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Bridging Program Practices Tool:

Emerging and Best Practices in Bridging Programs for Internationally Trained Individuals Seeking Professional Registration in Canada

Bridging Program Practices Tool

Introduction

While Canada has a strong record of successfully attracting highly skilled immigrants, many experience challenges to fully using their education, training and skills. To improve outcomes for immigrants, many jurisdictions have invested in bridging programs, which seek to address the education and/or skill differences between the newcomers' home country requirements in the regulated occupation and Canada's. This Bridging Program Practices Tool has been developed as a summary of emerging and best practices in bridging program design that can be used to develop future bridging programs or assess current ones.

Practice Definitions

Definitions and uses of the terms "best practices," and "emerging practices" vary in the literature. However, for the purpose of this tool, the following working definitions will be used.

Best Practice
Best practices demonstrate successful, measurable bridging program outcomes, such as improvements on assessments, exam results, licensure rates and employment rates.

Emerging Practice
Emerging practices show promise for becoming best practices but have not yet been validated by measurable outcomes.

Bridging Program Definitions

For the purpose of this tool, the following working definition will be used:

"Bridging" is a term associated with addressing differences in training that may exist from one system of education and practice to another. In this context, bridging programs provide resources and training that assist internationally trained individuals to meet entry standards in a regulated occupation.

Review

This tool organizes best and emerging practices in bridging program design under three broad criteria: Participant Assessment Practices, Bridging Program Components, and Program Development and Delivery. As you evaluate your current bridging program or develop a new one:

- ▶ Decide whether the best or emerging practice being described is present.

- ▶ Make notes in the comments section that will help you to identify the practices you will consider adopting in your program.

This tool was developed following a Literature Review prepared for the MQRWG.[1]

[1] Even though Québec is an active member of the MQRWG, the province did not participate in the drafting of this document and does not recommend its use by and/or distribution to its regulatory organizations.

I.   Bridging Program Participant Assessment Practices

Comprehensive Assessment of Education and Skills:
As much as possible, a bridging program should be designed to recognize the knowledge and skills that ITIs have acquired. The bridging program itself should ideally fill gaps in knowledge and skills where they are identified through an assessment against entry-to-practice standards. As such, it is important to develop an initial assessment process that will identify any missing skills, knowledge or competencies required to practice the profession. This supports the development of modularized and customized content for the ITI's learning needs and minimizes repetition of prior learning.

Best or Emerging Practice	Comments/Notes
☑ **Best** ○ Emerging **01.** Develop an initial needs assessment process to identify any missing skills, knowledge or competencies required to practice the profession. Possible effective assessment tools include: ▸ prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) ▸ competency-based assessment ▸ leveraging the regulatory bodies' assessment results to determine individual needs	
☑ **Best** ○ Emerging **02.** Conduct readiness-for-success assessments. These may include assessments of: ▸ learning style ▸ financial needs ▸ family supports	
☑ **Best** ○ Emerging **03.** Clearly document bridging program eligibility criteria and assessments online.	
☑ **Best** ○ Emerging **04.** Document pre-bridging training options/ requirements online. Examples may include: ▸ occupation-specific language training ▸ pre-program examination/evaluation supports ▸ pre-bridging workplace placements ▸ workplace safety certification courses, for example: ▹ Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHIMIS) ▹ Transferring, Lifting, Repositioning (TLR) ▹ Food Safety ▸ cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR)	
☑ **Best** ○ Emerging **05.** Establish a formal bridging program admissions committee if there is a need to consider exceptional admission circumstances.	

Language Proficiency Requirements for Bridging Programs:
It is important that applicants best prepared for the bridging program are selected. Language proficiency is an important consideration when assessing the preparedness of an applicant. While applicants need not be completely fluent, advanced fluency is generally considered to be necessary for success.

Best or Emerging Practice	Comments/Notes
☑ **Best** ◯ Emerging **01.** Set language proficiency requirements for admission to the bridging program that ensure participants speak English or French at a competent functional level.	
☑ **Best** ◯ Emerging **02.** Use language proficiency assessments that test the four language dimensions (speaking, listening, reading and writing) such as: ▶ Canadian Language Benchmark test (CLB) ▶ International English Language Testing System (IELTS) ▶ International English Language Testing System, Academic Module (IELTS AC) ▶ Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) ▶ The Canadian Test of English for Scholars and Trainees (TEST-CAN) ▶ Test pour étudiants et stagiaires au Canada (CAN-TEST)	
☑ **Best** ◯ Emerging **03.** Provide applicants with a variety of assessment options, such as: ▶ CLB ▶ IELTS ▶ IELTS AC ▶ Test of Spoken English (TSE) ▶ TOEFL ▶ TEST-CAN ▶ CAN-TEST ▶ Canadian English Language Benchmark Assessment for Nurses (CELBAN)	
☑ **Best** ◯ Emerging **04.** Consider consolidating the pre-program language assessment tool required with that required for immigration, licensure, or employment to ease the burden of duplicative and lengthy assessment procedures.	
☑ **Best** ◯ Emerging **05.** Inform candidates that the regulatory body may have different language requirements than the bridging program to manage expectations.	

II.   Bridging Program Components

Orientation:

It is recommended that bridging programs offer participants an orientation before the program begins. The length of the orientation may vary depending on the focus and the objectives of the orientation. Shorter orientations may be limited to orienting students to the program by going over standards, policies, academic environment, course selections, and financial assistance. Longer orientations could also include practice assessments or refreshers, as well as language development and information on practicing in the Canadian context.

Best or Emerging Practice	Comments/Notes
☑ Best ◯ Emerging **01.** Provide an orientation that clarifies: ▶ expectations ▶ workload ▶ costs ▶ program components ▶ supports provided	
☑ Best ◯ Emerging **02.** Allow candidates to interact with other participants and faculty through the orientation.	
☑ Best ◯ Emerging **03.** Develop individual learning plans, action plans or other case management approaches to help participants make the best use of the program.	

Administrative Supports:

Effective and adequate administrative supports are critical to bridging program success.

Best or Emerging Practice	Comments/Notes
☑ Best ◯ Emerging **01.** Provide administrative and infrastructure support, including: ▶ committed staff, faculty, and supervisors ▶ access to equipment ▶ access to libraries ▶ learning materials	
☑ Best ◯ Emerging **02.** Ensure program educators and administrators have: ▶ prior experience working with internationally educated individuals ▶ received cultural sensitivity training	

Mentorship and Networking:

Mentorships can support an ITI in integrating to the professional culture and values in Canada. They can also support ITIs in developing professional networks, workplace readiness, and communication/language skills. Mentoring provided by other ITIs who have gone through the process can help ITIs learn to navigate the licensure and employment process from those who have successfully done so.

Best or Emerging Practice	Comments/Notes
Best / Emerging — **01.** Connect participants with ongoing mentorship from bridge program alumni or other practitioners.	
Best / Emerging — **02.** Invest in mentor training to ensure mentors can successfully fill their roles.	
Best / Emerging — **03.** Provide professional networking opportunities that are meaningful. These could include events such as: ▶ career fairs ▶ professional development events ▶ industry-institutional liaison ▶ networking events	
Best / Emerging — **04.** Create a community of learners through in-class contact with other newcomers in the same situation.	

Occupation-Specific Language Training:

Occupation-specific language training offers instruction geared to a particular profession and typically includes practical exercises based on workplace communication tasks. It also teaches students about Canadian social and cultural expectations within the profession.

Best or Emerging Practice	Comments/Notes
Best / Emerging — **01.** Ensure language proficiency requirements have been met prior to enrolling candidates in a bridging program.	
Best / Emerging — **02.** Provide occupation-specific language training through: ▶ occupation-specific language curriculum ▶ occupation-specific language training embedded throughout other program curriculum, and/or ▶ practical/work experience training	
Best / **Emerging** — **03.** Support program participants by including English as a Second Language specialists alongside assessors in testing situations and as needed throughout the program.	

Practicing in the Canadian Context: Cultural Literacy and Soft Skills:

Soft skills are rooted in culture. They include communication, interpersonal, problem-solving and critical-thinking skills. Soft skills include the ability to give and receive feedback, work in teams, and use appropriate levels of deference and initiative in superior/subordinate relations. These skills have enormous impacts on ITIs' success in the workplace.

Best or Emerging Practice	Comments/Notes
Best / Emerging — **01.** Develop soft skills through supports such as: ▶ observational job shadowing ▶ clinical/workplace experiences ▶ workplace readiness curriculum ▶ communication courses ▶ mentorships ▶ simulations	
Best / Emerging — **02.** Provide opportunities to improve cultural competence—the knowledge of the local culture of practice through supports such as: ▶ observational job shadowing ▶ clinical/workplace experiences ▶ workplace readiness curriculum ▶ communication courses	

Practicing in the Canadian Context: Canadian Work Experience:

The practical workplace experience offered in bridging programs allows ITIs to gain Canadian experience, obtain references, develop their networks, and learn more about Canadian workplace culture. Practical work experiences might be referred to as practicums, internships, co-ops, clinical placements, etc.

Best or Emerging Practice	Comments/Notes
Best / Emerging — **01.** Provide Canadian workplace experience opportunities.	
Best / Emerging — **02.** To secure placements: ▶ schedule work placements off-cycle from full-time programs and/or ▶ seek placements in rural or underserviced areas	
Best / **Emerging** — **03.** Structure the work placement by providing a detailed checklist of observable tasks [2]. This should include validation or sign-off that the ITI carried out the tasks at an acceptable level. Staff supervising the placement may require training to support this.	

[2] The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) has developed a guide to help design work-integrated learning opportunities: http://www.heqco.ca/en-ca/Research/ResPub/Pages/A-Practical-Guide-for-Work-integrated-Learning.aspx

Best ○
Emerging ☑

04. Ensure ITIs have access to reasonably priced liability insurance coverage in order to participate in an observational job shadowing role or in supervised practical/clinical placements.

Academic Requirements and Exam Preparation:

While bridging programs should recognize that ITIs have already earned an academic credential in their field and should not repeat learning already acquired, bridging programs may offer academic modules that fill any identified gaps in required academic knowledge. Exam preparation can support ITIs by teaching them about expected response style, format of exams, and underlying cultural assumptions. Increasing the speed of taking the exam may also be important as most licensing exams only allow for a limited amount of time to answer each question.

Best ☑
Emerging ○

01. Establish formal affiliations with the post-secondary institutions responsible for training practitioners in Canada.

Best ☑
Emerging ○

02. Develop academic content based on identified gaps/needs in:

- ▶ assessment results (e.g. self-assessment, PLAR, competency-based assessment)
- ▶ licensure exam results
- ▶ discipline records
- ▶ credential reviews
- ▶ feedback from mentors and employers

Best ☑
Emerging ○

03. Use teaching methods and assessments that are similar to the approaches used with students in Canada to ensure acceptability to the public and the professional community.

Best ☑
Emerging ○

04. Evaluate academic content on a regular basis to ensure it is filling identified client needs.

Best ☑
Emerging ○

05. Provide exam preparation supports as a topic or module, but not the focus, of the program.
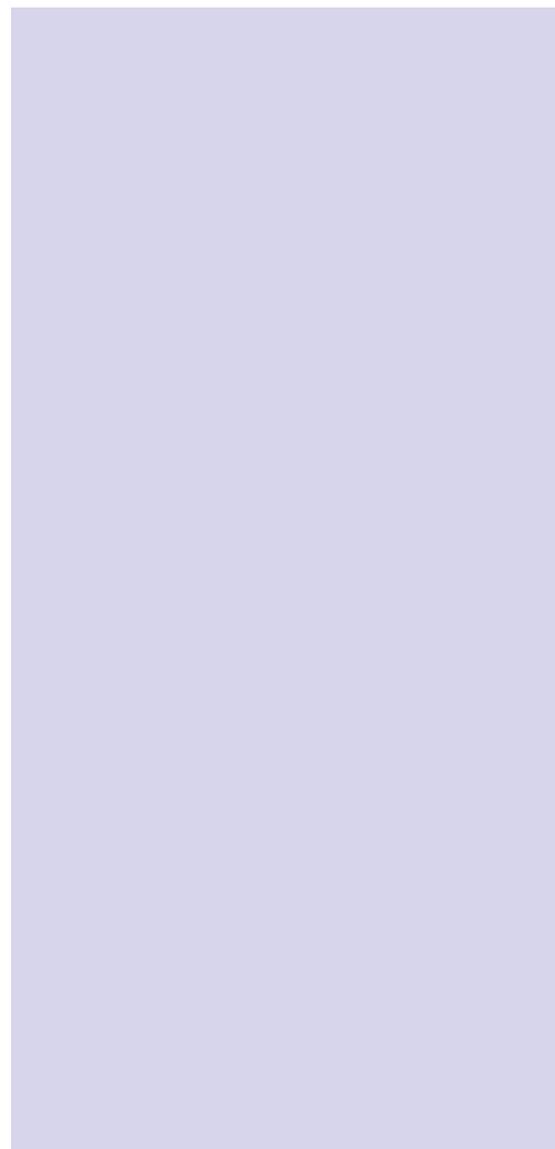
Career Planning:

Since the ultimate goal, and one of the measures of success, of bridging programs is employment in an ITI's profession, career planning and employment preparation topics can contribute to an ITI's long-term development as a professional.

| Best or Emerging Practice	Comments/Notes
Best ✓ / Emerging — **01.** Provide workforce integration supports such as: ▶ job shadowing ▶ clinical/work placements ▶ networking with local professionals	
Best ✓ / Emerging — **02.** Provide workshops on: ▶ job search strategies ▶ interview skills ▶ resumés and cover letters	
Best ✓ / Emerging — **03.** Provide timely, accurate, and geographically based labour market information to set realistic expectations about job prospects.	
Best / **Emerging** ✓ — **04.** Encourage participants to keep a record of job search activities.	
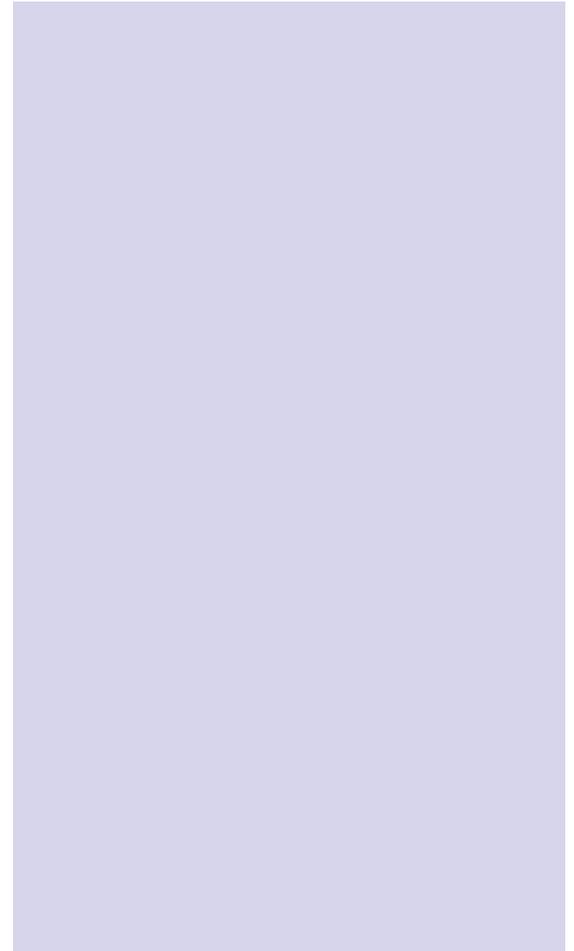
III.   Program Development and Delivery

Stakeholder Input, Coordination and Roles:
Partnerships among different organizations are a key element of bridging program success. The development of a bridging program should ideally involve partnerships between stakeholders such as employers, educators, regulators, professional associations, governments and community/settlement or employment agencies.

|	Best or Emerging Practice	Comments/Notes
Best ☑ / Emerging ○	**01.** Involve a broad range of stakeholders such as employers, educators, regulators, immigrant-serving organizations, governments and community/settlement or employment agencies in program planning and oversight to improve coordination and outcomes.	
Best ☑ / Emerging ○	**02.** Create an interdisciplinary coordinating or advisory body to oversee the development and delivery of a bridging program.	
Best ☑ / Emerging ○	**03.** Involve internationally educated practitioners or bridging program alumni as: ▶ members of the coordinating body ▶ program participant mentors	
Best ☑ / Emerging ○	**04.** Involve regulatory bodies to: ▶ identify needs/gaps for curriculum development ▶ refer potential participants ▶ collect data on licensure rates of bridge program graduates	
Best ☑ / Emerging ○	**05.** Partner with post-secondary institutions to ▶ provide expertise in education and assessment ▶ offer comprehensive services to bridge program candidates that are already in place for other students	
Best ☑ / Emerging ○	**06.** Engage employers to: ▶ provide advice on curriculum, particularly language, communication, and job search ▶ offer work placements ▶ offer employment to bridging program graduates ▶ contribute financially ▶ become ambassadors for the bridging program	

Best ○ Emerging

07. Engage government to:

 ▶ provide funding

 ▶ share promising practices

 ▶ coordinate the delivery of clear and accurate information to immigrants
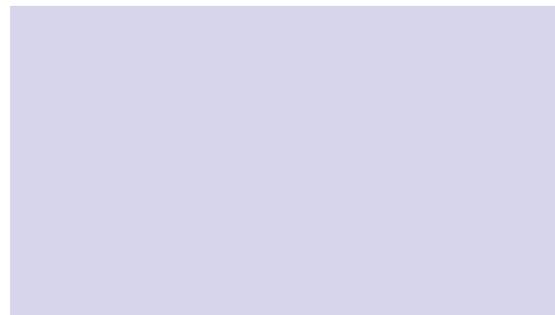
Flexible, Client-Centred Delivery:

Where ITIs require bridging, programs and services should minimize repetition of previous learning. Programs should allow flexibility of access. The aim should be to reduce barriers to access resulting from geography as well as barriers that result from ITIs' need to work to support themselves and their families while simultaneously completing a bridging program.

✔ Best ○ Emerging

01. Assess participants' individual needs prior to starting the program.

✔ Best ○ Emerging

02. Offer modular programming that allows ITIs to take courses that specifically address the differences between Canada's occupational expectations and those of the ITI's home country.

✔ Best ○ Emerging

03. Create a culture of difference rather than deficit by facilitating a strengths-based programming model that draws on current knowledge and skills, rather than the starting point being a position of deficit, lack or weakness.

✔ Best ○ Emerging

04. Offer a range of programming approaches according to the candidate's needs and learning style. Examples include:

 ▶ on-line

 ▶ face-to-face

 ▶ blended on-line and face-to-face

✔ Best ○ Emerging

05. Provide flexible scheduling and program delivery for those who cannot attend a full-time program.

✔ Best ○ Emerging

06. Ensure that participants have opportunities for professional socialization, cultural orientation, and networking.

○ Best **✔ Emerging**

07. Use technology to improve communication by distance, such as Blackboard Collaborate and Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment).

Best ✓
Emerging ○
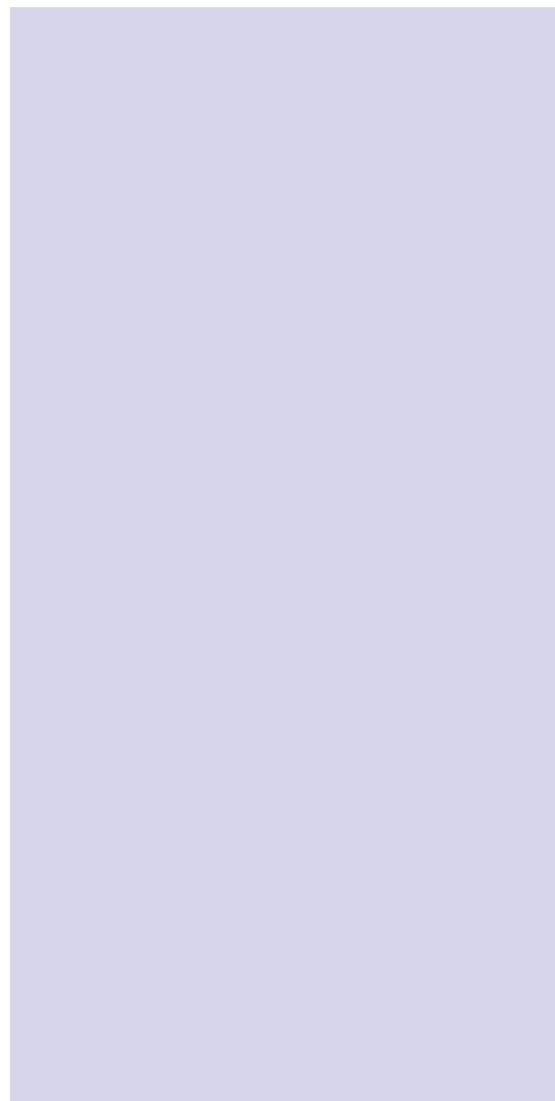
08. Operate satellite offices in other communities according to candidate needs.

Program Evaluation:

A robust program evaluation of both processes and outcomes is important to respond to day-to-day operations as well as to evaluate program impacts.

Best ✓
Emerging ○

01. Identify a program evaluation framework, which includes four levels of program evaluation, such as[3]:

1. measures participants' reactions to the program
2. measures whether learning occurred
3. examines behavior that has changed
4. assesses program results

Best ✓
Emerging ○

02. Include comparative analysis to validate and identify practices that are associated with successful outcomes, such as improvements on:

▶ assessment results

▶ exam results

▶ licensure rates

▶ employment rates

▶ cultural competence

▶ occupation-specific language

Best ✓
Emerging ○
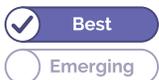
03. Include ongoing evaluation to continuously improve the program. Ongoing evaluations should include well-defined indicators that could be attributable to program success. This should include an evaluation of:

▶ participants (see measures of success in 2 above)

▶ instructors/staff

▶ curriculum

▶ administrative supports

▶ workplace mentors/preceptors

▶ participating employers

▶ the usefulness of the advisory committee

[3] Program evaluation framework example developed by Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (2007).
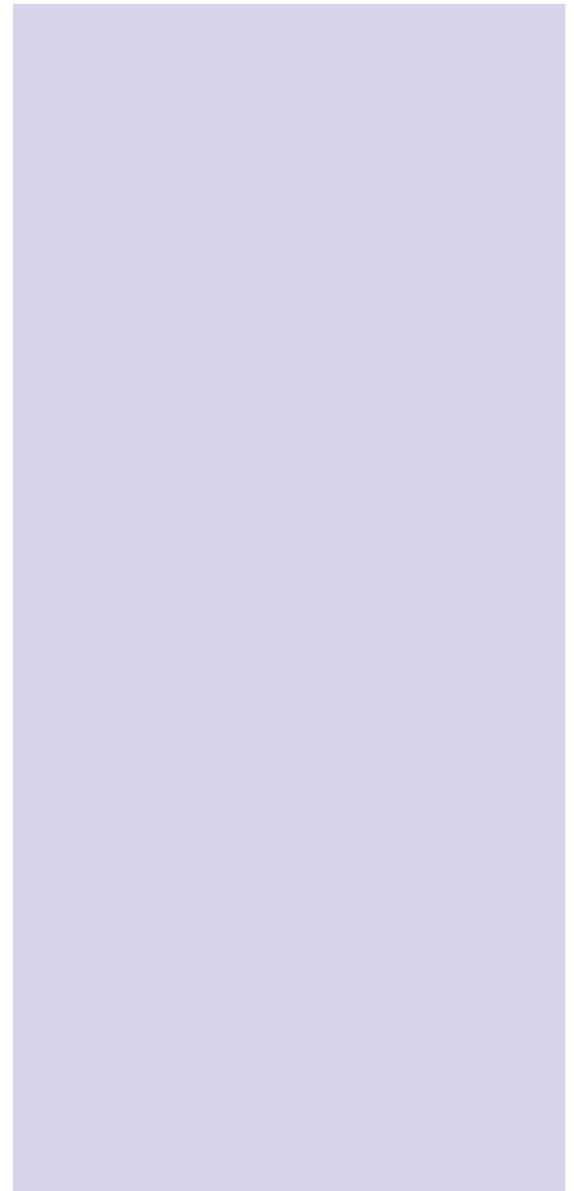
Program Funding and Financial Sustainability:

Funding and financial sustainability are important features of effective bridging programs.

Best or Emerging Practice	Comments/Notes
Best ✓ / Emerging — **01.** Develop a strategic, long-term vision to position bridging education as an expected part of occupational training.	
Best ✓ / Emerging — **02.** Develop a clear organizational framework and a systematic approach to curriculum development.	
Best ✓ / Emerging — **03.** Conduct an environmental scan to identify potential funding sources.	
Best ✓ / Emerging — **04.** Provide a list of financial options that program participants may be eligible to apply for, such as: ▶ microloans ▶ student loans ▶ bank loans ▶ provincial/territorial FQR supports ▶ scholarships ▶ bursaries	
Best ✓ / Emerging — **05.** Conduct market research on program needs.	
Best ✓ / Emerging — **06.** Market the program through regulatory bodies and/or professional associations.	
Best ✓ / Emerging — **07.** Build flexibility into the program to be able to adapt to changing enrolment numbers.	
Best ✓ / Emerging — **08.** Coordinate the delivery of online bridging programs across provinces.	
Best ✓ / Emerging — **09.** Advocate for stable long-term funding.	
Best ✓ / Emerging — **10.** Work with student loan policy makers to achieve student loan eligibility for bridging program participants if this does not already exist.	
Best / **Emerging** ✓ — **11.** Set-up administrative processes to make the program attractive to donors, e.g. the ability to generate tax receipts.	

Best ✓
Emerging ○

12. Encourage employers to pay for the cost of participants, especially in high-demand occupations.

Best ✓
Emerging ○

13. If considering offering income assistance in pilot programs, ensure it is sustainable on an ongoing basis.

Best ○
Emerging ✓

14. Continuously evaluate the roles of program staff to ensure optimal use of resources.

Best ○
Emerging ✓

15. Provide low cost features that are highly desirable to participants such as:

  ▶ study space
  ▶ opportunities for networking with other international candidates
  ▶ common timetable scheduling

Best ✓
Emerging ○

16. Create strong ties to employers and regulatory bodies to improve sustainability.