Social Innovation Research Fund
Targeted Research Challenge
Barriers to Adult Literacy Training
Thematic Overview

The Social Innovation Research Fund is launching a targeted research challenge. **The principal objective of this research challenge is to develop a better understanding of the barriers to adult literacy training in New Brunswick**. This brief document provides an initial overview of the topics of interest. Research funding applications which look beyond these sample topics while remaining within the framework of this principal objective are welcomed and will be given full and equal consideration. Furthermore, note that training in reading and writing are of principal interest within the provincial approach to literacy but not exclusively so, as discussed herein; research funding applications which engage a broader conceptualization of literacy are also welcomed and will be given full and equal consideration.

What is Literacy

As a quick response, literacy is often defined as an ability to read and write. As a broader response, literacy is the ability and willingness to engage in language to acquire, develop, interpret, understand, and communicate meaning in all aspects of life—about oneself and the world. In this sense, literacy represents ability in the comprehension and application of language, wherein language is a shared system of communication, including commonly referenced languages such a French and English, as well as other forms of digital, cultural, emotional, and inter-personal communications.

Within this broadened conceptualization of literacy, reading and writing nonetheless remain of fundamental importance. Much of codified learning is premised on an ability to read and write. As an example, consider how much of the teaching of digital literacy builds from an already-established ability to read and write**. Reading and writing are literacy skills in their own right as well as building-blocks to other distinct literacy skills**, hence the importance of reading and writing within literacy training.

Why Adult Literacy Training

Literacy is important to personal and community development and engagement, and particularly so to labour force participation. With labour force participation critical to regional economic development, the regional literacy rate has become an important performance metric to be monitored by regional governments and educational agencies and organizations. With monitoring comes the impetus for literacy training, as what is measured becomes managed.

For youth, literacy training in New Brunswick remains largely within the remit of the public school system. However, if challenges with literacy should persist beyond these ages—and they certainly do quite frequently—literacy training transitions into an adult-focused endeavor beyond the remit of the

public education system and migrating into those of community organizations and government departments concerned with social and economic development.

The Government of New Brunswick and a varied network of community organizations and post-secondary education institutions have been active in adult literacy training for decades. Despite such efforts, the adult literacy rate in New Brunswick remains stagnant below the national average with nearly 50 percent of adults in the province not achieving functional literacy.

Barriers to Literacy Training

In this setting, **it is evident that barriers to adult literacy training exist**. What is less evident, however, is the nature of these barriers and how to overcome them. To address this situation, we are conducting a broad-reaching research challenge addressing various elements of barriers to adult literacy training.

The objective is to identify leading barriers to adult literacy training in New Brunswick and to provide further context and understanding about these barriers. At this stage, the focus remains on identifying and understanding. Research projects are not expected to provide fully-developed solutions to overcoming barriers, however informed discussions of potential options (likely requiring further research) to do so are helpful and appreciated.

Distinct research projects should explore one or more of the following themes. Samples of topics of inquiry are provided for each theme in efforts to provide context—**These are suggested examples only and research applications need not remain exclusively focused within these questions.**

Suggested Examples of Research Topics

Theme 1: Content and Pedagogy

This research theme relates to what is being taught and how it is being taught within adult literacy training programs.

- To what degree is training content informed by current research?
- To what degree are teaching methods informed by current research?
- How much variety in content and/or pedagogy is there within and between adult literacy training programs in N.B.?
- Are there examples of 'best practices' from outside N.B. which could inform developments within the province moving forward?

Theme 2: Accessibility and Engagement

This research theme relates to how individuals access adult literacy training in New Brunswick.

- Are individuals who could benefit from literacy training aware that they could benefit from such training? Are they aware that such training is available?

- If someone is operating at the lowest level of literacy, how do they become informed of potential adult literacy training programs.
- If aware, can individuals easily access training programs? Are any diagnostic tests, fees, wait lists, or so on, required prior to participation? What is the process for an individual who wants assistance in literacy training to actually receiving such assistance? Is this process similar across N.B. and across all programs?
- If adult literacy training programs involve a degree of technological interaction, is support provided for such within the training program or is this considered an extraneous element to be addressed by each potential participant themselves? What degree of adult literacy training is delivered through internet-based activities and how does internet connectivity throughout N.B. affect this?
- Can technology be applied to advance adult literacy training in N.B.—if so, how? Are there examples of this in other jurisdictions to be studied and potentially replicated?
- Are there any personal or cultural barriers to engagement? How widely are such elements shared throughout NB? How could these be addressed?

Theme 3: Programs and Networks

This research theme relates to how adult literacy training programs are developed, operated, and governed in New Brunswick.

- How much of adult literacy training in N.B. is delivered by government programs, government-funded programs, community organizations, for-profit training and education institutions, and non-profit training and education institutions? Are these programs coordinated to provide a provincial approach to adult literacy training? If so, how is such coordination managed?
- How do adult literacy training programs in N.B. relate to literacy training programs more generally (i.e., typically those with a focus on youth)?
- How are adult literacy programs funded and at what time horizons?
- How are adult literacy programs monitored, evaluated, and adapted? Is this relatively equally conducted across all programs in N.B.?
- Are there any adult literacy training programs or networks in N.B. demonstrating above average success metrics? What is different about these programs and could it be replicated more broadly, and how?