What We Heard Report:

ESDC Annual Dialogue Day with Representatives of the English-speaking Communities of Quebec (ESCQ)

Employment and Social Development Canada

November 13, 2025

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1.   Introduction

Employment and Social Development Canada's (ESDC) Dialogue Day with organizations representing the English-speaking communities of Quebec (ESCQ) took place on November 13, 2025. More information about the day's activities is provided in the agenda (Annex A). Participating organizations representing the English-speaking communities of Quebec are listed in Annex B. ESDC's senior management, as well as representatives of other federal departments are listed in Annex C.

Overview

The day began with a plenary session chaired by the Senior Assistant Deputy Minister of the Strategic and Service Policy Branch at ESDC, Elisha Ram. The plenary examined on how federal programs could better address ESCQ needs and more effectively integrate the OLMC lens across the policies-to-service delivery continuum, with a particular focus on employability.

The plenary session was followed by three breakout discussions, each focusing on a specific theme:

- Employment and Employability: Access to French-language learning, English-language employment services, and wraparound services; improving training and skills development initiatives; and partnerships with educational institutions.

- Economic Development: Addressing lower regional labour market participation rates and higher unemployment rates; remote training to improve training; and skills development access in remote regions.

- Labour Market Integration: Reskilling and upskilling for mid-career, transitioning and older workers.

The day concluded with an interdepartmental roundtable (ESDC, Canadian Heritage, the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, and Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada) on interdepartmental coordination in support of ESCQ priorities.

This report synthetizes the discussions and highlights the issues expressed by the ESCQ, as well as potential solutions proposed by participants.

2.   What We Heard (Summary)

2.1   Barriers to Accessing ESDC Programs

Participants highlighted structural and operational barriers that impede access to programs and funding:

- Federal-provincial dynamics

Stakeholders recognized that intergovernmental relations influence program implementation. Better collaboration between the province and the federal government is essential to avoid overlaps and ensure complementary interventions.

Participants noted that closing employment and earnings gaps require cooperation with Quebec, especially for skills training and French-language integration. They also stressed that intergovernmental tables often exclude ESCQ, making it hard to safeguard their interests.

Organizations expressed that they often face limitations because provincial laws restrict advertising or providing services in English (e.g., Service Québec information regarding jobs is not always available in English).

Stakeholders highlighted challenges in sustaining successful programs like the former *Skills Link*[1] and distance education initiatives due to funding discontinuation and lack of partnerships. Stakeholders emphasized the need for federal departments to collaborate with universities and other partners to maintain access for remote communities. When programs stop, it was noted that communities experience disappointment and most significantly, setbacks in employment outcomes.

- The Quebec Context

Stakeholders agreed that Quebec's context is unique, and characterized by strong provincial autonomy, which translates into specific legislative constraints. Organizations feel that Quebec does not adequately recognize English speakers as a linguistic minority, which in turn complicates the application of the *Official Languages Act* Part VII lens.

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[1] Since 2020, an agreement with the Province of Quebec combined the previous streams of the Youth Employment Strategy—Skills Link, Career Focus and Summer Work Experience—to create a more holistic approach to funding and service delivery.

Specifically, it was highlighted that legislation like Bill 96[2] and proposed constitutional changes create additional barriers for federal programs and minority-language rights.

Regional organizations highlighted that they often only access smaller, short-term programs. Examples cited were *New Horizons for Seniors* and *Canada Summer Jobs*, which do not build long-term capacity or address systemic barriers faced by the ESCQ. Larger multi-year investments are harder to access due to administrative and legal constraints.

Smaller organizations mentioned struggling with the capacity to manage large federal investments, especially when there are delays with the funding, i.e., if the funds arrive late in the fiscal year.

Additionally, stakeholders explained that when federal programs (e.g., *Skills Link*) are transferred to the province, the province has jurisdiction in implementing the program, and does so according to its own protocols, which makes it difficult for English-speaking organizations to access funding because the province does not recognize the organizations' general mandates.

Stakeholders consider that language legislation (Bill 96, Bill 14[3]) and cultural policies increase complexity for English-speaking organizations, limiting flexibility and creating systemic barriers to employment and training.

It was proposed that better interdepartmental collaboration at the federal level and better integration with Quebec's policies could help with jurisdictional issues that prevent organizations from accessing certain newcomer-related services. It was observed that Quebec programs are becoming narrower, focusing only on "historic anglophones," which complicates efforts to support newcomers and diverse English-speaking populations, illustrating the complexity of federal-provincial relations in Quebec.

"Policies don't fit us… programmes often don't align with English-speaking needs."

- an ESCQ representative

- M-30 - *Act respecting the Ministère du Conseil exécutif*

Participants noted that M-30 approvals are nearly impossible to obtain for provincially mandated areas like employment services, which leaves organizations in a challenging situation where they are unable to serve newcomers or expand services beyond the mandated areas, despite federal investments allowing them to do so.

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[2] Bill 96 (*An Act respecting French, the official and common language of Quebec*)
[3] Bill 14 (*An Act to strengthen the integrity of voting in political parties' leadership campaigns and nomination contexts*)

One example that was highlighted concerns older workers who face literacy challenges, including digital literacy needs, and for whom language barriers (working in a second language or struggling in French) limit access to workplace opportunities and retraining. It was also noted that complex literacy demands, and digital transitions are significant obstacles for mature workers. Because of M-30 legislation, which restricts certain Quebec organizations from accessing federal funds directly, literacy providers in Quebec, being more than 50% provincially funded, mentioned not being able to access federal money for pilot projects, forcing them to rely on creative partnerships.

2.2   Application of the OLMC Lens to better address the needs of ESCQs

Stakeholders noted that the systematic integration of the OLMC lens into program design, delivery, and implementation is necessary to meet the specific needs of the ESCQ, and to ensure that programs remain relevant to the ESCQ, particularly in terms of employment, training, and social services. It was also suggested that AI-supported platforms should integrate this perspective for equitable access and impact.

- The need for innovative funding mechanisms

Stakeholders called for exploring flexible funding models, such as multi-year agreements and strategic investments rather than funding one-off projects.

Organizations stressed the need for flexible, multi-sectoral funding rather than rigid project-based models to address interconnected issues (employment, childcare, language training) and create programs that knit together sectoral and generalist perspectives for long-term vitality of English-speaking communities.

Flexibility in funding mechanisms is considered essential because regional organizations are often generalists and cannot access highly sectoral provincial programs. It was suggested safeguards in federal-provincial transfers be put in place to protect minority language communities and ensure they benefit from federal investments.

Stakeholders also highlighted a need for partnerships beyond universities, including other government departments, to sustain distance education and training programs for the ESCQ. It was mentioned that when programs like *Skills Link* ended, communities faced setbacks, underscoring the need for flexible, innovative funding models that can adapt to regional realities.

- The importance of consultations and data-driven approaches

Stakeholders affirmed that improved data visibility and collaboration with ESCQ organizations to capture the lived reality of minority language populations is necessary.

Small communities often consider that they "disappear in the data stories" and there is a need for timely, up-to-date data and stakeholder engagement to shape long-term strategies.

One stakeholder organization stated that a recent study and regional employment profiles show how evidence informs targeted interventions. Another organization highlighted the need for data-driven policy development and stressed the necessity for ongoing stakeholder engagement through sectoral tables.
Stakeholders also called for holistic, multi-sectoral consultations to address interconnected issues like mental health, employability, and social determinants of health, rather than siloed interventions.

- Measuring results for the ESCQ

ESCQ organizations expressed concerns about transparency and accountability pertaining to the limited amount of federal funding that reaches these organizations through provincial agreements. One example was the federal transfer payments under Labour Market Development Agreements and Workforce Development Agreements.

Stakeholders stressed that evaluation and measurable outcomes are critical to ensure that there is data that can show the results of such an important investment. It was proposed to use as indicators specific, measurable, systemic benefits, such as targets for jobs created, employment secured, and businesses expanded.

Success stories were highlighted by the stakeholders, such as one organization having had success with job placement rates and employer engagement outcomes within the context of PPE programs (*Programme préparatoire à l'emploi*), which are funded by the province of Quebec.

Additionally, results from the former *Skills Link* program were highlighted as a best practice illustrating the importance of tracking outcomes and using dashboards and checkpoints for progress monitoring: stakeholders mentioned that the program supported 35 businesses and that 32 out of 35 participants ended in long-term employment or returned to school.

- Strategic investments versus projects funding

Stakeholders noted that Part VII obligations should drive strategic investment, not project proliferation, and called for integrated, scalable strategies instead of fragmented funding. ESCQ economic and labour market participation should be treated as a national economic priority, not just a community issue. Strategic investments in organizations to build capacity and deliver adapted services are necessary. Sustainable

funding is critical to maintain bilingual programs such as those that help mature workers regain confidence and employability, for example.

They also noted that while strategic investments are key, some project-based flexibility can help organizations pilot innovative models quickly, given the agility needed, and possible, at the community level.

Stakeholders called for long-term, systemic investments (e.g., wraparound services, such as a mobile daycare idea that is being implemented by one organization) rather than short-term projects.

2.3   Necessity for Flexibility and Agility of Funding Models

Stakeholders called for the need to adapt programs to respond quickly to the emerging needs of the ESCQ.

As an example, it was emphasized that mature job seekers face complex barriers beyond language, such as ageism and loss of confidence, and that programs must adapt to meet these realities. Bilingual workshops and safe spaces do help these job seekers regain confidence and linguistic skills, showing the need for flexible, client-centered approaches rather than rigid program models. However, it was noted that multisectoral organizations cannot benefit from certain federal programs (e.g., EAS funds) due to provincial restrictions, limiting sector-specific support for ESCQs, such as those activities previously mentioned.

It was noted that adapted employment services are critical so mature workers *"feel like they're being served in a place where they can see themselves"* and stakeholders highlighted the importance of agility in program design.

- Multifunctional realities of ESCQ organizations

Stakeholders noted that ESCQ organizations often offer multiple services (employment, health, education). Programs must take this versatility into account, allowing for adaptable funding streams. Flexibility was highlighted as essential for ESDC to apply a meaningful regional lens. English-speaking communities outside major urban centers are small, scattered, and often embedded in francophone environments. Their organizations are generalists delivering multiple services because they are the only ones available locally. Therefore, stakeholders argued that program design should value multifunctional realities instead of expecting specialized, urban-style organizations. Demographic weight also disadvantages these communities, so funding models should prioritize real needs over sheer numbers.

Another example concerns the interconnectedness of sectors. It was highlighted that literacy providers in Quebec are grassroots organizations receiving over 50% of their

funding from the province, therefore subjecting them to M-30 restrictions, which limits their access to federal funds. Literacy is broader than employment and is also related to other sectors such as health, and funding models that recognize multifunctionality versus offering sector-specific funding are needed to address this.

While communities work across sectors, some stakeholders noted that federal departments often remain siloed. Stakeholders called for interdepartmental collaboration and investment to help knit together generalist and sectoral perspectives for community vitality.

- Difficulties accessing sector-specific funding

Stakeholders emphasized the importance of a blended approach combining in-person and digital tools for training and employment services. It was noted that communities need to be nimble and agile to adapt to changing realities, including AI and evolving learner preferences. It was stressed that solutions should be tailored to regional realities and demographics (rather than specific sectors) to avoid leaving anyone behind. There is little recognition of the multifunctional realities of ESCQ organizations.

Stakeholders noted that often, regional organizations are general in scope and not sector-specific, which makes them hard to classify under provincial funding systems that are highly sectoral. Essentially, this means that organizations struggle to access programs designed for narrowly defined mandates (e.g., employment-only or health-only). ESCQ stakeholders suggested instead that federal programs should fund multifunctional realities and aiming to avoid rigid sectoral expectations/ or frameworks/structures/criteria.

Provincial transfers of federal programs without a language lens have made access harder for English-speaking communities. Because Quebec does not recognize these organizations as sectoral, some ESCQ needs are excluded from provincial programs after transfers, such as newcomers and holistic initiatives. It was recommended that mechanisms be put in place to safeguard minority language communities during transfers and ensure they can access federal investments.

Current models often silo funding, making it hard for organizations to respond holistically to community needs.

2.4 Data and Evidence-based Policy

Stakeholders emphasized the importance of robust evaluation and data collection to measure outcomes of federal investments.

- The need for improved data collection

In particular, concerns were raised about the lack of granular data available on the ESCQs' participation in Quebec programs, which leads to questioning whether federal investments "trickle down" effectively.

Stakeholders mentioned that the province of Quebec also does not collect race-based data, making it difficult to measure inequities; organizations compensate through community-led research.

In particular, there are gaps in data for remote communities, and it was suggested that there be more collaboration between the federal government and ESCQ networks/organizations to ensure better evidence gathering to identify needs.

Stakeholders repeatedly stressed the need for rigorous analysis and data-driven strategies. Evidence and trends have demonstrated areas of opportunity for the ESCQ, including AI in agriculture and digitization in rural communities.

- Better engagement with the ESCQ particularly in remote communities

Stakeholders affirmed that for ESDC to apply a true regional and remote lens in Quebec, it's important to understand what "regional" means for English-speaking minority communities: there are small, scattered communities embedded in largely francophone environments. Regular engagement with these communities, not just before program rollouts or during Official Languages Action Plan development, would really help ESDC understand how federal policies play out on the ground.

ESCQ stakeholders stated that what is needed is dialogue that values local and lived experience and flexibility to reach communities that current programs overlook, and would provide data that reflects their realities, and hopefully result in tailored programs and partnerships to overcome isolation and barriers.

Stakeholders from the Gaspé region raised examples showing the importance of partnerships and outreach to address isolation and service gaps: in the North Shore and Lower North Shore, local realities call for blended approaches and collective solutions, which are essential to address labour shortages and immigrant integration challenges.

Stakeholders noted that most programs are centered in Montreal, leaving regional member of the ESCQ underserved. Stakeholders called for targeted engagement and adapted services for these communities.

Another example of a targeted approach that was highlighted: hybrid programming to reach seniors province-wide, showing how engagement strategies can overcome geographic barriers.

- Using information gathered through engagement to inform policy adjustments

Stakeholders highlighted that the information collected should be used to adjust policies and design more inclusive programs and that engagement with ESDC needs to go beyond one-day dialogues, ensuring that insights from communities inform policy design and investment decisions on a continuous basis.

Advisory boards and employer committees were proposed to help tailor programs to local labour market realities (e.g., vocational vs. post-secondary training needs).

One stakeholder stressed that policy recommendations should be grounded in data. Stakeholders also referenced the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies[4] (PIAAC) literacy data as essential for understanding workforce challenges, advocating for oversampling OLMCs in future studies to inform policy.

Participants stressed the importance of collecting stronger data for OLMC organizations to better understand what the gaps are and ensure that specific data is collected to inform solutions.

One stakeholder also highlighted the importance of timely and up-to-date data intelligence, smart labour market information, and insight sharing to inform collaborative strategies and reduce disparities.

2.5   Interdepartmental Coordination in Support of OLMC Priorities

Following presentations by federal partners on alignment and joint action, participants emphasized the need for collaboration between federal, provincial, and community actors, and the need for integrated approaches (e.g., linking employability programs with education and childcare).

ESCQ representatives agreed that federal departments should better coordinate mechanisms between them to support the priorities of their communities and avoid fragmented interventions.

Informal networks and advisory committees were cited by ESCQ stakeholders as effective tools for coordination and sharing best practices.

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[4] PIAAC was conducted by Statistics Canada on behalf of the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada and Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC). Close to 11,700 adults aged 16 to 65 across the country completed the computer-based survey through in-home interviews between September 2022 and July 2023. Samples were sufficiently large to provide statistically reliable results not only for Canada as a whole, but also for each province. Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies

3.   Solutions Proposed by the Stakeholders

Several potential solutions were proposed by the representatives of the ESCQ for ESDC to consider in support of their communities:

Stakeholders proposed that ESDC explore flexible funding models, such as:

- Multi-year agreements and strategic investments rather than only funding one-off projects to ensure sustainability.
- Multisectoral funding to address interconnected issues, managed by generalist organizations.
- Develop integrated economic development strategies with measurable outcomes for the ESCQ, particularly for job creation, business growth, and labour market participation.

Stakeholders called for timely and up-to-date data collection and for ESDC to engage regularly with stakeholders to shape long-term strategies:

- Multi-sectoral consultations would address interconnected issues like mental health, employability, and social determinants of health.
- Engage regularly with the ESCQ rather than hold only one-day dialogues.
- Ensure consultations of the ESCQ in remote regions to ensure perspectives (lived realities) are taken into account into policy and programming.

The ESCQ also called for establishing better collaboration between the province of Quebec and the federal government to avoid overlaps and ensure complementary interventions:

- Strengthen federal leadership regarding the management of M-30 and the inclusion of OL in agreements with Quebec.
- Provide better transparency about the amount of funding spent on the ESCQ within the context of federal transfers to the province.

4.   Conclusion

Participation in ESDC's dialogue day was very encouraging, demonstrating a desire to continue seeking sustainable solutions to the challenges faced by the ESCQ and to maintain collaboration between their representative organizations and ESDC. The meeting allowed for a consensus to emerge on several issues such as the need for flexible funding models, including those that consider multi-sectoral organization mandates, the need for better engagement, in particular with remote regions, and the need for better collaboration between the federal government and the province of Quebec to ensure the ESCQ receive funding, especially within the context of federal transfers. These topics were at the heart of concerns, as were questions related to the development of digital literacy skills and AI, and targeted support for mature job

seekers.

Participants expressed the desire for the dialogue to continue on an ongoing basis, and for ESDC to lead to concrete actions to strengthen the economic and social vitality of the English-speaking communities of Quebec.

Annex A

Agenda

Annual Dialogue Day with English-speaking Communities of Quebec

November 13, 2025

	Agenda		
Agenda			
9:00 – 9:05	**Welcome and Overview of Day**	Facilitator Firmin Andzama Director, Part VII Centre of Expertise	Plenary Room
9:05 – 9:15	**Opening Remarks**	Speaker Elisha Ram Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic and Service Policy Branch	Plenary Room
9:15 – 9:30	**Participant Introductions** ESDC Participants, OLMC Representatives, OGD Participants and Observers	Facilitator Firmin Andzama, Director, Part VII Centre of Expertise	Plenary Room
	Morning Plenary Session		
9:30 – 10:30	**Panel Discussion** How federal programs can better address the needs of ESCQs and more effectively integrate the Part VII/OLMC lens across the policies to service delivery continuum, particularly in relation to employability within ESCQs.	Moderator Elisha Ram Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic and Service Policy Branch Panellists Catherine Demers Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Skills and Employment Branch Sylvia Martin-Laforge Director General, TALQ Cathy Brown Executive Director, Regional Development Network (RDN) John Buck	Plenary Room

		President and CEO, Community Economic Development and Employability Corporation (CEDEC)	
10:30 – 10:45	**Health Break**		
10:45 – 11:45	**Breakout Sessions** Sessions run concurrently		
	Breakout 1 *Employment and Employability* Discussion topics: Access to French-language learning, English-language employment services, and wraparound services; improving training and skills development initiatives; and partnerships with educational institutions	Moderator Lori Brooks Director General, Workforce and Skills Development Policy Directorate, Skills and Employment Branch Panellists Raeanne Francis Managing Director, Black Community Resource Centre (BCRC) Jessica Synnott Executive Director, Vision Gaspe Perce Now (VGPN) Denis Kotsoros Executive Director, Townshippers' Association	Breakout Room #1
	Breakout 2 *Economic development* Discussion topics: Addressing lower regional labour market participation rates and higher unemployment rates; remote training to improve training; and skills development access in remote regions	Moderator Elizabeth Casuga Director General, Early Learning and Childcare, Income Security and Social Development Branch Panellists John Buck President and CEO, Community Economic Development and Employability Corporation (CEDEC) Cornella Maurice Executive Director The Coasters Association Mario Clarke	Breakout Room #2

		Director of Community Granting, YES Employment + Entrepreneurship	
	Breakout 3 *Labour Market Integration – Mid-career, transitioning, and older workers* Discussion topics: Reskilling and upskilling for mid-career, transitioning and older workers.	Moderator Elisha Ram Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic and Service Policy Branch Panellists Paul London Manager, Enabling Fund for OLMCs, Skills and Employment Branch Nicholas Salter Executive Director, Provincial Employment Roundtable (PERT) Wendy Seys President, Literacy Quebec Leslie Acs Executive Director *La Passerelle*	Breakout Room #3
11:45 – 12:15	**Synthesis of the Morning**	Moderator Elisha Ram Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic and Service Policy Branch Panellists Elizabeth Casuga Director General, Early Learning and Child Care, Income Security and Social Development Branch Paul London Manager, Enabling Fund for OLMCs, Skills and Employment Branch Sylvia Martin-Laforge Director General, TALQ Cathy Brown	Plenary Room

		Executive Director, Regional Development Network (RDN)	
		John Buck President and CEO, Community Economic Development and Employability Corporation (CEDEC)	
12:15 – 13:00	**Lunch**		
13:00 – 14:00	**Afternoon Session**		
	Interdepartmental Coordination in Support of OLMC Priorities *Exploring opportunities for alignment and joint action in support of OLMCs* Topics include updates such as interdepartmental mapping exercise, PCH consultation calendar, and Part VII Regulations.	Moderator Jennifer Allen Manager, Canadian Heritage Speakers Daniel Cadieux Manager, Treasury Board Secretariat Karim Adam Director, Treasury Board Secretariat Patrick Cyr Manager, Canadian Heritage Jalila Bendarhou Director, Canadian Heritage Melanie Kolaj Director, Intergovernmental Affairs, Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada Julie L'Allier Manager, Enabling Fund for OLMCs, Skills and Employment Branch, Employment and Social Development Canada	Plenary Room
14:00 – 14:15	Closing Remarks	Facilitator Firmin Andzama Director, Part VII Centre of Expertise	Plenary Room

Annex B

OLMC Attendees
Organization Name
Talking. Advocating. Living in Québec. (TALQ)
Community Economic Development and Employability Corporation (CEDEC)
Regional Development Network (RDN)
YES Employment + Entrepreneurship (formerly YES Montreal)
Seniors Action Quebec (SAQ)
Literacy Quebec
Black Community Resource Centre
Provincial Employment Roundtable (PERT)
Community Health and Social Services Network (CHSSN)
Regional Association of West Quebecers
Community for Anglophone Social Action (CASA)
Townshippers' Association
North Shore Community Association (NSCA)
Coasters Association
Voice of English Québec (VEQ)
Montérégie West Community Network (MWCN)
La Passerelle
Agence Ometz

Annex C

Federal Government Attendees
Department Name
Canadian Heritage
Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada
Treasury Board Secretariat
Health Canada
Global Affairs Canada