similar services but made distinctive because of the added value of flexible schedules, non-traditional training environment, and innovative use of electronic technologies.

It is the evaluator's view that with one or two exceptions the CSCs are making as much progress toward this objective as could be expected at their respective stages of development. Staff as a group possess a combination of expertise in business, training, and community economic development. They are very good at creating partnerships and collaborating with community stakeholders. This has entailed a great deal of hard work, but considerable progress has been made in these partnerships. Where there is potential for revenue generation and leveraging of private (and public) funds, the CSCs definitely have identified the potential and have acted upon it. However, we believe that this objective is not realistic for each and every one of the CSCs. As we will discuss further when we turn to the overall evaluative issues of rationale, impact, effectiveness and alternatives for the future, it does not seem appropriate to set this as an objective

for all CSCs when they must also respond to local conditions -- which in themselves preclude generation of sufficient revenue to become financially independent.

As for the administration of funds, we are not auditors and cannot comment in depth on the achievement of this element of Objective 4. However, from our research it does seem that many of the CSCs still are finding their way in terms of keeping complete and up-to-date financial records. It is a difficult task, given the range of funding sources, types of contracts, and array of individuals served, but there definitely is room for improvement in this area. Better financial administration means better accountability and more effective planning at the local and program-wide levels.

Evaluative Conclusions on the CSC as a Program

In this section we draw together the descriptive findings and the evaluative findings on the achievement of the four objectives at the level of the Community Skills Centres themselves to address the four *program-wide* evaluation issues. These were the basis of the evaluation framework, and they correspond to the federal government's guidelines for the evaluation function. The evaluation issues are:

- Program rationale ("Program relevance to policy goals and objectives and program design.");
- Impacts and effects of program ("...deem to be the impacts of the initiative," which means at the level of individuals or individual projects, and generally impacts in the shorter term);
- Program objectives achievement ("...to what degree the initiative has been implemented; how effective these processes have been....");
- Alternatives for improved programming ("...provide recommendations and best practice model"); these are to be provided under separate cover, but we will comment on the issue in this section.

Program Rationale

There are two elements of program rationale that need to be addressed. One is whether the CSC as a program fits appropriately within the policy goals and objectives of federal and provincial governments, and within the goals and needs of the communities in which the CSCs are placed. The second element to be evaluated is whether *this* program design is an appropriate one for meeting those goals and objectives. That is, do the structure and operation of the CSCs component parts logically and practically enable the achievement of the goals set out for the program overall? We will deal with each topic in turn.

First, it will be recalled that the rationale for the Strategic Initiatives Program (SIP) of the federal government were couched in terms of reform of the social

security system. Programs under the SIP were to find new ways to help individuals "facing serious labour market problems" to overcome these barriers and thereby reduce their "dependence on the social security system." At the provincial level, through its *Skills Now* program, the British Columbia government utilizes a number of ways to "...prepare British Columbia's workforce for the 21st Century..." The CSC program is one of those ways.

In our view, the CSC program as a whole in the province fits completely within the goals of federal, provincial, and community partners. Each wishes to strengthen the employability of individuals and to enhance the economic strength of communities. Training is an essential tool to achieve that goal. Hence, the focus of the CSC initiative on facilitating training at the community level entirely supports the rationale for the program.

But what about the program model itself -- the focus on community boards, community participation in decision-making, the identification of training needs, the concentration on the use of electronic technology offered in a community-centred facility? Do these processes and program structures make sense for achieving the goals of the initiative? Though there are many and varied training resources across the province, it is clear to the evaluators that in many communities, particularly smaller ones, that there is a decided gap in exactly the kinds of services the CSCs can offer. In these communities either these training services do not exist or if they do exist in some form, they may not be sufficiently responsive to the particular needs of employers or those unemployed individuals who are not comfortable in more traditional learning situations (e.g., formal classrooms, traditional student/teacher relationships, fixed entry and exit points from programs, etc.). In addition, the reliance of many CSCs on their boards for input on decisions and the efforts of their managers to assess the needs of the community for training fit well with the ability of the CSC to make a rapid, flexible, and innovative response to identified needs.

Thus, the rationale for the CSC initiative, as implemented as a whole in the province, is fully justified in terms of need and it is clearly supported by its design, processes and structure. It does not appear to jeopardize local training services nor duplicate them. The CSCs ability to add value to local programming largely precludes strict duplication. However, given the lack of clarity in many communities about what "competition" and "duplication" mean, conceptually and in practice, it would be very useful for the respective governments to clarify their own working definitions of these concepts and then communicate them fully to all concerned.

Impacts and Effects of Program

The underlying questions for this evaluation issue had to do with whether the CSC initiative increased community control over local education and training

issues, whether the CSCs enhanced the local "training culture" through the use of technologies, and whether they met the local training needs effectively.

Because of the role of their boards and because of the intensive partnering and networking efforts of most managers and staff, it can be said that the CSCs have made significant progress in increasing local control over education and training issues. They have actively identified needs and have striven with some success to meet these needs. They rely heavily upon their own technological base to meet these needs. There have been strains between the CSCs and the public and private sector trainers in a number of communities. However, in many of these, the CSCs have developed effective partnerships that have reduced or resolved these strains. We believe that there may have been a learning opportunity for the other training resources as well, in that a number have become more aware of the increasing importance of being more flexible and responsive in their own services, to meet the particular needs of their own client groups.

We believe that there is not a strong "learning culture" present in many businesses or among many individuals in the labour force across the province. This evaluation and many of the others we have done, as well as our study of adjustment and training issues in general, leads us to this conclusion. Therefore, the challenge for CSCs to enhance the local learning culture is a large one. Nevertheless, in several communities the CSCs have done just that. They have done so with large companies, small businesses, labour organizations, and individuals who are employed, under-employed, unemployed or contemplating entering the workforce after a gap of many years. The CSCs partnerships and informal contacts tend to reinforce the efforts of community leaders, educators, and government offices (HRCC's, MoEST/Skills Now) to create more awareness of the importance of life-long educational and skills upgrading. The CSCs technological capacities play a key role in facilitating that upgrading. The new technologies have an inherent appeal to today's worker, assuming that they can overcome their initial unease about their ability to use it. But the programs of the CSCs are aimed at reducing that anxiety and they are quite effective at doing so.

The CSCs generally are responding to identified needs for training, and their programming is designed to meet those needs in ways that are appealing and supportive to their clientele. Thus, it appears that the CSCs do indeed meet the training needs of clients effectively. It should be noted that the clients are not only the trainees, but the many employers or the HRCC's and Skills Development offices that are supporting their workers/clients in the training that is provided through the CSCs. The evidence is that there is a high level of satisfaction with the CSC services from both levels of client -- trainees and those who support them.

Thus, the impacts and effects of the CSC program on the local training culture and on those who use the training and related services can be seen as positive.

The training provision is generally highly focused on identified needs and the quality of service seems to be fully adequate to meet these needs.

Program Objectives Achievement

The goals and objectives of the federal and provincial governments for the CSC program were not completely congruent with each other. That is, at the federal level, the goals of the Strategic Initiatives Program focused on persons who were dependent on the social security system. This would mean people on Income Assistance. (We do not understand Employment Insurance to be a social security program, but believe that it is a goal of both federal and provincial governments to assist workers on EI to find employment as soon as possible, to reduce their reliance on this benefit.) The provincial goals and objectives for the CSC program seem to be broader. Those to be assisted certainly encompass persons on Income Assistance, but as the broad range of programming that falls within the *Skills Now* initiative indicates, the British Columbia government's goals for the CSCs are much more inclusive. As we noted earlier, the CSC initiative is but one of the ways that *Skills Now* programming helps the British Columbia workforce to be prepared "... for the 21st Century..." As such, training services are very diverse and they address the needs of both employed, under-employed, unemployed and new entry workers who require training support. Employers often are an integral part of these provincial training programs as well, as their training needs are identified and training programs are developed for their workers.⁴

From what we could learn about the profile of those served in the CSCs as a whole, it appears that the goals of the federal government for its primary target group are as well met as the goals of the provincial government.

It is true that there seems to be an under-representation (if that is indeed the case) of persons on Income Assistance. Our discussions with MoEST Training Consultants indicated that they can encourage clients to take training or educational upgrading at the CSC, but that they cannot cause the person to do so. (It may be that the new YouthWorks component of B.C. Benefits will result in more use of services such as CSCs by youth, in that at some point in their time on IA they must undertake training to continue to be eligible for assistance.) Also, the barriers to employability that persons on IA already experience are very difficult to overcome in any case, and the CSCs do not have outreach services that might encourage greater utilization by persons on Income Assistance.

In contrast, there is substantial, and we think increasing, utilization by employer-sponsored workers, persons on EI, and a small proportion of those who pay for

4 Examples of these employer-based programs are the Small Business and Sectoral Partnership Training programs.

services themselves. This is very much a result of the efforts that the CSCs make to become financially independent. They market to these groups. They design their programming for these groups. They create a learning environment that is appealing to these trainees and their employers.

But no matter what the proportions of employed or unemployed/income assistance persons receiving services from the CSCs, the fact is that both federal and provincial governments are committed to enhancing employability -- for the employed and unemployed.

Thus, taking together all of the findings, and assessing achievement in relation to the federal and provincial goals for the CSC program, we find that the development and implementation of the CSC program and its individual community Centres has made substantial progress in achieving those objectives. The program as a whole is impressive. Progress has been made on all four objectives, though there are inherent limitations, we believe, to the full achievement of financial independence for each and every Centre.

Alternatives for improved programming

The rationale of the CSC program is sound, the goals and objectives fit within federal and provincial policies and priorities, and they take into account community needs for increased economic well-being. The structure and processes of the CSC program as a whole are appropriate for achieving its goals and objectives. Some of the objectives are more achievable than others, given local circumstances, as we have noted at several points in the report. Thus, we do not see a need for substantial change to the program nor to developing alternate ways of achieving these program goals.

Virtually all programming can benefit from some modification, based on a systematic review of its operations. This is a major value of the evaluation process. We have provided our recommendations for future directions of the CSC, under separate cover, as called for in the terms of reference of the project. However, it may be useful to have a brief discussion in this overview report of some of the areas that were considered in the recommendations.

We believe that the CSC initiative as a whole would benefit from:

- A clarification of its roles and responsibilities for training in comparison to those of the public and private sector training providers.
- The development of specific, but different standards for individual CSCs for achieving financial independence; with these standards reflecting the goal of independence but the reality of limited possibility in many communities. These standards would be a contractual obligation and would be re-visited and revised as circumstances called for this.

- The development of comprehensive, consistent and comparable information management systems for all CSCs.
- A long-range plan for assuring that all CSC electronic technologies remain up-to-date, without unduly taxing the capacity of the CSCs to achieve their respective requirements for financial independence.
- Regular, systematic communication and consultation among all CSCs, to share ideas, resolve problems, and increase their capacity to meet all program objectives.

The specific ways that each of these benefits could be implemented are addressed in the recommendations and best practices discussion. But for now it should be evident that the essential soundness of the idea and the implementation of the initiative as a whole does not call for a consideration of full-scale alternatives to meeting the objectives of the program.