Targeted call for FSC Project Partners

Instructions to complete the application form

Please refer to the Future Skills Centre's (FSC) **Targeted Call for FSC Project Partners Guidelines** document when preparing your application.

This application form is structured to help you address the selection criteria for this call and give reviewers easy access to your project information. This form is divided into the following sections:

- Part 1 - General information
- Part 2 - Project summary
- Part 3 - Project details
- Part 4 - Project work plan and budget
- Part 5 - Declaration

If you would like to request accommodations or other types of support, please contact Maysa Mourad by email at targetedcall@fsc-ccf.ca or by phone at 437-331-0613.

If you have any questions while compiling your application, you may contact our team at targetedcall@fsc-ccf.ca. We would be happy to answer any questions.

PART 1 - GENERAL INFORMATION

1. Lead organization

Name of lead organization

Bow Valley College

Name of project lead

James Thangaraj

Project lead's preferred method of contact (email address and/or phone number)

jthangaraj@bowvalleycollege.ca

2. Proposed project

Project title

Bridging the Gap 2.0 (BtG2.0)

Project start and end dates

April 1, 2022 to June 30, 2023

Projects must end no later than September 30, 2023.

Amount requested from FSC (total)

$1,373,546

Project partners and their location

Bow Valley College – Calgary.
Canada West Foundation – Calgary.
Other partners to be decided.

PART 2 - PROJECT SUMMARY

1. Proposed project "one-liner"

How would you describe your new project in one sentence?

Identifying the most innovative approaches and solutions for market-driven, industry-led, online assessments that enable individuals, especially from underrepresented populations, to demonstrate their competencies to hiring organizations.

(30 words maximum)

2. Proposed project summary

How would you describe your new project and how it builds on the testing and learning of your current project to date?
We suggest that this summary covers the main information about how your new project addresses all selection criteria of this targeted call.

Our current project, Bridging the Gap, was conceptualized in 2019 with a vision to promote and implement Bow Valley College's mandate to "make all learning count". Its goal was to enable individuals to demonstrate their competencies for a role to prospective employers, so that recruitment could take place based on demonstrated ability instead of external factors such as traditional education credentials, years of experience, Canadian experience, current employment status, and so on.

Our project made a number of assumptions based on reality at that time that did not hold true in a post-pandemic world where both post-secondary institutions and employers saw changed priorities. As a result, the implementation of Bridging the Gap was not what we expected it to be.

While evaluating our current project with the help of an external expert and advisory partner (Canada West Foundation) we learned five valuable lessons (these are mentioned in Part 3). These learnings provided us with insights to not just what we could do differently with the remaining period of implementation, but also what we would do in the future if given the opportunity.

Regarding immediate implementation, we have pivoted to limit the number of assessments that we are developing (from 14 to 5), offboarded some partners, and requested a timeline extension of six months to ensure more time for learnings. We also applied for and were accepted into FSC's Accelerator where we will be able to validate some of the hypotheses gained through the learnings from our current project.

The problem that we initially set out to address is probably even more acute in a post-COVID world, so regarding the future, we will use our learnings and the findings of the Accelerator to design a new program from the ground up.

This forms the basis for Bridging the Gap 2.0.

(250 words maximum)

3. Additional scope

How does your new project go beyond the scope of your current FSC-funded project?

The additional scope may include expanding or extending a project model, its principles and/or components. For example, it may include expanding the project to new regions or jurisdictions, including new or larger target populations, and testing different delivery formats to understand what works to address demands. This would assume the potential for bringing additional partners to deliver the project at a broader scale. The additional scope must be grounded in new concrete learning questions to contribute to your work and of others in the skills ecosystem.

Our new project addresses the same problem of helping individuals demonstrate their competencies for a role to potential employers. However, it goes beyond our current project's scope by starting with a blank page rather than a well-defined model. We propose to focus on employers (small, medium, large) as the starting point and conduct customer discovery to work backwards from their needs to identify 1) specific roles, levels and skills they wish to assess and 2) a new approach, process and technology that best allows individuals to meet these needs. We have a fair idea of what our findings might be, but because we are approaching BtG2.0 with an open mind, we do not wish to state anything with certainty. Customer discovery will tell us.

(150 words maximum)

4. Importance of the additional scope

Why is the additional scope of your project important to your organization, sector and target populations? Why is it timely?

We have learned through numerous conversations that while it is critical to help individuals demonstrate their competencies for a role to potential employers, our current approach, through Bridging the Gap, does not fully fit with the needs of the job market.

Therefore, our additional scope of conducting customer discovery through the Accelerator and building on its findings through Bridging the Gap 2.0 will help us to focus on the right customers and sectors, target the most in-demand roles, and

leverage technology that is most relevant and user friendly.

This is important to our target populations because it provides a more accurate way of helping them demonstrate their competencies to prospective employers. It expedites their path to employment.

It is important to employers because it provides a more accurate way of assessing what applicants bring to the table during the hiring process, or when designing talent development, or retention activities.

It is important to Bow Valley College because it allows us to meet a market need and create economic and social stability.

(150 words maximum)

PART 3 - PROJECT DETAILS

In this section, please provide information about how your new project supports each of the selection criteria of this targeted call.

We provide prompting questions to help you address all criteria in the application guidelines. You may prepare this section following the prompting questions in sequence or using your own sections and narrative.

Although you have flexibility regarding the format for this section, please make sure that you address all criteria according to the prompting questions. Reviewers will assess your application by scoring each criterion individually.

This section should not exceed **seven** pages. We anticipate that most proposals will present this section in **five** pages.

Introduction

Bow Valley College received $1.52m from Future Skills Centre in 2020 to help Canadians secure employment by demonstrating their competencies for a role to potential employers. We proposed to work with six postsecondary institutions across Canada to create a library of 14 Natural Language Understanding assessments reflecting in-demand jobs across Canada and offer them to job seekers through a custom-built online platform (Flexible Learning Platform) that would certify the successful demonstration of competencies with a micro-credential that could be presented to employers. The unique characteristics of our project are its pan-Canadian scope, the inclusion of underrepresented populations, an emphasis on both

technology infrastructure and service delivery, and a coalition of 10 academic, public, and private partners.

Unfortunately, the pandemic affected implementation of Bridging the Gap, and the Canada West Foundation, our project evaluation partner helped us to identify five key learnings:

1) The project has an implementation track and a research track. The implementation track (building Pivot-Ed as a business through the Flexible Learning Platform and a 14-assessment library) has been a gradual process. However, the research track generated important learnings that we reported to FSC. These learnings have been valuable in helping us to finetune our approach and shape upcoming customer discovery and Bridging the Gap 2.0.
2) Colleges are unable to easily convene industry partners.
3) In the few cases where industry was convened, partner engagement was challenging because of the pandemic and other priorities.
4) Instead of leading with industry pull, colleges typically default to seeking assessments in areas where they already offer courses.
5) Natural Language Understanding, the technology we are using for assessments in the current project, is limited in what it can address.

This got us thinking about better ways to approach and address the problem of enabling individuals to gain employment based on demonstrated ability, which if anything, has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

That intention forms the basis of this proposal. It is important for us to clarify upfront that this is a speculative research venture. We are approaching it with a clear idea of the problem to be addressed, but no pre-conceived notions around what solutions will work. Customer discovery carried out through the Accelerator will help us validate hypotheses that we will then implement through Bridging the Gap 2.0.

BRIDGING THE GAP 2.0:

Creating employment opportunities for individuals can best be summed as a problem of supply and demand. The individuals form the supply and hiring organizations create the demand. As with any business, matching supply to demand, and delivering the best product to the right person at the right price with an assurance of quality at the desired time is key. Bridging the Gap 2.0 (BtG2.0) proposes to do exactly this for job seekers and employers.

1) Through the Accelerator, conduct extensive customer discovery to understand which sectors are hiring, which functions they are seeking talent for, and at what organizational level. We also want to understand if there are other talent-related bottlenecks pertaining to training, retention, and promotion that we can address. Any discovery that is not conducted through the Accelerator will be completed at the start of BtG2.0.

2) Having understood roles and levels, we will map the competencies for each and validate them with the hiring organizations. For example, the competencies required for an entry level customer advisor in financial services will be different than those required by a customer service manager supervising a team in the hospitality sector, which will be altogether different to competencies required by a data analyst in a startup.

3) Use the validated competency profile to create authentic assessments reflecting the day-to-day, real-world demands of the role. We are currently using Natural language Understanding to create assessments but have noticed its limitations and do not know which alternate technology that would be best. It all depends on the functions and roles to be assessed. For example, the technology required for technical skills assessments will in all likelihood be different to that required to soft skills assessments.

4) Based on the nature of assessments and the technology used to create them, identify the best medium to deploy them to job seekers. While a keyboard-based assessment may effectively capture certain competencies, in other cases, speech recognition may be required. We don't know yet.

5) Last, Bow Valley College will award a micro-credential to each individual that successfully completes an assessment. This is the proof of competency that can be presented to an employer.

RESPONSES TO FUTURE SKILLS QUESTIONS:

A. Relevance

a. How does your new project align with FSC's Strategic Priorities?

This proposal builds on the strategic priority of FSC to enable Canadians to rapidly transition in the workplace by gaining employment because the assessment of competencies and their validation through a micro-credential is becoming more widely acceptable and being used by both industry and postsecondary institutions.

b. How does your new project address recognized systemic challenges about future skills in Canada?

People develop skills and competencies through past education, jobs, life experiences and even online platforms, such as YouTube, but struggle to demonstrate these competencies effectively to employers. Simultaneously, employers strive to recruit the best candidate for a role but struggle to identify the exact skills an applicant brings to the table. This leads them to considering conventional parameters, such as years of experience, traditional educational accreditation, and current work status instead. This situation disproportionately impacts the unemployed individuals, newcomers to Canada, rural populations and indigenous communities. It creates systemic barriers to getting a job commensurate with and equivalent to an individual's skill set. BtG2.0

bridges this gap by focusing the hiring conversation on competencies and demonstrated ability.

c. Explain how your proposed project fulfills the demand for your service. Who is demanding this and how do you know? Why is it timely?

This proposed project focuses on satisfying employer needs in the marketplace and ensuring that Canadians can quickly and effectively transition to new roles. As part of the project, we aim to more effectively engage with industry partners to ensure we are building the most robust solution for Canadians moving forward. This is timely as we are seeing more organizations and post-secondary institutions move to shorter and more competency-based assessments and learnings. For example, Google recently launched Google Career Certificates as a part of Grow with Google program, an online series of flexible courses to support those looking to develop and demonstrate competency in specific job areas. In our current project we have learnt from industry that there are issues with recruitment, retention, and promotion of staff that could be effectively addressed through authentic assessments.

B. Innovation and evidence

a. In what way is your project innovative by pursuing a new way of doing things? If applicable, how is your project model informed by evidence?

Building on the learnings of the Bridging the Gap project will allow us to be more innovative than before. We are basing this new proposal on the findings from the current project which will enable us to provide relevant evidence of what works better for industry and job seekers. In the new project, we will work with both industry and job seeker to ensure that the model we build is robust and creates measurable value for both sides.

b. How do you plan to generate evidence and insights during your project? What new knowledge will it generate and what are the potential implications of your approach for the broader skills ecosystem?

Evidence will be generated through customer discovery as well as real-world implementation. We will use both survey and interviews with industry and those going through the process to assess impact and effectiveness. We will ensure that as we move through the project, we are able to adapt our process based on feedback from both to ensure we are providing the right solutions for industry and job seekers. Our partnership with Canada West Foundation will continue with them serving as an evaluator and knowledge generator. The generated knowledge will inform a variety of stakeholders, such as Future Skills Centre, industry, workforce, policy makers, and post-secondary institutions about the most relevant methods and pathways to employment for Canadians. Moreover, it will address exactly what this means in terms of sectors, roles, levels, and competencies.

C. Learning

a. What learning has your current project with FSC generated and how has this learning informed the scope of your new project?

Our current project has generated valuable learnings around post-secondary challenges, industry engagement and assessment development. In a nutshell, they are:

1. The project has an implementation track and a research track. The implementation track (building Pivot-Ed as a business through the Flexible Learning Platform and a 14-assessment library) has been a gradual process. However, the research track generated important learnings that we reported to FSC. These learnings have been valuable in helping us to finetune our approach and shape upcoming customer discovery and Bridging the Gap 2.0.
2. Colleges are unable to easily convene industry partners.
3. In the few cases where industry was convened, partner engagement was challenging because of the pandemic and other priorities.
4. Instead of leading with industry pull, colleges typically default to seeking assessments in areas where they already offer courses.
5. Natural Language Understanding, the technology we are using for assessments in the current project, is limited in what it can address.

b. What are additional learning questions that your new project will address?

New learning questions will begin during customer discovery via the Accelerator and continue through Bridging the Gap 2.0. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

-   Do organizations fully understand the importance and relevance of assessing competencies?
-   Which sectors are hiring?
-   What roles are they hiring for?
-   At what organization level are these roles?
-   What is the size of the job market in Canada?
-   What competencies are they seeking for these roles?
-   Are they more interested in assessing technical skills, functional skills or soft skills?
-   Is our solution only relevant to hiring, or is it also applicable to existing employees in training, retention, and promotion?
-   What business challenge does BtG2.0 address for employers e.g. save money, save time, increase customer satisfaction, build brand etc.?
-   Who is best suited within the organization to hold these conversations e.g., HR leader, business leader, both?
-   What is the best technology for creating assessments?
-   What are the best ways to deploy it?

- What are the best solutions currently available?
- How do employers wish to see validation of competencies for new and existing individuals?
- How do they wish to help individuals develop the competencies yet to be demonstrated? Can existing training content be used, do they want to create new content or is it the individual's responsibility to identify and digest the learning themselves?

D. Equity, diversity and inclusion

a. Does your project incorporate in its design and execution the perspectives of end-users and other stakeholders, particularly groups facing barriers? If so, how? If not, why not?

Yes. We are specifically targeting unemployed Canadians, indigenous populations, rural communities, and newcomers.

b. What are the practices and activities of your project that directly support and are grounded in principles of equity, diversity and inclusion?

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion are at the core of Bow Valley College's vision and mission to make all learning count by challenging our thinking, removing barriers, and providing opportunity. Our policies and procedures are invested in creating and deploying learning opportunities and assessments that are inclusive, respectful of diversity in all forms, accommodating and empathetic, and authentic and open at all organizational levels. We will translate these values to our new project and ensure that the technology we use to create and deploy assessments is considerate of factors, such as learning disabilities, lack of fluency in English, and so on.

c. Will your project further equity, diversity and inclusion in the field or sector of your project? If so, how? If not, why not?

We hope to increase equity, diversity, and inclusion in industry by creating equal opportunities for all communities to take assessments, to demonstrate their competencies, to gain employment, and to get promoted. Currently, only those who tick boxes related to education, work experience and the like have these opportunities. Through the project we are taking into account the needs of underrepresented individuals who until now were unable to demonstrate competence (no formal accreditation) and are excluded from potential employment opportunities. It is important to highlight that one potential limitation in ensuring full equity, diversity and inclusion will be in that starting with industry first we may learn that opportunities are not fully focused on underserved populations but those looking to upskill and reskill i.e., those already employed. However, we have learnt that shorter and more timely assessments for organizations can help them improve recruitment for certain groups, like newcomers, who may have competence but not formal accreditation.

E. Capacity

a. What are the skills, experience and resources available within the lead organization (and partners, if applicable)? How will these elements support the successful execution of the project?

At a strategic level, BtG2.0 has the support and guidance of the President & CEO and Executive Team of Bow Valley College. We also have a deep pool of experts and resources from departments as diverse as Research and Innovation, Competency Based Education, Office of the Registrar, Marketing, Finance, IT Services, and Legal to support different aspects of this project. Pivot-Ed itself has the departmental capacity and knowledge around customer discovery, industry engagement, and new technology. We will identify new partners at a later stage but hope to continue working with the Canada West Foundation.

b. Does your current project with FSC hold a good track record? Have you faced any challenges? If yes, how have you addressed them?

Yes, we believe that we have maintained a good track record with FSC by keeping open communications, meeting deliverables in time, and building a positive relationship. Although implementation of the current project has not been what we had expected, we have been able to generate good learnings and feed them back to FSC in a timely manner.

F. Coherence

a. What are the main project activities that will enable you to meet the project objectives?

1. Continuation / Completion of Customer Discovery from Accelerator Phase
2. Compilation and Validation of Customer Discovery Findings
3. Using Findings to Identify Sectors, Job Functions and Levels
4. Engaging Industry Partners to Create Competency Profiles
5. Exploring Options for Design of Assessments, Technology and Delivery Mechanisms
6. Building of Assessments using Identified Technology
7. Testing of Assessments using Identified Delivery Mechanism
8. Implementation of Assessment to Target Populations
9. Evaluation of Assessment Design, Delivery and Relevance
10. Knowledge Dissemination

These activities are reflected in our work plan.

> *b. Explain how your project presents good value for money. How is your budget reasonable, appropriate and aligned with your work plan?*
>
> Customer discovery will ensure that our model builds on what job market needs. Our budget presents value for money as we wish to take savings of approximately $250,000 from our current project and apply them to new project as well as seeking another $1,373,546 to support customer discovery, industry engagement, assessment design, resourcing, technology identification, technology building, testing and implementation. Bow Valley College will also make an in-kind contribution of Pivot-Ed and other staff.

(3,500 words maximum)

PART 4 - PROJECT WORK PLAN AND BUDGET

1. Please submit a **one-page work plan** with key milestones and their timeline. **Do not** include detailed activities at this time. If your proposal is selected, we will work with you to develop a detailed work plan.

2. Please complete the project budget template provided to you as part of the application material.
    a. Include only **new funding** associated with your new project and its additional scope. Please do not include the existing funding that is already part of your current funding agreement with FSC.
    b. If applicable, identify new funding pending or confirmed for this project from other sources. **This funding should be included as in-kind contributions. (Please note that funding from other federal sources cannot be counted towards in-kind contributions)**

3. Please submit your work plan and budget by sending these files, along with this completed form, to targetedcall@fsc-ccf.ca.

4. You may use the space below to provide comments to accompany your work plan and/or budget.

> **As requested, our work plan is high level and divided into monthly deliverables instead of specific dates.**

(100 words maximum)

PART 5 - DECLARATION

By submitting an application, the lead organization and its partners agree to the requirements of the following sections, detailed in the guidelines outlined for this funding call, and they affirm that they comply with and/or commit to the following:

- Organization eligibility.
- Active support for co-creating and carrying out an evaluation with an FSC-approved evaluator, if FSC decides an evaluation is appropriate for this project.
- Active engagement in knowledge mobilization activities related to the project.
- Compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans.
- Confidential due diligence inquiries from Future Skills Centre into the applicant.

Signature

Name of signing authority	**Date**
Paulette Hanna, Vice President - Academic	November 8, 2021