Skills Catalyst Fund Call for Proposals

Application Guide

December, 2017
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OVERVIEW

The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD) is launching a three-year $9M Skills Catalyst Fund, allocated at $3M per fiscal year starting in 2017-18 and ending in 2019-20. The Fund will support initiatives that better align education, training, and employment service with the needs of the economy and employers so that Ontario’s workforce is better equipped with the skills and opportunities needed to meet the demands of the jobs of today and tomorrow.

The Skills Catalyst Fund complements a growing number of funding initiatives announced by government as part of its strategy to support innovative and collaborative approaches to developing talent and skills. These programs are designed to enhance Ontarians’ adaptability to a rapidly changing labour market, resulting from a more technologically-driven and knowledge-based economy.

Specifically, the Skills Catalyst Fund will support new and existing initiatives that foster greater collaboration, innovation, and inclusion in Ontario’s labour market—by making sure that the ‘supply’ of talent developed through education and training meets the skills ‘demands’ of employers.

CONTEXT

Like most jurisdictions around the world, Ontario’s economy is being transformed as a result of technology, demographics, globalization and other factors. These drivers of change in the economy are causing shifts in the types of jobs available, and the skills required for those jobs.

In August 2015, Premier Wynne appointed an Expert Panel on Highly Skilled Workforce (HSW) to assess how well the workforce is positioned to meet the needs of Ontario’s economy and to develop a strategy that will help the province’s workforce adapt to the demands of a technology-driven knowledge economy.

The Panel met with a wide range of interested parties, attended public meetings and reviewed the latest research and best practices in other jurisdictions. In June 2016, the province received the Premier’s Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel’s report *Building the Workforce of Tomorrow: A Shared Responsibility*, and affirmed its commitment to act on the report’s recommendations.

The report suggests that Ontario needs a highly skilled and adaptable workforce to meet the needs of today’s fast-paced and changing economy. Jobs are increasingly more technology-driven and the labour market is progressively more skills based. To better prepare Ontarians, the report notes that employers, educators, intermediaries, industry, and government all have key and intersecting roles to play in developing the future workforce.
This includes collaborating in designing and delivering innovative initiatives that address regional and sectoral needs, developing and utilizing better labour market information, encouraging entrepreneurship and innovation, and better integrating underrepresented groups into the workforce. Furthermore, this collaboration must be responsive to the supply and demand needs of the labour market to ensure that it remains attuned to the ever changing trends of the economy.

The Skills Catalyst Fund supports Ontario’s highly skilled workforce agenda by promoting this kind of collaborations – with an emphasis on priority areas such as strengthening partnerships, developing skills and competencies, expanding experiential learning, promoting multiple career pathways and encouraging investment in employer-led training.

The Challenges

Ontario’s skilled workforce has always been its strength. Our workforce is diverse and recognized as well-credentialed. However, Ontario operates within a new global economic environment that is undergoing significant changes as a result of technological advances, globalization, and shifting demographics. These changes are having an impact on the type of skills employers demand, as well as the types of occupations available to jobseekers.

The skills required for jobs in today’s labour market are rapidly changing. A more technology-driven economy means digital skills are in higher demand. Demand for routine skills is declining, while demand for more complex competencies such as creativity, problem solving, and critical thinking is on the rise. Furthermore, changing skills requirements are expected to affect the combination of jobs available in the labour market, creating new jobs in some fields, transforming the tasks required for many existing jobs, and potentially reducing overall opportunities in certain occupations.

Making sure all Ontarians can access the learning opportunities and develop the skills they need to adapt and succeed is important to ensuring our continued competitiveness and prosperity.

The Opportunities

In addressing the challenges posed by the changing economy, the Skills Catalyst Fund seeks to incent innovative initiatives that build on the strength of our education, training and employment service systems, equipping Ontario’s current and future workforce with the skills required to participate in an innovative, inclusive economy. It also seeks to support employers in increasing investment in, and taking ownership of, the training needs of their workforce. It recognizes that supporting the continued growth of Ontario’s economy requires collaboration between various partners in the labour market, innovation to test out new ideas and approaches, and inclusion to ensure that no one is left behind.
OBJECTIVES

Government cannot act alone responding to the challenges. Educators, business, labour, local communities and other partners need to work together to rethink what it means to learn, understand how the workplace is changing, and consider how we can adapt.

There are already innovative projects that are connecting education, training, and employment service programs to the demands of employers, and there are new ideas and innovative approaches that could be further developed. The goal of the Skills Catalyst Fund is to support existing or new projects that foster such collaboration, and supports increased innovation, and inclusion in our workforce. It ensures that the talent developed through education and training, and the individuals seeking support through our employment service programs are provided with the requisite skills and competencies that are in demand from employers and industry.

The objectives of the Skills Catalyst Fund are to:

- Build meaningful partnerships that align education, training, and employment service systems better with the needs of employers, and prepares students, jobseekers, and incumbent workers for in-demand jobs;
- Encourage innovative ideas and solutions that strengthen education, training, and employment service programs to better plan for, and respond to the needs of the economy;
- Provide the supports skills, tools, opportunities, and experiences learners, jobseekers, workers, and employers need to thrive in the current and future workforce; and
- Help all Ontarians – including those in underrepresented groups – to enter, adapt to, and remain in a changing workforce;

CONDITIONS OF FUNDING

While the Skills Catalyst Fund will support a diverse range of projects that are aligned with its objectives, the Fund is supplemental and will not be provided on an ongoing basis. Through its life cycle, the Skills Catalyst Fund will fund eligible projects in the 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20 fiscal years.

Applicants may submit project proposals spanning a maximum of two years. The maximum eligible amount that will be funded is $500,000. However, applicants are able to combine funds from the Skills Catalyst Fund with other funding sources without risk of penalty.

The projects submitted in this current Call for Proposals are eligible for funding for the 2017-18 and 2018-19 fiscal years. Projects with activities requiring funding in the 2019-20 fiscal year will not be considered at this time. The Ministry will be launching a final
Skills Catalyst Fund Call for Proposals in 2018 for projects with activities requiring funding in the 2018-19 and 2019-20 fiscal years.

Although not required, applicants are encouraged to provide in-kind contributions or seek additional funding sources.

Eligible Organizations

To apply for the Skills Catalyst Fund, applicants must be from one of the following:

- private sector firm employer
- education or training provider (i.e. school boards, colleges, universities, professional accreditation bodies, employment training organizations, Aboriginal Educational Institutes)
- business development organization (i.e. professional, industry, sector associations, labour and economic development organizations)
- government (i.e. municipalities, First Nations)
- non-profit organization (i.e. Indigenous organizations, community development organizations, social enterprises, professional and trade organizations)

In addition, applicants must:

- be licensed to operate in Ontario
- be in full compliance with all applicable laws
- maintain appropriate workplace safety standards
- have third party general liability insurance of no less than $2 million per occurrence

Organizations may not submit multiple applications as a lead applicant. However, applicants may participate or collaborate in more than one proposal.

Project Criteria

The HSW Expert Panel report made recommendations on key areas of actions that can be taken to develop a skilled workforce capable of adapting to the rapid changes of the new economy. These key areas form the basis of the criteria for evaluating all proposals to the Skills Catalyst Fund.

Specifically, applicants to the Skills Catalyst Fund must demonstrate how their project builds or enhances partnership and / or collaboration between industries, sectors, and / or institutions. Additionally, applicants must demonstrate how their initiatives helps align the needs of the education and training system with the regional or sectoral needs of employers. These are mandatory criteria for all projects.

In addition to these criteria, proposals must demonstrate alignment with at least one of four themes: developing skills and competencies, providing experiential learning
opportunities for learners, promoting multiple career pathways, and increasing employer-led training in the workforce.

Proposals will be evaluated against the following criteria:

**Partnerships**
Building meaningful partnerships is a key objective of the Skills Catalyst Fund. Projects must demonstrate how they provide an environment for two or more parties to execute a collaborative model or approach that supports a resilient and adaptable workforce. This partnership approach must also address the workforce needs in a sector or region, and support skill development and employment opportunities.

While a range of partnerships are possible, from a best practice perspective, projects that have a partnership / consortia approach to workforce development, have representatives from each of the following:

- Employers in the private and non-profit sectors in Ontario
- Education / training providers (e.g., postsecondary institutions, professional accreditation bodies, employment training organizations, etc.)
- Business development organizations (e.g., industry associations, labour and economic development organizations, etc.)
- Intermediaries bringing together employers, job seekers, and / or educators

In addition to the mandatory theme of partnerships, projects must also respond to a minimum of one of the following themes:

**Developing Skills and Competencies**
Education and training (i.e., literacy, essential skills and competency skills) are important in both building a resilient workforce and addressing the gaps between employers’ needs and the skills and competencies that employees require in today’s job market. Moreover, in the absence of traditional degrees and diplomas, there is a need to better recognize the skills and competencies gained and / or held by jobseekers.

The Fund seeks to support initiatives that may:

- Determine employers’ skill requirements;
- Increase skills, competencies and credentials for all Ontarians including those in underrepresented groups (i.e., women, youth, Indigenous people, persons with disabilities, newcomers, and veterans) in line with the demands of regional and sectoral needs;
- Increase certification of newcomers in their profession or trade;
- Bring together multiple stakeholders such as employers, industry associations, business associations and other organizations to develop industry-recognized skills and competency framework.
Experiential Learning Opportunities for all Learners
Experiential learning provides opportunities for learners to develop skills, work in an interdisciplinary field, and make decisions about their future career pathways. Successful experiential learning programs also provide value for employers by providing them access to recruit and attract qualified talent. There are many types of experiential learning but some common examples are co-ops, workplace simulations, work-study programs, apprenticeships, industry-recognized class projects, bootcamps / hackathon, and so on.

The Fund seeks to support initiatives that may:

- Better align experiential learning with education and training, and labour market needs; and
- Increase the quantity and quality of EL activities unique to the context and strengths of Ontario’s employers, intermediaries, and education and training institutions.

Promotion of Multiple Career Pathways
With a fast-changing economy that is constantly evolving, the types of jobs and careers available – including the required skills for them – are changing. As such, an approach promoting and enabling various career options is necessary. Individuals need to understand the career options available to them including the skills required for such occupations. These career options also need to be attuned to the labour demands of the economy.

Students require early exposure to non-traditional fields such as skilled trades, entrepreneurship, in addition to science, technology, engineering, arts and math pathways – which are increasingly becoming important in today’s technologically-driven economy. Moreover, they require better exposure to high demand jobs in high growth sectors that may not require a PSE credential.

Jobseekers and incumbent workers also need flexible career pathways that recognizes that education and training, and careers no longer follow a linear pathway. Flexible career pathways allows individuals to easily and rapidly upgrade their existing skills for higher skilled job positions. It also enables jobseekers and incumbent workers to retrain for different job positions that may not necessarily be in the same sector but is experiencing high demand.

Promoting and exposing individuals to multiple career pathways requires the active collaboration of education, training, and employment service programs and institutions with employers in understanding the current and anticipated demand for a particular type of skill or job opportunity, which is better supported by accurate labour market information.

Thus, the Skills Catalyst Fund seeks to promote multiple career pathways through:
• Earlier and better exposure to non-traditional pathways for students and jobseekers in line with the needs of the labour market;
• Flexible career pathways that allow for sectoral bridge programs, and rapid industry-recognized up-skilling or re-skilling programs for workers and jobseekers;
• Better labour market information on career prospects and trends, skills in demand, education and employment requirements; and
• Improved communication and partnerships between industry and education / training institutions to help address or prevent skills shortages and labour market needs.

**Investment in Employer-Led Training**
Investing in human capital is important for both business productivity as well as addressing the skills and competencies gap for employers and jobseekers. Employers play a large role in fostering and enabling conditions for skills training, and are key partners in supporting innovative approaches to skills development for the re-skilling and up-skilling of employed individuals. Recent evidence suggests that there is room to incentivize and support greater employment engagement in the workforce, and improved collaboration with education and training institutions as well as organizations involved in employment service.

The Fund seeks to increase employer-led training in various areas such as:
• Employee training;
• Mentorship;
• Workforce planning for future employment;
• Programs addressing skills gaps in a region or sector; and
• Addressing barriers to employment for underrepresented groups.

**FUNDING ALLOCATION METHODOLOGY**

The Ministry seeks to fund small to medium size, high impact, innovative projects and a limited number of large scale projects. Interested parties in this iteration of the Skills Catalyst Fund’s Call for Proposals can apply for up to two years of funding (i.e. 2017-18 and 2018-19 fiscal years). Projects with activities in the 2019-20 fiscal year will not be considered through this Call for Proposals.

Funding for 2017-18 will support approved activities up to March 31, 2018. If the project is two years, funding beyond the 2017-18 fiscal year will be available following a review of appropriate interim reports. Applicants should take note that initiatives that are seeking funding for just the 2017-18 fiscal year should be able to demonstrate in their work plan or submitted budget that the total amount requested, provided it is approved, will be spent before the end of the fiscal year i.e. March 31st, 2018.

Funding from other government initiatives (i.e., provincial, federal, etc.), in-kind contributions, or funding from other entities are allowed and may be stacked. The
maximum funding cap that projects can obtain from the Skills Catalyst Fund is $500,000. MAESD reserves the right to set limits on the amount of funding an applicant will receive.

The use of funds and eligible costs will be governed by a Transfer Payment Agreement (TPA) between the Ministry and the lead applicant. Proposals must provide a breakdown and description of all costs that are deemed necessary for the successful implementation and completion of the project. All proposed costs must be justified and supported by acceptable documentation.

Successful applicants of the Skills Catalyst Fund will be required to complete a financial statement at the end of each fiscal year outlining how the funds were used. This is to verify that the funding was solely applied to costs directly related to the proposed project.

Expenses that do not directly support the project are not eligible for funding and should not be included in the project budget. Examples of ineligible costs include, but are not limited to, the following:

- professional membership fees;
- fundraising expenses;
- profit making activities;
- costs associated with special events such as tournaments, conferences, receptions, festivals, parties;
- insurance fees;
- capital expenses, such as renovations; and
- costs associated with activities or operations performed outside of Ontario.

Notice in writing to an applicant that it has been identified as a successful applicant and the subsequent full negotiation and execution of a written TPA will constitute an agreement for any eligible expenditures. The ministry will have the final word in determining expenditure eligibility and valuation.

**SUBMISSION PROCESS**

Formal applicants will be required to register to be users of the Grants Ontario system if they wish to apply for the Skills Catalyst Fund. The application process can be found on the [Grants Ontario webpage](#). Once registered, applicants can download the application form on the Grants Ontario website.

Applications must be submitted before 4:00 PM on January 26th, 2018 through the Grants Ontario system. Late applications will not be assessed. Applicants must also ensure that required attachments such as signed declaration, proof of third party general liability insurance coverage, and supporting letter(s) from partnering organizations are included in their application. Any additional relevant information may be attached as additional appendices to the completed application.
Applicants of successful proposals will be informed in early 2018 and issued approval for funding, subject to a signed TPA with the ministry. The agreement will include reporting, performance measurement, funding and accountability requirements. Any questions or requests for clarification about the Skills Catalyst Fund, or how to respond to this Call for Proposals can be sent to MAESD’s Workforce Policy and Innovation Division at skillscatalystfund@ontario.ca.

A list of technical questions received during the open application process and their answers will be shared with all applicants and posted online. Please note that no further questions will be accepted after 11:59 PM on January 12th, 2018. Additional support may be made available to applicants as required with further information to be provided at a later date. For more information, please email skillscatalystfund@ontario.ca.

PROPOSAL ASSESSMENT

An inter-ministerial committee will review all applications against the eligibility requirements and program criteria and make recommendations for approval of project for funding. Efforts will be made to select a broad range of projects that represent Ontario’s diverse demographics and geography including but not limited to the following:

- populations in urban, rural / remote, and northern locations; and
- traditionally underrepresented groups in the workforce (i.e., women, youth, Indigenous people, persons with disabilities, newcomers, and veterans).

Proposals will be evaluated against the following criteria:

1. Partnerships and Collaboration

   This is a key focus of the Skills Catalyst Fund. Proposals must clearly demonstrate partnerships between employers, educators, trainers, intermediaries, industry, and / or business development organizations. Proposals should explain the number and type of partnerships, and indicate how the partnership will help the proposed project align education and training programs and services with the sectoral or regional needs of businesses.

2. Project Overview

   Proposals must explain how their project responds to at least one of the four themes, and more broadly the objectives of the Skills Catalyst Fund. Proposals must also demonstrate how their project is innovative or applies a new model or approach. Furthermore, proposals must articulate how their project will help Ontarians enter, adapt, and remain in a changing workforce, and provide them with skills, tools, or opportunities they need to thrive in the workforce. Additional points will be awarded to projects that address barriers faced by underrepresented groups in the workforce, and projects that demonstrate their scalability and adaptability to other regions and / or
sectors.

3. Organizational Capacity
Proposals should demonstrate organizational capacity and strengths of the partnering organizations to undertake the proposed project, including their experience in delivering similar services as the one being proposed.

4. Project Delivery
Proposals must clearly define the scope and purpose of the project and provide a clear understanding of the steps for implementation. A work plan that sets out expected timelines for key activities is recommended. Proposals must also demonstrate effective use of resources to achieve objectives within the established timeframe for funded activities. Anticipated risks and mitigation strategies must also be clearly articulated and proposals should have a plan for the project after the funding period ends.

5. Evaluation Framework
Measurement and evaluation are central to confirming whether new approaches or solutions are working. The ministry is interested in high quality evidence of "what works". For this reason, this assessment criteria places a significant emphasis on evaluation approach, and how the project will be measured. A comprehensive evaluation framework that is focussed on outcomes and has strong key performance indicators to measure these outcomes are important. Applicants are also encouraged to describe their proposed theory of change, and provide details of their evaluation approach.

For additional information on criteria, and the weighting of scores, applicants are strongly encouraged to refer to the document *Reviewing and Scoring Considerations*. Furthermore, applicants are encouraged but not required to attach additional supporting documentation through the Grants Ontario application process. These supporting documentation may include: additional information on existing programs or initiatives, highlight of successes, additional information on partnering organizations. Applications receive no additional score for attaching supporting documentation.

**PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT**
Successful applicants will be required to report to the ministry on a semi-annual and year-end basis on a set of performance indicators for the purpose of assessing progress toward the project’s intended outcomes. These performance indicators will be finalized and approved by the ministry for all successful applicants through the TPA process.
ACCOUNTABILITY

If approved, projects will be funded through a TPA between the applicant and MAESD.

Recipients of the Skills Catalyst Fund will be responsible for managing and executing their projects under the TPA. The agreement will set out the terms and conditions governing the payment of the grant, and will include the following:

- project budget;
- project management requirements;
- monitoring and reporting requirements;
- audits and financial reporting obligations;
- milestones and performance measures;
- mode and schedule of payments; and
- process for contract termination

Successful applicants will:

- be accountable to the ministry for all monies and project components, and the designated lead will be considered to be the final decision-making authority for the project;
- manage their project plan, and be responsible for meeting all financial and accountability requirements and deliverables, as identified in the funding agreement;
- submit semi-annual and annual reports that will be used by the Ministry to assess implementation and effectiveness, as well as compliance with financial and auditing requirements, as required by the funding agreement

Funding will be allocated in installments according to a payment schedule. Receipt of funding installments is dependent on the recipient meeting all deliverables and reporting requirements under the TPA with the Ministry. Please note that applicants requesting funding for just one year in 2017-18 must be able to demonstrate that the requested amount will be spent before March 31st, 2018.
### IMPORTANT DATES

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<th>Activity</th>
<th>Timelines</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Application opens. Applicants can send questions relating to the Call for Proposals.</td>
<td>December 13, 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deadline for questions relating to the Call for Proposals</td>
<td>January 12, 2018</td>
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<tr>
<td>Answers to all questions relating to the Call for Proposals posted online</td>
<td>Jan 17, 2018</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deadline to respond to the Call for Proposals</td>
<td>January 26, 2018</td>
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<tr>
<td>Announcement of successful applicants</td>
<td>Early 2018</td>
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