



Developing a flexible training model for Aboriginal Cultural Ambassadors in Canada

Background

The Aboriginal Cultural Ambassador (ACA) program is an innovative and first of its kind training program, which addresses the unique industry need for targeted training-to-employment and skills development in the Aboriginal Cultural Tourism (ACT) sector. Although there are other Aboriginal tourism training programs across Canada, none to date have balanced mainstream tourism industry requirements with Aboriginal arts, culture and heritage training. This is an essential combination for any Aboriginal people wanting to pursue a career in ACT. ACA was developed as a National program, through a partnership between Aboriginal Experiences, Art & Culture (AEAC) and OTEC, which ensures that all graduates obtain nationally recognized certifications.

Purpose

The ACA program was first created to develop the service skills and knowledge

of Aboriginal youth and prepare them to become Ambassadors for their culture and secure employment in the ACT sector. It is well aligned to serve the gaps identified in [Aboriginal Tourism Ontario's 2013 strategic plan](#) including, high Aboriginal unemployment, growing tourism sector labour shortages and the growing Canadian Aboriginal Tourism industry. The program has since been adapted to be delivered to incumbent Aboriginal tourism professionals and, specifically, for experienced Heritage Interpreters.

Aboriginal Cultural Ambassadors: Program Overview

To reiterate, the ACA program is an innovative training-to-employment and skills development program. The Training-to-Employment program model includes extensive opportunities for participants to learn more about their cultural heritage through building wigwams, creating hand drums, learning traditional songs, stories

and dances. The program provides a strong sense of culture and community, with Aboriginal trainers for both the tourism and arts/culture components which allows each element of the program to be reflective of their community and culture. Some of the additional “aboriginal” support structures such as an elder/culture resource person being available to participants, helps to ensure the successful completion of the program by participants, despite whatever barriers individuals might have faced in the past. All skills and knowledge gained are transferable skills, opening doors to the many opportunities that are available in the Aboriginal Cultural Tourism sector as well as mainstream tourism industry sectors. The Aboriginal Cultural Ambassador program model combines nationally recognized industry certifications with a well-rounded curriculum of Aboriginal elder teachings. The ACA model is responsive, adapting content based on participant profiles and training objectives to create a program variation uniquely designed to meet the needs of the specific project.

curriculum reflected the training required for new workers in the industry and included a comprehensive curriculum incorporating workplace foundational skills training, heritage/cultural interpretation training, as well as occupation-specific skills training for the occupational stream chosen by the participant. This program model was delivered to two cohorts over the course of two years (January 2012 and January 2014) and participants travelled from as far as the Northwest Territories and British Columbia to participate in this intensive pre-employment training program (6 months).

“Successful outcomes are based not just on our participants’ successful employment integration but on the recognized self-awareness and confidence the participants walk away with. I AM and I CAN.”

-Arlene Chevrier
Project Coordinator,
ACA Training Program



Outcomes

The ACA program and model have been implemented in four unique projects across the country, with components differing based on objectives for each.

The first project was launched in 2011 in Ottawa and was targeted at job seekers from across Canada interested in careers in tourism and hospitality. As such, the

An important component of the ACA Training-to-Employment program model is an eight week “field placement”, secured with tourism employers which gives the participants of the ACA training program the opportunity to start accumulating hours towards their national tourism certified professional designations in either *emerit* Heritage Interpreter or their 2nd *emerit* certification choice. This is a critical outcome of the program as participants gain very valuable work experience to add to their resume and build upon their confidence and skills for securing sustainable employment.

Aboriginal Experiences, Art & Culture (AEAC) took an active role in ensuring participants who were interested in pursuing their *emerit* Heritage Interpreter

Certification had the opportunity to complete their placement at their tourist site on Ottawa's Victoria Island, providing guided tours to visitors. AEAC also provided placements for participants who selected Event Coordinator as their 2nd *emerit* choice, and provided the opportunity for participants to work directly with the Summer Solstice Aboriginal Arts Festival which AEAC coordinates under the direction of the National Aboriginal Day committee. This festival allowed participants to obtain hands on experience in the coordination of a fast growing festival with over 30,000 attendees.



The second project was delivered in Calgary, again with the program curriculum geared specifically towards Aboriginal jobseekers interested in careers in tourism and hospitality. For this project the curriculum included workplace foundational skills training and occupation-specific skills training for the occupational stream related to their future employment.

The third project was delivered in British Columbia, for participants employed with the Klahowya Village in Stanley Park for the 2014 summer season. The program was delivered in partnership with the Aboriginal Tourism Association of British Columbia (AtBC) and was primarily focused on heritage and cultural skills training. Participants of the program challenged the national *emerit* Heritage

Interpreter Certification Exam upon completion of the training.

The fourth project was delivered in partnership with Great Spirit Circle Trail (GSCT) and the program objective was to provide culturally relevant *emerit* Heritage Interpreter training and professional certification to experienced guides and interpreters in the Manitoulin Island region. GSCT identified the need for industry-recognized training for their staff and community members, and it was a natural fit for AEAC to deliver this training, based on their experience.

The consistent theme across all of the ACA program cohorts was that the curriculum combines *emerit* National Occupational Standards and Aboriginal Cultural components, and each program was delivered by Aboriginal trainers.

Results

63 individuals participated in the 4 program variations, of which 55 received the national tourism certification resulting in a certification rate of 87%. 41 participants are currently employed, or are returning to school full time, or pursuing other training relating to the Tourism Industry. To date the ACA program has inspired over 65% of participants to pursue careers in the Tourism sector.



Partnership

The partnership between OTEC and Aboriginal Experiences Arts and Culture was formed to respond to the lack of nationally recognized mainstream tourism training combined with a strong balance of Aboriginal arts, culture and heritage programming for the ACT sector. OTEC was chosen to partner with Aboriginal Experiences due to their expertise in *emerit* nationally recognized certifications and strategic program development. Since the program's inception in 2011 the partnership has expanded to include a new Ottawa-based Culinary program beginning in summer 2015 and discussions are under way with academic partners for a new corporate training program in Northern Ontario.

Key Outcomes

The Aboriginal Experiences ACA project has resulted in 3 main project legacies:

- 3 years after the first train-the-trainer delivered by OTEC, AEAC is now OTEC's recognized partner in Heritage and Culture training
- AEAC's partnership with OTEC has grown to include community and industry partnership networks across Canada
- AEAC's ACA program has been recognized by Industry Canada as a success story of the Federal Tourism Strategy

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