



Natural Asset Management Challenge Dialogue



October 2023

Table of Contents

| | | |
|---|---|----|
| 1 | Introduction | 1 |
| 2 | Summary | 2 |
| | <i>Figure 1: Main areas of concentration categorized as templates and tools, marketing and communication, integration and collaboration, requirements and regulation, and engagement and inclusion.</i> | 3 |
| 3 | Discussion | 4 |
| | Templates and tools | 4 |
| | Marketing and communication | 5 |
| | Integration and collaboration | 5 |
| | Requirements and regulation | 6 |
| | Engagement and inclusion. | 6 |
| 4 | Recommendations | 7 |
| 5 | Conclusion | 8 |
| | Appendix | 9 |
| | Methods | 9 |
| | Results | 10 |
| | <i>Figure 2: Illustration of one breakout group in MURAL.</i> | 10 |
| | Educational and professional perspectives | 11 |
| | <i>Table 1: Selected workshop quotes from professionals that related to 'professions' and 'requirements'.</i> | 11 |
| | Sentiment index. | 12 |
| | <i>Figure 3: Starting Points</i> | 12 |
| | <i>Figure 4: Leverage Points</i> | 13 |
| | <i>Figure 5: Opportunities and Partnerships.</i> | 14 |
| | Word frequency | 15 |
| | <i>Figure 6: Word Cloud associated with all breakout group responses by workshop participants where greater prominence illustrates greater frequency.</i> | 15 |
| | <i>Figure 7: Word Cloud associated only with workshop participants working in education where greater prominence illustrates greater frequency.</i> | 16 |
| | <i>Figure 8: Word Cloud associated only with workshop participants working in professional practice where greater prominence illustrates greater frequency.</i> | 17 |
| | Thematic coding. | 17 |
| | <i>Figure 9: Matrix of coded instances according to capacity building phases on the left axis and enabling strategies along the top axis.</i> | 17 |



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Champion Organizing Team:

- **Dena Kae Beno**, Challenge Dialogue System Network
- **Roy Brooke**, Executive Director NAI
- **Dr. Liese Coulter**, Royal Roads University
- **Dr. Robin Cox**, Royal Roads University
- **Dr. Michael Drescher**, University of Waterloo
- **Joanna Eyquem**, Intact Centre on Climate Adaptation, University of Waterloo
- **Vivian Forssman**, Royal Roads University
- **Keith Jones**, Challenge Dialogue System Network
- **Dr. Susan Nesbit**, Environmental Engineering Program, UBC
- **Melina Scholefield**, Professional engineer
- **Jeff Walker**, CSA Group

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1 Introduction

Nature-based Solutions (NbS) are increasingly being adopted as part of a just transition to a low carbon society that is better prepared to meet the challenges of a changing climate¹. In practice, NbS are creating new employment and work activities which require new services and re-employment training². The increased need for skilled workers, professionals and training programs³ is especially challenging for small local governments with limited resources⁴.

NI must necessarily connect with existing built infrastructure, therefore existing training and practice programs need to develop new pathways to educate the 21st-century engineer⁵. For example, Engineering and Geoscientists of British Columbia (EGBC) worked with the NAI to develop directives that guide the inclusion of NAM into professional practice. Such examples are rare, but with a clearer articulation of the required combinations of competencies, and how these translate into professional practice, they can increase.

This is a final report on research engaging a multi-stakeholder/rights holder group in a survey process (Challenge Paper questionnaire) and a subsequent virtual dialogue (Challenge Dialogue Workshop). The Challenge Dialogue⁶ explored and responded to a proposed set of natural infrastructure (NI) and Natural Asset Management (NAM) norms, identified core competencies, and explored user-needs related to NAM training. Working with the Natural Assets Initiative (NAI), this work builds on the efforts of the Adaptation Learning Network project led by Dr. Robin Cox and the Resilience By Design lab at (RRU). Details of the research methods and results are included in the appendix.

The long-term goal of the project is to contribute to the ongoing evolution of the field of natural asset management through identifying a map forward for education and training curricula that will help mainstream the practice across Canada. Ultimately, we hope this work will inform the design and development of learning opportunities that will contribute to upskilling a workforce to implement and mainstream NAM more effectively.

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- 1 Warren, F. J., & Lulham, N. (Eds.). (2021). *Canada in a Changing Climate: National Issues Report*. Government of Canada, Ottawa. [doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4095/328384](https://doi.org/10.4095/328384).
 - 2 Reid, Hannah, Gabriela Balvedi Pimentel, and Mon Castillo. *Decent Work in Nature-Based Solutions*. (International Labour Organization and UNEP, 2022). www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_863035.pdf.
 - 3 Sarabi, S., Han, Q., Romme, A. G. L., de Vries, B., Valkenburg, R., & den Ouden, E. (2020). *Uptake and implementation of Nature-Based Solutions: An analysis of barriers using Interpretive Structural Modeling*. *J Environ Manage*, 270, 110749. doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2020.110749
 - 4 Méthot, J., & Rawluk, A. (2023). *The State of Play Report for Natural Infrastructure on the Canadian Prairies*. International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD). www.iisd.org/system/files/2023-05/state-of-play-natural-infrastructure-canadian-prairies.pdf
 - 5 Nesbit, S., Ellis, N., & Ostafichuk, P. (2017). *Working with "Others": Developing Sustainability Skills in the First Year Engineering Classroom*. Proceedings of the Canadian Engineering Education Association (CEEA). doi.org/10.24908/pceea.v0i0.10191
 - 6 Details available at: www.challengedialoguesystem.net

2 Summary

Natural Infrastructure (NI) and Natural Assets Management (NAM) face a wide range of well-identified inter-related barriers to becoming mainstream practices. One such barrier is the lack of skilled workers, professionals and training programs to develop the skills needed for climate resilient NI which is the foundation of NAM. In addition, the roles and responsibilities associated with NAM are not well understood or defined. Despite the growing availability of funding opportunities for NI, smaller local governments may lack the staff time and technical training to plan, fund or implement NI projects.

A Challenge Dialogue is one methodology for gathering stakeholder / rights holder views on a complex issue such as the foregoing⁷. Within this context, a NAM-related Challenge Dialogue was framed by a statement regarding a potential, desirable future end-state. The statement is that *for there to be Canada-wide NAM, natural assets will be appreciated alongside built assets as integral to community infrastructure, and that local governments want to initiate NAM with the help of existing firms and organizations*. The statement also added *that widespread capacity to deliver NAM will depend on the availability of trained professionals working from norms, standards and certifications that makes their practices effective, comparable, and replicable*. This report is an assessment of responses received through a Challenge Dialogue process (a survey and workshop) to these statements.

The NAM Challenge Dialogue workshop was structured around three capacity building focal areas: Starting Points, Leverage Points and Partnership Opportunities. Participants identified themes that are grouped into five dominant enabling strategies. In order of participant emphasis these are: 1) Templates and tools; 2) Marketing and communication; 3) Integration and collaboration; 4) Requirements and regulation; and 5) Engagement and Inclusion (Figure 1).

The results from this workshop is intended to support the efforts of a range of stakeholders involved in NAM, develop effective interventions to increase its uptake.

Recommendations from the workshop

1/ Templates and tools: Share case studies

Develop NAM case studies as teaching and learning materials that can address all phases of NI projects and represent the range of transdisciplinary actors who must collaborate across the ongoing life of natural assets. Make learning materials open-access while regulating credentials.

⁷ Details available at: www.challengedialoguesystem.net

2/ Marketing and communication: Increase demand

NI and NAM are emerging fields and there are valid questions regarding the speed and extent of demand for related education and skills training. Without requirements to shift to greener infrastructure through legislation or regulation, a substantial government funding stream linked directly to NI would be needed to increase demand for training and education.

3/ Integration and collaboration: Network knowledge

Develop and make freely accessible, enabling devices such a tools and templates to share common understandings of NAM and transfer knowledge across networks. Address the skills and abilities needed to evaluate co-benefits of NI, applying principles for integration with grey infrastructure and sharing knowledge across existing professional and cultural boundaries.

4/ Requirements and regulation: Standardize guidance

Develop and share good-practice guidance at introductory and intermediate levels that can be applied by multiple professions. In addition to basic principals for NI, more specialized skills and competencies will usually be developed and accredited by professional associations such as those for engineers and planners, for example.

5/ Engagement and Inclusion: Build on relationships

Strengthen existing relationships within organizations and partnerships, as well as reaching out to new partners. Build inclusive working relationships with professions, skilled workers and administrators to support NAM and develop new champions. Support NAM professional development opportunities across a wide range of roles in education, community and employment.

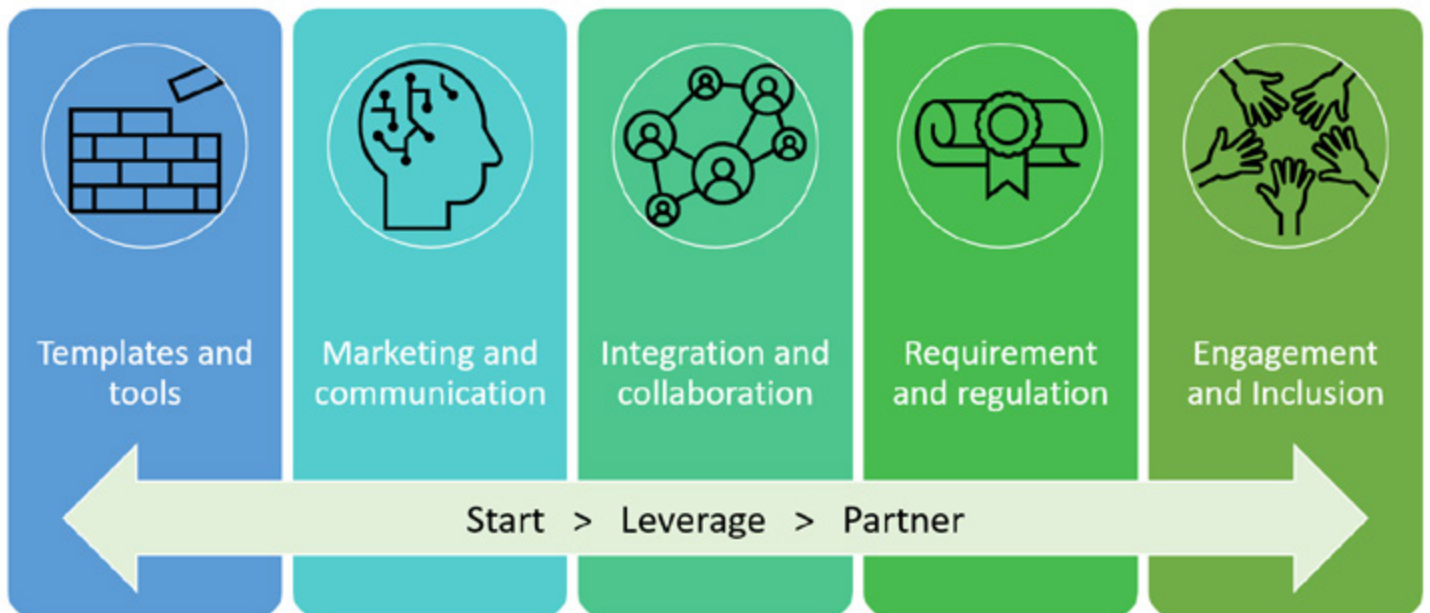


Figure 1: Main areas of concentration categorized as templates and tools, marketing and communication, integration and collaboration, requirements and regulation, and engagement and inclusion.

3 Discussion

The key questions asked of all Challenge Dialogue participants concerned opportunities to increase natural asset management education and skills. Participants involved in education showed a different focus compared to those involved in professional practices aligned with natural infrastructure and natural asset management. The main avenues forward identified by educators were through developing curriculum material and learning opportunities to increase knowledge for engaged students. Professionals were more focused on credentials and meeting regulatory requirements, either set by government through legislation, or by professional associations. However, across all participants there was a clear focus on case studies as a key educational tool for NI and NAM, and public works projects as appropriate subjects to engage an invested audience.

Templates and tools

Above all, participants focused on educational and professional materials and resources that can assist to build capacity in NI and NAM. Templates and tools are especially important to leverage existing guidance for regulation and policy, public and professional communication materials and educational programs. Updating existing materials recognizes the importance of using familiar channels of communication and aligning with professional and policy norms of information access and acceptance. This included calls for standards and regulations to increase drivers for participation in NAM. These resources were also seen as vital to information sharing to support partnership opportunities and to update professional standards. NAM case studies were often cited to support both training and practice, and to increase demand by supporting marketing and communication. Creating new curriculum and training materials were also mentioned to address changing risk and hazard profiles that will shift with climate change impacts and social and economic change.

Participant suggestions include:

- Restoration Case studies: Contextual issues as well as specific outcome.
- Establish and advertise platforms for data sharing.
- Existing resource collections (e.g., Green Infrastructure Ontario) -- bring these together, make them accessible to different communities.
- Use of CVC Return on Investment Tool to promote NAM.
- Create curriculum material to develop case studies (share in education and PD).

Marketing and communication

Increasing understanding and awareness of NAM through communication was commonly called for as a starting place, especially with an aim to create greater demand, which is a fundamental aspect of marketing. Many suggestions aimed to promote awareness of the multiple benefits of ecosystem services through well informed communication, again highlighting the need for case studies. There was significant crossover with templates and tools especially as leveraging points to link with current education and professional resources. References to NA valuation generally aimed to promote NAM by communicating the economic benefits, rather than as useful for other purposes, such as monitoring.

Participant suggestions include:

- Why do it? articulate this clearly (CAOs, councils need to see rationale, value added) -- case studies helpful.
- Educational opportunities targeting municipalities, asset managers, public servants etc. -- create demand.
- Facilitate access to education resources through awareness building.
- CASE STUDIES that illustrate co-benefits across value systems & emphasis the economic benefits.
- CONFERENCES - multi-disciplinary info exchange e.g. BCWWA⁸.

Integration and collaboration

When considering NAM opportunities and potential partnerships, integration and collaboration were a common theme. Again, the focus on how to achieve this was largely on templates and tools, seen as enabling devices to share common understandings and transfer knowledge. Skills were mentioned here with calls for greater recognition of skilled workers beyond professional associations. Collaborations were also seen as important leveraging points where ongoing efforts can be aligned to support NbS and NAM. Integration referenced both knowledge synthesis across disciplines and areas of expertise and more cultural inclusion of nature and indigenous communities as NAM is developed in practice.

Participant suggestions include:

- Collab with colleges/univ to set up co-op programs /early work terms.
- Need to bring skill sets together --- not just technical training.
- Integrating within changes in registration being required for Reconciliation (relation to nature is part of this).
- Co-benefits of NBS -- integration with grey infrastructure.
- Something similar to the IRP⁹ designation - broader set of integrated, connected skills (engineering).

⁸ BC Water & Waste Association (BCWWA).

⁹ In 2015, Engineers Canada launched the Infrastructure Resilience Professional (IRP) designation for Canadian engineers.

Requirements and regulation

Regulation was seen most often as a leverage point, rather than a place to start. Regulation was referenced as a tool for integration into common practice and as a method to increase demand for NAM. Rather than government legislation, regulation was usually discussed in the form of professional credentials that can be developed and monitored through self-regulating associations. Professional associations related to infrastructure management (i.e., engineers, asst managers, planners) were seen as offering the most direct and immediate leverage points to increase uptake of NAM. Continuing professional development (CPD) was specifically mentioned in all breakout groups, supporting inclusion of NAM in current and new credentials, and their education programs. The terms of reference (TOR) and requests for proposals (RFP) that define requirements for projects were acknowledged as regulating instruments in professional practice, reflecting back on the educational value of updated templates and tools.

Participant suggestions include:

- RFP requirements or criteria (requires clients to be trained).
- Mainstream this in accreditation programs (there's a lot of demand across areas).
- CPD programs run through professional associations.
- PROF ASSOCIATIONS - having (engineering) standards drives - specialist designations, credential programs.
- Room for cohort-based learning in a professional accreditation setting or professional development.

Engagement and inclusion

While workshop participants focused more on the how-to of upscaling NAM rather than the question of who is involved, engagement with partners was seen as a significant opportunity and effective starting point. Motivations for engaging with others include to gain funding and program support from all levels of government, to combine efforts by developing a community of practice with a local or professional focus, to be more inclusive of diverse communities and skill sets, and to gain economies of scale in sharing new knowledge supporting NAM. Building on existing partnerships was connected to more long-range thinking with immediate opportunities seen to support NAM champions in local government, indigenous communities and professional associations.

Participant suggestions include:

- Educational opportunities targeting municipalities, asset managers, public servants etc.
- Support Champions: elected officials & others -- could push LGs along, build support for training.

- Partnerships to do restoration & protection project with Indigenous groups, municipalities, etc.
- Governments of Canada (all have educational departments aimed at civil servants).
- Partner with public works associations & particularly operators – gap.

4 Recommendations

1/ Templates and tools: Share case studies

Develop NAM case studies as teaching and learning materials that can address all phases of NI projects and represent the range of transdisciplinary actors who must collaborate across the ongoing life of natural assets. Make learning materials open-access while regulating credentials.

2/ Marketing and communication: Increase demand

NI and NAM are emerging fields and there are valid questions regarding the speed and extent of demand for related education and skills training. Without requirements to shift to greener infrastructure through legislation or regulation, a substantial government funding stream linked directly to NI would be needed to increase demand for training and education.

3/ Integration and collaboration: Network knowledge

Develop and make freely accessible, enabling devices such a tools and templates to share common understandings of NAM and transfer knowledge across networks. Address the skills and abilities needed to evaluate co-benefits of NI, applying principles for integration with grey infrastructure and sharing knowledge across existing professional and cultural boundaries.

4/ Requirements and regulation: Standardize guidance

Develop and share good-practice guidance at introductory and intermediate levels that can be applied by multiple professions. In addition to basic principals for NI, more specialized skills and competencies will usually be developed and accredited by professional associations such as those for engineers and planners, for example.

5/ Engagement and Inclusion: Build on relationships

Strengthen existing relationships within organizations and partnerships, as well as reaching out to new partners. Build inclusive working relationships with professions, skilled workers and administrators to support NAM and develop new champions. Support NAM professional development opportunities across a wide range of roles in education, community and employment.

5 Conclusion

This Challenge Dialogue was framed by the statement regarding a potential future end-state, namely, that for there to be Canada-wide municipal natural asset management (NAM), natural assets will be appreciated alongside built assets as integral to municipal infrastructure, and that local governments are motivated to initiate NAM with the help of existing firms and organizations. The statement also added that widespread capacity to deliver NAM will depend on the availability of trained professionals working from norms, standards and certifications that makes their practices effective, comparable, and replicable. The recommendations were informed by the dominant enabling strategies identified by the workshop participants: 1) Templates and tools; 2) Marketing and communication; 3) Integration and collaboration; 4) Requirements and regulation; and 5) Engagement and Inclusion.

When considering these recommendations, it is important that the capacity building focal areas of Starting Points, Leverage Points and Partnership Opportunities are not seen as a linear progression following sequentially from one stage to the next. For systemic change in how natural infrastructure is understood and developed, it will be an ongoing process to identify and act on new starting and leverage points and to initiate and nurture partnerships, and the opportunities they provide..

Appendix

Methods

Participant responses were focused on a set of six statements related to identified education and training challenges for NAM and potential forward steps to address these challenges. The statements were developed with expert guidance for educators and professional familiar with the skills needed to develop natural infrastructure (NI) and manage natural assets.

Participants were challenged to respond to these six options as ways forward:

- Develop a roadmap that describes a desired future state and the tactics to achieve it over time
- Develop a resource directory which describes what organizations are doing.
- Determine top priorities for continuing professional development learning topics.
- Formalize a NAM community of practice.
- Develop a competency framework for NAM
- Conduct an indexed inventory of NAM-related academic programming, training and certifications across Canada

The Challenge Dialogue System (CDS™) offers a framework to help diverse groups collaborate and innovate to accomplish complex tasks for change and transformation. Structured discussions allow groups to test the nature of the challenge, its context, crucial assumptions, and expectations. With this shared clarity, groups can better align on impactful strategies and clear action plans. Participants responded to an online- questionnaire hosted by a Canadian-based engagement platform called Ethelo. In this questionnaire they were asked to read a Challenge paper that outlines a suggested national pathway forward for education. Results of the survey were reported in a progress report and informed the virtual workshop which was convened on 23 September 2022 to clarify understandings and plan strategic actions.

The workshop included plenary presentations and four facilitated breakout discussion groups, three of which involved participants mainly from related professions and one which involved participants mainly with educational affiliations. In the breakout groups, data was collected through the online collaboration tool MURAL. To broaden considerations beyond the initial challenge statements, discussions were focused on three strategic topics: starting points, leverage points, and partnership opportunities.

Responses were entered as text into the qualitative research analysis software, NVivo, and coded to identify thematic patterns. In addition to thematic coding, word frequency and sentiment analysis were used to confirm inferences and contribute to the formation of recommendations.

Results

The data was collected through two framing perspectives. First, inputs were framed by the ways in which interventions might be best suited to start new efforts, leverage new or existing efforts, or develop partnerships that can be initiated, supported or expanded to benefit from opportunities (Figure 2). Second, the inputs were grouped through breakout groups base on the participants’ background with a greater focus as a practitioner or as an educator. Notably, there were three professional breakout groups and one educational group, so results are described by group and in combination.

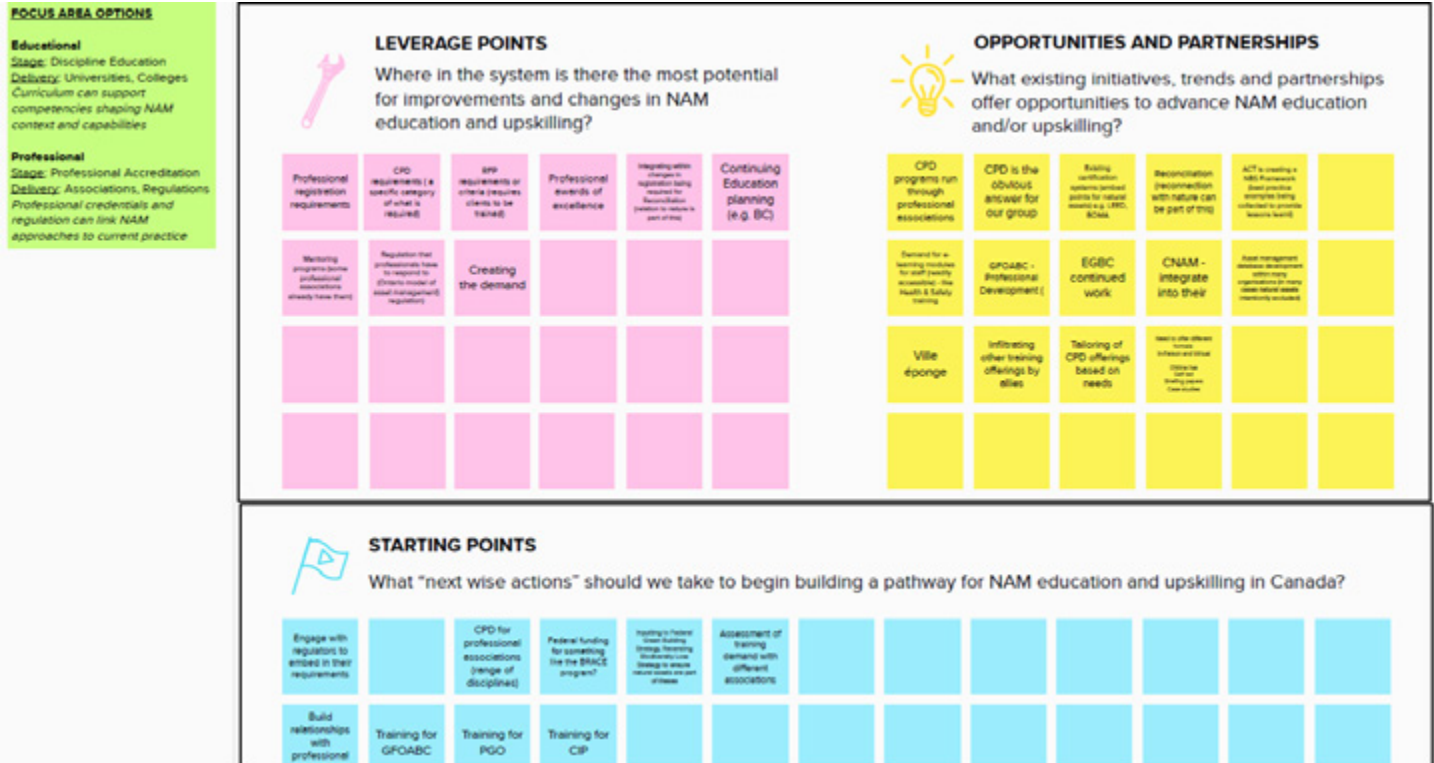


Figure 2: Illustration of one breakout group in MURAL.

Starting points, leverage points and partnership opportunities

Colour coding for the topic areas was:

- **Blue** indicated STARTING POINTS: START
- **Yellow** indicated OPPORTUNITIES AND PARTNERSHIPS: OPPS/PARTNERS
- **Pink** indicated LEVERAGE POINTS: LEVER

All input recorded in Mural was added to NVIVO as a data set with the fields: TEXT, and GROUP. TEXT responses were open ended while the GROUP field is labelled by either E for Educational focus or P for Professional focus, and an initial (E-S, P-M, P-D, P-). The report-back summary notes were labelled O-E. Each topic area was imported as a case following one of the three options detailed above: START, OPPS-PARTNERS and LEVER.

Educational and professional perspectives

While the number of participants was too small to develop statistically significant data, there were noticeable and perhaps unsurprising differences between the two groups in their education focus. Professionals overwhelmingly focused on professional activities and operations associated with NAM education, taking a largely practice-based view. In contrast, the only comment from educational sources that related to “public sector and professional associations”, was concerned “to make sure we have not over-priced our educational products to the point we have lost students”.

Build on existing accreditations to develop “sub-accreditation” in NAM

Aggregate good practices from the field and share in courses for designations

Assessment of training demand with different associations Build relationships with professional associations Training for GFOABC Training for PGO Training for CIP

CNAM - integrate

CPD requirements (a specific category of what is required) Professional Practice Standards

Credential Programs

Developing sub-accreditations for Engineers, Planners, Landscape Architects, Asset Managers,

Engage with regulators to embed in their requirements CPD for professional associations (range of disciplines)

Existing certification systems (embed points for natural assets) e.g. LEED, BOMA

GFOABC - Professional Development EGBC continued work

Infiltrating other training offerings by allies Tailoring of CPD offerings based on needs

opportunity to build NAM considerations into risk assessment of practice for engineers

professional practice guideline helps to normalize NAM but not sufficient

Professional registration requirements

Regulation that professionals have to respond to (Ontario model of asset management) regulation)

Standards - eg CSA Standards - good linkage between Engineers and Geoscientists ...

Table 1: Selected workshop quotes from professionals that related to ‘professions’ and ‘requirements’

Sentiment index

Spider graphs were automatically generated through NVivo and offer a preliminary insight into the rich information that was captured as participants responded to a key question.

STARTING POINTS: What “next wise actions” should we take to begin building a pathway for NAM education and upskilling in Canada? (Figure 3) Starting points were considered more positive than negative, offering a moderately positive sentiment index. The strongest responses related to case studies, followed by good practices and associations. There were also significant mentions of infrastructure, curriculum material, guest lecturers, resources, people, demand and transdisciplinary research.

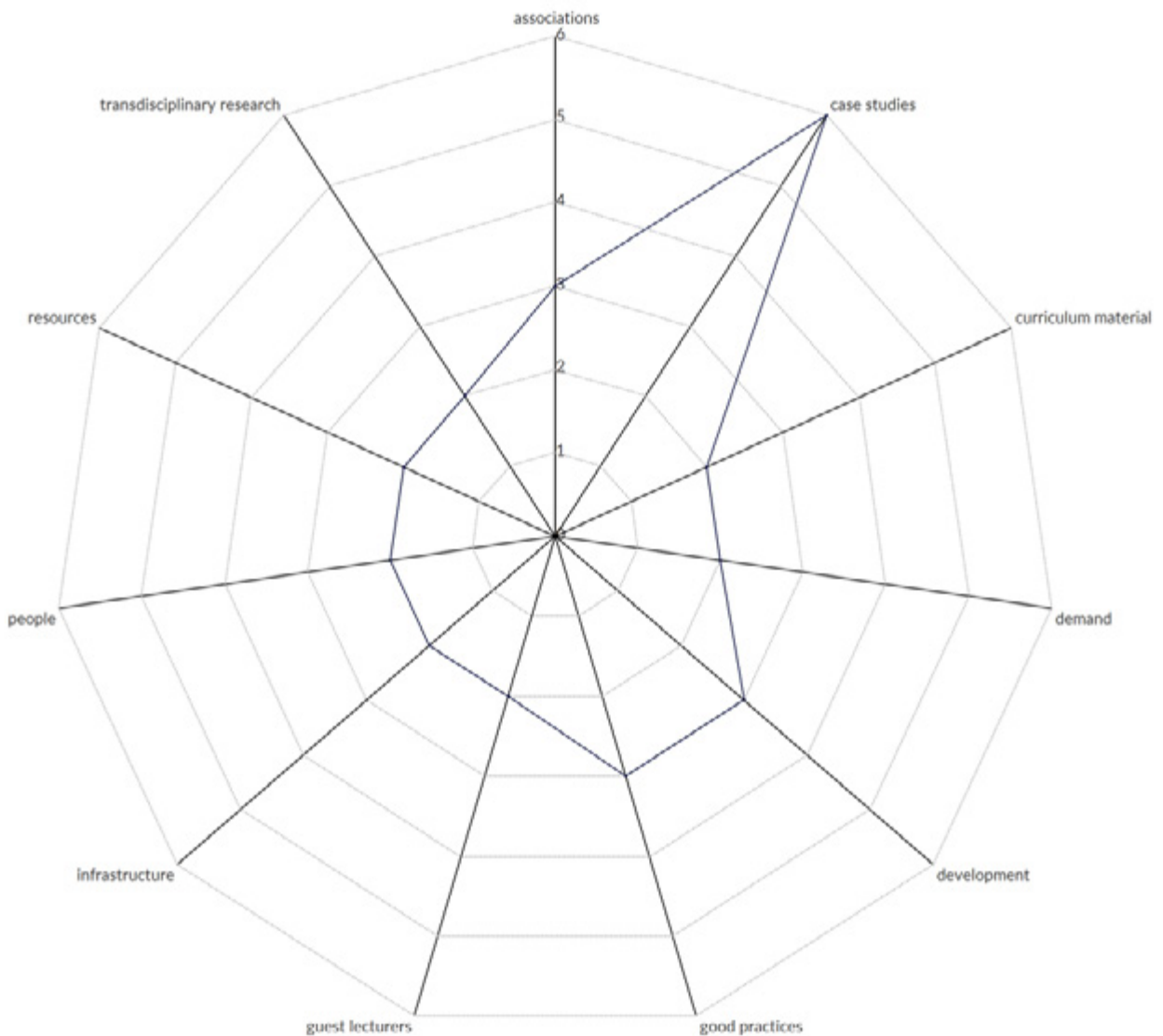


Figure 3: Starting Points

LEVERAGE POINTS: Where in the system is there the most potential for improvements and changes in NAM education and upskilling? (Figure 4)
 Leverage points were considered neither positive nor negative, offering a neutral sentiment index. Public works were seen as especially significant opportunities for leverage. Other commonly mentioned leverage points were accreditation, information sharing, managers, development and similarly to starting points, case studies.

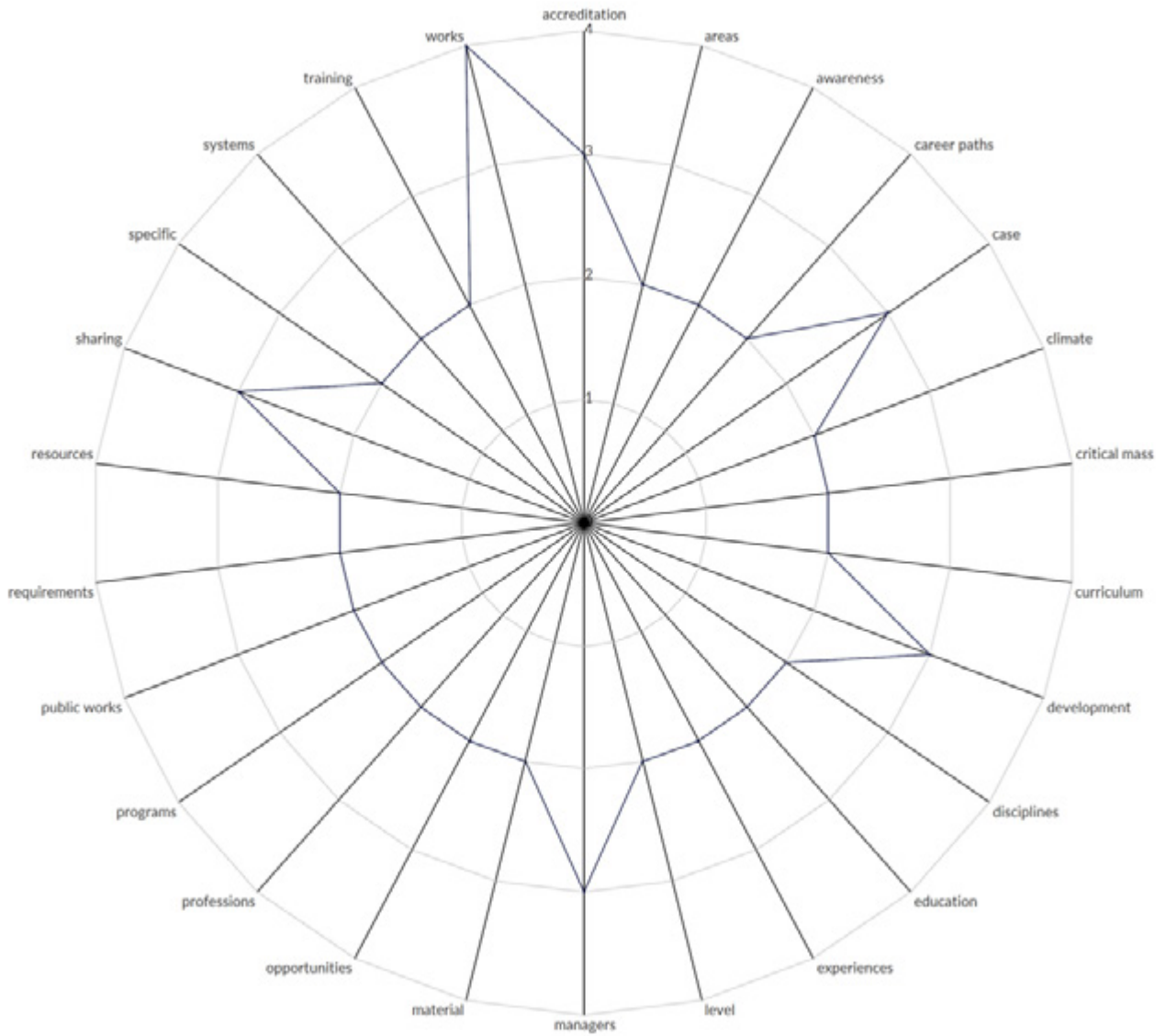


Figure 4: Leverage Points

OPPORTUNITIES AND PARTNERSHIPS: What existing initiatives, trends and partnerships offer opportunities to advance NAM education and/or upskilling? (Figure 5) Opportunities and partnerships were considered neither positive nor negative, offering a neutral sentiment index. Similarly, to starting points, public works were seen as significant opportunities for partnerships, followed by infrastructure assets, then operators and professional associations.

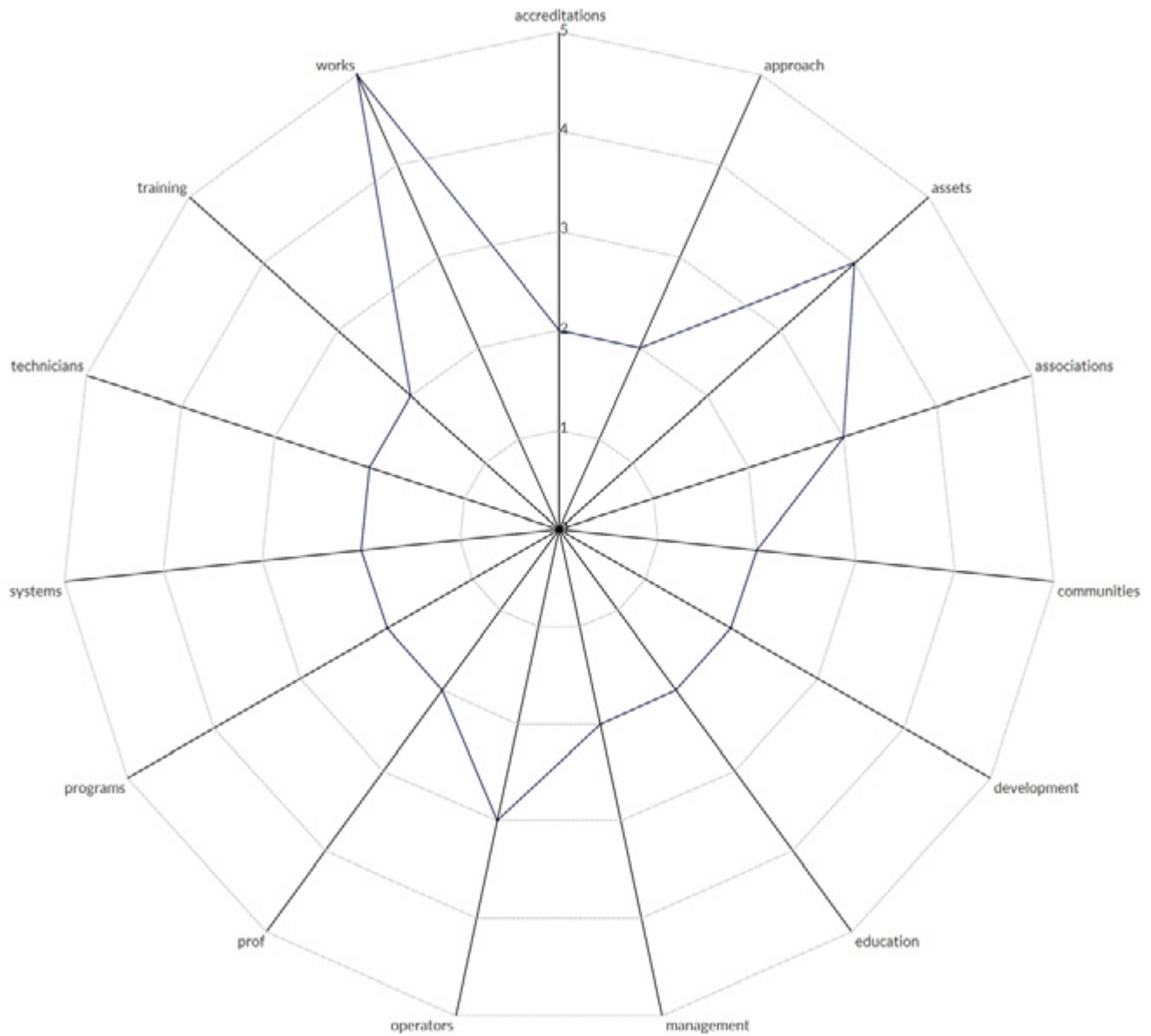


Figure 5: Opportunities and Partnerships

Word frequency

The workshop responses were considered for the frequency that key words and topics were mentioned as an indicator of general priorities. The criteria for assessing frequency included stemmed words because the words themselves were not as important as the ideas they represent. For example, the count for 'requirements' included similar words, such as *required*, *requirement* and *requires*.

Across the four breakout groups, the most common words found in all participant response were *development*, *training*, *professional*, *need*, *asset*, *integration*, *works*, *practices* and *requirements* (Figure 6). The second tier of frequent terms included *standards*, *integration*, *education*, *requirements*, *resources*, *need* and *works*.



Figure 6: Word Cloud associated with all breakout group responses by workshop participants where greater prominence illustrates greater frequency.

When only educational sources were considered across all topics, participants focused on the curriculum resources, especially through case studies with a sustainability focus (See Figure 7).



Figure 7: Word Cloud associated only with workshop participants working in education where greater prominence illustrates greater frequency.

After frequent mention of professional requirements as important motivators and methods to increase NAM knowledge and abilities, participants focused on topics of policy, government, technical skills and applications and NAM concepts (See Figure 8).



Figure 8: Word Cloud associated only with workshop participants working in professional practice where greater prominence illustrates greater frequency.

Thematic coding

Overall, five main areas were identified as important: templates and tools, marketing and communication, integration and collaboration, professional and policy regulation, and engagement and participation. Their relevance, which varied across the focal areas of starting points, leveraging points and developing partnership opportunities (Figure 5), is explored in the discussion. The matrix figure of coded instances is organized according to capacity building phases on the left axis and enabling strategies along the top axis. Cooler colours indicate relatively stronger presence and hotter colours indicate relatively less common occurrence. The table was generated through NVivo software.

| | A : templates and tools | B : marketing | C : integration | D : regulate | E : engage |
|------------------|-------------------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------|------------|
| 1 : START | 23 | 22 | 9 | 6 | 10 |
| 2 : OPPS-PARTNER | 23 | 10 | 18 | 12 | 14 |
| 3 : LEVER | 28 | 16 | 13 | 17 | 9 |

Figure 9: Matrix of coded instances according to capacity building phases on the left axis and enabling strategies along the top axis.

Natural Assets Initiative

