Northern Talent, Clean Future

Workforce development for the clean energy economy in northern B.C.

July 2026

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These acknowledgements are part of the start of a journey of several generations. We share them in the spirit of truth, justice and reconciliation, and to contribute to a more equitable and inclusive future for all.

Contents

Executive summary

Northern British Columbia is entering a period of economic transition. While communities across the area have historically relied on resource industries such as forestry, mining and oil and gas, new opportunities are emerging in clean energy, critical minerals, transportation, mass timber and other low-carbon industries. Continuing to seize these opportunities will require a workforce development approach that reflects the unique realities of the north.

Northern B.C. covers most of the province's landmass but is home to a small and widely dispersed population. Despite strong potential for growth and ongoing leadership, the area faces persistent workforce challenges, including a limited talent pool, declining training capacity, barriers to accessing education and employment services, and systemic inequities affecting Indigenous communities. These challenges are compounded by long travel distances, insufficient housing, few transportation options and gaps in broadband connectivity.

Labour market conditions also vary considerably across the area's four economic regions. Some communities are experiencing growth linked to major projects and clean energy development, while others continue to face employment losses associated with downturns in forestry and manufacturing. This situation underscores the need for workforce planning that is tailored to regional conditions rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

Based on interviews with regional experts and a review of existing policies and programs, we identified several gaps in the current workforce development system that, if addressed, could enable greater prosperity in northern B.C. Scaling proven training models, addressing funding pressures faced by post-secondary institutions, leveraging employer-led training opportunities, and taking a regional lens to provincial economic and climate strategies are some of the ways in which the north could be supported. Prioritizing long-term economic diversification and local workforce development as part of implementing large resource projects is also critical.

We recommend that the Government of British Columbia strengthen northern training capacity through targeted investments in post-secondary institutions, expand flexible and community-based training delivery models, increase work-integrated learning opportunities for secondary students, and foster stronger collaboration among governments, Indigenous peoples, employers, organized labour and training providers.

With coordinated action, northern B.C. can build a skilled local workforce that supports regional prosperity, strengthens resilience and enables communities to benefit from the clean energy economy.

1. Introduction

Communities in northern British Columbia have historically relied on resource-based industries such as mining and forestry. Today, global market shifts and the adoption of clean technology are creating new economic opportunities. Many northern communities have already begun investing in sectors like renewable energy and diversifying their economies, reducing their dependence on volatile, high-emissions industries. To fully realize the benefits, however, provincially supported regional workforce planning must accompany the province's plan for a low-carbon future.

This report identifies regional labour market challenges and opportunities in northern B.C. to inform workforce planning that reflects the region's unique conditions. It examines how these insights can guide workforce development solutions that strengthen regional resilience and nurture the growth of low-carbon industries. The report also recommends policy actions for the provincial government focused on training, community capacity, and alignment with clean economy goals, with the aim of enabling local workers to participate in and benefit from the energy transition.

To centre this work in northern voices, we interviewed nine experts from across the region. Participants included representatives from post-secondary institutions, the B.C. government, economic development organizations, training providers, and Indigenous-led organizations. These experts shared their views on the training system, clean growth opportunities, key labour market challenges, and successful workforce development initiatives.

2. Overview of northern B.C.'s economy

Northern B.C. has four economic regions: the North Coast, Nechako, Northeast and Cariboo. The area spans a diverse landscape of coastal rainforests, lakes, mountains, valleys, and plains, providing abundant natural resources that have historically sustained economic activities such as agriculture, hunting, fishing, forestry and mining. It covers around 70% of the province's landmass but is home to only 7% of the population.[1] Indigenous communities are the most prevalent in the area, accounting for 38% of the population in the North Coast, 20% in the Nechako, and 16% in both the Northeast and the Cariboo.[2] While the north generally faces population outflows to other parts of the province and Canada, it saw net population growth driven primarily by immigration in 2024.

Labour market indicators in northern B.C. show emerging challenges. Employment and labour force participation are declining due to major projects transitioning to the operations phase (e.g., Site C), slowdowns and closures in natural resource industries, ongoing uncertainty across resource sectors, and tariff impacts.[3] Furthermore, the recent federal Immigration Levels Plan has reduced targets for immigration, limiting potential immigration-driven labour market growth in the area. While new critical mineral, clean energy, transportation and LNG projects could help restore employment growth, current conditions highlight the volatility associated with project-based job cycles.

2.1 North Coast and Nechako regions

The North Coast and Nechako regions have traditionally relied on mining and forestry, but their economies have diversified in recent years. Service industries like transportation and social services now account for a large share of activity. From 2019 to 2024, employment grew modestly by 3.4%, mainly in the service sector, while agriculture, forestry and manufacturing declined. [4] Construction saw strong workforce growth of 19.5%, partially due to major projects

[1] Statistics Canada, "Table 98-10-0007-01: Population and dwelling counts: Canada and census divisions," spreadsheet, February 9, 2022. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/cv.action?pid=9810000701

[2] Statistics Canada, "Table 98-10-0293-01: Indigenous identity population by gender and age: Canada, provinces and territories, census divisions and census subdivisions," spreadsheet, November 15, 2023. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/cv.action?pid=9810029301

[3] Northern Development Initiative Trust, *State of the North Report* (2025). https://www.northerndevelopment.bc.ca/state-of-the-north/

[4] Government of British Columbia, "Annual Employment and Unemployment Rates by Industry for British Columbia and Economic Region," spreadsheet, March 2025.

such as LNG Canada, which was recently completed, and Cedar LNG, which is starting construction. Transportation and warehousing employment more than doubled, driven by trucking and support activities like port and harbour operations for Prince Rupert and Kitimat.[5] However, construction slowdowns and tariffs are beginning to reduce labour force participation, which fell from 70% in 2024 to 63.8% in 2025. [6] Overall, hiring demand remains stronger than in the other northern regions, likely because of energy infrastructure and public sector activity in Prince Rupert.

Key cities are broadening their economic activities. Prince Rupert is expanding its port, with completion expected in 2030–2031.[7] This expansion will support transportation jobs across the north and strengthen export capacity.[8] Kitimat hosts LNG Canada, the country's first major LNG export facility, and three more proposed LNG projects have received export licences.[9] Kitimat is also home to B.C.'s only aluminum smelter, which has recently received investments to perform upgrades and extend its lifespan.[10]

Northwest B.C. has strong potential to grow the critical minerals sector. It already leads the province in mineral exploration and the production of copper, molybdenum and other critical minerals, with at least six new mines being proposed.[11] From 2019 to 2024, this activity increased the number of workers from fewer than 1,000 to 2,200.[12] The area has also seen growth in clean energy, including the 200 MW Nithi Mountain Wind Project near Fraser Lake in the Nechako region. The project has secured an electricity purchase agreement through the province's recent Call for Power.[13]

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[5] "Annual Employment and Unemployment Rates by Industry for British Columbia and Economic Region."

[6] *State of the North Report*.

[7] Prince Rupert Port Authority, "Second Port Terminal in Prince Rupert." https://www.rupertport.com/active_project/secondterminal/

[8] Ministry of Jobs and Economic Growth (B.C.), "Prince Rupert terminal expansion opens doors to job growth, business opportunities," media release, August 29, 2017. https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2017JTT0138-001492

[9] BC Energy Regulator, "Major Projects." https://www.bc-er.ca/what-we-regulate/major-projects/

Natural Resources Canada, "Canadian liquified natural gas projects," January 7, 2025. https://natural-resources.canada.ca/energy-sources/fossil-fuels/canadian-liquified-natural-gas-projects

[10] Rio Tinto, "Rio Tinto invests in Kitimat operations," media release, November 14, 2023. https://www.riotinto.com/en/news/releases/2023/rio-tinto-invests-in-kitimat-operations-1

[11] British Columbia Geological Survey, *Provincial Overview of Exploration and Mining in British Columbia, 2024* (2025). https://cmscontent.nrs.gov.bc.ca/geoscience/PublicationCatalogue/InformationCircular/BCGS_IC2025-01.pdf

[12] "Annual Employment and Unemployment Rates by Industry for British Columbia and Economic Region."

[13] BC Hydro, "The Participants." https://www.bchydro.com/work-with-us/selling-clean-energy/2024-call-for-power/participants.html

2.2 Cariboo region

Forestry and the downstream wood and paper manufacturing industries are central to the Cariboo, making up 9.4% of the workforce.[14] However, from 2019 to 2024, forestry lost over 40% of its workforce (with climate change and mill closures contributing factors),[15] while overall employment declined by 2.7%.[16] Downstream, wood manufacturing lost 13.3% of its workforce and paper manufacturing suffered an even greater loss of 31%. The Cariboo has shifted from a resource-dependent economy to a more diversified service economy, led by healthcare, social services and education, which together represent more than one in four jobs in the region.[17]

Prince George, the region's largest city, is a transportation hub for the resource and manufacturing industries, especially forestry.[18] It hosts the University of Northern British Columbia, the only university in northern B.C., and is harnessing that local talent to position itself as a centre of entrepreneurship. For example, the non-profit Northern Innovation Network focuses on catalyzing northern development, including supporting clean tech companies.[19]

The region has some critical minerals mining, including the Mount Polley copper mine and Gibraltar copper-molybdenum mine. Several projects have also been proposed, such as the Beaver-Lynx nickel-cobalt mine, as well as other molybdenum and copper prospects.[20] Clean energy development is also advancing. For example, the Indigenous-owned Anahim Lake Solar Project in 2025 will be the largest off-grid solar project in Canada.[21]

The downstream wood industry has potential for growth. Mass timber, an engineered wood product used to construct buildings, can boost domestic markets for B.C. lumber. Provincial initiatives like the Mass Timber Demonstration Program and the BC Manufacturing Jobs Fund support this development and have created over 200 forestry jobs across the province.[22]

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[14] "Annual Employment and Unemployment Rates by Industry for British Columbia and Economic Region."

[15] "Annual Employment and Unemployment Rates by Industry for British Columbia and Economic Region."

[16] Jim Stanford and Ken Delaney, *A Better Future for B.C. Forestry: A sector strategy for sustainable value-added forest industries* (Unifor, United Steelworkers, and Public and Private Workers of Canada, 2024). https://centreforfuturework.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/A_better_future_for_BC_forestry-1.pdf

[17] "Annual Employment and Unemployment Rates by Industry for British Columbia and Economic Region."

[18] Resonance Consultancy, *City of Prince George Five-Year Economic Development Strategy and Action Plan 2020–2025* (2019) https://www.princegeorge.ca/media/193

[19] Northern Innovation Network. https://northerninnovation.ca/

[20] *Provincial Overview of Exploration and Mining in British Columbia, 2024.*

[21] Ulkatcho Energy Corp, "Canada's Largest Off-Grid Solar Project, 100% owned by a First Nation, Breaks Ground in Anahim Lake, Powering Ulkatcho First Nation's Energy Future," media release, June 11, 2025. https://www.ulkatcho.ca/docs/uec2025.pdf

[22] Government of British Columbia, *Mass Timber Action Plan: Progress Update* (2024). https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/government/ministries-organizations/ministries/jobs-economic-development-competitiveness/mass_timber_action_plan_progress_update_2024.pdf

2.3 Northeast region

The Northeast, traditionally centred on coal mining, remains heavily reliant on fossil fuel industries. From 2019 to 2024, employment fell 6.8%, primarily in the service sector, unlike in the other northern regions.[23] While its construction and manufacturing workforces both shrank in that time, losing 17.6% and 62.8%, respectively, the oil, gas and mining workforce grew 52.8%, and now accounts for nearly one in six jobs.

The region's population rose by nearly 2% in 2024, the highest among the northern regions, largely from international migration.[24]

Fort St. John, its largest town, is a centre for natural gas, hydroelectricity and forestry, but is aiming to become an entrepreneurial hub.[25] The North Central geological region is rich in copper, zinc, niobium and rare earth elements and is well positioned to expand its critical minerals sector, including with a proposed niobium mine. However, most exploration activity is still focused on coal.[26]

The region is home to the Tu Deh-Kah geothermal energy project, owned by Fort Nelson First Nation, which is currently in the design phase and could become the country's first operating geothermal power plant.[27] The region's lengthy experience with oil and gas provides unique opportunities to transition to low-carbon industries. Old oil and gas wells have the potential to be repurposed for geothermal heat and power,[28] while well and site remediation, including logged forests, could be a growing source of employment. The total cost of oil and gas restoration in the Northeast is estimated be as much as $19.5 billion by 2050.[29]

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[23] "Annual Employment and Unemployment Rates by Industry for British Columbia and Economic Region."

[24] *State of the North Report*.

[25] Rynic, *Resourceful Fort St. John: City of Fort St. John Economic Development Strategy 2023–2028* (2023). https://www.fortstjohn.ca/media/file/6750-20-economicdevelopmentstrategy-2023

[26] *Provincial Overview of Exploration and Mining in British Columbia, 2024*.

[27] Tu Deh-Kah Geothermal, "About," https://tudehkah.com/about

[28] Matteo Cimellaro, "A First Nation's geothermal project shows how fossil fuels can power the next seven generations," *Canada's National Observer*, July 15, 2024. https://www.nationalobserver.com/2024/07/15/news/first-nations-geothermal-project-shows-how-fossil-fuels-can-power-next-seven

[29] Catherine Scott-May, Paul Jeakins, and Ines Piccinino, *The Restoration Market in Northern British Columbia: With a focus on the Northeast region – Summary report* (B.C. Oil and Gas Research and Innovation Society, 2024). https://www.bcogris.ca/files/projects/operations-local-issues/LOCAL-2024-01-Restoration-Supply-Chain-Scott-May-Summary-Report_May2024.pdf

3. Workforce challenges

Each region in northern B.C. has promising opportunities in the shift to a clean energy economy, but workforce challenges present a barrier to growth. The following section outlines the key issues that must be addressed.

3.1 Local talent base

The north's sparse population limits the available workforce and increases the risk of mismatches between the available skills and industry needs. Many programs offering specialized skills that support decarbonization, such as building retrofits and EV maintenance, are only available in urban centres, creating worker retention challenges for rural areas. This makes it challenging for emerging industries to get established and for new workers to find experienced mentors or gain practical experience.[30] Those seeking jobs involving innovative technologies and activities, such as energy advisors, find work more easily in urban centres where training occurs.[31] Consequently, the valuable experience and technical knowledge they gain fails to benefit the north.[32] This underscores the importance of building relationships between training providers and regional employers.

Employers developing major projects such as dams and mines (or even smaller projects like community energy facilities) often recruit workers from outside the region or province to address skills and labour shortages. These projects typically create temporary, on-site jobs done mostly by non-local workers living in work camps.[33] While some local labour is used during construction, much of the technical expertise required to design and operate clean energy–related projects is not available in remote and Indigenous communities.[34]

3.2 Institutional capacity

There are several post-secondary institutions (PSIs) across the north, including the University of Northern British Columbia, the College of New Caledonia, Northern Lights College, and Coast Mountain College. These institutions are small, community-based institutions that offer

[30] *British Columbia's Workforce Readiness for a Clean Economy Future: Industry Strategy*, 34.

[31] *BC Energy Step Code Capacity Study*, 72.

[32] Participant interviews (Indigenous energy organizations).

[33] *British Columbia's Workforce Readiness for a Clean Economy Future: Industry Strategy*, 34.

[34] Electricity Human Resources Council, *Lighting the Path: Labour market dynamics in the energy transition of Indigenous communities* (2025). https://ehrc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/EHRC-Lighting-the-Path.pdf Participant interview (post-secondary institution).

regionally tailored programming and serve as critical economic drivers, yet training capacity remains a constraint.[35]

Consistent with national trends, northern B.C. institutions of higher learning have faced substantial funding cuts, affecting staffing, programming and student housing. Province-wide, 177 post-secondary programs have been cut, suspended or paused since 2023.[36] This is of particular concern to the north since its smaller, community-based institutions may feel the cuts more acutely, making it even harder to develop new programs to meet workforce needs. Many small northern communities already face labour shortages and population decline, which stands to worsen if local training capacity is reduced.[37]

These pressures are intensified by higher training costs in remote communities due to small economies of scale, especially for specialized programs with few students.[38] Mobile training, where instructors visit communities to deliver short-term certificate programs, can improve access. However, it is expensive for institutions, costing up to three times as much as on-campus training.[39] The demanding nature of the work — including travel, varied accommodations, and relationship-building with local communities — also makes it harder to recruit qualified staff.

3.3 Training and service accessibility

Northern B.C.'s widely dispersed population means many students have to commute long distances or relocate entirely for training.[40] Students that rely on public transit face an additional barrier due to a lack of a province-wide public transit network and limited inter-city transportation services in the north.[41]

For students who choose to move for their education, a lack of sufficient and affordable housing in northern communities makes it difficult to find accommodation.[42] Rental vacancy rates for

[35] Government of British Columbia, "Full-Time Equivalent Enrolments at B.C. Public Post-Secondary Institutions," spreadsheet, July 11, 2024. https://catalogue.data.gov.bc.ca/dataset/full-time-equivalent-enrolments-at-b-c-public-post-secondary-institutions

[36] Hannah Liddle, "B.C. budget announces little help for universities," *University Affairs*, February 18, 2026. https://universityaffairs.ca/news/b-c-budget-announces-little-help-for-universities/

[37] Akshay Kulkarni, "B.C. saw 66% drop in international student approvals following federal reforms: auditor general," *CBC*, March 24, 2026. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/bc-international-students-drop-study-permits-9.7139597

[38] *Lighting the Path*.

[39] Participant interview (post-secondary institution).

[40] Participant interview (training provider).

[41] Charlotte Bull, *A Review of Barriers and Opportunities facing First Nations in accessing Equitable, Reliable, Safe, Affordable, and Low-Carbon Transportation in BC: Executive Summary of Internal Report* (2023). https://sustain.ubc.ca/sites/default/files/2023-075_BarriersEquitableTransportationFirstNations_Bull.pdf

[42] Participant interview (development organization).

apartments in major northern centres range from 0.2% to 2.4% (except for Prince George, at 4.5%), significantly below the provincial rate of 3.5%.[43] Students who relocate to urban centres for their education may also experience additional strain from being separated from local support systems, cultural responsibilities and connections to the land, especially Indigenous students.[44]

Remote learning is a viable option for a variety of training and degree programs, but requires a stable internet connection, which many northern communities still lack. In 2024, only 76.5% of rural households in B.C. had access to 50/10 Mbps broadband internet, the minimum speed required to support stable video applications such as online classes. Further, internet in rural areas costs an average of $14.15 more per month than the provincial average.[45] While the provincial government committed to addressing these challenges,[46] remote learning alone cannot fill all education needs.

Skilled trades training has an academic component that can be completed online, but practical training is an even larger part of the learning process. As a result, students must either commute to a campus or rely on mobile training delivered in their communities. Distance from social and government services can also result in delays in obtaining certifications, licences and other credentials.[47]

3.4 Systemic barriers affecting Indigenous people

Indigenous communities and workers face many of the same labour market challenges as settler communities, often intensified by structural inequities. For instance, many reserves lack infrastructure linking them to regional transportation networks and may also lack access to well-funded K–12 education programs and qualified teachers.[48] In addition, the rate of

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[43] Canadian Mortgage and Housing Commission, "British Columbia – Vacancy Rates by Bedroom Type by Metropolitan Areas, Census Agglomerations and Cities," spreadsheet, October 2025 data. https://www03.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/hmip-pimh/en/Profile?geoId=59&t=2&a=6#Profile/59/2/British%20Columbia

[44] Participant interviews (post-secondary institution, Indigenous energy).

[45] Ministry of Citizens' Services (B.C.), *B.C. Connectivity Report 2024* (2024). https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/british-columbians-our-governments/services-policies-for-government/initiatives-plans-strategies/internet-in-bc/pdfs/2024_bc-connectivity-benchmarking-report_apr23_2024.pdf

[46] *B.C. Connectivity Report 2024*.

[47] Participant interviews (Indigenous energy, B.C. government).

[48] British Columbia Assembly of First Nations, *BC First Nations Transportation Assessment Report and Action Plan: Recommendations for Advancing First Nations Low-Carbon Transportation and Mobility* (2025). https://www.bcafn.ca/sites/default/files/2026-04/10.2025_BCAFN%20Transportation%20Action%20Plan.pdf

Hill + Knowlton Strategies, *Let's talk on-reserve education: Survey report* (2024). https://web.archive.org/web/20250418193241/https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1509019844067/1531399883352

Indigenous households living in inadequate or unaffordable housing in the north is much higher than for non-Indigenous ones — by up to 85% in Prince Rupert.[49] These barriers affect educational outcomes. In 2021, only 65.7% of Indigenous people in the north had a high school diploma or higher, compared with the province-wide figures of 73.8% for the Indigenous population and 87.2% for the non-Indigenous population.[50] At the same time, Indigenous people are underrepresented in workplace leadership roles and a disproportionately high number occupy lower-paid positions that provide less training and fewer mentorship opportunities.[51]

Many Indigenous communities are tight knit and maintain strong cultural connections to the land. Thus their members may be less willing to relocate for training and education.[52] A lack of culturally integrated local training programs and limited local employment options further impact learning outcomes for Indigenous people in the north.[53] Communities often must rely on external employers and educators who fail to understand community context, values and practices.

These gaps and barriers underscore the critical need to integrate housing, infrastructure and education into Indigenous workforce planning. This includes community-based training grounded in local culture and values, forming the foundation of a resilient, high-quality, Indigenous-led workforce development system.

[49] Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, "British Columbia — Aboriginal Households (% of Households in Core Housing Need)," spreadsheet, October 2025. https://www03.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/hmip-pimh/en/Profile?geoId=59&t=2&a=6#Profile/59/2/British%20Columbia

[50] Statistics Canada, "Table 98-10-0428-01," spreadsheet, June 21, 2023. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/cv.action?pid=9810042801

[51] Amanda Bleakney, Farhana Khanam, and Mohan B. Kumar, *Quality of employment among First Nations people living off reserve and Métis, 2022* (2024). https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/41-20-0002/412000022024002-eng.htm

[52] Participant interviews (post-secondary institution, Indigenous energy).

[53] *British Columbia's Workforce Readiness for a Clean Economy Future: Industry Strategy*, 35.

4. Policy gaps

Northern B.C. is highly diverse, requiring labour market solutions tailored to the region's unique economic and workforce needs. Long commutes, inconsistent internet access, and limited student housing options combine to make training access more challenging, which makes it harder for workers in the region to participate in clean energy industries. Rather than addressing these issues in isolation, a comprehensive regional workforce plan is needed to address them in concert. The following analysis highlights policy gaps identified through our research, including interviews with northern residents, that should be addressed through an integrated workforce plan.

4.1 Shortfalls in core training capacity

Funding and human resources to deliver training is inadequate. Central to this challenge is decreasing provincial support to PSIs. Across Canada, public spending on PSIs has fallen from an average of 1.47% of GDP in 2011 to just 1.1% in 2025.[54] In B.C., Budget 2026 provided only a 1.8% increase in education funding, an amount insufficient to tackle chronic funding challenges.[55]

Rollbacks to federal immigration targets stand to worsen funding constraints at B.C.'s PSIs. Until 2024, international student tuition accounted for an average of 18% of PSI revenue, reaching as much as 40% in some instances.[56] After the rollbacks began in 2024, study permit approvals dropped by 66%.[57]

This loss of funding continues to be felt deeply in the north, which had experienced the province's fastest international enrolment growth. In 2023, international students represented 22.2% of the student body, 3.8 times the share a decade earlier.[58] These impacts reverberate

[54] Jackie Pichette, *Testing Times: Fending off a crisis in Canadian postsecondary education* (RBC Thought Leadership, 2025). https://www.rbc.com/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2025/03/Testing-Times-Fending-off-a-crisis-in-Canadian-postsecondary-education-RBC.pdf

[55] Justine Hunter, "B.C. to raise taxes, cut jobs as budget projects record deficit," *Globe and Mail*, February 18, 2026. https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-2026-bc-budget-deficit/

[56] "B.C. budget announces little help for universities."

[57] "B.C. saw 66% drop in international student approvals following federal reforms: auditor general."

[58] Joanna Heslop, *International students in BC's education systems: Summary of research from the student transitions project* (Student Transitions Project, 2025). https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/post-secondary-education/data-research/stp/stp2023_international_research_results_2025-02-07_final2.pdf

across local economies: small towns rely on local PSIs as economic centres and benefit from international graduates remaining in the community, helping to address labour shortages.[59]

In 2025, B.C. announced a review of the public post-secondary education system to develop a path to financial sustainability and improve program delivery within existing budgets.[60] This review must consider the urgent need to enhance training capacity in the north as a means of building a workforce capable of implementing the area's 20 provincial and 6 proposed federal major projects.[61]

4.2 Limited scaling of proven solutions

There have been workforce programs that in part successfully addressed the needs of northern communities, but these programs did not receive wide scale or consistent funding. One such program was Contact North BC, which connected communities to remote learning offered by PSIs but was ultimately shuttered due to inconsistent funding (see appendix). Tailored programs are important, whether they provide hybrid learning, mobile or remote training. However, they are expensive, logistically complex and require deep understanding of a community's unique circumstances. In addition, engaging a cross-section of northern communities in their establishment is important.

4.3 Underutilized role of employers in workforce training

Employer-delivered training is not being fully leveraged, reducing opportunities to share training cost with PSIs, better align skills with industry needs and provide paid hands-on learning experiences. Such training is currently incentivized through the B.C. Employer Training Grant, which subsidizes up to 80% of training costs for employees and prospective hires, including travel costs for learners in remote areas.[62] In practice, this training often focuses on

[59] CUPE, "International Students and the Canadian Economy," July 7, 2025. https://cupe.ca/international-students-and-canadian-economy

[60] Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills (B.C.), "Province review public post-secondary system to ensure long-term sustainability," media release, November 25, 2025. https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2025PSFS0056-001159

[61] Government of British Columbia, "Major projects in B.C. delivered faster," June 17, 2026. https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/employment-business/major-projects

Major Projects Office, "Projects and transformative strategies map," March 12, 2026. https://www.canada.ca/en/privy-council/major-projects-office/projects/map.html

[62] WorkBC, "B.C. Employer Training Grant." https://www.workbc.ca/find-loans-and-grants/industry-and-employers/bc-employer-training-grant

short-term requirements like health and safety or organizational gaps, rather than long-term training that provides transferable skills or certificates.[63]

A regional workforce plan could support greater collaboration between PSIs and employers to better align training timelines with industry's need for workers with up-to-date skills, addressing concerns that post-secondary programs are too slow.[64] While these partnerships take time to build, they are mutually beneficial, providing employers with a steady stream of local labour while helping PSIs offset training costs through lending equipment and workspaces.[65] Moreover, apprenticeship supports and hiring quotas attached to major projects could incentivize employers to help develop the next generation workforce.[66]

4.4 Lack of regional approach under existing provincial strategies

Many cornerstone provincial initiatives lack a regional lens and accompanying labour market plans.

- B.C.'s climate strategy, CleanBC, includes a plan to reduce diesel reliance and support clean energy in remote communities, but has no corresponding workforce plan to promote local employment. [67]
- The province's Look West economic strategy lists several northern LNG and critical mineral projects as drivers of growth, but community engagement, labour market supports, and other mechanisms to ensure fair revenue distribution are absent.
- B.C.'s Critical Minerals Strategy lacks mechanisms to support on-site training, accessible transport and worker housing, which are crucial for the success of mining projects in remote areas.[68] Failure to plan for these elements could leave one of the north's most important opportunities for clean economic growth on the table.

[63] Abigail Jackson, Rachel Samson, and Ricardo Chejfec, *Resilient Workers, Resilient Communities: The Need for Place-Based Skills Development* (2025). https://irpp.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Resilient-Workers-Resilient-Communities.pdf

[64] Business + Higher Education Roundtable, *Upskilling and Reskilling: How employers are retraining and retaining Canada's Workforce* (2023). https://bher.ca/assets-documents/resource/Skills-Working-Group-Report.pdf

[65] Participant interview (post-secondary institution).

[66] Participant interview (training provider).

[67] Ministry of Energy, Mines and Low Carbon Innovation (B.C.), *Remote Community Energy Strategy: 2023 update report* (2023). https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/farming-natural-resources-and-industry/electricity-alternative-energy/community-energy-solutions/rces-vfin2-online-print.pdf

[68] Participant interview (training provider).

B.C. did address rural economic development in its 2023 Good Lives in Strong Communities plan, which advanced policies to address housing, internet and skills development, including targeted funds for Indigenous skills development.[69] However, many of the plan's workforce development programs were of limited duration and have since ended.

4.5 Constrained economic diversification

Provincial plans emphasize major resource projects as the primary focus of economic development in the north. While these projects can provide short-term economic and labour gains during the construction phase, these gains may not be sustained, especially if a great deal of the labour force is sourced from outside the region. In addition, energy and resource industries are exposed to volatile global markets. This risks locking northern communities into a boom-bust employment cycle.

Although some major projects are essential to advance the low-carbon transition (e.g., critical mineral mines), others pose greater risk depending on global energy commodity demand scenarios (e.g., LNG).[70] While B.C. does offer grants in the north through the Rural Economic Diversification and Infrastructure Program, these primarily go to small-scale local projects, many of which pertain to the cultural sector and not the energy transition.[71] Continued prioritization of major projects over whole-economy diversification and value chain buildout risks concentrating an already limited workforce and perpetuating economic volatility.

4.6 Persistent education gaps in Indigenous communities

Since 2012, funding for First Nations schools in B.C. has been governed through a tripartite agreement between the federal government, provincial government and the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC), an organization that represents B.C. First Nations schools. This funding formula mirrors that for B.C.'s public school system, but with the addition

[69] Government of B.C., *Good Lives in Strong Communities: Investing in a bright future for rural communities* (2023). https://news.gov.bc.ca/files/Good-Lives-Strong-Communities-2023.pdf

[70] Janetta McKenzie and Megan Gordon, *Drilling Down: Oil and gas jobs in transition* (2025). https://www.pembina.org/sites/default/files/2025-08/Drilling_Down.pdf

[71] Ministry of Jobs and Economic Growth (B.C.), "2024–25 Funded Projects." https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/employment-business/economic-development/support-organizations-community-partners/rural-economic-development/redip/2024-25-funded-projects

of supplements like rural and transportation funding to accommodate schools' unique circumstances.[72]

FNESC gives First Nations schools in B.C. better access to funding, administrative and support services compared to other provinces, as well as grants for summer work experiences, career awareness programs and cooperative work placements.[73] These programs enhance the employability of Indigenous youth while helping schools offer relevant and diverse programming. In spite of these supports, schools in Indigenous communities lack access to the same level of student supports as settler schools,[74] particularly in recruiting high-quality teachers.[75] However, there are data gaps around current funding, policy and infrastructure needs of schools on reserves in B.C. and how shortfalls may affect student success, indicating the urgent need for further research.

[72] BC First Nations Schools Association & BC First Nations Education Steering Committee, *BC First Nations Education Funding Handbook* https://www.fnesc.ca/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/2023-24-BCTEA-Funding-Handbook_31Aug2023.pdf

[73] MNP, *First Nations K-12 Education Transformation Review and Costing Analysis* (2024). https://afn.bynder.com/m/94c28002b27d9f7/original/First-Nations-K-12-Education-Transformation-Review-and-Costing-Analysis.pdf

BC First Nations Schools Association & BC First Nations Education Steering Committee, *Annual Report 2024/25* (2025). https://www.fnesc.ca/wp/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/62643-FNESC-AR24-25-V03-F1-WEB.pdf

[74] *Let's talk on-reserve education: Survey report*.

[75] Interview participant (Indigenous energy).

5. Recommendations

As raised in the previous section, the north needs a comprehensive workforce development approach to address interlocking training delivery barriers and capacity issues, with the goal of creating a self-sustaining system that grows local economies. Based on the policy gaps identified in our analysis, we recommend that the provincial government develop the following initial actions in partnership with northern communities.

5.1 Empower training providers

5.1.1 Increase PSI funding through targeted investments

Post-secondary institutions play a vital role in northern B.C.'s economy — as both training providers and partners in developing community programs. The B.C. government should increase funding to northern PSIs to strengthen their capacity to deliver programs tailored to regional needs.

Targeted funding should prioritize:

- programs aligned with local labour market demand, ensuring a match between training outcomes and employer needs
- programs with poor economies of scale that are important to economic diversification, such as those that support a clean energy workforce
- training delivery in remote and Indigenous communities, where access barriers are highest
- instructor recruitment and retention, to build internal capacity and ensure consistent, high-quality program delivery

5.1.2 Scale successful approaches to training delivery

Given the diversity of community and student needs across the north, no single training model is sufficient. Northern training providers, both public and private, must be able to deliver flexible in-person, remote, hybrid and mobile training to accommodate a range of circumstances.

Successful pilots need to be identified and fully resourced to evolve into full-scale programs, expanding their reach and impact. Communities and learners know their own needs best, and programs developed in partnership with community members, such as the Resilient Housing

and Upskilling for Canada Communities program, should be prioritized (see appendix for program details). The B.C. government should also focus on identifying and supporting the scale-up of successful Indigenous-led programs, like the Workforce Warriors' Leadership Development for Indigenous Communities program (see appendix).

5.1.3 Expand work-integrated learning opportunities for secondary students

Secondary schools play a critical role in the workforce development ecosystem by providing a base education on core subjects, equipping students with key competencies, and influencing training and career choices.

Expanding work-integrated learning opportunities through partnerships with employers and PSIs would enable high school students to gain early work experience and explore potential avenues for employment. For instance, FNESC's Co-operative Education Program offers grants for work experience, career exploration and career readiness programs at First Nations high schools.[76] Dual-credit early recruitment programs, like the Trades Discovery program offered by the College of New Caledonia (see appendix), can incentivize apprenticeship enrollment and help address labour shortages in the skilled trades.

The delivery of high-quality K–12 education, as well as dual-credit and other special programming, hinges on the availability of qualified teachers, who often act as internal champions. However, as with the rest of the province, northern B.C. faces a widespread shortage of elementary and high school teachers.

To support the expansion of these programs, the B.C. government should allocate additional resources to support work-integrated learning. Strengthened teacher recruitment should complement this effort in northern communities through focused financial incentives, such as service-linked grants similar to the Ontario Learn and Stay Grant, which supports students in key occupations to train and work in underserved communities.[77]

[76] First Nations Education Steering Committee & First Nations Schools Association, "Co-operative Education Program (COOP.EDU) 2025–2026 Call for Proposals." https://www.fnsa.ca/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Co-op-Ed-2025-2026-Call-for-Proposals.pdf

[77] *Recruit, Train, Retain.*

5.2 Nurture multi-stakeholder collaboration

5.2.1 Leverage major projects to establish new partnerships

Major projects present a promising opportunity for the provincial government to convene regional workforce development partners.

When a major project is approved, the provincial government should bring together Indigenous, municipal and regional governments; employers; organized labour; and PSIs and other training organizations to discuss labour market needs and assess local training capacity.[78] As rightsholders, Indigenous governments must be established as core partners in workforce development planning from the outset.

Such partnerships can strengthen relationships among PSIs, industry, and other partners and foster the collaborative development of responsive training programs. The Offshore Academy in Esbjerg, Denmark, a historic fossil fuel community, is an example of a successful program that used this collaborative model (see appendix).

5.2.2 Encourage greater PSI-industry collaboration

Employer-delivered training can have an outsized impact in the north by providing work-integrated learning and experience and sharing training costs with PSIs. Coordination between industry and PSIs can help ensure that available training meets labour market needs and that the curricula remain up to date as technology and standards of practice evolve. This is especially important in clean energy sectors, where technology advances rapidly.

Subsidies like the Employer Training Grant should be used to encourage the development of longer-term training timelines that respond to labour demands while providing workers with transferable skills to navigate a dynamic employment environment.

5.2.3 Negotiate triparty project labour agreements

Project labour agreements and similar arrangements (e.g., community benefit agreements) are tools that set out project workforce terms jointly negotiated between unions, industry and potentially governments. These agreements can support better outcomes for workers by establishing clear compensation and benefit terms and by helping prevent labour disruptions, including strikes, through the early mitigation of potential grievances. Specific terms that may be covered include prevailing wages, the promotion of local and equity hiring, and apprenticeship quotas. For instance, BC Infrastructure Benefits, a Crown corporation created

[78] *Resilient Workers, Resilient Communities.*

through a similar agreement, provides a unionized workforce for publicly funded infrastructure projects such as hospitals, highways and bridges. This initiative has promoted local hiring while increasing employment for women, Indigenous workers and apprentices (see appendix). Successes from this model could be replicated to promote local hiring and training for northern communities in other contexts.

5.3 Incentivize low-carbon diversification

5.3.1 Introduce tax credits to support community economic diversification

In addition to major development projects, complementary diversification strategies are needed to strengthen economic resilience in northern communities. Distributed clean energy projects, clean technology and clean tech manufacturing can create new avenues of employment and municipal tax revenues while helping to reduce dependence on major projects.

The B.C. government should provide clean energy–focused and place-based investment tax credits (ITCs) to encourage private sector investment in the clean economy, especially in transition-vulnerable and market-exposed regions like the Northeast. The following are two examples from other jurisdictions:

- The federal government offers ITCs of between 15% and 60% for projects related to clean technology, carbon capture, hydrogen, manufacturing and electricity.
- In the United States, the Energy Communities Tax Credit from the Inflation Reduction Act provides an additional 10% credit for clean economy projects in fossil fuel communities, such as those with recently closed coal mines or a high proportion of fossil fuel workers.

ITCs can also encourage improved job quality by incorporating employer incentives, such as bonus tax credits tied to meeting prevailing wages and apprentice hiring targets.

6. Conclusion

Northern B.C. is undergoing a transition to a more diverse, low-carbon economy, driven by growth in clean energy, critical minerals, transportation and innovative technologies and approaches such as geothermal and mass timber. In response, the area has developed a wide range of workforce development solutions to meet a dynamic labour market. This diversity is a strength: many programs are community-based and tailored to local needs. Effective workforce development policy for the north must build on these strengths by centring northern voices, fostering strong relationships, and grounding decisions in local context.

Much of the area's recent growth has come from major resource and energy projects like LNG Canada and the Site C dam. While these projects have generated local tax revenues and employment opportunities, their benefits often primarily serve provincial and federal interests. Deeper community engagement and deployment of tools such as community benefit agreements can better address long-term local needs and strengthen northern labour markets. Investment in emerging low-carbon sectors can improve stability by mitigating the boom-bust cycles associated with volatile markets. These actions must be paired with regional workforce planning that addresses training capacity and access.

The B.C. government already recognizes the north's potential, but can do more to advance the energy transition in a regionally equitable manner. By increasing funding for PSIs and proven programs, improving support for Indigenous workforce development, fostering collaboration between training providers and industry, and involving communities in project planning, B.C. can build a strong, skilled northern workforce ready to lead in a low-carbon future.

Appendix A. Best practices

Community-led upskilling: Resilient Housing and Upskilling for Canada Communities

Resilient Housing and Upskilling for Canada Communities was a one-year pilot program funded by ESDC and run by Canadian Colleges for a Resilient Recovery to provide sustainable construction training to Indigenous communities.[79] The program consulted with Indigenous communities to identify and co-develop housing opportunities and training needs, created resources to guide communities through planning their own housing solutions, and developed sustainability-focused certifications and skills training for Indigenous workers in housing trades.[80]

In one example, Mohawk College in Hamilton, Ontario, partnered with the Independent First Nations Alliance, who helped the college find a training location, develop the curriculum, promote the course, and fly in equipment, providing 18 participants with hands-on training.[81]

Overall, the program reached more than 200 members across 14 Indigenous communities. It demonstrated the power of Indigenous engagement and co-design, and how that engagement can support economic and workforce development in tandem.

Indigenous-led mentorship: Leadership Development for Indigenous Communities

Workforce Warriors, an Indigenous-led workforce development organization in New Brunswick, developed the Leadership Development for Indigenous Communities project to help close economic gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers through skills building and mentorship.[82] The project began with research done in partnership with Indigenous communities, including elders and knowledge keepers, to develop a leadership model using the

[79] Canadian Colleges for a Resilient Recovery, "Over 200 members of Indigenous communities across Canada gain valuable construction skills," *Journal of Commerce*, June 21, 2024. https://canada.constructconnect.com/joc/news/labour/2024/06/over-200-members-of-indigenous-communities-across-canada-gain-valuable-construction-skills

[80] Amy Chen, "BCIT participates in C2R2 project focused on resilient housing and upskilling," *BCIT*, October 17, 2023. https://www.bcit.ca/news/stories/c2r2-resilient-housing-upskilling-canada/

[81] "Over 200 members of Indigenous communities across Canada gain valuable construction skills."

[82] Katie McLaren, *Leadership Development for Indigenous Communities* (Future Skills Centre, 2025). https://fsc-ccf.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/leadership-development-for-indigenous-communities.pdf

Two-Eyed Seeing approach, which incorporates both Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives.

The project engaged 16 organizations and 5 partners, leading to the development of three programs, including a work-integrated learning program to bring 30 young people into electrical and renewables trades and an early childhood arts education program. A program evaluation of the Leadership Development project attributes its success to taking time to establish a foundation of trust and remaining flexible to meet diverse community needs.[83] The success of the early education program particularly helped build trust with communities and opened doors for more Workforce Warriors programs,[84] which highlights the importance of understanding early education as a vital part of the skills-building ecosystem.

Connecting students with remote learning: Contact North BC

Contact North BC was a program that connected students to remote training from PSIs across the province, with on-site support and reliable connectivity provided at 20 learning centres.[85] The program, which closed after its pilot period, was developed by Indigenous representatives and a consortium of PSIs to meet unique community needs and was administered by Coast Mountain College and Indigenous communities in northwestern B.C.

Trades Discovery program

The Trades Discovery program from the College of New Caledonia is a dual-credit program that allows students to earn high school credits during four trade rotations, helping them explore career options and transition into post-secondary trades training.[86] The program is provided on campus, but could be adapted for rural and Indigenous high schools to engage with local industry. Because of poor economies of scale in rural training delivery, programs that offer high added value, such as both work opportunities and school credits, are efficient for both learners and providers.

[83] Johnston Research, *Workforce Warriors: Evaluation Report* (2024). https://fsc-ccf.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/FSC_JRI-FSC-Workforce-Warriors-Evaluation-Report-Final.pdf

[84] *Leadership Development for Indigenous Communities.*

[85] Ministry of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills (B.C.), "Contact North BC expands access for post-secondary students in remote locations," media release, March 9, 2021. https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2021AEST0017-000416

[86] College of New Caledonia, "Trades Discovery: High School Credit." https://cnc.bc.ca/programs-courses/programs/detail/trades-discovery

Community-driven, self-directed training: National Advanced Skills and Training Program for Rural Practice

The National Advanced Skills and Training Program for Rural Practice was an initiative by the Society of Rural Physicians of Canada that enabled rural physicians to upskill. Learners assessed their communities' needs and their own skill gaps and were given supports to access their choice of specialized training for 30 days, including training subsidies, income supplements, preceptor and locum funding, and travel costs.[87] During its one-year pilot, the program reached 342 physicians in 187 communities nationwide, more than 60 of which were Indigenous.[88] After its funding from the federal government's Sectoral Workforce Solutions Program ended in 2024, 94% of participants had ongoing training needs, but 74% felt that they had a stronger support network.

The program demonstrated how allowing rural community members to direct their own training helps match skills development with community needs. It also showed the outsized impact that specialized training for only a few workers can have on an entire community. Workers in the north may benefit from similar self-directed upskilling programs to develop advanced green skills, such as those used in sustainable building construction.

British Columbia Infrastructure Benefits (BCIB)

BCIB is a Crown corporation created through a unique Community Benefits Agreement between the province and its major construction unions. It serves as an employer that provides the unionized workforce for select major projects, allowing it to meet ambitious equity goals for women and Indigenous workers, arrange training, and provide apprentices with work experiences.[89] Between 2019 and 2024, 20% of its workforce were trainees or apprentices, 14% Indigenous, and 9% women, well above the average for construction. BCIB also offers sensitivity training at work sites to address the sometimes toxic culture that can make them hostile to equity-deserving groups.

[87] Society of Rural Physicians of Canada, "National Advanced Skills and Training Program for Rural Practice: Frequently Asked Questions." https://srpcportal.ca/advanced-training-faqs

[88] Society of Rural Physicians of Canada, "Program Results or Successful Outcomes: Enhancing Access." https://srpc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Skills-and-Training-Program-SRPC-Oct-31-2024.pdf

[89] John Calvert, *Building Better: The positive impact of community benefits agreements on the B.C. construction workforce* (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2025). https://www.policyalternatives.ca/news-research/building-better/

Esbjerg Offshore Academy

Esbjerg, a port city in Denmark, was formerly home to half the country's oil and gas jobs. In 2020, however, the Danish government passed the Climate Act, committing to reduce the country's GHG emissions by 70% by 2030 compared to 1990. This cut had the potential to jeopardize jobs in the region.[90] In response, the government, port industry, organized labour, and local learning institutions convened to assess workforce development needs, leading to the development of the Offshore Academy, a place-based training program to help oil workers transition to offshore wind jobs. Through this collaborative approach, training partners were able to coordinate training based on their respective strengths and use resources efficiently, for example by using existing port infrastructure for on-the-job training. The academy's programming focuses on providing workers with relevant transferable skills through short-term on-the-job training. By building a training ecosystem with local partners, workers do not have to move to find new jobs. According to the local unions, the training academy has smoothed the transition for many workers, preventing them from falling into unemployment.

[90] Abigail Jackson, Shaimaa Yassin, and Valentin Pautonnier, *From Oil and Gas to Wind: Esbjerg's Offshore Academy in Denmark* (Future Skills Centre and Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2025). https://irpp.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/From-Oil-and-Gas-to-Wind.pdf

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