Enhancing Employment Programming for Vulnerable Youth

Implementation Report

DECEMBER 2023

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Since its establishment in December 1991, SRDC has conducted over 450 projects and studies for various federal and provincial departments, municipalities, as well as other public and non-profit organizations. SRDC has offices located in Ottawa and Vancouver, and satellite offices in Calgary, Hamilton, Montreal, Regina, St. John's, Toronto, and Winnipeg.

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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Ensuring that youth in Canada have the skills and experience needed to succeed in the labour market has been an ongoing priority for the Government. The Youth Employment Strategy (YES) was launched in 1997 to support youth between the ages of 15 and 30 to gain knowledge, skills, and work experience through a range of program streams (e.g., internships, wage subsidies, skills training) that has evolved over the years. A summative evaluation (ESDC, 2015) reported mostly positive outcomes for youth across recent program streams, but found that Skills Link, one of the streams focused on vulnerable youth, had mixed results. For example, Skills Link participants showed a slight increase in the use of social assistance and earned less than a comparison group across a five-year period. However, participants were more likely to be employed than the comparison group, and those who had some post-secondary education had higher earnings. Mixed results such as these suggest that there are differences in the way participants experienced Skills Link, likely related to variation in both individual and program characteristics. It also highlights the need for data that includes program and service delivery characteristics to help us identify the conditions that lead to the best outcomes for all youth and greater cost-effectiveness.

In 2018, Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) engaged the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) to support the implementation of management recommendations in response to the summative evaluation, focusing on 1) further examining program design improvements that can achieve strong results and cost-effectiveness, 2) exploring existing data sources to enhance evaluation, and 3) revising the performance measurement strategy to include more detailed and robust data collection including program content. Working with the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES)[1] and ESDC's evaluation and youth branches, SRDC developed a two-phase project to 1) identify effective practices and innovations in program design and delivery through additional analyses of Skills Link data, literature review, and consultations with service delivery organizations, and 2) develop a demonstration project with service delivery organizations to test the use of pay-for-performance funding models to encourage innovation in programming for vulnerable youth.

[1] OLES is now known as the Skills for Success Program.

This project was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and spanned five years until its completion in 2023. This period included key shifts in the skills training and employment sector, including the recognition of social-emotional skills as critical for the modern labour market – culminating in the launch of the Skills for Success framework in 2021; an increased commitment to reporting outcomes and demonstrating the value and effectiveness of programs; a concomitant increased need for enhancing measurement capacity in the sector; and a strengthened focus on youth facing multiple systemic and individual barriers, especially those from underrepresented groups. These trends were reflected within the project, particularly in the social-emotional skills training enhancements made by all service delivery sites in the demonstration project, and the associated development of more flexible service delivery models tailored to the needs of diverse vulnerable youth, as well as more expansive outcome and performance measurement approaches.

The knowledge generated from this project is timely as it aligns well with the most recent priorities identified as part of the new modernized Youth Employment and Skills Strategy (YESS). The Government of Canada invested over $109 million in YESS as part of the 2021 budget with a focus on funding programs that provide flexible and tailored services to help vulnerable youth overcome multiple barriers (e.g., wraparound supports, mentorship) and encouraging collaboration and capacity building across the sector (e.g., employers, educators, service providers). These priorities remain especially relevant today as youth were amongst the groups most impacted by job loss during COVID-19, especially Indigenous, newcomer, Black, or racialized youth (Department of Finance, 2021), and they continue to face challenges exacerbated by COVID-19 and its long-term impacts on individuals, communities, and the labour market.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Phase One (Research synthesis)

The primary objective of this early phase of work was to identify best practices and innovations in the delivery of employment programming for vulnerable youth, including those from underrepresented groups such as women, newcomers, official language minority communities, and Indigenous youth. This included exploring innovations and program characteristics that are associated with strong results and improved cost-effectiveness.

This objective was achieved through:

- Conducting a literature review examining emerging best practices and innovations in youth employment programming, especially for youth facing multiple barriers;[2]
- Expanding on an earlier ESDC analysis of Skills Link data to examine differences in outcomes by the characteristics of the programs and providers; and
- Consulting with service delivery providers to explore potential obstacles to achieving positive outcomes and innovations to enhance results.

This research synthesis provided an important framework for the next project phase by highlighting effective practices and potential enhancements to youth programming and important considerations in improving data collection and outcome measurement.

Phase Two (Implementation)

Building on the research synthesis, the objective of this phase was to develop a demonstration project to test the effectiveness of pay-for-performance funding models to encourage best practices and innovation in the delivery of employment programming and skills training for vulnerable youth. This was achieved through:

- Developing and implementing a demonstration project, featuring enhanced service delivery models, comprehensive evaluation frameworks, and customized pay-for-performance funding models with four service delivery organizations;
- Conducting outcome research with each organization that examined both intermediate outcomes (e.g., social emotional skills, employment readiness, career adaptability) and the longer-term outcomes they support (e.g., employment) where appropriate; and
- Conducting implementation research that explored how each organization responded to the performance-based funding strategy and evaluation activities (e.g., challenges, lessons learned, value-add over traditional funding models) as well as collecting insights into innovative program features and how they align with youth success.

[2] SRDC conducted a comprehensive literature review in response to a delay in our access to the 2015 Skills Link evaluation data. The results of the data analysis were initially planned to inform subsequent engagement with service delivery organizations. However, SRDC was able to begin engaging practitioners without access to the data by leveraging best practices identified through the literature review. Once data access was available and the analysis completed, SRDC used the results to help inform the design of the demonstration project in Phase Two.

The results of this demonstration can help inform future investments under the modernized YESS, including identifying practices that can enhance positive outcomes and cost-effectiveness, and important outcomes that can inform youth progress towards employment goals.[3]

CURRENT REPORT

The current Implementation Report summarizes the design, implementation, and evaluation activities of Phase Two while the research activities of Phase One are documented in the Research Synthesis Report. Building on the findings from the research synthesis, SRDC first developed a generic pay-for-performance model as a common framework to guide the subsequent building of customized models for each service delivery organization. Next SRDC worked closely with the four service delivery partners in a co-design process involving knowledge sharing and iterative reflection and revision, to develop customized curriculum enhancements, evaluation frameworks and pay-for-performance models to be implemented at each site. SRDC conducted quantitative and qualitative outcome and implementation research with all four partners as part of the demonstration project and documented the results in four case studies described in detail below. The collective learnings across the four organizations related to pay-for-performance and best practices in program delivery are shared at the end of the report, including a set of broad recommendations for funding youth employment and training programs.

[3] A comparison group design was initially planned, to allow us to conduct quantitative impact and cost-benefit analyses. However, the realities associated with the pandemic presented both methodological and ethical challenges, as it was more difficult to recruit youth while those that were recruited had elevated levels of need. As a result, the enhanced services developed for this project were offered to all recruited youth, and the evaluation focus shifted to pre-to-post outcome analysis, with qualitative assessment of cost-effectiveness.

DEVELOPING A PAY-FOR-PERFORMANCE MODEL

Pay-for-performance incentive models aim to improve the quality, efficiency, or value of a program or service by providing financial incentives to service providers when they reach or exceed pre-determined performance measures, benchmarks, or targets (James, 2012). Depending on the type of pay-for-performance initiative, the financial incentive may be in the form of a bonus on top of regular funding or attached to the full funding allocation. The performance benchmark measures can take various forms (James, 2012). For example, process-based measures capture specific components of a program (e.g., completing an intake assessment). Structure-based measures relate to facilities, personnel, and equipment used in services (i.e., using a particular survey measure). Participant experience measures capture the perception of services received (e.g., youth are satisfied with the program). Outcome-based measures capture the effect of a program (e.g., gains in skills).

Our approach to pay-for-performance funding

In this project, we explored a flexible, co-designed pay-for-performance approach in which service delivery organizations and the evaluation partner (SRDC) collaborated to identify and define target outcomes, measurement approaches, and a funding structure with the goal of incentivizing progress towards holistic, contextualized, and meaningful indicators of success.

For each organization, a portion of the budget was allocated to fixed costs (e.g., staffing, resources, etc.) required to produce the intended outcomes, with an additional performance funding allocation structured in the form of bonus payments to be provided when target outcomes are reached.

The use of pay-for-success models to foster innovation in skills and employment training is still relatively new. The Pay for Success project was the first test of this funding model in an Essential Skills training context in Canada, funded by ESDC (SRDC, 2017). It involved three organizations, with one delivering a sector-specific training and work experience in collaboration with a large local employer, and the other two delivering programs preparing participants to engage in further training, education, and employment. The organizations collectively served diverse participants in Manitoba and Nova Scotia, including newcomers and Indigenous learners. The pay-for-performance model focused on participant outcomes including completion of key program components, gains in Essential Skills, and enrolment in education, employment, and retention. Results demonstrated that pay-for-performance models are feasible in an Essential Skills training context. The model added value for organizations, in particular through encouraging innovations in new delivery approaches that included deeper engagement with employers, more comprehensive supports for participants, and a more intentional approach to delivering services as a pathway to education and employment. However, the development and implementation of the pay-for-performance model required significant support and capacity building, as well as careful planning and adjustments

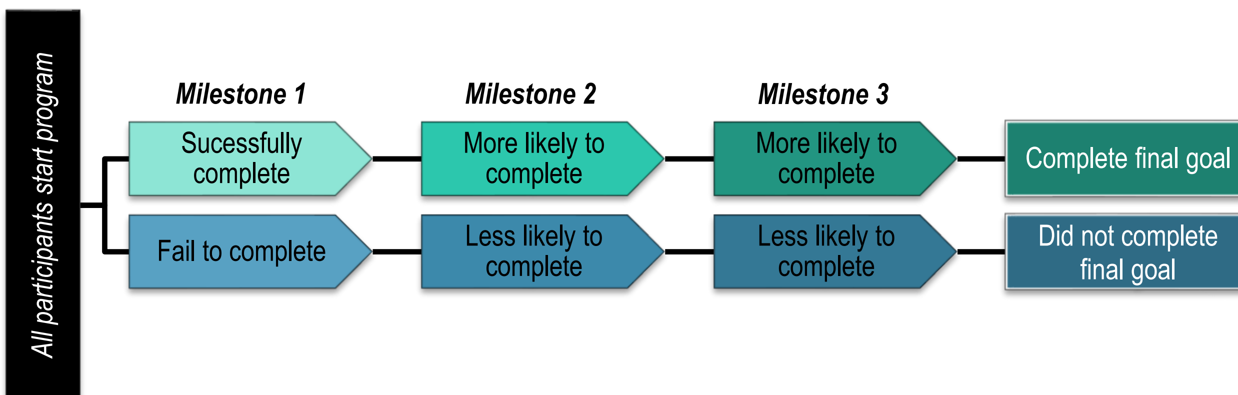
along the way to address recruitment, data collection, and other challenges that emerged. The current demonstration project will represent a test of this funding model in the context of skills training specifically targeted at vulnerable youth facing multiple barriers to the labour market.

DEFINING PERFORMANCE MEASURES

Defining measures for a pay-for-performance model requires identification of meaningful success outcomes that reflect program objectives and activities, and how they create change for participants. One method of doing so starts with building a theory of change for the program, i.e., a model or explanation of how program activities work together to bring about desired outcomes (e.g., youth skill development, network formation, career pathfinding, employment, etc.). It can be based on theory, data, or staff and participant experience. Often it highlights the causal chain of events (and outcomes) that allows the program to be successful. For example, youth develop career goals and greater motivation through career exploration activities which then increases the probability that they will be engaged with and succeed in skills training. The increased skills then make it more likely that youth will gain a certification, which then increases their chance of being hired.

This interconnected sequence of outcomes or milestones shows how the achievement of earlier outcomes creates conditions that increase the likelihood of later outcomes. This is called a milestone-based approach and is illustrated in Figure 1 (see SRDC, 2018b for more details). It is also illustrated as part of the conceptual framework for youth service pathway to employment, showing how pre-employment activities and outcomes form building blocks for later employment training, work experience, and sustained employment (see Research Synthesis Report). A milestone-based pathway approach has been implemented successfully in the past, including in the Pay for Success project (SRDC, 2017). This approach to identifying and selecting benchmarks acknowledges the full range of benefits that a program has for its participants and ensures that even if some youth may not achieve the intended final outcome (e.g., employment), earlier successes are documented. This is especially important when longer-term outcomes like employment or further education may fall outside the project timeline or are likely to be impacted by structural or systemic factors beyond the control of organizations (e.g., labour market trends, economic climate, discrimination, etc.). This approach also can be motivating for organizations when used to plan program activities, identify gaps and opportunities for enhancements, track programs, and celebrate wins along the way.

Figure 1 Interconnected relationships among milestones



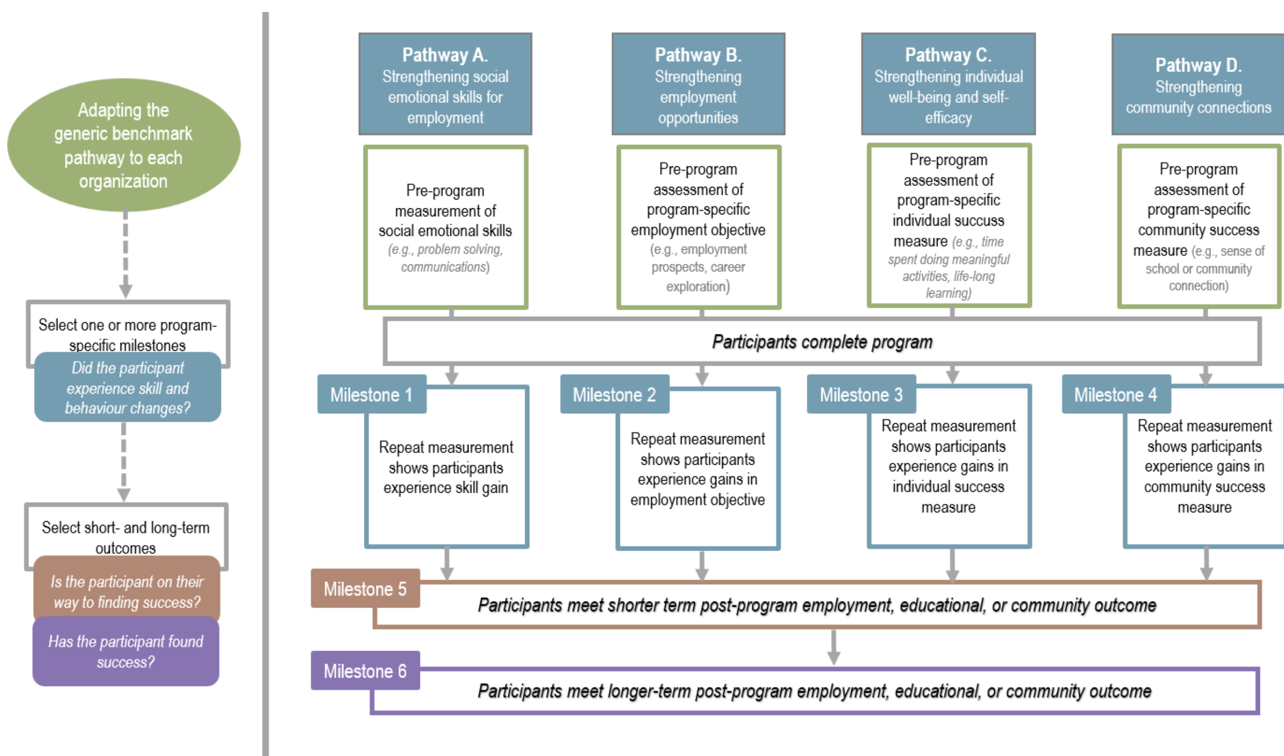
DEVELOPING A GENERIC COMMON FRAMEWORK

SRDC developed a generic pay-for-performance model using a milestone-based approach and informed by the research synthesis of Phase One activities. The intention was that this generic model would serve as a starting point and common framework that individual organizations could use to build their own customized model reflecting their unique training objectives and population needs. It would hopefully allow organizations to showcase unique characteristics of their program and context but retain some common elements across sites. The Pay for Success project also successfully used this approach, starting first from a common model and then working with the three partners to customize it. As shown in Figure 2, the generic pay-for-performance model included six milestones along four pathways aligned with different areas identified as influential in promoting youth development towards long-term employment success. Each pathway defined performance measures in four key areas of youth success:

- **Pathway A** focused on strengthening social emotional skills for employment.
- **Pathway B** focused on strengthening participants' readiness in employment opportunities, including building career pathfinding skills (e.g., job search, resume writing, interview skills) and working towards finding and retaining employment.
- **Pathway C** focused on improving individual well-being and self-efficacy among participants, as aligned with specific program goals (e.g., improving receptivity to learning).
- **Pathway D** focused on strengthening community connections and social capital, including connecting to a network of people that can support youth in reaching long-term employment and social goals.

Each pathway in the generic model had short-term milestones (Milestones 1 through 4) that were intended to be measured through comparing pre-program and post-program surveys. In addition, the generic model included a mid-term milestone (Milestone 5) and long-term milestone (Milestone 6) to be assessed after the completion of a program. In this sense, the generic model invited organizations to increase their capacity to track longer-term outcomes among program participants.

Figure 2 Generic pay-for-performance model



THE DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

IDENTIFYING SERVICE DELIVERY PARTNERS

Building on our engagement of service delivery organizations as part of Phase One activities, four delivery partners were identified for the demonstration project (see Table 1). The partners showed interest in testing out a pay-for-performance model and exploring enhancements in program design and measurement, particularly related to social emotional skills. As a group, the four organizations include a range of program models, youth populations served, and regions across Canada, allowing us to examine the effectiveness of pay-for-performance across different training contexts.

Table 1 Service delivery partners

Population	Program overview
NEEDS Inc. (Manitoba)	
Newcomer youth, mostly in high school	NEEDS Inc. works closely with schools to provide a range of programming. The employment program offers career exploration and pre-employment and employment readiness training workshops delivered in schools. Youth can also access one-on-one career counselling and a paid work experience with follow-up supports on-the-job. Services are trauma-informed with a strong development focus and all youth have access to professional psychosocial support.
NPower Canada (Ontario, Alberta, growing across Canada)	
Diverse NEET youth with high school or GED, including newcomers	NPower provides 15-week information and communication technology training to diverse youth experiencing barriers. This training includes Essential Skills and technical certifications and social services supports. They have a strong employer-led focus, tailoring the curriculum to meet industry needs. Employers are involved from design to delivery. Uniquely, NPower provides 5-years of post-hire supports, including coaching, wraparound supports, industry connections, and career laddering.

Population	Program overview
Construction Foundation of British Columbia (British Columbia)	
Indigenous youth in and out of school	CFBC provides a range of programming with a focus on the construction and trades industries. Currently, they are working closely with First Nations communities in BC, taking a whole community approach to determine community goals, including workforce development plans. Their program aims include work readiness for community members, upskilling individuals for jobs and supporting graduation, providing skills or trades training for work, and supporting work and apprenticeship placements. For example, workshops centred on traditional arts help youth develop cultural and social and emotional skills.
Career Trek (Manitoba)	
Gr. 5 to high school, including newcomer and Indigenous youth, single mothers	Career Trek offers career exploration programs that feature a wide range of occupations and emphasize hands-on experiences in collaboration with post-secondary institutions, businesses, and employers. They provide wraparound supports, and work closely with schools and families to foster positive development as youth age through programs.

INTEGRATING SKILLS FOR SUCCESS

During the development of this demonstration project, ESDC launched Canada's new Skills for Success framework in 2021 (see Figure 3). SRDC had already been discussing social emotional skills with partner organizations. Leading up to the launch, the skills and training sector was increasingly recognizing the role of these skills (e.g., social emotional, personal attributes, employability, non-cognitive) in learning, employment, and life (see SRDC, 2018a). They are especially relevant to a modern labour market that is characterized by rapid growth in technology and automation, globalization and an increased focus on diversity and inclusion, and the gig economy and contract work (see Palameta et al., 2021).

Figure 3 Skills for Success framework[4]

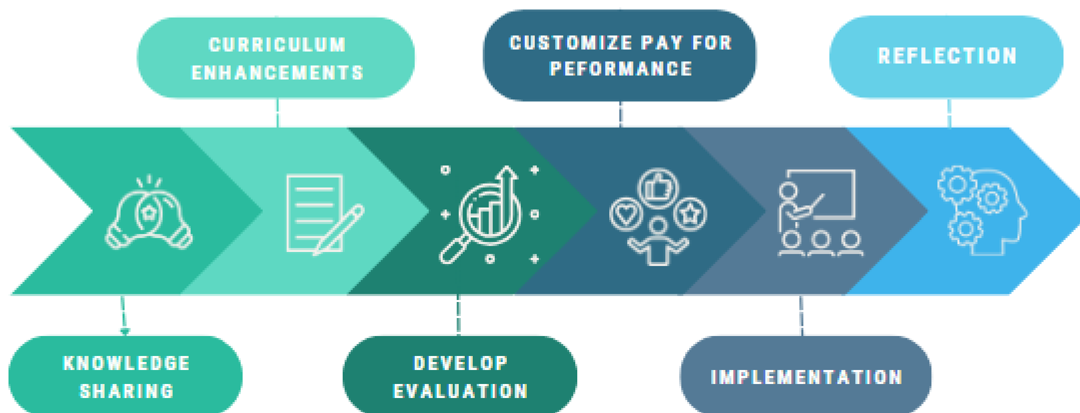
Employers need people skills that are not easily replaced by computers, individuals need to be able to communicate and collaborate with diverse people, and the labour force needs adaptability and resilience to navigate these changes. In particular, social emotional skills have been shown to be critical for child and youth development and lay the foundation for continued learning and success (see Research Synthesis Report). With the launch of Skills for Success, SRDC and partner organizations were able to more formally adapt the social emotional Skills for Success into their program models. The framework provided more structure and language to discuss the skills, how they can enhance program development for youth, and how they can be measured. Indeed, the integration of social emotional skills was one of the pathways characterizing the generic pay-for-performance model (see above) and also the primary area of innovation for the four partner organizations (see below).

DEVELOPING CUSTOMIZED PAY-FOR-PERFORMANCE MODELS

Figure 4 outlines the process by which SRDC and partner organizations collaborated to create and implement curriculum enhancements, evaluation frameworks, and pay-for-performance models customized to each site. The consultation process began with establishing a collaborative working group of staff members at each organization to inform program design and implementation. These working group engaged in several rounds of **knowledge sharing.** In meetings with SRDC, organizations shared their program structure, approach, and goals for enhancement. Each organization shared key documents, including curricula, intake documents, and program descriptions to support the discussions. SRDC worked with organizations to draft preliminary theory of change models to better understand and articulate how their programs work and begin to identify some key outcomes. SRDC provided information on Skills for Success and discussed how the new skills framework could be applied to benefit the youth population each organization served.

4 https://www.canada.ca/en/services/jobs/training/initiatives/skills-success/understanding-individuals.html

Figure 4 Consultation and implementation process



Following the initial knowledge sharing meetings, organizations engaged in a **curriculum enhancement** exercise, updating and adding activities or training components focused on supporting social emotional Skills for Success development. The extent to which each organization integrated social emotional skill development within their programing varied considerably and is described in the case studies.

> **Social emotional Skills for Success enhancements**
>
> All partner organizations enhanced their program models by increasing activities that foster social emotional Skills for Success including Communication, Collaboration, Adaptability, Problem Solving, and Creativity and Innovation.
>
> For example, NPower added social emotional skills to their professional development curriculum and CFBC melded their Indigenous carving skill workshops with reflection activities that foster social emotional skills. Both Needs Inc. and Career Trek leveraged the new Skills for Success framework to more intentionally and explicitly target social emotional skills in their training activities.

Working with each organization, we then **developed the evaluation framework**. Based on the knowledge sharing process and preliminary theory of change models, SRDC compiled a bank of youth-focused survey measures aligned with key outcomes identified by the organizations, categorized along the four pathways of the generic milestone-based pathway (see Appendix A for a complete list of measures). To measure social emotional skills along Pathway A, we recommended the use of items adapted from the Behavioural, Emotional, and Social Skills Inventory (BESSI; Soto et al., 2022) which was developed in the United States and showed promising psychometric properties in validation studies. The BESSI consists of 192 items across 32 skill facets – it shows good conceptual overlap with the Skills for Success, and its simple behavioural statement structure seems suitable for youth. SRDC mapped BESSI items to the Skills for Success for direct use in our survey banks, and also created BESSI-like items (i.e., simple behavioural statements phrased as skills) when needed to address any gaps. For Pathway B, we included validated scales and

single-time measures linked with career pathfinding and job search, especially those with a strong track record of sensitivity and validity in past SRDC projects. The question bank we developed includes measures appropriate for each stage of career development and job search – e.g., early-stage measures focused on career or identity exploration and development, mid-stage measures focused on career decision-making self-efficacy, job search clarity, and job search self-efficacy, and late-stage measures such as job satisfaction. Pathway C focused on well-being and self-efficacy and includes measures such as readiness and motivation to learn, engagement in meaningful activities, generalized self-efficacy, and beliefs and attitudes related to post-secondary education. To measure social capital and community connections as part of Pathway D, we included items and scales related to sense of belonging, peer belonging, relationships at school, and social network.

Through an iterative process, SRDC and three of the four partner organizations (NEEDS Inc., NPower Canada, and Career Trek) selected measures from the survey bank, customized measures as needed (e.g., adjusting wording, removing items), and developed evaluation tools (e.g., surveys). While CFBC initially explored measures from this same survey bank, challenges that came up through this process led them to realize that this type of evaluation did not align with the needs of their population (i.e., Indigenous youth in community) nor their approach to program delivery. Instead CFBC developed five milestones that were integrated into program activities and measured as activity outputs documented in workbooks aimed to capture learner-defined successes. Although this departs somewhat from the generic pay-for-performance model, there is overlap and the milestones that were developed could be loosely mapped onto the four generic pathways (see CFBC case study for more details).

Following – and to some extent, integrated within – the evaluation development, SRDC worked with each organization to create **a customized pay-for-performance model** and payment structure that aligned with each organization's target outcomes and evaluation indicators. Each organization was allocated a $100,000 budget, much of which was dedicated to generalized capacity building in areas such as curriculum enhancement, and development and coordination of data collection tools and activities, but a portion of which was allocated to outcome-based pay-for-performance. Organizations were involved in selecting their specific performance funding allocation, i.e., $22,500 (22.5 per cent) for NEEDS Inc., $35,000 for NPower Canada (35 per cent), $20,000 (20 per cent) for Career Trek, and $15,000 for CFBC (15 per cent). The performance payment funds could be used for any organizational purposes, including hiring staff, buying equipment, program development, and participant stipends, providing a level of flexibility for partner sites. Having helped to define milestones across each of the four pathways, organizations were also involved in determining how the payments would be distributed across the milestones. Some organizations opted to attach payments to all milestones (i.e., NPower Canada), while others attached payments only to select milestones. For example, NEEDS Inc. attached payments only to milestones in pathway A and pathway B, as their training curriculum was most closely aligned with those outcomes.

Next, partner organizations and SRDC collaborated to set recruitment targets (i.e., expected number of participants), target response rates to data collection activities, and target success rates. Recruitment numbers ranged widely across programs based on organizational capacity. Target response rates were also customized across sites, with response rates to measures of short-term milestones originally set between 80 per cent and 90 per cent (see Reflections and lessons learned section for details about adjustments made). Across all sites and all milestones, a target success rate of 90 per cent was set, with the exception of CFBC, who set a rate of 80 per cent. This means that if 80 or 90 per cent of participants successfully met a given milestone, a full payment would be provided. A target success rate less than 100 per cent recognizes that not all participants in a program are expected to demonstrate results in the specified way. For example, a portion of participants may not be fully prepared to benefit from programming, may be coping with barriers beyond the scope of the program, or addressing competing life priorities.

An overview of organization-specific adaptions of the generic milestone-based pathway

Career Trek: selected three milestones to attach to performance payments. Two milestones were related to short-term outcomes, related to increased social emotional skills and career pathfinding skills. The third milestone was a related to longer-term engagement in employment, further education, or community. By merging these three possible longer-term outcomes into a single milestone, Career Trek sought to emphasize that they support youth make progress towards their individual goals rather than prescribing specific outcomes.

CFBC: selected five milestones to attach to performance payments. Although they do not follow the four pathways of the generic model in the same way as other organizations, they can be loosely mapped to them. The milestones include youth reflections on social emotional skills at baseline and follow-up (Pathway A), setting goals (Pathway B), and presenting their achievements to community (Pathway C and D). These milestones were selected based on their ability to be integrated into programming and capture youth definitions of success.

NEEDS INC.: selected four milestones to attach to performance payments: including a Pathway A milestone focused on positive change in social emotional skills and Pathway B milestones focused on positive change in career pathfinding skills and job retention. Milestones in Pathway C (strengthening wellbeing and self-efficacy) and Pathway D (strengthening community connections) were not attached to performance payments, as these areas were considered potential indirect benefits of the program but were not directly related to training curriculum or activities.

NPower Canada: selected nine milestones across all four pathways outlined in the generic model. Pathway A focused on positive short-term change in social-emotional skills, pathway B focused on change in career pathfinding skills and securing employment or further education after program completion, pathway C focused on positive short-term change in readiness to learn and self-efficacy, and pathway D focused on positive short-term change in social networks.

Finally, SRDC collaborated with each partner organization to determine a calculation methodology for each milestone. The methodology involved selecting items from surveys or other data collection tools (e.g., facilitator reports, workbooks from youth) and determining

what responses would define successfully meeting the associated milestone. For example, social emotional skill milestones were tracked with survey questions adapted from the Behavioral, Emotional, and Social Skills Inventory (BESSI) and mapped to the Skills for Success: an average skill gain of 0.5 (on a scale of 1 to 5) was set as the threshold for a full payment. In many cases, SRDC and partner organizations allowed for pro-rated payments to recognize participants' progress towards milestones. For example, BESSI score gains between more then zero but less than 0.5 received partial payments. We describe the specific milestones and calculations in further detail in each of the partner case studies below. Note that some adjustments were made during the implementation phase of the pay-for-performance model in response to unanticipated recruitment and data collection challenges. These are explained in the individual case studies and also summarized in the Reflections and lessons learned section at the end of the report.

IMPLEMENTING PAY-FOR-PERFORMANCE

Throughout program delivery and implementation, organizations had regular meetings with SRDC. SRDC provided support such as troubleshooting emerging issues, undertaking preliminary analysis (e.g., tracking response rates, baseline skill scores) and sharing preliminary results to ensure organizations had the help and information they needed in a timely way. Each organization also provided quarterly reports to track progress, including ongoing curriculum enhancements and changes, training and evaluation successes and challenges, and any other organizational changes that resulted from participating in the evaluation. More detailed information about program delivery and implementation of evaluation frameworks and pay-for-performance models are provided in the case studies below.

REFLECTION

Near the end of program delivery, organizations participated in implementation interviews or focus groups to help SRDC document what was delivered, what worked well, what did not work well, what adaptations were made, what outcomes were observed, what was learned, and staff experience in implementing the pay-for-performance model. Typically, these interviews and focus groups included both management staff who were more involved in the design and coordination of the pay-for-performance model as well as frontline instructors and facilitators who delivered programming and helped collect data. In the final weeks of the project, SRDC organized two virtual all-partners meetings attended by one or more representatives from each organization. These meetings were an opportunity to collect additional insights and feedback from participating organizations, especially around youth outcomes and the pay-for-performance model, and for them to engage in cross-organization discussions and sharing.

SITE CASE STUDIES – DOCUMENTING PROGRAM DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION, AND OUTCOMES ACHIEVED

The following sections describe the development, implementation, and results for each of our four partner organizations (Needs Inc., NPower Canada, CFBC, Career Trek). These case studies bring to life the best practices identified in the Research Synthesis Report, illustrate the implementation successes, challenges and adjustments that arise when delivering services to different populations of youth facing multiple and intersecting barriers, and document the outcomes achieved. While the same consultation process was followed with each of the organizations, the program models, organizational capacity, program goals, and participant populations varied widely. As a result, the four partner organizations provide examples of how a generic milestone-based evaluation approach and pay for performance funding structure can be customized and adapted to align with different program objectives and learner needs.

While each case study follows the same general organization, the tone, content, and presentation of each one reflects the unique experience of each partner organization, including their successes and challenges in program delivery, data collection, and the pay-for-performance model. For example, CFBC's case study uses a more reflective and narrative approach that is consistent with their qualitative methodology and personal goals related to testing a pay-for-performance model. Career Trek's case study includes details on the lessons learned through implementing formal evaluation for the first time in some of their programs. In the NEEDS Inc. section, there is a detailed description of their training approach, while NPower Canada includes older adult learners as a comparison group to contextualize their youth learners' outcomes. Despite the unique approach of each partner organization, there were clearly common experiences that emerged from the project. These collective and common experiences, lessons learned, and recommendations are shared after the case studies (see Reflections and lessons learned and Recommendations sections) and represent considerations for the sector moving forward, especially with the continued focus of the Government on serving vulnerable youth through tailored and individualized approaches.

NEEDS Inc.

Participants

This program served **45** newly arrived refugee and immigrant youth aged 15 - 20.

Program goals

- Increase social emotional skills
- Build career pathfinding skills and obtain early work experience
- Support youth wellbeing
- Increase social capital, peer belonging, and feelings of belonging to community

Program model

Skills training helped youth build skills and develop peer relationships in the classroom.

One-on-one career coaching supported youth as they created resumes and looked for a job.

Job placements were provided to employment-ready youth with NEEDS Inc.'s partner employers.

Post-employment support was available to help youth troubleshoot challenges and continue to build skills.

Key outcomes

25
participants found employment or a job placement

73%
of participants reported increased engagment in meaningful activities (which are associated with better mental health)

90%
of participants reported increased social emotional or career adaptability skills

53%
of participants reported higher feelings of peer belonging after the program

NEEDS INC.

SITE INTRODUCTION

Newcomer Employment & Education Development Services (NEEDS) Inc. is a non-profit settlement organization in Winnipeg, Manitoba. NEEDS Inc. delivers client-centered, trauma-informed services to immigrant and refugee children, youth, and their families. NEEDS Inc. offers programs to support newcomer youth entering Canadian schools, runs settlement worker in schools (SWIS) programs, delivers employment training, and provides in-house psychosocial supports. NEEDS Inc. staff are trained in trauma-informed approaches and work to customize client experiences and meet clients' unique and evolving needs.

Target population, recruitment, and eligibility

Newcomer youth were recruited for the employment program through internal referrals, referrals from other settlement organizations, recruitment in high schools, and word of mouth. Youth that were 16 or older at completion of the classroom portion of training were eligible to participate. Youth from all immigration categories, at any point after arrival, were eligible to participate. At intake to any NEEDS Inc. program, youth completed a needs assessment and were streamed into the services that were most appropriate for their interests and needs. Youth interested in the employment program completed an Employment Readiness Assessment. Those with a minimum level of baseline skills required for a positive employment experience were eligible to participate, while those with a lower skill level were offered other programming options to increase their capacity prior to entering the employment program.

Training program

The NEEDS Inc. program included a training component, one-on-one career coaching, and individualized matching to job openings and short-term work placements. Each component is described below.

Training

The training program provided 48 hours of training over 12 to 14 weeks of in-person workshop experience. The training focused on building youths' employment readiness, including awareness of workplace environment and workers rights, social emotional skills, and career adaptability

skills (e.g., job search skills, resume writing, interview preparation). Near the end of the training, youth participated in mock interviews with staff or visiting employers to build interview skills and familiarity with the job application process.

All NEEDS Inc. staff are trained in trauma-informed approaches. These skills are crucial to supporting the target population of newcomer and refugee youth, as many have experienced challenging displacement, relocation, and settlement experiences and have had experiences of trauma. Program staff prioritize creating a safe learning environment and supporting youth in developing social supports and connections. For example, staff provide opportunities for participants to develop peer relationships, skills, and self-confidence. Staff work on building trust slowly over time using a non-judgemental approach, while maintaining expectations that youth demonstrate respectful behaviour towards others.

Career coaching

Following training, youth received one-on-one support from career coaches. Career coaches worked with youth to identify goals, continue individualized skill development, create a resume, apply for jobs, and prepare for interviews. As a part of the one-on-one support, career coaches helped youth recognize and articulate their transferrable skills and existing experiences. This approach helped youth reflect on their strengths and abilities, building confidence, create strong resumes, and communicate their skills to employers in interviews. Additionally, career coaches provided retention supports after youth found employment, including troubleshooting challenges and helping youth navigate expectations in the workplace and communication with their new employers.

In addition to career-related support, career coaches provided social emotional support to youth. Many NEEDS Inc. staff are immigrants and refugees to Canada, and staff reported that their shared lived experience helps them understand youths' challenges. Staff were able to draw from their own experiences and stories to normalize the difficulties youth were facing as they navigated settlement in Canada and early Canadian employment experiences. In the words of one career coach:

> *"We're not doctors, we're not their parents. We're this middle ground of people that aren't there to fix them, necessarily, or judge them. The way that we are with them, I feel like they feel safe with that information knowing that we're not there to fix all of their problems, but we can listen to them."*

While career coaches were well-placed to social support youth, they were not working in a mental health support capacity. Staff provided support as appropriate through their role as a career coaches, and connected youth to additional, longer-term supports in cases where extra support was needed. Career coaches encouraged participants to visit the in-house psychosocial support services offered by NEEDS Inc., other programs, and more informal spaces – such as

homework clubs – where youth could continue to connect with peers with shared experiences. While making these referrals, career coaches emphasized participants' autonomy, providing information, and allowing youth to decide which steps to take. One career coach described how they handled this process with youth:

> *"[T]alking to them definitely in a friendly manner is important, but at the same time giving subtle reminders that we are your coaches. We can help you as much in these capacities, but if at all there is something deeper that you want to discuss and you feel like it would be best if you seek other people or if you see other people. And that's when we start introducing that this might be a good time for us to start considering these [psychosocial support] services… some of the clients, I would like to encourage them to come to workshops so that they start making friends from within the same country or from other places… So, weaning them off of just the career coach dependency onto other positive relationships, but also at the same time not making decisions for them, giving them the opportunity to explore."*

Employer liaisons

Employer liaisons develop and maintain NEEDS Inc.'s network of over 100 local partner employers. Through these relationships, NEEDS Inc. is able to provide youth with employment opportunities, internships, and paid work placements in a range of sectors and occupations. Employer liaisons connect employers with skilled candidates to meet specific labour needs and provide retention support after youth are placed in positions. Staff shared that having dedicated staff to develop mutually supportive relationships with employers is crucial to maintaining a large network of partner employers.

Throughout programming, employer liaisons worked closely with career coaches to create individualized matches between youth participants and available employment opportunities. Before referring a youth to an available position, liaisons engaged with participants and career coaches to learn more about youths' skills, goals, and interests. This knowledge allowed employer liaisons to create customized matches between youth and available employment opportunities. Employer liaisons and career coaches helped youth evaluate employment opportunities to determine which opportunities were a good fit, conducted mock interviews, and attended interviews with youth (when requested). As one staff shared:

> *"We're trying to look at all the logistical things, too. So, if the youth is prepared to travel to the location, will that meet their expectations for working after school? For example, are there buses that even run there on a Saturday morning? Like these things are things that we always have to be aware of when pitching clients for those opportunities."*

After a placement, employer liaisons provided retention support to employers, including mediating challenges, facilitating communication, and providing ongoing skill training or certification opportunities as required.

Program support

NEEDS Inc. offers in-house psychosocial support services to all clients. While the psychosocial support staff are provided at no-cost, youth are often hesitant to access the supports, in part due to stigma around mental health challenges. As described above, career coaches played an important role referring clients to the psychosocial support team. Career coaches provided youth information and answered questions to address concerns about accessing psychosocial supports. Some psychosocial support staff also worked as career coaches or worked in the same area of Needs Inc., which provided youth an opportunity to build familiarity and trust before agreeing to participate in formal psychosocial support sessions.

In addition to psychosocial supports, NEEDS Inc. provided meals, bus tickets, and a referral to "SafeWalk", a service that escorts youth to bus stops or nearby locations if they are not comfortable walking alone. Additionally, participating youth were also provided the opportunity to participate in job fairs, community building events, and cross-cultural activities provided by NEEDS Inc.'s network of partner organizations.

Integrating Skills for Success to enhance programming

NEEDS Inc. brought existing experience and training materials related to social emotional learning into this project. Like many training programs, NEEDS Inc. has long recognized the value of social emotional learning and has used the Essential Skills framework in the past. In this project, staff used the Skills for Success framework to enhance existing social emotional training and evaluation content. Skills for Success training activities were incorporated throughout employment readiness training, in part through an increased focus on activity-based learning. Activity-based learning provided youth participants the opportunity to exercise and practice the social emotional Skills for Success in a safe, structured environment.

The Skills for Success model resonated with staff, as it reflected the skills that they see as being crucial to employment success. For example, staff shared that youth with strong Adaptability skills – including flexibility, and responsibility – are often those that tend to be most likely to obtain employment.

> *"[F]or certain job, for sure, the language ability might be the prime focus, but I think employers are really looking for individuals that are willing to work, have a strong work ethic. Can you transfer other skills from previous jobs or volunteer experiences?"*

Examples of training activities included in the enhanced curriculum and how they relate to social emotional Skills for Success are described in Table 2. In addition to the social emotional skills, the curriculum supported Reading, Writing, Numeracy, and Digital skills through employability activities such as reading job descriptions, writing resumes, calculating payment, understanding paystubs, and searching and applying for jobs online. NEEDS Inc. also enhanced their data collection and program evaluation capacity using measures to assess Skills for Success. Building on existing evaluation tools – including their needs analysis assessment and their Employability Skills assessment – the evaluation developed for this program included targeted measures related to Communication, Collaboration, Adaptability, Problem Solving, and Creativity and Innovation skills.

Table 2 NEEDS Inc. activities and skills

Activity	Description	Skill(s)
SMART (Specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, timed) goals	Participants were given statements of real-life examples of goals such as "I want to get a job at Starbucks". Through collaborative discussion, participants updated goal statements so that they were specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timed goals. Following this, participants set short-, medium-, and long-term goals for themselves.	**Adaptability:** Participants built goal-setting skills and engaged in self-reflection to set realistic goals. **Problem solving:** Participants analyzed the different statements and found solutions to improve them.
Hire me activity	Participants were asked to imagine objects (e.g., car, cellphone, stapler). In groups, participants were asked to brainstorm the objects' "skills and talents" and promote them for sales associate position to the facilitators and class.	**Creativity and innovation**: Participants used creativity to think of the "skills" of different objects. **Collaboration**: Participants worked together and were required to take employers' perspective to understand what skills employers would value. **Communication**: Participants were required to communicate their ideas and present to a group.
Positive work behaviour	Participants were taught about workplace rights, positive workplace behaviour, diversity and discrimination in the workplace. Participants practiced small talk, positive workplace behaviour, and how to deal with challenging customers at work.	**Adaptability:** Participants practiced managing their emotions to resolve simulated challenging workplace interactions. **Collaboration**: Participants practiced skills required to collaborate with others at work.

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN, CHALLENGES, AND CHANGES

What was the implementation plan?

Training delivery

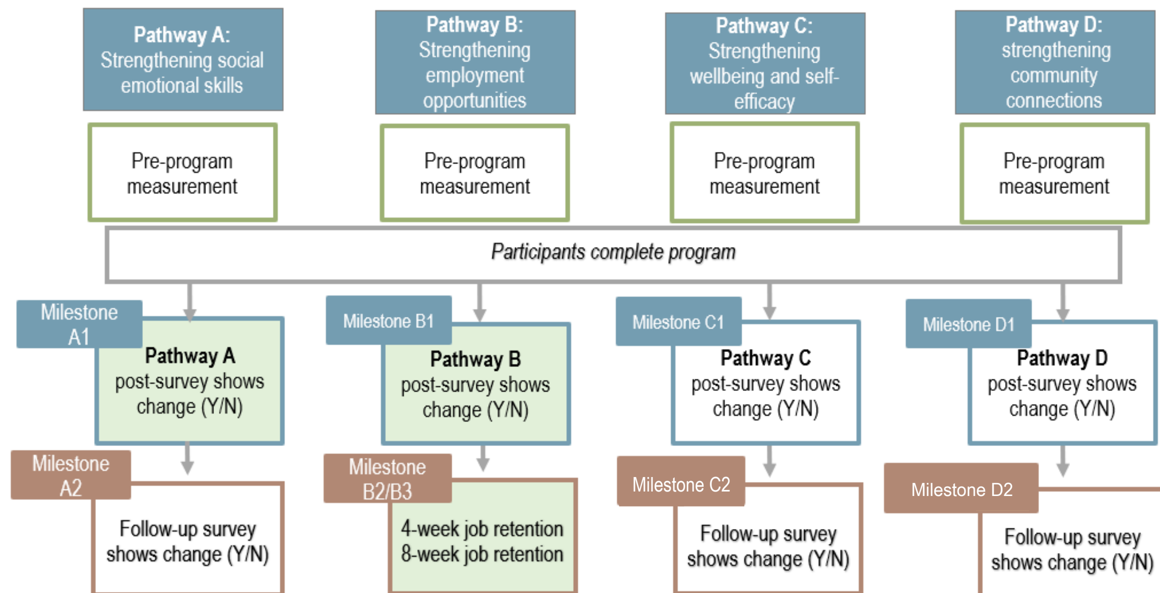
NEEDS Inc. planned to deliver two cohorts in Winter 2022-2023 to serve a total of 45 participants. The first cohort was delivered at NEEDS Inc. in four-hour sessions delivered on Saturdays over 12 weeks. The second cohort was delivered as an afterschool program in a school facility in two-and-a-half hour sessions for 16 weeks. Both cohorts had the same number of total training hours and curriculum, with the in-school cohort running for more weeks. After participating in the training, participants were expected to work with career coaches on an individual basis through Spring 2023 and apply to summer jobs at the end of the school year. Based on previous years of training delivery, NEEDS Inc. expected that the majority of participants would be placed with partner employers for unpaid internships, some matched with paid positions, and a few continuing to build skills for work readiness with career coaches.

Customized milestone framework

SRDC and NEEDS Inc. staff worked together to customize the generic milestone-based pathway to reflect NEEDS Inc.'s program priorities and evaluation structure. Milestones were identified in each of the four pathways in the generic model – strengthening social emotional skills, employment opportunities, wellbeing and self-efficacy, and community connections (see Figure 5).

The first set of milestones identified were related to skill gains (Milestones A1 and B1) and positive change in perception of wellbeing, belonging, and social connections (Milestones C1 and D1) that occurred during the training program. These milestones were measured by assessing change between the pre-program and post-program surveys. The second set of milestones (A2, B2/B3, C2, D2) were longer-term outcomes that were assessed through the follow-up survey, conducted three to five months after training. The longer-term employment outcomes (B2 and B3) were originally planned to be measured in two separate follow-up surveys, but as a result of changes to implementation, both outcomes were assessed in a single follow-up survey.

Figure 5 Customized milestone-based framework



Customized performance payment structure

Based on the customized milestone framework, NEEDS Inc. and SRDC developed a performance payment structure. First, NEEDS Inc. attached performance payments to select milestones that were most closely aligned with the training curriculum (A1, B1, B2/B3). Next, the relative weight of each milestone, the target response rate, and a calculation approach was determined for each milestone (see Table 3).

Table 3 Customized performance payment structure

Milestone	Objective	Data collection tool	Calculation	Weight of payment	Target response rate
Short-term outcomes					
A1	Positive change in social emotional skills	Adapted BESSI scale, mapped to Skills for Success	Gradient payment based on mean gain in scale score from 0-0.5	33.5%	70%
B1	Positive change in career pathfinding skills	Career decision-making and job search self-efficacy; Student Career Construction Inventory		24%	70%

Milestone	Objective	Data collection tool	Calculation	Weight of payment	Target response rate
Long-term outcomes					
B2	Job retention for 4 weeks	Updated follow-up survey	Gradient payment based on number of weeks employed	18.5%	60%
B3	Job retention for 8 weeks		Gradient payment based on number of weeks employed	14%	60%

Evaluation activities and tools

Using the generic milestone-based pathway as a guiding structure, SRDC and NEEDS Inc. collaboratively developed a series of evaluation tools to assess progress towards the defined milestones. The evaluation tools developed included an evaluation consent form, a pre-program and post-program survey, a longer-term follow up survey, and an employer survey (see Table 4). Supplementing this data collection, NEEDS Inc. shared participants demographic information using information provided in organizational intake surveys and records of attendance. Following training delivery, several implementation focus groups were conducted with NEEDS Inc. staff and they also participated in the two virtual all-partners meetings at the end of the project.

The pre- and post-program surveys were administered by training instructors on the first and last days of programming, respectively. The pre-program survey included a series of questions on participants' employment history and questions related to skills, wellbeing, belonging, and social networks. These questions were repeated in the post-program survey to assess changes that occurred during training delivery. To assess longer-term, sustained change, selected measures from the pre- and post-program survey were also included in the follow-up survey, which was conducted three to five months after the conclusion of the training program. In addition to measures on skills, wellbeing, and belonging, the follow-up survey included questions on employment outcomes and job satisfaction.

While it was not included in the performance calculations (see Reflections and lessons learned section for more details), the employer survey included 11 items related to the demonstration of social emotional skills in the workplace and was administered online. The survey links were shared by employer liaisons two to five weeks after employers hired participating youth.

Table 4 Data collection tools

	What	Who	When	How
Organizational intake form	Background and demographic information	All participants	Prior to starting the program	NEEDS Inc. existing form, administered at intake to any NEEDS Inc. program
Pre-program survey	Data collection for short-term outcomes (Milestones 1)	All participants	First week of training	New survey developed for project. Administered as an online survey.
Post-program survey		All participants who remained in the program	Last classroom session	
Follow-up survey	Data collection for mid- and long-term outcomes (Milestones 2)	All participants who remained in the program	August 2023 (3-5 months after end of program)	
Employer survey	Data collection for additional information on participants' social emotional skills	Employers that hired or provided work placements to participating youth	2-5 weeks after employers hired participating youth	Administered online with a link provided by career coaches

Evaluation measures

The evaluation tools included a combination of pre-existing scales and measures developed or customized specifically for this project. Pre-existing measures were used to assess skills and perceived wellbeing and connection (see Appendix A). Customized survey measures were developed to assess employment history, employment outcomes, and feedback on the training program. All of the measures were screened for reading and language level by both SRDC and NEEDS Inc. staff to ensure they were clear and understandable to youth participants. Youth were also invited to use translation tools while completing surveys and NEEDS Inc. staff were available to provide additional support.

NEEDS Inc. and SRDC staff further reviewed measures to remove questions that could trigger negative emotional reactions among participants. Reviewing the survey through a trauma-informed lens was an important part of creating a positive and productive survey environment that supported youth in meaningful self-evaluation and reflection. Despite this screening, a few

of the participants flagged the questions on social connection in the pre- and post-program survey as upsetting. Instructors encouraged youth to skip these questions, re-affirming participants' voluntary participation and autonomy to select the questions that they felt comfortable answering. Instructors reflected that questions on social connections can highlight change or loss in social connection and relationships that occur as a result of displacement and relocation experiences.

> *"[S]ome of the youth were not comfortable talking about their networking, even during the workshops, we had noticed. Maybe they didn't feel safe, or maybe they just did not want to talk because it was something deeper."*

Implementation challenges and changes

NEEDS Inc. experienced four main challenges during implementation: recruitment, classroom management, response rates for follow-up surveys, and response rates for the employer survey. Each challenge and how it was addressed is described below.

Recruitment

NEEDS Inc. had lower-than-expected registration in Fall 2022, enrolling 26 participants. To address this challenge, NEEDS Inc. delivered a third cohort in Spring 2023, reaching a total enrolment of 47 participants across all three cohorts. To ensure that participants would complete training in time for summer employment, NEEDS Inc. delivered a condensed training model that included full-day sessions during youth's school spring break. Despite concerns around engagement for these longer sessions, NEEDS Inc. reported high levels of attendance and engagement. Facilitators shared that youth were enthusiastic about the spring break sessions, as the workshops provided the opportunity for youth to get out of the house, spend time with peers, and continue learning even while school was not in session.

> *"The spring break workshops, you know, it's pretty demanding on them. Five workshops over seven days... And attendance is strong throughout, strong throughout. They just kept coming back because it's something to do. I feel like they generally feel, again, safe and comfortable here. And it's part of, you know, a form – a component of them forming their identity here too. You know, this is what I do, this is who I am. I'm here to learn."*

One lesson learned from the full- and half-day sessions offered at NEEDS Inc. was that students benefit from more movement-based activities to break up the day and meet different learning objectives.

Classroom management

In the third cohort, NEEDS Inc. reported high levels of classroom disruption and challenges with behaviour management. In contrast to other cohorts, which were a mix of participants of different countries of origin, linguistic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, almost all participants in this cohort were very recently displaced. Staff reported that this cohort had a high number of disruptions in the classroom, including behavioural issues, conflict between students, and emotional or triggering conversations about displacement experiences. NEEDS Inc. staff are familiar working with recently displaced and recently arrived clients and employed a variety of trauma-informed strategies to support a positive classroom experience for all youth. Facilitators spent extra time discussing classroom expectations, mediating challenges between participants, and welcoming youth to participate to the extent they were comfortable with each day – including observing workshops and not participating in activities and leaving the classroom when needed. Additionally, staff connected with youth outside of sessions to discuss behavioural expectations and provide referrals to in-house psychosocial supports.

To further support youth, staff worked to develop trusting relationships and help participants identify and remember their goals, and the reasons why they were participating in the training. In the supported program environment, staff helped youth practice the behaviour and accountability required to succeed in a workplace context.

Follow-up response rates

While there were strong response rates for the baseline and post-program surveys, career coaches had challenges connecting with youth to complete the 4- and 8-week outcome surveys. In previous years, many program graduates were placed in temporary work placements with partner employers and career coaches continued to be actively engaged with youth, providing additional training, and observing in the workplace as needed. In contrast, this year the majority of participating youth were directly hired by employers and required less retention support from career coaches. In part, NEEDS Inc. staff attributed this shift to the increased labour needs of local employers following the COVID-19 pandemic. NEEDS Inc.'s reputation as a trusted training program also likely contributed to employer confidence in NEEDS Inc. graduates and resulted in a higher proportion of direct hires.

While the increase in direct employment was a success for the participants and the program, many youth reduced or stopped engagement with career coaches after finding employment, resulting in challenges collecting responses to the outcome surveys. To address this challenge, we combined the surveys into one follow-up survey completed in August 2023, three to five months after training completion. NEEDS Inc. staff organized an end-of-summer in-person meet-up for all participants to reconnect at the NEEDS Inc., enjoy a meal, and complete the

survey. To further incentivize engagement, SRDC authorized $50 incentives for survey completion.[5]

Employer response rates

Because of the increased number of direct hires and youth finding employment with non-employer partners, NEEDS Inc. staff also faced challenges receiving survey responses from employers. These surveys were developed as an opportunity for employers to provide feedback about youth job performance during work placements, as a part of ongoing communication with employer liaisons. However, as many of the youth were directly hired by employers (i.e., instead of conditional work placements or internships), there was little engagement with these surveys. While direct feedback from employers was not collected, the number of direct hires and the high rate of transition from work placements into full employment positions indicated employers' satisfaction with the youth job performance. As shared by NEEDS Inc. staff in an activity report:

> *Employers have generally been impressed with the quality of work provided by the clients who graduate from this program and find employment. Our clients have been successful in these opportunities, and we have seen a higher rate of success for clients in maintaining employment and transitioning from unpaid work experiences to paid employment [than in prior years].*

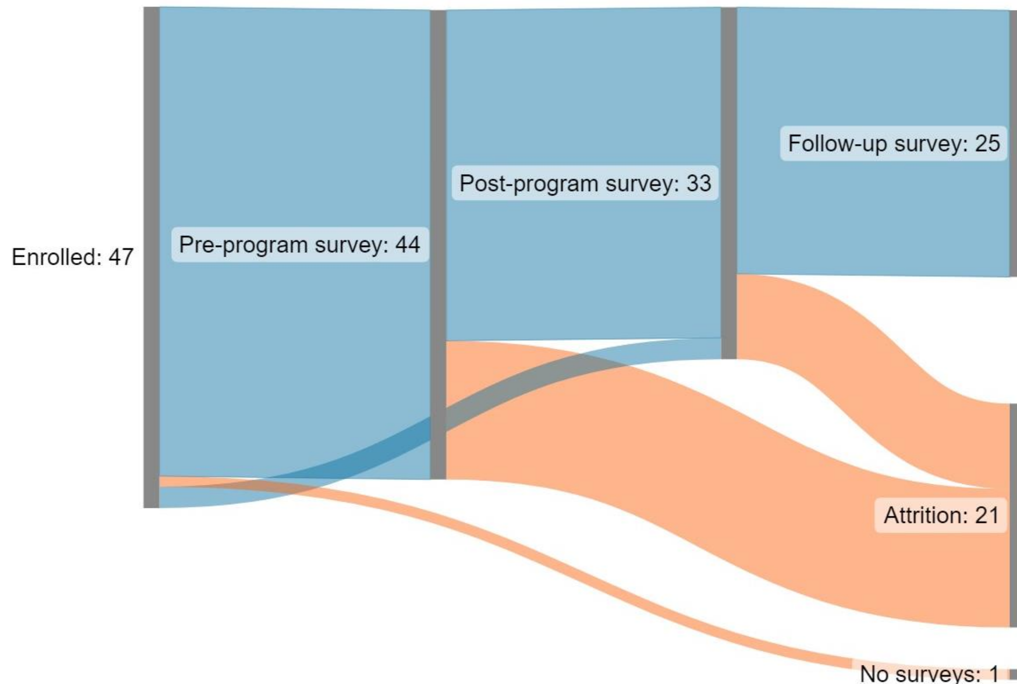
LEARNER OUTCOMES

Response rates and attrition

A total of 47 participants enrolled in the program and 44 participants participated in the pre-program survey. Of the 44 participants that completed the pre-program survey, 11 per cent participated in cohort one, delivered in a local high school in Fall 2022; 48 per cent participated in cohort 2, delivered at NEEDS Inc. in Fall 2022; and 41 per cent participated in cohort 3, delivered at NEEDS Inc. in Spring 2023. Three-quarters of the participants that completed the pre-program survey were retained throughout the program and completed the post-program survey and over half (56 per cent) completed the follow-up survey (see Figure 6).

[5] The follow-up survey incentive was larger for NEEDS Inc. than for NPower and Career Trek because the NEEDS Inc. survey was longer and required more time to complete.

Figure 6 Response rates and attrition

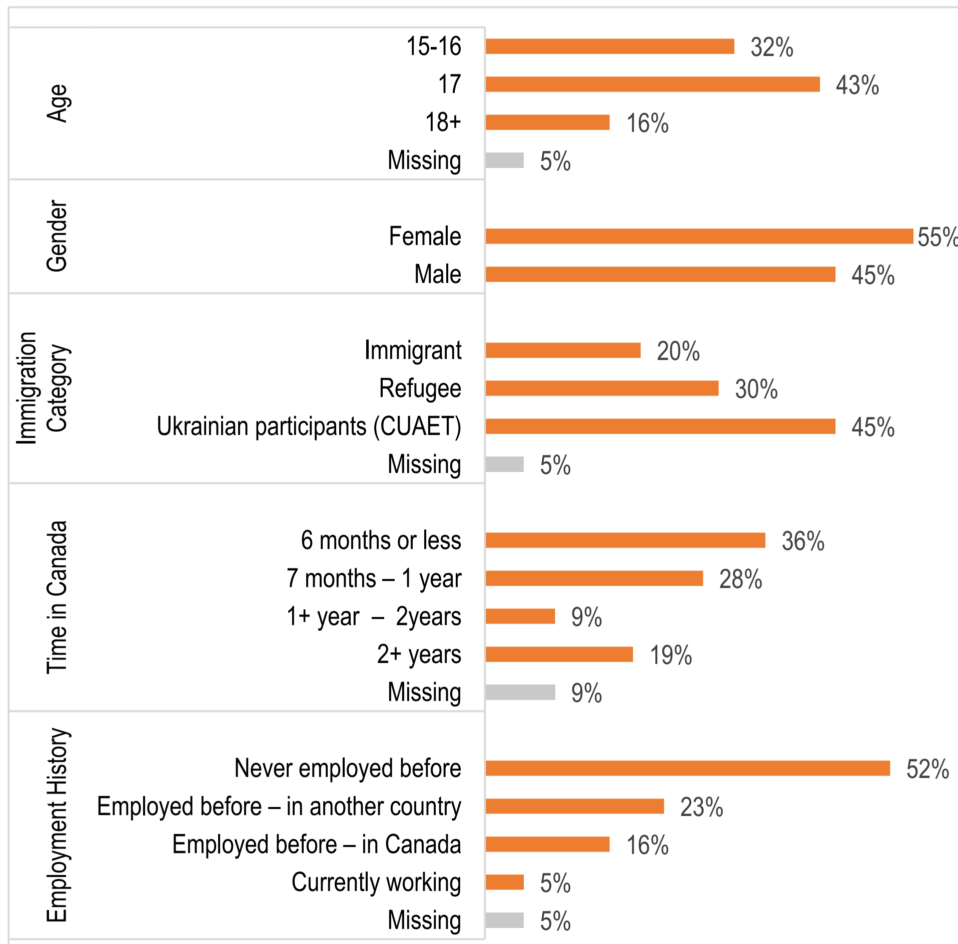


Reasons for attrition from the program varied. Several participants participated in the first session – which included the pre-program survey as well as orientation on expectations for the program – but did not return. Other participants found a job mid-way through the program and stopped attending sessions. Staff reported that other reasons for attrition included relocation to different provinces and youths' competing school and family responsibilities.

Demographic characteristics

Demographic information for participants that completed the consent form was shared with SRDC. The demographic information for the 44 participants that completed the baseline survey is described in Figure 7. The majority of youth (75 per cent) were under 18, and there was a relatively even gender divide, with just over half (55 per cent) of participants identifying as female and the reminder identifying as male. Approximately two thirds of participants were refugees (30 per cent) or recent arrivals through CUAET (45 per cent), Canada's immigration program for resettling displaced Ukrainians. Many of the participants were recent arrivals to Canada, with 64 per cent of participants arriving within the last year. Approximately half of participants reported no work experience, approximately a quarter reported prior work experience in a different country, 16 per cent reported previous work experience in Canada, and 5 per cent of participants were employed at the time of the survey.

Figure 7 Demographic Information



Short-term outcomes

The short-term outcomes were assessed by comparing participants' responses to pre-program and post-program surveys on a five-point Likert response scale, with one indicating the lowest level and five indicating the highest. To calculate an overall score for related items (e.g., scores for skills or underlying skill components or facets) a scale mean was calculated for participants who responded to more than 50 per cent of the related items in a given scale. Paired sample t-tests were conducted to assess the difference in pre-program and post-program scores. The t-tests showed that participants reported significant skill gains across many of the social emotional skills assessed, and reported increased feelings of engagement in meaningful activities, peer belonging, belonging to their school, and connection to caring adults at school.

Pathway A: Social Emotional Skills

Using items adapted from the Behavioral, Emotional, and Social Skills Inventory (BESSI) and mapped to Skills for Success domains, participants reported significant skill gains in social emotional skills overall, for each of the individual skills, and for many of the skill facets (i.e., components) underlying each skill (see Table 5).

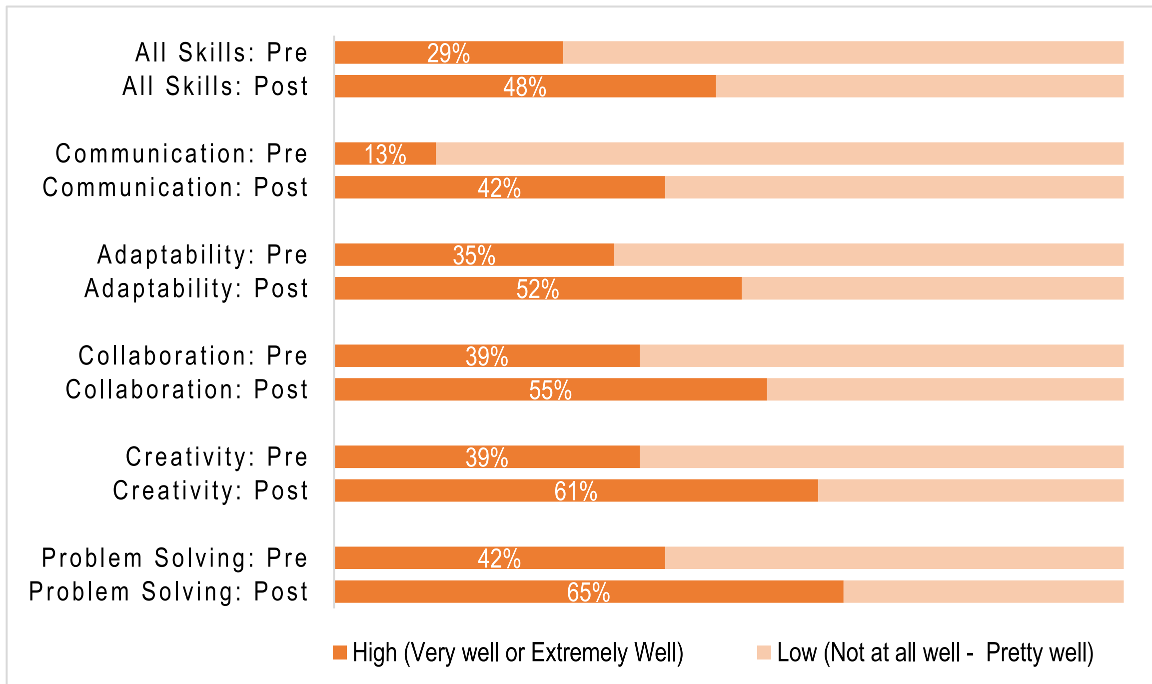
Table 5 Pathway A pre- and post-training outcomes (*N* = 31)

	Pre-program survey	Post-program survey	Pre-to-post gain	T-test p-value
Social emotional skill score	**3.62**	**3.88**	**0.26**	**0.00*** **
Communication	**3.16**	**3.55**	**0.39**	**0.01*** **
Conversation Skills	3.23	3.63	0.41	**0.03** **
Expressive Skills	3.10	3.46	0.37	**0.01** **
Creativity & Innovation	**3.57**	**3.91**	**0.34**	**0.01*** **
Abstract Thinking Skill	3.59	3.94	0.36	**0.03** **
Creativity Facet	3.56	3.87	0.31	**0.02** **
Problem solving	**3.77**	**4.03**	**0.27**	**0.02** **
Decision-making Facet	3.77	4.03	0.27	**0.02** **
Adaptability	**3.67**	**3.90**	**0.24**	**0.01*** **
Adjusting to Change	3.74	3.91	0.17	0.13
Anger Management skill	3.49	3.76	0.27	**0.08* **
Stress Regulation Skill	3.34	3.66	0.31	**0.03** **
Capacity for Optimism	3.72	3.94	0.22	**0.03** **
Self-confidence	3.83	3.98	0.15	0.28
Goal Regulation Skill	3.91	4.08	0.16	0.22
Task Management Skill	3.72	4.04	0.32	**0.03** **
Time Management Skill	3.62	3.92	0.30	**0.03** **
Collaboration	**3.76**	**3.99**	**0.23**	**0.01*** **
Capacity for Social Warmth	3.60	3.83	0.23	0.11
Perspective-taking Skill	3.71	3.91	0.20	**0.10* **
Teamwork Skill	3.86	4.12	0.26	**0.04** **
Cross-cultural Skill	3.88	4.12	0.24	**0.02** **

Note: T-test significance levels: * ≤ 0.10, ** ≤ 0.05, *** ≤ 0.01.

Figure 8 shows the distribution of participants that reported high skills scores (an average of 4 or higher on the 5-point scale) at pre-program and post-program. Consistent with the gains in mean scores, the percentage of participants that reported high scores increased for all the social emotional skills.

Figure 8 Distribution – Social emotional skill scores



Communication skills had the lowest score at baseline and showed the highest skill gain – 29 percentage points – reflecting the focus on applied language skills throughout the program. Creativity and Innovation and Problem Solving also showed strong skill gains (22 and 23 percentage points, respectively). Throughout the training program, youth were encouraged to develop and apply these skills multiple ways, including creatively constructing resumes that reflected their strengths and learning how to market themselves in job interviews. Staff shared that the skill gains were evident in participants' behaviour during the training program. Participants showed increased confidence and comfort communicating and working collaboratively on tasks and demonstrated Creativity and Problem Solving skills when completing classroom activities. One facilitator shared the following example of how language skills and confidence developed during the program:

> *You can actually see – like literally see – the personality develop. And for most of the youth, when they started, not a single word. They were very shy to ask a question. And by, I think, when we're almost halfway through the workshop – we have seen this – seen them lead a group. They would be like, 'okay I'll do it'."*

Pathway B: Strengthening employment opportunities

Participants reported significantly higher career adaptability skills in the post-program survey than the pre-program survey (see Table 6).

Table 6 Pathway B pre- and post-training outcomes

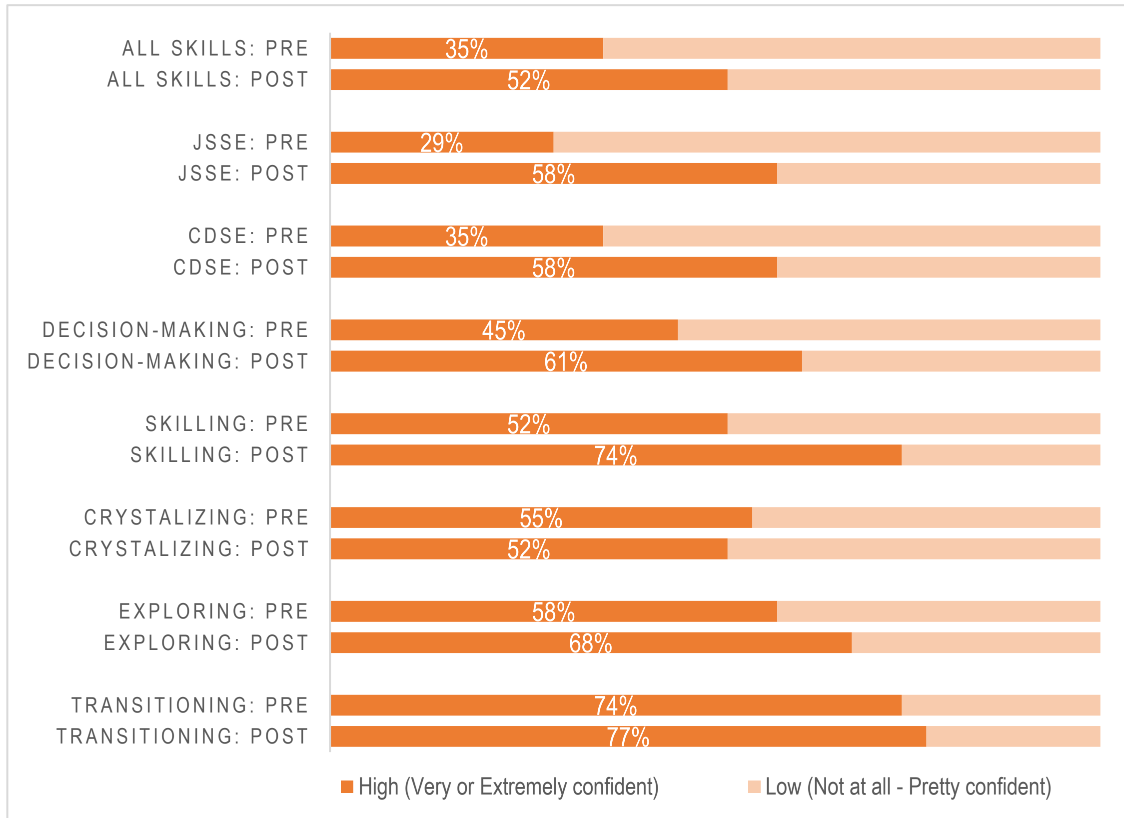
	Pre-program	Post-program	Pre-to-post gain	T-test p-value
All career pathfinding	3.70	4.06	+0.36	**0.00*** **
Job search self efficacy (JSSE)	3.41	4.08	+0.67	**0.00*** **
Career decision-making self-efficacy (CDSE)	3.69	3.99	+0.30	**0.04** **
Student Career Construction Inventory				
Crystalizing Vocational Identity	3.77	4.01	+0.24	**0.01*** **
Exploring Career Options	3.78	4.11	+0.33	**0.00*** **
Making Career Decisions	3.64	4.12	+0.48	**0.00*** **
Job Skilling	3.86	4.11	+0.25	**0.08* **
Transitioning into Employment	4.02	4.29	+0.28	**0.05* **

Note: T-test significance levels: * ≤ 0.10, ** ≤ 0.05, *** ≤ 0.01.

Job search self-efficacy showed the largest gain, with those reporting high scores (4 or above on a 5-point scale) increasing by 29 percentage points (Figure 9). This measure included items such as confidence in one's abilities to "*Write resumes that will get you interviews", and "Impress interviewers during job interviews*", which were directly related to the skills trained during the program. As well as an increased ability to search for a job, youth reported gains in items related to finding meaningful employment aligned with their skills, such as *"Finding a line of work that suites me*" and picking another career or occupation if they do not like their job.

Measures from the Student Career Construction Inventory also showed significant and high magnitudes of positive change, especially on the area of making career decisions.

Figure 9 Distribution – Career Adaptability Scores



Pathway C: Wellbeing and self-efficacy

Though Pathway C and D outcomes were not directly targeted by the program, and thus not part of the pay for performance structure, there were nevertheless a number of significant gains in these areas, showing the ripple effects an employment and skills training program can potentially have on a range of other outcomes.

For example, participants reported significant gains in engagement in meaningful activities (EMAS), which served as a proxy measure for youth wellbeing and mental health (see Table 7). In particular, there were large gains for the items *"The activities that I do…contribute to my feeling competent", "…give me a sense of satisfaction"* and *"… have just the right amount of challenge"*. Past research has found that positive scores on the EMAS are associated with lower self-reported depression, anxiety, and stress (Eakman, 2010). Although this research was conducted with a sample of adults, there is strong conceptual evidence that participating in meaningful activities supports wellbeing and positive mental health, beyond the value of the activities themselves.

Table 7 Pathway C pre- and post-training outcomes

	Pre-program	Post-program	Pre-to-post gain	T-test p-value
Engagement in Meaningful Activities	3.50	3.87	0.37	**0.01*** **
Doubts about PSE	2.80	3.04	0.24	0.11
Benefits of PSE	3.96	4.11	0.15	0.15

Note: T-test significance levels: * ≤ 0.10, ** ≤ 0.05, *** ≤ 0.01.

There were no significant changes in youth perceptions of the benefits of post-secondary education overall, in sub-scales, or at the item level. The lack of change reflects the lack of focus on post-secondary education in this program, which primarily focuses on skill development and employment.

Pathway D: Community connections

In addition to skill gains and increased wellbeing, NEEDS Inc. emphasizes social connections and integration into the community, city, and Canada overall. In the words of one staff member, success for participants is "…being able to identify with the peers in the class as well as in the greater culture of the city in which they live." The survey results show success in reaching these goals, as summarized in Table 8.

Table 8 Pathway D pre- and post-training outcomes

	Pre-program	Post-program	Pre-to-post gain	T-test p-value
Belonging to School	3.71	4.23	0.52	**0.01*** **
Belonging to Community	3.48	3.74	0.26	0.17
Belonging to City	3.32	3.58	0.26	0.21
Peer Belonging	3.30	3.67	0.37	**0.03** **
Caring Adults	3.57	3.87	0.30	**0.04** **
Social Capital	3.64	3.89	0.25	**0.07* **

Note: T-test significance levels: * ≤ 0.10, ** ≤ 0.05, *** ≤ 0.01.

Youth reported significantly higher feelings of belonging to their school, as well as peer belonging after the training program – particularly to the item "*When I am with other kids my age, I feel I belong*". Additionally, youth were significantly more likely to report that they had access to caring adults at school. However, both the peer belonging and caring adults measures showed that a minority of participants (39 per cent and 42 per cent, respectively) reported high scores (i.e., 4 or above on a 5-point scale) even after the training program. This suggests that while participants did report gains, there is still space for continued growth in these areas. Recognizing this, NEEDS Inc. staff provided youth participants opportunities to stay connected to NEEDS Inc., offering a range of formal programs (e.g., English for Employment) and informal groups and gatherings.

There was also a marked positive trend towards gains in social capital – for example "*people in your network*" that can help you pursue educational or career goals, though a relatively high level of imprecision in this measure meant that the gain was only marginally significant. The positive trend may indicate that youth perceptions of their network expanded beyond the usual family and community ties to include NEEDS Inc. staff and their employer networks.

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

Long-term outcomes were assessed in a follow-up survey conducted three to five months after the end of the classroom portion of learning. To encourage high response rates, this survey was shorter than both the pre-program and post-program surveys and included selected scales from the pre- and post-program surveys and questions related to employment outcomes, job satisfaction, plans for the future, and feedback on career coaches.

Retention of skill gains, wellbeing, and belonging

The follow-up survey included a targeted selection of key survey measures. For Pathway A, the three facets that showed relatively large amounts of change (conversation skills, expressive skills, task management skills) and small amounts of change (self-confidence, goal management, and adjusting to change) were included, to test for potential sustained gains and continuing improvement respectively. In Pathway B, the two scales that were most closely related to NEEDS Inc.'s curriculum (career decision-making self-efficacy and job search self-efficacy) were included. For pathways C and D, the EMAS and peer belonging scales were included. While relevant to the program, the social capital scale was not included, as some participants reported discomfort answering these questions in the pre-program and post-program survey.

A series of paired sample t-tests were conducted to assess whether the skill scores reported in the follow-up survey significantly differed from the skill scores reported prior to the program.

The limited sample size at follow-up (*N* = 23-24) reduced the statistical power associated with the test, increasing the size of skill gain required for a test to be considered significant. As a result, although measures showed a similar magnitude of positive gain to those found in the previous comparison of pre- and post-program surveys, most of the results were only marginally significant or no longer significant, likely due to the larger standard error (see Table 9).

Table 9 Follow-up survey results

N = 23-24	Pre-program	Follow-up	Pre-to-post gains	T-test p value
Pathway A				
Communication – conversation skills	3.13	3.54	0.42	**0.05***
Communication – expressive skills	3.04	3.33	0.29	**0.08***
Adaptability – task management skill	3.57	3.91	0.34	**0.07***
Adaptability – self-confidence	3.63	3.89	0.26	0.11
Adaptability – adjusting to change	3.75	4.00	0.25	**0.06***
Adaptability – goal regulation skill	3.75	3.90	0.15	0.33
Pathway B				
Job search self-efficacy	3.25	3.94	0.69	**0.00*****
Career decision-making self efficacy	3.59	3.84	0.25	0.15
Pathway C				
Engagement in meaningful activities	3.44	3.78	0.33	**0.00*****
Pathway D				
Peer belonging	3.19	3.57	0.38	**0.07***

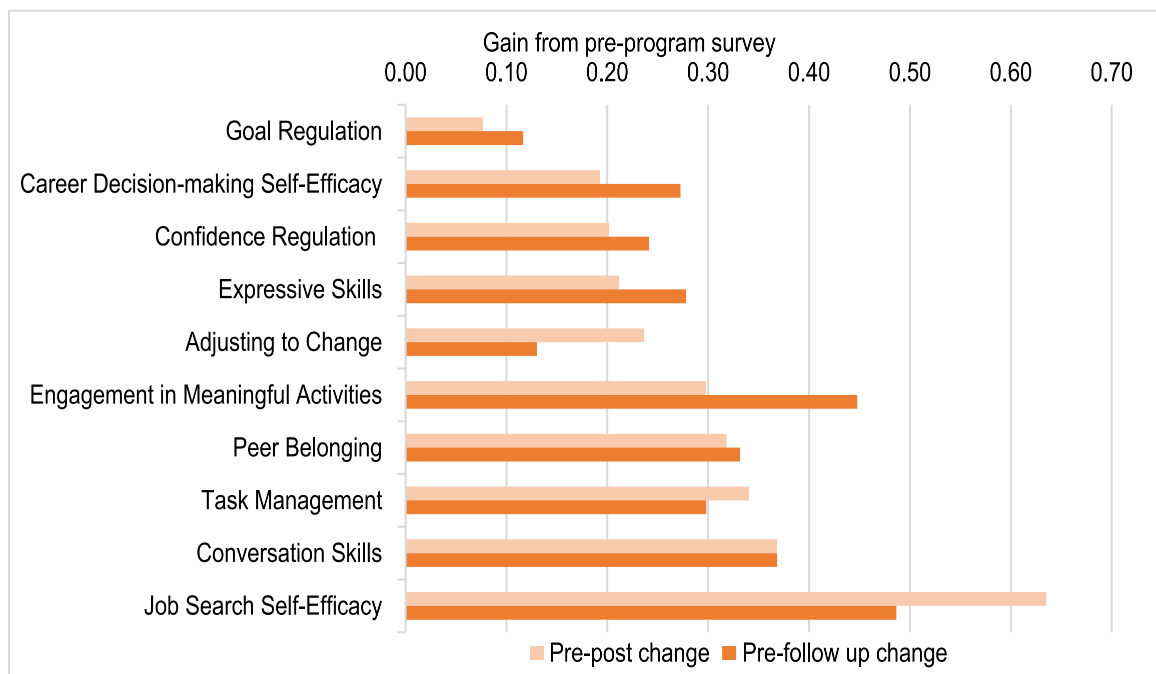
Note: T-test significance levels: * ≤ 0.10, ** ≤ 0.05, *** ≤ 0.01.

To test whether pre-to-post program gains were sustained or even improved during the follow-up period, we compared the magnitudes of pre-to-post gains and pre-to-follow-up gains among participants that completed all three surveys (Figure 10).

Some measures such as adjusting to change, task management, and job search self-efficacy showed a declining trend at follow-up compared to their levels immediately after the program –

though the scores reported at follow-up were still higher than in the pre-program surveys. This may be a result of youth facing challenges in these areas as they searched for employment and began working. However, for the majority of scales, the change between the pre-program and follow-up surveys were similar to the change between the pre- and post-program surveys. This indicates that the gains achieved during the program were largely retained during the three-to-five-month follow-up period. For example, conversation skills and peer belonging both had similar levels of change at the post-program survey and at follow-up. Other measures (e.g., expressive skills, career decision-making self-efficacy, and engagement in meaningful activities) showed an increasing trend from post-program to follow-up, indicating that youth may have continued to develop these skills while working with career coaches and starting employment. It may be that experiences with career coaches or in the workplace support youth as they continue to build their confidence and communication skills.

Figure 10 Comparing change at post-program and follow-up for participants that completed all three surveys (*N* = 23-25)



The sustained skill, wellbeing, and belonging gains reported by youth several months after the end of the program demonstrate the participants' ability to take lessons and positive experiences from the program and carry them forward as they continue their employment and settlement journeys. Setting the stage for this kind of learning retention is one of NEEDS Inc's priorities. In the words of one staff member, a sign of success for learners is:

> *"Independence. I mean, they're all generally very independent because when they come here, they have to be. But independence from us as well, learning what they need to learn. But then like seeing them like go off and flourish on their own – that's really big. Whether that's with employment or with school or just with their mental health."*

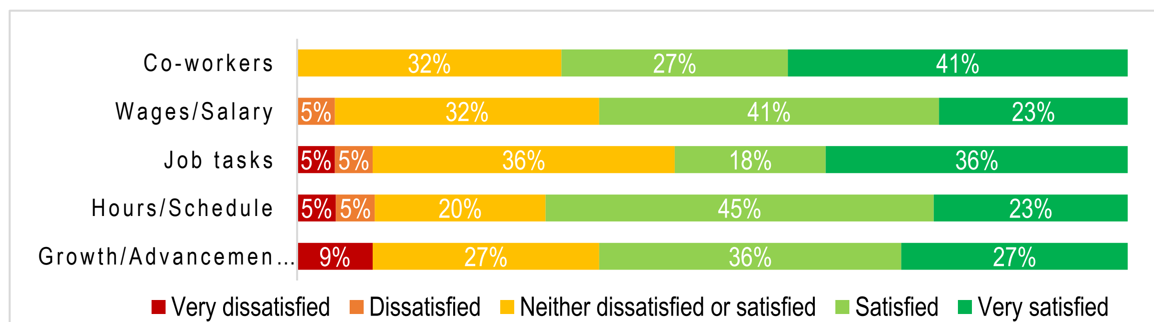
Employment outcomes

Youth reported very successful employment outcomes, building on the strong skill gains developed during the program**. Of the 25 follow-up survey respondents, 88 per cent reported finding employment or a work placement.** According to administrative data provided by NEEDS Inc., six of these participants were provided with facilitated work placements, five of which were then hired into paid positions with the same employer. Of those that were employed, 73 per cent were working in part-time positions (less than 30 hours a week), and 27 per cent were working full time or more than 40 hours a week. NEEDS Inc. staff reported that in the month after the follow-up survey, two more participants found employment positions.

Of the participants that completed the follow-up survey, **88 per cent were employed or in work placements.**

For 65 per cent of the youth employed, this was their first employment experience; for another 25 per cent, this was their first employment experience in Canada. Youth were employed in a range of sectors and occupations, including customer service positions with retailers, recreation and youth leadership roles with the City of Winnipeg, customer service roles in grocery stores, and positions in food and services. Overall, youth shared positive feedback about the employment positions, with the majority of participants reporting being satisfied or very satisfied with co-workers, wages, work schedule, job tasks, and opportunities for growth (see Figure 11).

Figure 11 Job satisfaction

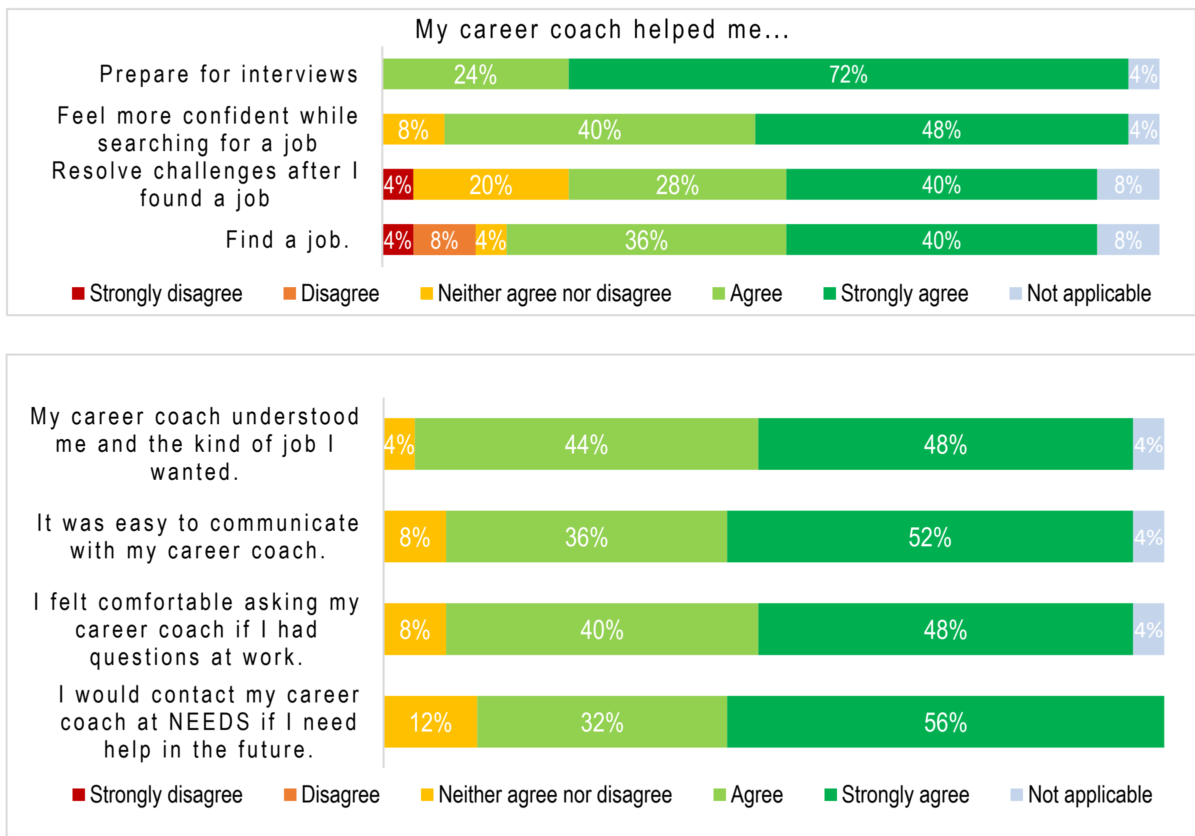


PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Participant feedback

During the follow-up survey, youth were asked to reflect on their experience working with career coaches. Overall, youth reported positive feedback about their career coaches (see Figure 12). The vast majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed that their career coach helped them prepare for interviews (96 per cent), feel more confident when searching for a job (88 per cent), find a job (76 per cent), and resolve challenges after finding a job (68 per cent). Over 85 per cent of participants agreed or strongly agreed to statements about feeling comfortable and understood when communicating with career coaches.

Figure 12 Participant feedback



How did the milestone model perform?

The results of the pay-for-performance model are shown in Table 10. Overall, 61 per cent of the performance payment budget was paid to NEEDS Inc., with individual milestone payments ranging from 45 per cent to 76 per cent. For the skill gain-related milestones (A1 and B1), NEEDS Inc. earned 55 per cent of the available budget for social emotional skills (Milestone A1) and 66 per cent for the career adaptability skills (Milestone B1). In some cases, participants showed gains in both skill areas; in other cases, participants reported gains in one of the two skill areas.

Table 10 Pay-for-performance results

	Percent of milestone payment received	Percent of participants that earned:		
		Full payments	Partial payments	No payments
Total Pay for Performance	**61%**	-	-	-
Milestone A1: Strengthen social emotional skills	55%	35%	32%	32%
Milestone B1: Strengthen career adaptability skills	66%	48%	16%	35%
Milestone B2: 4-week job retention	76%	56%	6%	38%
Milestone B3: 8-week job retention	45%	25%	16%	59%

Considering the skill-gain milestones (A1 and B1) together, 90 per cent of participants reported a gain in milestone A1 or B1, 58 per cent of participants met the criteria for a full payment in one of the two milestones and 32 per cent met the criteria for a partial payment. These results suggest that most participants reported significant skill gains in either social emotional skills or career adaptability skills, and some participants reported skill gains in both areas.

The most successful milestone was the 4-week job retention, reflecting the high rates of employment among participants. Though over 70% of participants who retained employment at 4 weeks also continued working for at least some of the subsequent 4 weeks, payments for the 8-week job retention milestone were somewhat reduced – partially reflecting the "summer work" nature of many of these jobs. Nevertheless, the fact that these were the first jobs of any kind for most participants, and the first jobs in Canada for others, shows the likely future value of these initial forays into the labour market may be high for this group of young newcomers and refugees.

How did measurement capacity change as a result of this project?

NEEDS Inc. entered this project with strong existing measurement capacity, including detailed intake forms and employment readiness assessments, administrative data collection, and outcome assessments used to collect information required by funding organizations. Through this project, NEEDS Inc. increased their capacity to develop assessments using a milestone framework that track progress towards longer-term outcomes (e.g., skill gains as a foundational step towards employment outcomes). Staff were exposed to new measurement tools to assess holistic outcomes tailored to program priorities. NEEDS Inc. staff shared that the collaborative process of designing the evaluation and selecting Skills for Success measures was a valuable exercise to help program staff clarify and articulate key learning outcomes.

As NEEDS Inc. implemented the data collection tools, front-line staff (instructors and career coaches) gained experience administering surveys, many for the first time. These staff played an important role in introducing the surveys, walking youth through the consent forms, providing clarification on survey questions, and relaying participant feedback to SRDC staff. The strong relationships staff developed with participants during the program made it possible to conduct an extended follow-up survey to track how skills were retained in the months following the training program.

Informed by the evidence collected in this project, NEEDS Inc. staff plan to make moderate, data-driven changes to programming. Furthermore, going forward, NEEDS Inc. plans to conduct pre- and post-program surveys for all future workshops to continue to monitor learner needs and collect evidence for data-driven programming. As shared in an activity report, staff stated that:

> *"[This project] helped us evaluate our current processes and identify areas for improvement in a variety of areas of our service delivery. This is important as this program has been operating for over 15 years. And while we do try to keep up with new developments and regularly modify content, without regular formal evaluations, long running programs may not reflect the changing needs of clients and employers. This evaluation helps us keep pace with the changing client demographics we support and to meet the needs of employers in helping them adapt to changing employee trends and expectations."*

NPower Canada

Participants

This program served **305** youth who engaged in **digital skills training** alongside another 490 adults.

Program model

Learners undertook two types of **full-time training over three months**: 1) The Junior IT Analyst Program or 2) The Junior Data Analyst Program.

Program goals

- Provide participants with **free in-demand digital and professional skills training**
- Connect unemployed and underemployed job seekers to new and **rewarding career opportunities**
- Provide **post-training employment support** to alumni and employers
- Build an **alumni network** to support continuous learning and mentorship

Online training offered across Canada

Key outcomes

251
youth completed the three month training program. Among them, **103 started employment or further education** in a digitally skilled area after three months

65%
of the 101 youth who completed in-program surveys, two-thirds reported higher **career pathfinding skills** after training

58%
of the 101 youth who completed in-program surveys, more than half reported higher **social emotional skills** after training

61%
of the 101 youth who completed in program surveys, more than half reported their **social network** had improved after training

NPOWER CANADA

SITE INTRODUCTION

Launched in 2014, NPower Canada is a charitable organization that offers free digital and professional skills training to people who are unemployed or underemployed across Canada. Training is three months in duration and runs for a minimum of four hours a day Monday to Friday. Along with training, NPower Canada engages employers to connect graduates to organizations that are seeking to hire people in digitally-related roles. NPower Canada's model of training mirrors NPower USA, an organization founded in 1999 through a partnership between Microsoft, JPMorgan Chase, and Accenture that offers training to both youth (18-26 years old) and military veterans across eight states.

Target population, recruitment, and eligibility

Target population

NPower Canada targets low-income individuals, regardless of their age. While the organization initially only offered training to youth aged 17 to 30, it expanded training eligibility in 2021 to include older adults, especially targeting mid-career workers who lost their job during the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemic through a re-skilling program funded by Ontario's Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development. During this same period, all programs and services moved online with support from a learning management system.[6] With these changes, the number of learners across Canada increased from 590 in 2019 to 2,598 in 2022. In implementation interviews, NPower Canada staff described the change in age-based eligibility in largely positive terms. For example, one staff member spoke of the various ways different age groups can offer support to one another:

> *"Even with an entry level program there will always be some participants, young and old, who will be more well versed in the tech field, in troubleshooting and IT concepts. The beauty of this is that we have scrum groups and in those groups it's a mix. And we definitely see the support that they provide to each other. I've seen younger ones trying to lead the older members of their group into finishing their courses or explaining concepts. And then I've seen the older demographic guiding the younger ones on best practices in the workplace, especially when it comes to self-regulation and self-awareness."*

[6] If needed, participants in training receive a free laptop and Wi-Fi stick to ensure they have access to the technology they need during programming.

The age of a learner is linked to their career stage and prior work experience, both of which may influence their employment readiness. As we discuss further below, NPower Canada offers individualized employment support that takes age and prior work and education experience into account. Therefore, while technical programming does not differ between youth and adults, all participants receive tailored employment-based support based on both individual needs and age-related stages of career development.

Recruitment and eligibility

NPower Canada actively recruits people who are unemployed, under-employed, or facing financial challenges and barriers to employment. The organization recruits learners through: 1) partnerships with other non-profits or community organizations; 2) digital/online marketing; and 3) referrals from alumni who recommend the program to their network. Currently, people are eligible for programming if they: reside in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba, or Nova Scotia; can legally work full-time in Canada; have completed high school; are proficient in English or French; do not exceed individual and household income thresholds;[7] and are not attending school full-time.

Along with these eligibility requirements prior to entering training, NPower Canada also expects participants to be available Monday to Friday from 8:45 am to 1:00 pm to participate in training over three months. Training participation is a full-time commitment, although accommodations are available on a case-by-case basis. A learner requiring accommodation can establish an alternative learning plan with NPower Canada staff. For example, a caregiver can receive additional training breaks, and a participant with a disability can receive additional time on assessments and assignments.

Part way through the project in 2023, the training time commitment changed for incoming cohorts to offer more opportunities for self-paced learning. Learners must still log on for a minimum of four hours a day, but certain training sessions are optional (but recommended). The aim of this synchronous-asynchronous training approach is to provide greater flexibility to people who learn differently or are dealing with multiple priorities and/or unanticipated challenges. Learners can use asynchronous time to enhance their understanding of concepts through self-directed learning. It also provides extra time for staff to connect with learners who may need one-on-one support.

[7] To be eligible, recruits must have an individual income of less than $40,000 and an overall household income that is less than $100,000.

Training program

Among those who are eligible, NPower Canada currently offers two main program streams:

1. The Junior IT Analyst (JITA) Program introduces a range of digital skills to participants without any prior technical experience, although learners must have basic computer skills prior to entry (e.g., Internet navigation, email). This program covers the skills related to entry-level IT jobs, including customer support for computer assembly, wireless networking, installing programs, and troubleshooting and debugging. Participants can obtain the Google IT Support Professional Certificate during the program.

2. The Junior Data Analyst (JDA) Program is a more intermediate digital skills program that requires some prior education or knowledge in programming or database languages. NPower Canada launched this program in 2021 in partnership with Microsoft. It covers skills in the areas of data visualization, regression and projection modeling, and machine learning. Participants can obtain the Microsoft Azure Fundamental Certificate or the IBM Data Analyst Professional Certificate during the program — two industry-recognized credentials that will prepare learners for roles such as Junior Data Analyst, Database Administrator, and Business Analyst.

Program support

NPower Canada offers both in-program support for learners and post-program support for alumni. While in training, participants can receive both social and employment support. Social support may come from individual referrals to other organizations or through in-program workshops offered to all learners. For example, cohorts in Alberta received a series of five mental health related workshops while in training. In interviews, staff members discussed the importance of offering this type of program support, although they also recognized that in-house resources may not meet the needs of all learners and referrals to external support may be necessary.

While in training, Talent Matching Specialists also provide some learner support, such as help creating resumes and alerting learners to new positions. Alumni Placement Specialists also have a one-on-one meeting with learners while they are in the program, a conversation that can include identifying barriers to employment (e.g., childcare, transportation) and setting post-program goals. Across these support services, staff use a case management system to track learners in terms of their performance in training, personal circumstances, and career goals. NPower Canada also offers job attainment, job retention, and career progression support up-to five years after graduating. While Alumni Placement Specialists do regular email check-ins initially following the program, the frequency of one-on-one meetings is participant-directed

with some people seeking more support than others. In an interview, a staff member described the amount of post-program support as dependent on the needs of each alum, with some who want weekly phone calls and others who do not want post-program support.

Alumni Placement Specialists provide a range of supports, from sharing employment opportunities and referrals to engaging in mock interviews and providing feedback on resumes. Across multiple interviews, support was described as tailored to the needs of participants, such as being specialized for newcomers who are not familiar with how to job search in the Canadian market. A staff member described the need to be "incredibly open to their life circumstances" and adapt career support to an individual's background, employment goals, and any life circumstances. If a NPower Canada participant disengages with this alumni support service soon after program completion, staff members try to re-engage the person. Staff members described using a range of creative ways to get back in touch with someone who has disengaged, such as reaching out by text or on social media. One staff member described an instance where this persistence paid off:

> *"I had one situation where I called a participant like every other week for six months. They were engaged at the beginning and then, for three months in the middle, they were completely disengaged – I never heard from them. But I kept calling and eventually he finally answered. He explained what was going on, and then he said the only reason why he's bothering to job search at all is because I kept calling. And then he ended up getting a very good job, it was well deserved, at a bank. But it was the consistency of someone checking in on him, and kind of like being an extra push. Of course, that doesn't work for everybody. That can be a lot for some participants, having someone continuously call and ask about your job search. But for this person, he was like 'I was not job searching until I heard your voicemails.'"*

Alumni Placement Specialists also offer regular check-ins three months after an alum gains employment. After they start working, retention support includes check-in calls to discuss skills they are regularly using at work and problems they may encounter. While many graduates gain employment in technical fields, a staff member described social emotional skills as central to these conversations. Newly employed alumni often seek advice on workplace relationships and engagements rather than technical skills.

Integrating Skills for Success to enhance programming

Along with technical training, learners in both program streams also receive 14 Professional Development workshops taught by Career Specialists — a curriculum that NPower Canada updated prior to the start of the evaluation. Lasting four hours each, workshops are mandatory to attend, and learners also complete independent activities outside of classroom hours (e.g., create a cover letter). While NPower Canada indirectly integrates Skills for Success into technical

training, it is a core component of their Professional Development training. As outlined in Table 11, workshops emphasize employment readiness skills needed to create strong resumes and cover letters, succeed in interviews, and transition to employment. It also covers key social emotional skills, namely Communication, Adaptability, and Problem-solving. As one staff member at NPower Canada described in an interview:

> *"I think when we talk about employment readiness, or individuals that are job ready, we really are talking about those social and emotional skills [...] if we are not seeing those social emotional skills, we're probably not considering them to be job ready."*

Table 11 Professional Development workshop overview

Workshop title	Skills for Success area
1. Résumé, Online Presence, and Personal Branding	Writing, Communication
2. Time Management and Résumé Edits	Adaptability
3. Critical Thinking and LinkedIn Profile	Problem solving
4. Stress Management and Online Recruitment	Adaptability
5. Interview Skills and Mock Interviews	Communication
6. Professional Business Communication and Interview Skills	Communication
7. Preparing for your First Day	Adaptability
8. Problem Solving, Feedback, and Critical Thinking	Problem solving
9. Decision Making, Resourcefulness, and Mock Interviews	Adaptability
10. Selling Oneself in an Interview	Communication
11. Business Communication and Document Tailoring	Writing, Communication
12. Mock Interview and Professional References	Communication
13. A Day in the Life (Stream Specific Employer Visit)	
14. Mock Interviews	Communication

The Professional Development curriculum is adapted regionally and by program depending on the needs of local participants. While the technical-based training involves a more structured curriculum often developed by external partners (e.g., Coursera and Google), instructors have more leeway to adapt Professional Development workshop activities. As an example, a NPower

Canada staff member described adapting a stress management workshop to include experiential education:

> *"When I first started it was really heavy on information sharing and we switched it to be "go find something." Go as a group and research a stress management technique and then assign everyone to go try one out. And then in the next one they're coming back and talking about their experience [...] they're actually trying out new things then, you know, not just kind of doing what they know and being open to that exploration."*

Skills for Success related training does not just take place in the Professional Development workshops but is also part of technical training. In technical training, NPower Canada staff described scrum groups established at the start of each program as central to promoting Collaboration. Through these groups, learners worked on projects together and tried different agile project management techniques commonly used in the tech sector. In interviews, NPower Canada staff also discussed the importance of one-on-one coaching sessions either during or after training as key to promoting Skills for Success. For example, one staff member described using a "share and explain" approach to build Communication skills:

> *"If they're working on a project or their portfolio, I ask them to share their screen and explain it to me [...] just to get them into the habit of showcasing, explaining. If you want to be a business analyst, how are you going to present your findings? I tell them, you know, make all the mistakes with me."*

In these interviews, NPower Canada staff emphasized that people who provide learners with program supports are often in the best position to discuss particular skill areas where they may face challenges and share ways that they can improve.

Program outcomes

NPower Canada has an organizational target that 80 per cent of participants will graduate from their program and earn at least one industry certification. Among those who complete training, NPower Canada's internal goal is that 80 per cent of those who are actively job searching or engaged with NPower Canada will secure employment or enroll in further education within six months. Early targets help support this aim, such as the goal that 25 per cent of program participants secure employment while in training.

While the organization has this overall aim, staff members described participants themselves defining their own measures of success. As one staff member told us in an interview: *"so as much as we have our goal of placing 80 per cent of clients in six months, we very much come from what the client deems as success as well."*

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN, CHALLENGES, AND CHANGES

What was the implementation plan?

Training delivery

As NPower Canada programs in Alberta and Ontario were participating in a separate randomized control trial to assess program outcomes, we restricted our evaluation to other regions so learners would not receive surveys and communication from two different evaluation projects. Nevertheless, included regions were also participating in smaller ongoing research and evaluation activities at the same time as this project. Along with NPower Canada's own internal evaluation activities, certain funders (e.g., RBC, United Way) also requested information from learners over the course of our project. As discussed further below, NPower Canada reduced the number of different internal and external surveys learners were asked to complete mid-way through the evaluation to decrease survey fatigue.

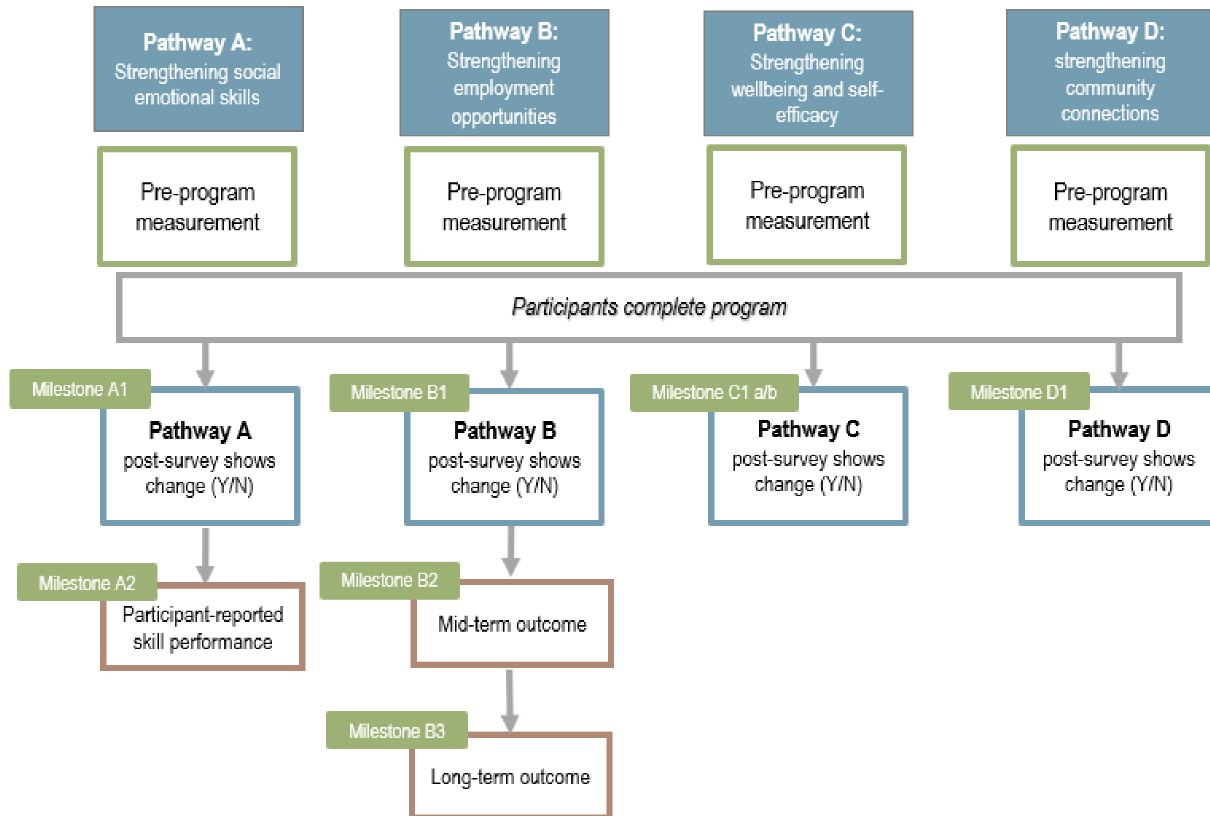
Within eligible regions, the project planned to recruit 500 youth participants from three incoming cohorts participating in either the Junior IT Analyst or Junior Data Analyst program: 1) the September 2022 cohort; 2) the November 2022 cohort; and 3) the January 2023 cohort. NPower Canada added the second cohort later in the evaluation planning stage as they had just launched a new French-language program in Quebec.

Customized milestone framework

NPower Canada and SRDC worked together to customize the generic milestone-based pathway to create a customized milestone framework, pay-for-performance structure, and to develop an evaluation implementation plan and survey tools. NPower Canada employees engaging in evaluation planning were executive and research staff employed prior to the start of the project, and no new staff members were hired to support the project. Staff who worked more closely with learners were aware of the evaluation through internal communication that described the evaluation, survey tools, and how to answer common questions learners may ask.

SRDC and NPower Canada worked together to adapt the generic milestone-based pathway model to NPower Canada's mission and programming. Along the four pathways described in the introduction, we selected eight milestones capturing short-, mid-, and long-term outcomes (see Figure 13).

Figure 13 Customized milestone-based framework



Customized performance payment structure

As Table 12 describes, we defined five short-term outcomes and aligned them with specific measurement tools to track which participants reached each milestone. As in the other sites, NPower Canada and SRDC co-developed surveys where participants responded to milestone-aligned measures, first at the start of the program and then again in the final two weeks of training. Responding to each measure twice allowed for the calculation of a change score for each evaluation participant. We selected a change score threshold of 0.5 as the minimum gain necessary to receive the full payment. We also decided to allow for partial payments for any gains greater than zero but less than 0.5.

Table 12 Customized performance payment structure

Milestone	Objective	Data collection tool	Calculation	Weight of payment	Target response rate
Short-term outcomes					
A1	Positive change in social emotional skills	Adapted BESSI scale, mapped to Skills for Success	Gradient payment based on mean gain in scale score from 0 to 0.5	20%	70%
B1	Positive change in career pathfinding skills	Career adaptability scales		10%	70%
C1-a	Positive change in readiness to learn	Readiness to learn scale		7%	70%
C1-b	Positive change in self-efficacy	General self-efficacy scale		3%	70%
D1	Positive change in social networks	Social capital scales		10%	70%
Mid-term outcomes					
B2	At three months, employed/training in digitally skilled area	NPower Canada tracking	Yes/no met benchmark	20%	60%
Long-term outcomes					
B3	At six months, employed/ training in digitally skilled area	NPower Canada tracking	Yes/no met benchmark	20%	60%
A2	Favorable participant-reported skill performance	Participant skill scale created by NPower Canada and SRDC	Gradient payment based on mean gain in scale score from 3 to 4.5	10%	60%

Milestones B2 and B3 were tracked according to whether graduates started employment or new training in a digitally skilled area three and six months after their program was complete; although, it was only possible to track six-month outcomes for the September 2022 and November 2022 intake cohorts. NPower Canada collected post-program employment and further training information through their internal tracking case management system (i.e., a mix of information from staff members following up with graduates and post-program survey data), and securely shared this information with SRDC.

SRDC and NPower Canada also co-created a skill performance scale measuring Communication, Collaboration, Adaptability, Problem solving, and Creativity and Innovation to support the long-term milestone A2. To measure this benchmark, participants completed a 16-item survey scale three-to-six months after graduation. NPower Canada received full payment for average scale scores that were 4.5 or above (on a 5-point scale) and partial payment for scale scores between 3 and 4.5. While it was not attached to the finalized performance payment structure, employers also received a similar survey approximately three months after an alum started a new position.

Evaluation activities

NPower Canada's milestone framework guided the participant data collection plan. To gather the information needed to track each milestone, we collaborated to create new surveys or adapt existing data collection tools already in use at NPower Canada (see Table 13). To measure all five short-term outcomes, we developed project-specific pre-program and post-program surveys that NPower Canada administered using Google Forms. We also adapted post-program surveys that were already active at NPower Canada prior to the start of the project. Across all three cohorts, we undertook participant data collection from September 2022 to September 2023.

Table 13 Data collection tools

<table>
<tr><th></th><th>What</th><th>Who</th><th>When</th><th>How</th></tr>
<tr><td>Intake application</td><td>Background and demographic information</td><td>All participants</td><td>Prior to starting the program</td><td>Intake process</td></tr>
<tr><td>Pre-program survey</td><td rowspan="2">Data collection for milestones A1, B1, C1-a, C1-b, and D1</td><td>All participants</td><td>First week of training (but after orientation week)</td><td rowspan="2">New survey developed for project and administered using Google Forms</td></tr>
<tr><td>Post-program survey</td><td>All participants who remained in the program</td><td>Second-to-last week of training</td></tr>
<tr><td>Three-month alumni survey</td><td>Data collection for milestones A2 and B2</td><td>All alumni</td><td>Three months after completing program</td><td rowspan="3">Adapted survey tool already developed and administered by NPower Canada using Salesforce</td></tr>
<tr><td>Six-month alumni survey</td><td>Data collection for milestones A3 and B2</td><td>All alumni</td><td>Six months after completing program</td></tr>
<tr><td>Employer survey</td><td>Data collection research purposes only</td><td>Employers who hire an alum</td><td>Three months after starting employment</td></tr>
</table>

Prior to data collection, NPower Canada informed potential participants about the evaluation using both implicit and explicit informed consent approaches.

- **Implicit consent process**: Upon program acceptance, each potential evaluation participant received a Participant Agreement package that described NPower Canada's expectations surrounding attendance, punctuality, communication, respectful behaviour, and other program areas. As part of this package, we included a one-page information sheet that described the evaluation and what participation would entail. To reduce the number of signatures required on the Participant Agreement package, participants did not need to sign the sheet to opt into the study but rather the document provided information on who to contact if they wished to opt out.

- **Explicit consent process**: NPower Canada staff members sent online survey links to learners who did not opt out of the study in the first stage of informed consent. Prior to starting each survey, information needed to provide informed consent (e.g., what the survey asked, how the survey collected and stored information, who would have access to the information) was shared by email and on the introductory page to the survey. A person had to opt-in and provide their contact information in order to proceed to the survey questions.

NPower Canada handled data collection internally and securely transferred anonymized data to SRDC for outcome analysis and performance payment calculations. As one NPower Canada staff member described in an interview, keeping data collection management internal helped streamline communication with participants and increased their internal capacity to administer, collect, and report on the data collected. Along with learner data collection, SRDC conducted three focus groups and one interview with 14 staff members, including those in executive positions and people who worked closely with learners (i.e., Alumni Placement Specialist, Talent Matching Specialist, Technical Instructor, Career Specialist). These implementation-focused interviews took place in June and July 2023.

Implementation challenges and changes

Youth recruitment

Overall, NPower Canada had high levels of enrollment; however, the share of youth participants was lower than expected. While the project goal was to recruit 500 youth participants, only 305 people aged 18 to 30 joined the evaluation. In contrast, participation among older adults was higher than expected and 490 people aged 31 or older engaged in the evaluation. Note that performance payments were linked only to youth outcomes, not the outcomes of older adults – however, SRDC still analyzed outcome data from older adults to provide a point of comparison and contextualize youth outcomes.

NPower Canada staff members described challenges recruiting youth in implementation interviews as related to the pandemic, recent economic fluctuations, and programming changes. One staff member shared that youth recruitment challenges were widespread:

> *"What we understand from our other community partners, they are also having those challenges. [...] We don't anticipate necessarily that we'll get back to pre-COVID times as the nature of recruiting changed from something where you were going in person to going digitally. So that's something that we navigated and keep navigating."*

Staff members also highlighted that slightly older applicants (i.e., aged 31 to 34) often have similar or sometimes even more barriers to employment as those aged 30 or under. They described that a high proportion of those in this slightly older age group are coming from service and hospitality industries and are from equity-deserving groups that NPower Canada targets (e.g., newcomers). For example, in October 2023, NPower Canada had a waitlist of over 2,300 applicants for training – nearly 45 per cent of this group were aged 31 to 34. Many have multiple barriers to employment and otherwise fit the NPower Canada participant profile but have simply aged out of youth programs by a few years.

While youth recruitment numbers were lower than expected, NPower Canada staff described a commitment to serving young people and prioritizing those who are most likely to be in poverty. As a staff member shared, the goal of the program is to reduce poverty and "help youth find employment that is sustainable long term. And that's very much in the digital world because it's future proof."

Survey response rates

For youth in the September 2022 and November 2022 cohorts, response rates were lower than expected with 69 out of 203 youth in these two cohorts (34 per cent) completing both the pre- and post-training surveys. The evaluation team recognized response rates were lower than expected mid-way through the project, and NPower Canada made changes to reduce the overall number of other surveys learners would receive going forward (i.e., an external RBC survey). This change likely contributed to an increased youth response rate in the January 2023 cohort. In this cohort, 59 out of 102 youth (58 per cent) completed both surveys while in training.

Survey response rates to the three- and six-month post-program outcome survey were also lower than expected. While the implementation team initially set an ambitious response rate target of 75 to 80 per cent, only 58 out of 251 youth (23 per cent) who completed training responded to at least one post-program survey at three or six months.

To try to bolster response rates to the three- and six-month surveys, a $25 Amazon gift card incentive was added in August 2023, with the six-month follow-up survey incentivised for the September and November 2022 cohorts, and the three-month follow-up survey incentivised for

the January 2023 cohort. While all youth and adult participants received information about this new incentive, only 78 people responded and received the gift card. Along with this incentive, NPower Canada staff used a range of different strategies to increase the response rate to surveys. When possible, they:

- reduced the number of different surveys learners received while in training;
- included clear messaging for communicating to participants the importance and value of participation in survey and evaluation activities;
- provided class time to complete surveys while in training;
- aligned and merged different questions into a single long-term follow-up survey that could collect data needed for different evaluations and funding requirements; and
- provided information to frontline staff who were administering surveys so they were familiar with them and could answer participant questions.

NPower Canada staff identified survey fatigue as a contributing reason for lower-than-expected response rates while in training. As one staff member explained:

> *"You know the good thing about NPower [Canada] is that we do collect a lot of data throughout the program. There's the initial surveys, and then there's mid-program surveys, and then all the end of program surveys. And the plus point is that we are able to hear from our participants a lot at certain intervals. [...] The downfall of that is at times they could get exhausted doing a lot of these surveys. Because we now have not just NPower Canada surveys, we have funder surveys that they need to do."*

Once learners complete the program, staff also highlighted that alumni tend to have limited time to respond to surveys or follow-up with staff once they have secured employment or moved on to further education.

Survey response bias and measurement error

There was some concern that the self-reported measures used in this evaluation may have been susceptible to response bias. For example, social desirability bias may have influenced learners to respond to certain scale items with the answer they perceived to be most acceptable rather than the most representative of their skill level. We are unable, however, to know how strongly this form of bias affected survey responses or the direction of influence (i.e., higher or lower scores).

For example, one question asked how well participants can "work as part of a group." Learners may have interpreted this question as something an employer or pre-employment survey may ask and therefore responded more positively. This impression may have influenced responses

even though instructors told participants that their survey answers would only be used to evaluate NPower Canada and that employers and staff would not see their answers. As one staff member described: “As much as we communicated this isn't going to affect your assessment at NPower Canada, it's remaining confidential. Maybe people were influenced by, you know, what are my instructors thinking of this?” This potential form of bias could increase when a survey also asks for identifying information, even with the explicit qualifier that such information would only be used to link data from different tools in our evaluation.

Although this type of response bias could influence the results of the evaluation, NPower Canada staff members still felt skill-based self-assessments were valuable. In an interview, a staff member highlighted that it could be necessary to build self-assessment skills first prior to undertaking the assessment:

> *“There's I feel like there's a lot of advantage to self assessments and scenario-based assessments. But I can see it from a participant’s perspective: There's a lot of skill that you [need] to be able to confidently do a self assessment, like your own judgmental skills, your own honesty, like being transparent. [...] Giving these types of questions at the beginning of the program when the participant may not know what their skills are like yet. They don't know how good they are in this type of professional development. And then the answers that they give at the end may be different because now they have built up skill sets that they can confidently assess themselves.”*

Challenges related to asynchronous and optional course content

Starting in January 2023, NPower Canada began to offer more opportunities for asynchronous learning and changed certain previously required seminars to have optional attendance. In these optional seminars, participants could seek extra support, ask questions, or engage in hands-on activities. Compared to required sessions, a staff member shared that these sessions were important for participants who may need extra support. Nevertheless, one challenge early on was attendance in these optional seminars. As one staff member explained, the language instructors used to communicate seminar attendance was important:

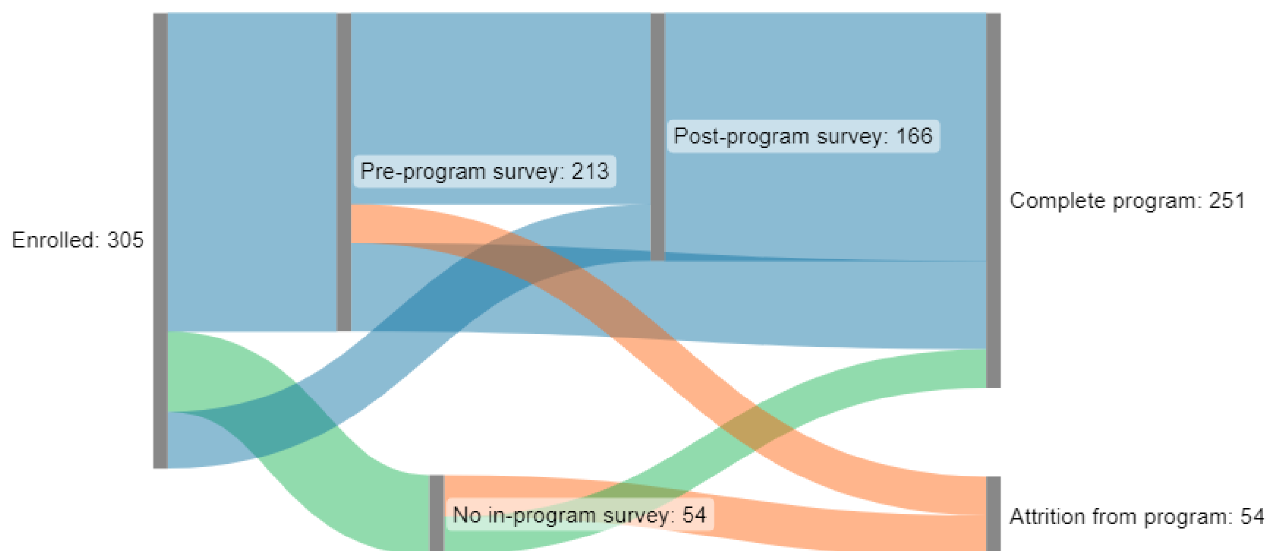
> *“At first it was introduced as “It's your choice if you want to be here” and we noticed that there were 5 or 6 people out of 50+ that would stay. And then people were having a ton of questions and having late deliverables [...] And so this time around we were like “It's optional if you're caught up, if you have a strong understanding, if you've met all your deliverables” and we have like 40 people staying and they're engaging and they're learning the material. [...] When we change the language around seminars and they're actually coming, we really presented it as an opportunity for future employment, right? You're going to use this for yourself and take advantage of the opportunity to access your instructor and all these supports.”*

LEARNER DEMOGRAPHICS AND ATTRITION

Program and survey completion

Figure 14 provides a high-level overview of program attrition and in-program survey response rates among youth participants. Overall, over 82 per cent of youth and older adults completed their NPower Canada program. Training completion rates were similar between both age groups, although they did differ between the two program types. For the Junior Data Analyst Program, 87 per cent of youth and 91 per cent of older adults completed training. In the Junior IT Analyst program, 81 per cent of youth and 79 per cent of older adults were completers.

Figure 14 Youth program attrition and in-program survey completion



While in training, youth participants were less likely to respond to both the pre- and post-program surveys than older adults. Table 14 provides an overview of how survey response rates varied across all data collection points for youth and adults participating in both programs. In the Junior IT Analyst program, 68 per cent of youth responded to the baseline survey, 59 per cent responded to the second post-program survey, and 44 per cent responded to both surveys. In the Junior Data Analyst program, 76 per cent of youth responded to the baseline survey, 41 per cent responded to the second survey, and 36 per cent responded to both – a decline in response rates compared to the previous program. In both program streams, older adult survey completion rates were several percentage points higher across all in-program data collection time points.

Table 14 Survey response rate by program (Junior IT Analyst – JITA; Junior Data Analyst – JDA) and age group

		In-program surveys			Outcome surveys	
	Total	Pre-program survey	Post-program survey	Both surveys	Employer skill survey	Learner skill survey
Adults (JITA)	342	272	215	184	24	76
	100%	80%	63%	54%	7%	22%
Youth (JITA)	229	155	135	101	26	40
	100%	68%	59%	44%	11%	17%
Adults (JDA)	148	121	81	73	13	28
	100%	82%	55%	49%	9%	19%
Youth (JDA)	76	58	31	27	4	18
	100%	76%	41%	36%	5%	24%
Total	**795**	**606**	**462**	**385**	**67**	**162**
	100%	76%	58%	48%	8%	20%

Response rates to the outcome surveys (i.e., the employer survey and three- and six-month learners surveys) was low for both youth and adult participants across both programs. Only a small percentage of people had outcome survey data on their skill level post-training, either through self-reported measures or through feedback from employers three months after starting a job.

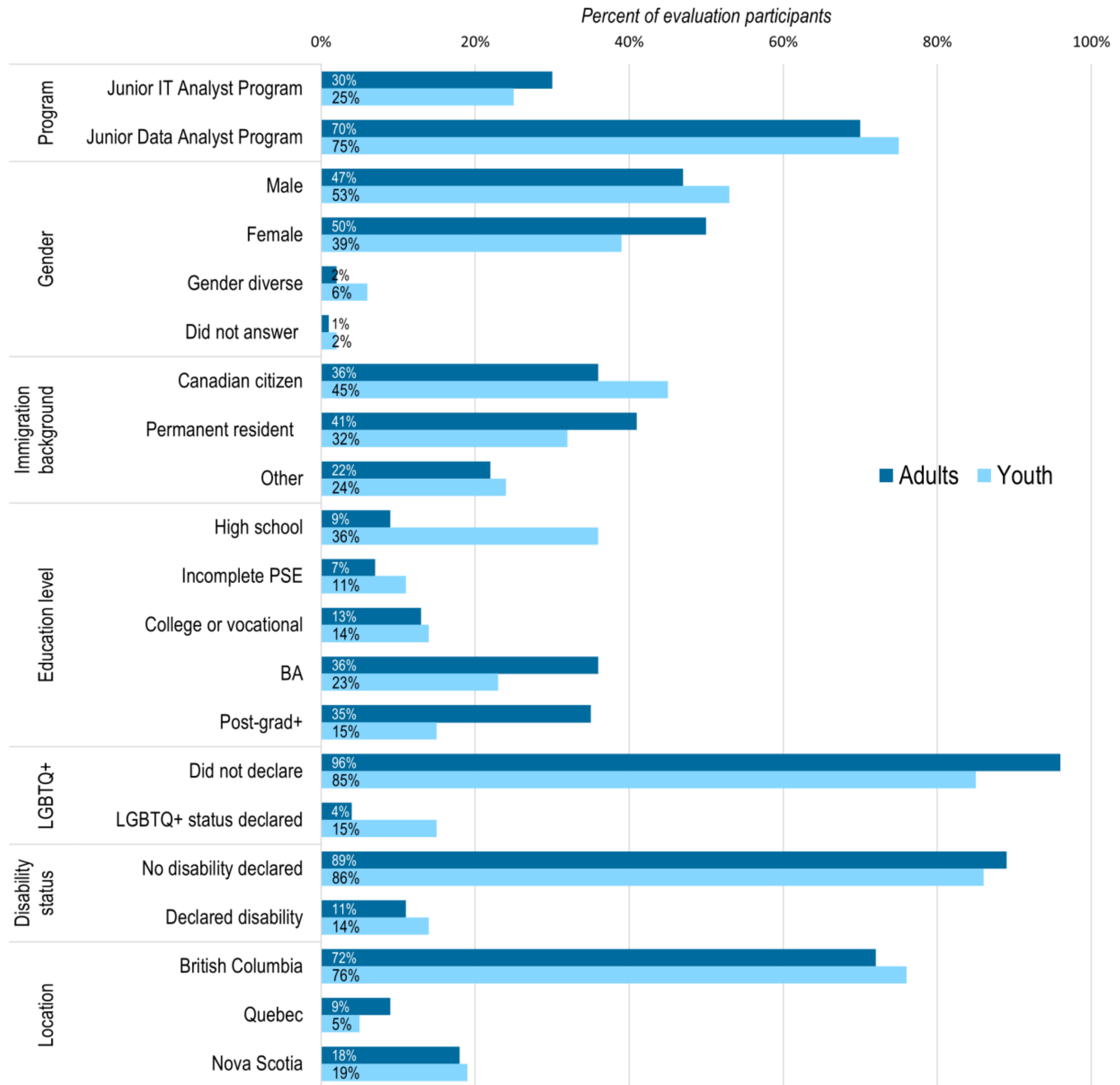
Demographic characteristics

Overall, 795 people participated in the evaluation. As demographic information was collected at intake by NPower Canada, we have detailed information on the characteristics of all participants. Among them, 305 (38 per cent) were youth aged 30 and under. As Figure 15 illustrates, a larger share of both youth and older adult participants enrolled in NPower Canada's Junior Data Analyst program. In terms of their gender composition, 53 per cent of youth identified as male, 39 per cent female, and 6 per cent gender diverse. Compared to older adults, slightly more youth identified as male and gender diverse overall.

Many NPower Canada learners were newcomers. While 45 per cent of youth participants were Canadian citizens, 32 per cent were permanent residents and another 24 per cent belonged to another immigrant group, which included those with work permits and a small number of refugees.

As is typical for people who are younger, youth learners tended to have lower levels of education compared to older adult participants. Around one in three youth had a high school diploma as their highest education level compared to one in ten older adults. Yet compared to the other partner organizations in this project, a higher share of youth had completed advanced post-secondary degrees, with 38 per cent having bachelor's or graduate degrees. Among youth, 15 per cent reported belonging to an LGBTQ+ group compared to 4 per cent of older adult participants. A similar percentage of youth and older adults reported a disability at intake, 14 and 11 per cent respectively. Finally, the largest share of both youth (76 per cent) and older adult participants (72 per cent) were studying in British Columbia, while a portion of learners also lived in Quebec and Nova Scotia.

Figure 15 Demographic characteristics of youth and adult participants



LEARNER OUTCOMES

Short-term outcomes

In this next section, we provide an overview of the short-term outcomes (i.e., Milestones A1, B1, C1-a, C1-b, and D1) among youth and older adults who completed both in-program surveys

(*n* = 385). We show the average change in individual-level scale scores across all survey domains, as well as how the overall percentage of people with high scores (i.e., 4 or greater) changed between both time points.[8]

Table 15 provides insight into Pathway A social emotional skill change across five Skills for Success domains (i.e., Communication, Collaboration, Adaptability, Problem Solving, and Creativity & Innovation) and their underlying components. Among youth who completed both in-program surveys, pre- and post-program scores were similar and resulted in no statistically significant change across any skills or skill components. For older adults, there were modest statistically significant gains in all skill domains other than Adaptability (where there was only component-level change for the sub-adaptability measure). Overall, older adult scores significantly increased from 3.94 to 4.03 (a 0.09-point change on a five-point scale) across all skill domains. Youth scores decreased slightly (a -0.03-point change), but this was not statistically significant.

Table 15 Change in pathway A skill measures among youth (*n* = 128) and adults (*n* = 257)

	Pre-program survey		Post-program survey		Pre-to-post gain		T-test p-value	
	Adult	Youth	Adult	Youth	Adult	Youth	Adult	Youth
Social emotional skills	3.94	3.87	4.03	3.84	0.09	-0.03	**0.01*** **	0.63
Communication	3.81	3.75	3.91	3.76	0.10	0.01	**0.02****	0.84
Listening skills	3.98	3.99	4.04	3.93	0.06	-0.06	0.17	0.34
Expressive skills	3.68	3.51	3.80	3.60	0.12	0.09	**0.02****	0.25
Communication adaptation skills	3.77	3.75	3.89	3.75	0.12	0.01	**0.01*** **	0.94
Collaboration	4.00	3.98	4.09	3.96	0.09	-0.03	**0.04****	0.66
Manage difficult interactions	3.84	3.85	3.96	3.81	0.12	-0.04	**0.01*** **	0.52
Perspective-taking skill	4.02	4.06	4.08	3.99	0.06	-0.07	0.15	0.31
Teamwork skill	4.14	4.04	4.22	4.07	0.07	0.03	0.13	0.66

8 The NPower Canada sample was large enough to conduct psychometric analyses on the measurement scales, focused on confirming expected scale characteristics to ensure no major deviations (e.g., very low factor loadings) and consistency between youth and older adult respondents. We analyzed each scale's factor loadings, reliability, and inter-correlations using data from the pre-program survey (Appendix B).

	Pre-program survey		Post-program survey		Pre-to-post gain		T-test p-value	
	Adult	Youth	Adult	Youth	Adult	Youth	Adult	Youth
Adaptability	4.01	3.89	4.06	3.84	0.05	-0.05	0.20	0.39
Adaptability	3.97	3.91	4.07	3.83	0.10	-0.08	**0.03****	0.24
Confidence regulation	3.83	3.63	3.91	3.63	0.07	0.00	0.13	0.97
Responsibility management	4.18	4.05	4.22	3.99	0.03	-0.06	0.47	0.39
Time management	4.09	3.95	4.10	3.89	0.01	-0.06	0.82	0.43
Problem solving	3.96	3.91	4.06	3.89	0.10	-0.02	**0.01*****	0.74
Identify the issue to be addressed	3.97	3.89	4.09	3.84	0.12	-0.06	**0.01*****	0.43
Information processing skill	3.93	3.89	4.03	3.89	0.10	0.00	**0.02****	0.95
Decision-making skill	3.98	3.93	4.07	3.92	0.09	-0.01	**0.04****	0.89
Creativity & innovation	3.87	3.78	3.97	3.74	0.10	-0.04	**0.02****	0.53
Identify opportunities to innovate	3.98	3.89	4.04	3.86	0.06	-0.03	0.16	0.64
Creative skills	3.77	3.67	3.90	3.62	0.13	-0.05	**0.00*****	0.48

Note: T-test significance levels: * ≤ 0.10, ** ≤ 0.05, *** ≤ 0.01.

Figures 16 and 17 provide additional insight into how average scores changed for older adults but not youth. In these figures, we show the percentage of people who had a mean score of four or more across each skill domain. It shows that almost half (or in some cases more than half) of participants self-reported high skills in the baseline survey. For example, 40 per cent of youth and 44 per cent of older adults reported Communication scores of four or higher pre-program. However, while youth and older adult participants were similar in their likelihood of self-reporting ability to perform skills “very well” or “extremely well” at the start of the program, a greater proportion of older adults reported this by the end of the program.

Figure 16 Pathway A pre- and post-training outcomes among youth (*n* = 128)

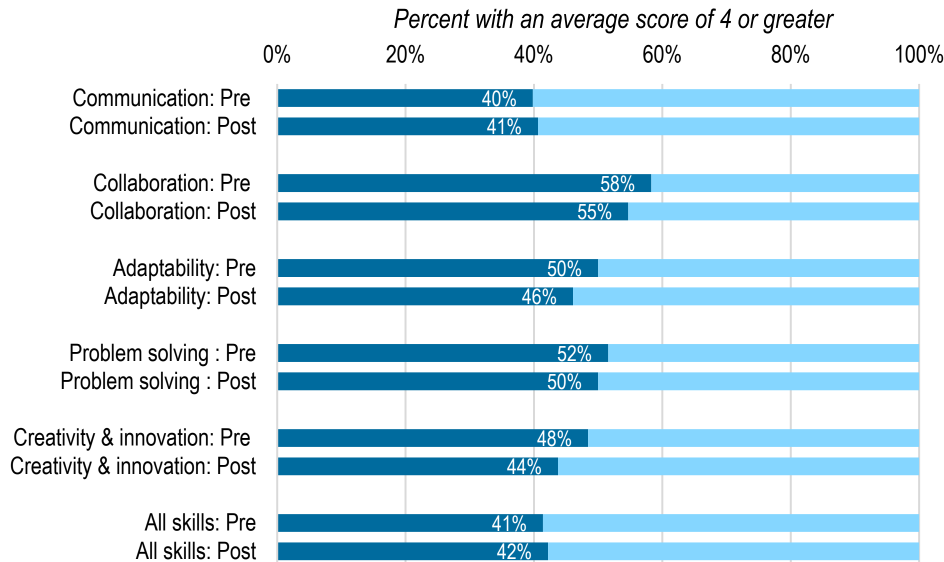
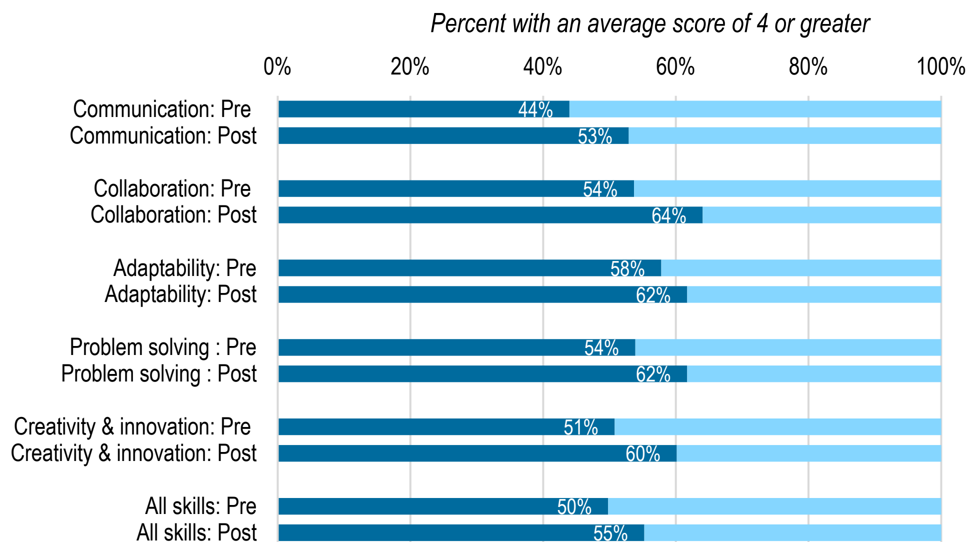


Figure 17 Pathway A pre- and post-training outcomes among adults (n = 257)



Why might adults but not youth report higher scores in the post-program survey? There are several possibilities, none of which we can establish as the definitive explanation. At the beginning of the study youth may have had different reference points than older adults as to what being "good" at something actually means, and their reference points may have changed to a greater extent than those of older adults over the course of training. For example, a person

may think that they can "manage their responsibilities" well at the onset of training; however, through self-management training, they may learn about new techniques that result in them viewing their ability to manage responsibilities differently in light of this new information. On the other hand, youth may have had greater difficulty making connections between specific training materials and generalised skill development, or placed greater weight on technical training than on Professional Development workshops where the link between training content and skills was more explicit.

While youth did not report significant gains on any Pathway A scales, a comparison of the other pre- and post-program survey results across Pathways B, C, and D (see Table 16) show they did report significant gains in job-search clarity and network strength. For the job-search clarity scale, mean scores among youth were 3.45 (on a five-point scale) in the baseline pre-program and grew by 0.25 points to be 3.70 in the post-program survey. Average adult scores also increase, although baseline scores were higher on average and growth was smaller (i.e., 0.11 points) compared to youth.

Table 16 Change in Pathways B, C, and D measures among youth (*n* = 128) and older adults (*n* = 257)

	Pre-program survey		Post-program survey		Pre-to-post gain		T-test p-value	
	Adult	Youth	Adult	Youth	Adult	Youth	Adult	Youth
Pathway B								
Career decision-making self-efficacy	3.75	3.63	3.76	3.58	0.01	-0.05	0.89	0.42
Job search clarity	3.72	3.45	3.82	3.70	0.11	0.25	**0.03****	**0.00*****
Job search self efficacy	3.57	3.51	3.67	3.55	0.10	0.03	**0.03****	0.58
All pathway B scales	*3.66*	*3.54*	*3.73*	*3.59*	*0.07*	*0.04*	***0.06****	*0.39*
Pathway C								
Self efficacy	4.14	4.04	4.23	4.05	0.09	0.01	**0.01*****	0.88
Readiness to learn	4.34	4.30	4.40	4.26	0.06	-0.04	**0.05****	0.31
Pathway D								
Network strength	3.29	3.32	3.48	3.57	0.19	0.25	**0.00*****	**0.00*****
Self-initiated social capital	3.81	3.71	3.82	3.68	0.00	-0.02	0.92	0.73
All pathway D scales	*3.48*	*3.46*	*3.61*	*3.61*	*0.12*	*0.15*	***0.01******	***0.02*****

Note: T-test significance levels: * ≤ 0.10, ** ≤ 0.05, *** ≤ 0.01.

Average network strength scores also increased among youth and adult participants. For youth, average scores increased 0.25 points from 3.32 to 3.57 (on a five-point scale) – a trend that was similar to adults. Adult respondents also had modest but statistically significant increases in their average scores for the job search clarity, job search self-efficacy, generalised self efficacy, and readiness to learn measures.

Figures 18 and 19 provide insight into the percentage of youth and adults who had high scores (i.e., a mean score of four or higher) across each Pathway B, C, and D scale in the pre- and post-program surveys. For job search clarity, a smaller proportion of youth had high scores compared to older adults at pre-program (31 per cent vs. 45 per cent respectively), but the gap had closed by the end of training (50 per cent of youth vs. 55 per cent of older adults). In addition, there was a large increase in the percentage of youth with high network strength scores, from 27 per cent pre-program to 48 per cent post-program – the increase among older adults was not as large, from 26 per cent to 40 per cent.

Figure 18 Pathways B, C, & D pre- and post-training outcomes among youth (n = 128)

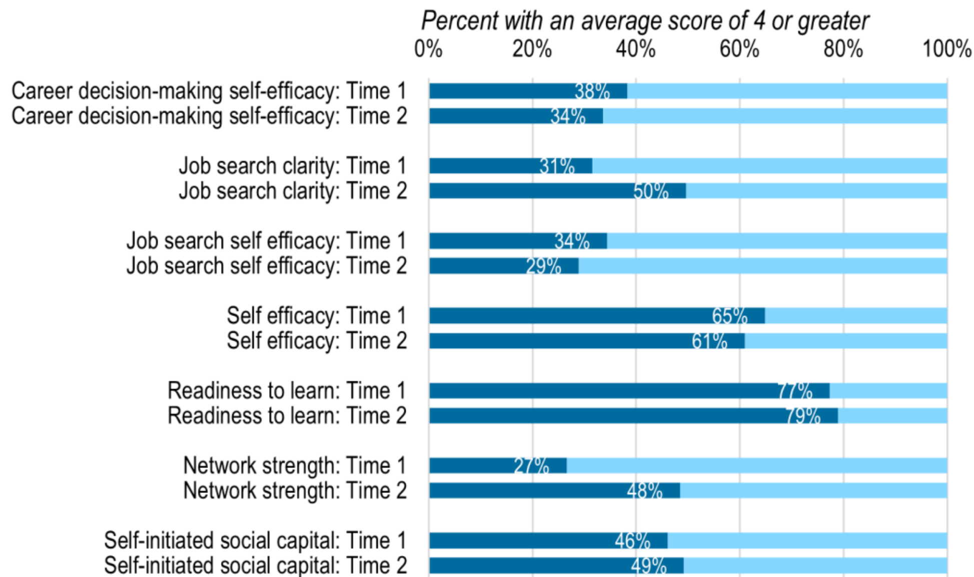
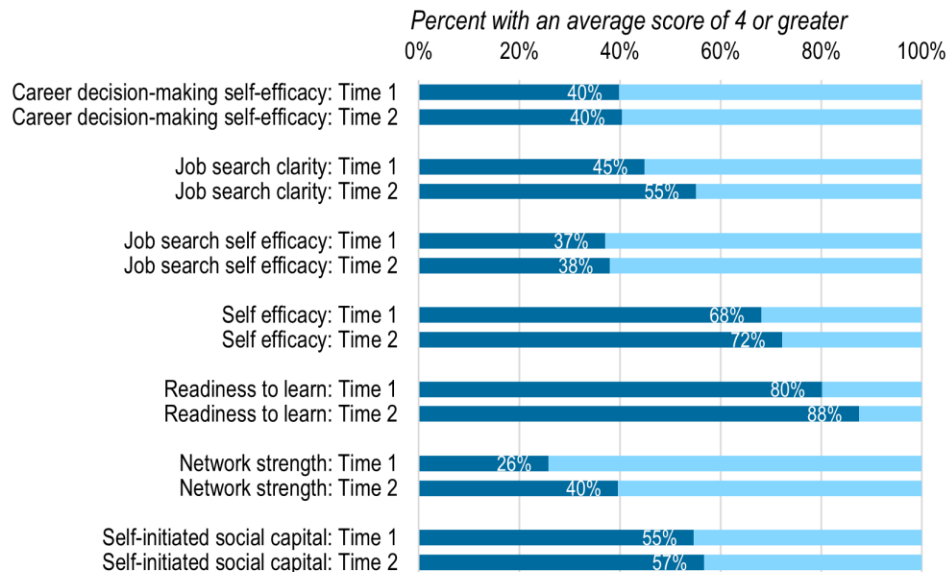


Figure 19 Pathways B, C, & D pre- and post-training outcomes among adults (*n* = 257)



LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

NPower Canada tracks learner outcomes after training in three primary ways:

1. After a client engages with Alumni Placement Specialists or other NPower Canada staff members (e.g., via an email, online meeting), they input any new employment or training information that came up through the interaction into the case management system.

2. NPower Canada invites learners who complete their training to respond to short three- and six-month outcome surveys implemented by NPower Canada staff using their Salesforce and Formstack data collection systems. Along with collecting information on employment and training outcomes, our evaluation developed and added a short self-reported Skills for Success assessment to this survey.

3. Three months after a NPower Canada alum begins employment, a staff member reaches out to the employer and requests they complete a short survey on the recent graduate's performance.[9] Our evaluation developed and added a short self-reported Skills for Success assessment to this employer survey.

[9] Once employed, information from each alum's supervisor is collected by NPower Canada on a voluntary basis. The survey request is sent to this supervisor three months after the alum's start date. In some cases, a NPower Canada staff member may also meet with an employer/supervisor and review the survey questions during the meeting.

In the following section, we assess results from each data source, all of which were only collected among graduates. We use information collected via NPower Canada's case management system to track employment and training outcomes across two measures: 1) an outcome measure that tracked how many people entered any employment or further education up to three and six months post-graduation; and 2) how many people were employed or in training in a digitally skilled area approximately three and six months after completing a program.[10]

As shown in Table 17, among the 655 evaluation participants who completed NPower Canada training, 339 (52 per cent) entered employment or further education up to three months after completing training. Most of these people (266 out of 339) were identified as employed or in training in a digitally skilled area around three months. Among these people, there were small differences between youth and older adults. In the Junior IT Analyst program, 51 per cent of older adults and 48 per cent of youth were employed or in training in a digitally skilled area. In the Junior Data Analyst program, 44 per cent of older adults and 36 per cent of youth were employed or in training in a digitally skilled area. The results suggest that youth were slightly less likely to be employed or in training in a digitally-skilled area compared to older adults, especially among those who completed the Junior Data Analyst program where there was an eight-percentage point gap between the two age groups.

Table 17 Three-month outcomes (Sept 2022, Nov 2022, & Jan 2023 cohorts)

	Enrolled	Completed program	Cumulative outcome by three months[1]	Digitally skilled outcome at three months[1]
Junior IT Analyst Program				
Adults	342	269	149	136
	100%	79%	55%	51%
Youth	229	185	104	89
	100%	81%	56%	48%
Junior Data Analyst Program				
Adults	148	135	74	59
	100%	91%	55%	44%
Youth	76	66	32	24
	100%	87%	48%	36%
Total	**795**	**655**	**359**	**308**
	100%	82%	55%	47%

Note: [1] Percentages calculated from number of completers.

[10] Because post-program education and employment information comes from a variety of sources and was inputted by different staff members interacting with alumni, it was not always possible to verify the exact date employment and training status was measured.

By six months, a greater percentage of both youth and older adults were employed or in training across both programs – a finding that suggests graduates may take longer to secure employment or find their next learning opportunity. In the Junior IT Analyst program, 54 per cent of youth (and 56 per cent of older adults) were employed or in training in a digitally skilled are by six months. In the Junior Data Analyst program, 53 per cent of youth (and 52 per cent of older adults) had this same positive outcome.

Table 18 Six-month outcomes (Sept 2022 & Nov 2022 cohorts)

	Enrolled	Completed program	Cumulative outcome by six months[1]	Digitally skilled outcome at six months[1]
Junior IT Analyst Program				
Adults	252	192	130	108
	100%	76%	68%	56%
Youth	166	131	87	71
	100%	79%	66%	54%
Junior Data Analyst Program				
Adults	70	63	38	32
	100%	90%	60%	51%
Youth	37	30	21	16
	100%	81%	70%	53%
Total	**525**	**416**	**276**	**227**
	100%	97%	66%	55%

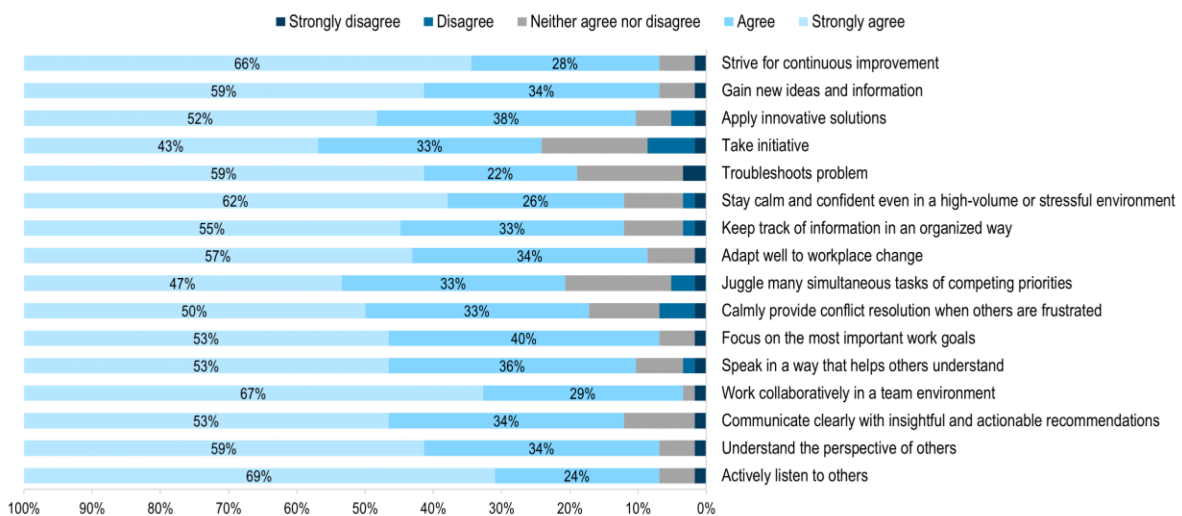
Note: [1] Percentages calculated from number of completers.

To collect information on employment and further training outcomes, NPower Canada reaches out to alumni on multiple occasions using a variety of methods; however, some alumni do not respond to outreach (e.g., graduates may find employment and choose not to continue to utilize NPower Canada post-graduation and employment supports), while others have other life events that prevent them from looking for a job or working.

When graduates who are not able to work, as well as those who are no longer in contact with NPower Canada, are excluded from the outcome calculation, employment and training outcomes are on track to meet NPower Canada's organizational target that 80 per cent will find employment or further education within six-months of graduation. For the three NPower Canada cohorts included in this evaluation, 72 per cent of graduates (87 per cent of youth and 65 per cent of older adults) who stayed in touch with NPower Canada and were actively looking for work found employment or started further education by August 2023.

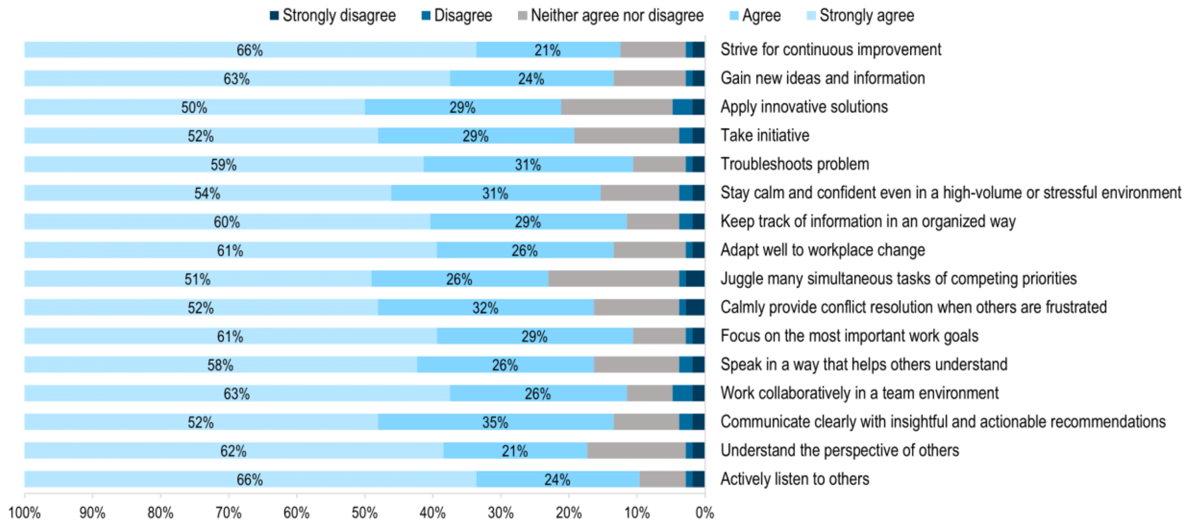
Along with employment and training outcomes, the evaluation also examined skill outcomes among graduates. Among the 58 youth and 104 older adult alum who completed a three- or six-month learner survey, the majority self-reported their Skills for Success to be high.[11] As Figures 20 and 21 illustrate, most participants agreed or strongly agreed with each survey item, which asked them to self-report how well they could do each task. In some cases, such as when responding to "stay calm and confident even in a high-volume or stressful environment," a higher percent of youth strongly agreed with the statement (62 per cent compared to 54 per cent of older adults). In other cases, such as "take initiative," a higher percentage of older adults strongly agreed with the statement compared to youth (43 per cent compared to 52 per cent of older adults).

Figure 20 Youth responses to Skills for Success items in learner outcome survey



[11] In these graphs, we combine both three- and six-month survey responses to avoid small cell sizes. If a participant did not respond to the three-month survey items, their six-month responses were used.

Figure 21 Older adult responses to Skills for Success items in learner outcome survey



Employers also rated NPower Canada graduates Skills for Success as high. As Figures 22 and 23 illustrate, most employers rated both youth and adults as being able to do each activity "very well" or "extremely well." While the number of employers who provided survey responses was low compared to the number of employed graduates, the results do suggest that employers who did respond were satisfied with the Communication, Collaboration, Adaptability, Problem Solving, and Creativity & Innovation skills among the NPower Canada graduates they hired.

Figure 22 Employer responses to Skills for Success items (youth n = 30)

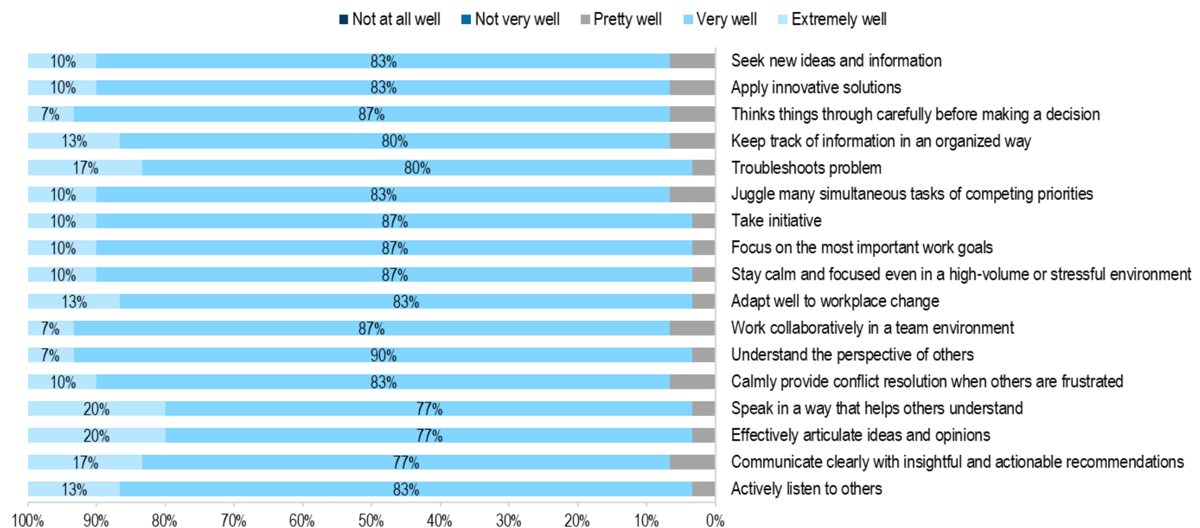
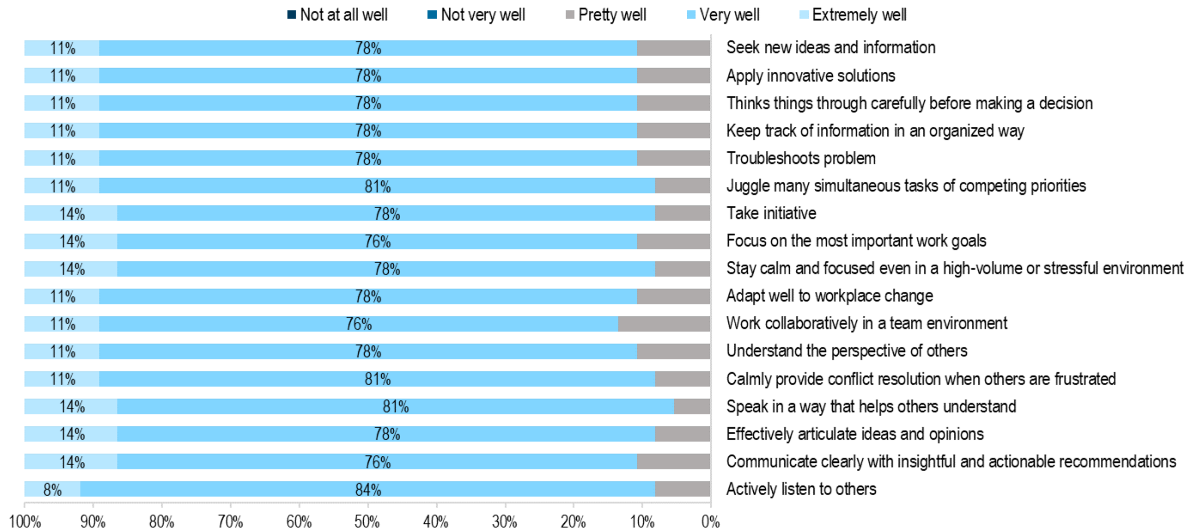


Figure 23 Employer responses to Skills for Success items (older adult *n* = 37)



PROGRAM OUTCOMES

How did the milestone model perform?

The results of NPower Canada's pay-for-performance model are shown in Table 19. Of the $35,000 incentive budget, $14,256.82 (41 per cent) was paid to NPower Canada. As discussed above, the number of youth included in each calculation was adjusted, accounting for response rate targets, the 90 per cent success threshold, and cohorts who could be observed for up to six months. For each milestone, NPower Canada earned between 17 per cent (milestone C1-a) and 79 per cent (milestone B3) of the possible budget.

Table 19 Pay-for-performance outcomes

	Budget	Payment	# after adjustment[1]	Full payments	Partial payments
Total	$35,000 100%	$14,256.82 41%			
A1: Positive change in social emotional skills	$7,000 20%	$1,259.82 18%	192	14 7%	45 23%
B1: Positive change in career pathfinding skills	$3,500 10%	$794.94 23%	192	26 14%	40 21%
C1-a: Positive change in readiness to learn	$2,450 7%	$418.21 17%	192	13 7%	39 20%
C1-b: Positive change in self-efficacy	$1,050 3%	$221.92 21%	192	22 11%	37 19%
D1: Positive change in social networks	$3,500 10%	$938.07 27%	192	40 21%	22 11%
B2: At three months, employed/training in digitally skilled area	$7,000 20%	$4,037.64 58%	165	95[2] 58%	NA
B3: At six months, employed/ training in digitally skilled area	$7,000 20%	$5,555.56 79%	110	87[2] 79%	NA
A2: Favorable participant-reported skill performance	$3,500 10%	$1,030.66 29%	165	29 18%	28 17%

Notes:

[1] While 305 youth were part of the evaluation, the number of youth who were part of the calculation was smaller due to response rate adjustments, the 90% success adjustment, and cohorts included in the six-month outcome measure.

[2] The number of youth captured as employed or in further training in a digitally skilled area is slightly smaller than described above due to when benchmark payment calculations were produced. NPower Canada updated the outcome data after this date, which showed slightly more youth reaching this outcome.

Overall, only a small number of youth had pre-post skill gains that were over the 0.5 benchmark for full payment for milestone A1, B1, C1; instead, a higher percentage of youth had partial rather than full payments (i.e., gains that were between 0 and 0.49). However, a higher percentage of youth did achieve outcomes associated with full payments for milestone D1, which measured a

positive change in social networks. Compared to the short-term gain milestones, a higher percentage of youth met the mid- and long-term employment/training outcomes required for payment. Finally, due to the small number of participants with follow-up survey data, only a small percentage of youth achieved outcomes associated with full or partial payments for milestone A2.

How did NPower Canada's evaluation capacity change as a result of this project?

Prior to starting this project, NPower Canada already had high research and evaluation capacity, employing data management, research, and evaluation staff. As one staff member mentioned in an interview:

> *"Evaluation has been part of the NPower Canada process since we began. So whether or not it's in the form of an external evaluator or our own teams evaluating the effectiveness of what we do and how we do it, that's really been embedded in our processes. So for example, we've had alumni surveys since the beginning. We've had employer surveys since the beginning. And this has really been the information that we've used to really drive our decision-making process. So we already have a culture of evaluation, of data informed practices."*

With a strong evaluation capacity already established, NPower Canada staff were supportive of the research and evaluation activities, and learners were engaged in related evaluation activities. By participating in the project, NPower Canada refined existing data collection processes and introduced new measures to capture learner success. Participation in the project also changed the way NPower Canada engaged learners in data collection activities, from the information shared with participants to inform them about evaluation, to trying new ways to encourage survey completion.

In addition, the use of NPower Canada's existing surveys to collect post-program outcome data from alumni supported NPower Canada's implementation of automation that aimed to increase the ease and efficiency of survey collection from alumni, track their responses, and follow-up with those not responding. NPower Canada will continue to find ways to increase survey response rates, track employment and training outcomes, and target follow-up with those who have not stayed in touch with staff after completing their program.

The project also introduced NPower Canada to new success measures, from new subject areas (i.e., social networks) to new ways of measuring change (i.e., pre- and post-program surveys). Going forward, NPower Canada plans to use the results from this project to assess quality. As a staff member highlighted, evaluation results like this can be used to "drive the quality of our programs, quality of our curriculum" and also answer the question "What are we missing? What do we need to improve on in terms of soft skills, hard skills?"

CFBC

Participants

50 Indigenous youth served in four communities across British Columbia.

Program goals

- Provide a safe space for youth
- Develop traditional carving skills
- Strengthen relationship with others and culture
- Increase social emotional skills
- Help youth recognize strengths and set goals
- Build youth confidence to take the next step

Program model

Participants engaged in traditional carving projects, creating feast spoons, bentwood boxes, and paddle pendants.

Participants reflected on their strengths, skills, and goals. Facilitators provided support throughout the process.

Participants engaged in group activities to build confidence, trust, and connection to culture.

Key outcomes

Participants recognized their strengths and increased their self-confidence. They developed traditional carving skills with 80% finishing their projects. Participants strengthened their social emotional skills and developed new goals for the future.

"[Skills I started with were] eagerness to learn and understanding to new ways of doing things."

"[I] learned how to use carving tools, how to be more creative."

"I learned how to use my voice, and to look at the brighter side of things. I learned there's nothing I could do about my past but I can keep moving forward."

"[My new goals is] to continuing carving for my culture."

"[My new goals is] to keep a positive mindset, to grow taller in my learning journey, to help others in the program."

"[My new goal is to] find a job"

CFBC

SITE INTRODUCTION

The Construction Foundation of British Columbia (CFBC) builds and supports communities through industry-focused education and research, providing a range of programming for youth and adults across British Columbia. This includes enhancing employability skills in students through presentations, events, and work experience, supporting apprentices to achieve red seal certifications, connecting new newcomers to employers and Indigenous culture, and working closely with First Nation communities on workforce development initiatives that prioritize community goals and regional opportunities. The focus of this project is their Indigenous Skills workshops which have been successfully implemented across multiple communities in the province. These workshops teach First Nation youth traditional skills from knowledge keepers and artisans and highlights the connection between traditional skills and contemporary skilled trades.

CFBC's goal in testing a pay-for-performance model is to explore whether it can be designed to serve all youth, including the most vulnerable and disengaged youth. Pay-for-performance funding models can unintentionally favour services to those who are further ahead and exclude those who are least likely to succeed based on traditional markers of success. This exclusion could occur during site selection or participant recruitment where only those most likely to meet milestone targets are included. It could also occur during program delivery when the priority is keeping the program on track to meet targets and the needs of those who are struggling or require more time become secondary. The intention was to develop a flexible model that acknowledges progress can look different depending on where youth are in their journey and prioritizes how youth define successes for themselves so there is accountability to participants and not only the funder.

Target population, recruitment, and eligibility

> *"The priority with Indigenous Skills has always been to support capacity development, confidence building, and a sense of empowerment for young people – many of whom are not finding success or a sense of belonging in school or community programs. Many of the participants in CFBC programs struggle to maintain long term success often due to experiences that are related to experiences of exclusion, discrimination, and trauma – including intergenerational impacts of colonial institutions such as Residential Schools."* (project manager)

Indigenous Skills is sometimes described as a pre-pre-employment program that serves youth who are disengaged or at risk of disengaging, who need trust and emotional safety to build the confidence and skills to pursue other training activities. CFBC works with many First Nations across British Columbia, building relationships with communities and providing customized supports to help communities pursue projects and initiatives that serve their priorities and goals. Through their ongoing engagement with communities, CFCB identified four delivery sites within the Vancouver Island and Interior regions of the province where groups of youth could benefit from the program, especially in preparation for upcoming opportunities (e.g., education, other programming).

This included youth attending a community secondary school (Community A), youth living in a transition housing complex for Indigenous youth (Community B), youth gathered by the community band and education program (Community C), and youth attending an alternative secondary school for Indigenous youth (Community D). Youth were recruited by education or centre staff in the community to participate in the program. Although the program was focused on youth aged 15 to 30 years, there was no strict eligibility criteria, and CFBC did not turn away any wiling participants.

Integrating Skills for Success to enhance programming

For this project, CFBC developed Indigenous Skills into a week-long program (approximately 5 days or 30 hours) that more intentionally integrates social emotional skills through reflection activities, specifically Communication, Collaboration, Adaptability, and Creativity and Innovation. It brought together three facilitators including an Indigenous Heart speaker and Circle Keeper to develop and lead activities building personal identity, confidence, and motivation; an Indigenous artist and educator to lead traditional carving activities; and a community engagement manager with a background in construction to support facilitation, research, and logistics.

The team developed a plan for each day with overarching objectives to guide activities, including a priority skill (e.g., Collaboration), a reflection question (e.g., what do you bring?), and an underlying message (e.g., just be you, you are good enough as you are). Each day involves hands-on and interactive group activities, circles, and carving workshops. The flow of the program includes building trust, setting goals for the week, establishing existing baseline skills, developing skills through hands-on learning and group projects, reflecting on skills gained, developing goals for the future, and presenting what was learned to the community. The program integrates culture within the content, teaching traditional carving skills, using relevant metaphors such as sacred fire, and integrating practices and traditional knowledge familiar to the youth. It also uses a strengths-based approach, acknowledging skills youth bring from community (e.g., school, cultural activities, life experience).

Program support

Because the program was delivered within existing social structures, youth received wraparound supports through their school, transition housing, and community (e.g., referrals for mental health and addictions, supports from teachers and counsellors). There was always at least one staff who knew the youth present at each delivery site. When appropriate, CFBC facilitators also connected youth to resources and support through their other programs and services (e.g., All Roads). As part of their model and approach, CFBC maintains relationships with communities and continues to work with them through different projects and initiatives, providing an opportunity to potentially reconnect with youth post-program.

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN, CHALLENGES, AND CHANGES

What was the implementation plan?

Training delivery

CFBC planned to deliver the program in-person at four sites during the Summer and Fall of 2023. CFBC tried to schedule program delivery shortly before upcoming activities that youth had the opportunity to engage in (e.g., training, school, work). In this way, Indigenous Skills could support disengaged youth to build enough confidence to take the next step forward. The plan was for each of the three facilitators to travel and stay in the community for the duration of the program. The goal was to recruit 5 to 15 youth at each site, with an average of about 10 youth.

Evaluation activities

CFBC worked with SRDC to explore how pre- and post-program surveys might capture youth gains in social emotional skills and other outcomes. After an extended discussion and review of survey items, the team decided that surveys would not be appropriate for vulnerable and disengaged Indigenous youth in this context. Lengthy surveys can seem irrelevant to youth and survey items may not apply to the lived experiences of youth or be culturally appropriate. Test-like assessments can prompt feelings of anxiety and being judged. Facilitators felt it was not consistent with their approach that is based in authentic relationships and trust-building. The team instead explored qualitative methods, including the use of a skills portfolio to document changes from the youth’s perspective. Youth would explore their existing skills and strengths, drawing from their everyday activities in school, with their families, or in community. At the end of the program, youth would revisit their skills and indicate new or strengthened skills.

These discussions led to the development of a unique approach where a) evaluation prioritized personal definitions of success from the youth's perspective and b) evaluation was integrated into program delivery rather than presented as separate activities (e.g., unlike surveys, interviews). Key outcomes included goal setting, the development of social emotional skills, and confidence to present oneself. CFBC wanted to allow youth to express their own gains and successes, acknowledging progress that was meaningful at any point in their journey. For some youth success might be completing a carving project whereas for others it might be simply showing up every day.

The team developed activities that supported youth to develop their own goals for the program, reflect on whether they were achieved and what their goal was for the future; reflect on their skill strengths and skills gains; and share who they have became and what they have learned by presenting a personal project to the community. These activities were part of the program, but the outputs documented in individual workbooks were leveraged as evaluation data. An advantage of this approach to data collection is that the activities are meaningful apart from their use in the evaluation and can contribute to youth's development and growth (e.g., learning to self-reflect, learning about goals).

Since the evaluation activities were integrated into delivery, and all youth were expected to participate, there would be no need to ask consent up front, as one would for a survey. This was a preferred approach as it allowed facilitators to first build trust with youth before asking them to share their information. At the start of the program, facilitators would introduce the evaluation as part of the project, that they hoped to learn how to improve the program and would share what happens in the program. Once program activities are completed, facilitators simply ask youth if they are willing to share their work for evaluation purposes. At this point, youth are also aware of what they are sharing because it has already been completed. Rather than use formal consent forms, facilitators would convey consent information verbally and record who provided consent.

Evaluation measures

The primary measure for evaluation was youth's completion and documentation of activities linked to 1) developing a personal goal for the week, 2) building a portfolio of baseline skills, 3) updating their portfolio with new and strengthened skills, 4) revisiting their initial goal and setting a new goal, and 5) presenting to the community. Youth would document their reflections in workbooks, with the help of facilitators if needed. This measure was intended to capture youth voices directly and their expressions of what they considered successes (e.g., what their goal was, if they reached it, what skills they felt they improved).

Other qualitative data would be collected through facilitator observation notes and interviews with facilitators, conducted by SRDC after delivery at each site. This could include stories about

youth successes and challenges as observed by facilitators, and reflections on how delivery went (e.g., what worked well, what did not work, what adaptations were made). A third source of data was a Program Management Information System (PMIS) developed in excel to track participant basic demographics (e.g., age, gender), attendance, and the completion of key activities.

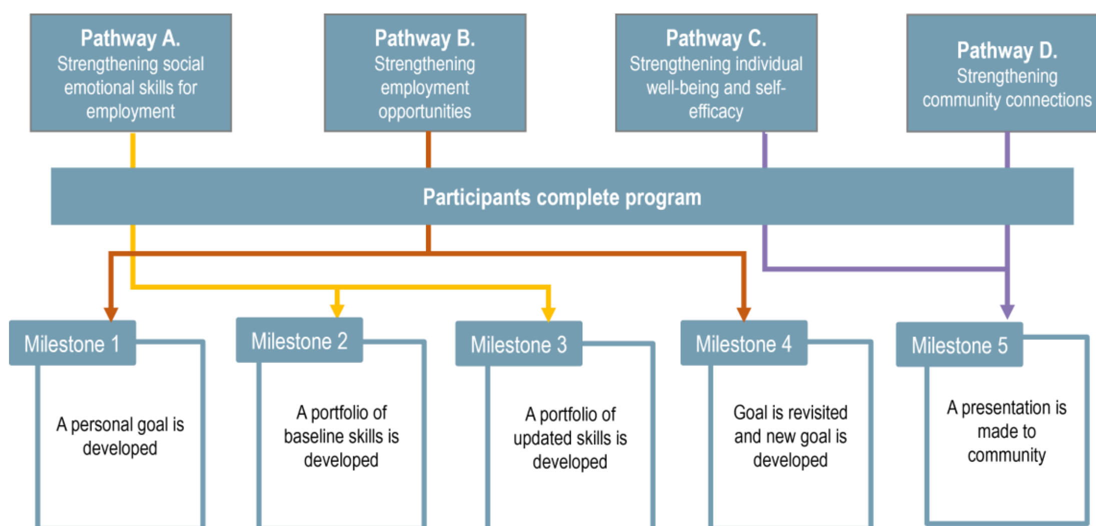
Customizing the milestone framework

The design phase was a challenging process for CFBC who struggled to define milestones that would not exclude youth. They identified that the priority should be programming that meets the needs of youth. Rather than adapting programming to a pay-for-performance model, they should strive to adapt the pay-for-performance model to programming. This led to the shift away from quantitative survey-based milestones towards output-based qualitative milestones anchored in program delivery.

CFBC worked with SRDC to define five milestones that could be integrated into program delivery and that allowed youth to define and express their own successes in the program. Milestone 1 was developing a goal for the week, Milestone 2 was building a portfolio of baseline skills, Milestone 3 was updating the portfolio with new and strengthened skills, Milestone 4 was revisiting the initial goal and setting a new goal, and Milestone 5 was presenting a project or themselves to the community.

Although the five milestones departed from the structure used by other project partners, the outcomes still align loosely with the generic milestone-based pathways (see Figure 24). For example, Milestones 2 and 3 focus on strengthening social emotional skills (Pathway A). Milestones 1 and 4 focus on goal setting, which can be viewed as first steps toward considering plans for education or employment (Pathway B). Milestone 5 focuses on presenting oneself or one's project to other people, which involves self-confidence (Pathway C) and feeling comfortable and connected to others (Pathway D).

Figure 24 Customized milestone-based framework



Customized performance payment structure

Based on the customized milestone framework, CFBC and SRDC developed the performance payment structure shown in Table 20. Each milestone was given equal weighting (20 per cent), and the estimated success rate was set at 80 per cent. The success rate acknowledges that programs are delivered within real-world constraints and contexts and not all participants may demonstrate success in the ways defined by the milestones. The target response rate was set at 100 per cent because unlike other partner organizations that used surveys, CFBC evaluation activities were integrated as part of the program. The performance budget was divided between the four sites. For three of the sites (Groups A, B, and D), outcomes at each site could earn up to 23 per cent of the maximum funds available. Outcomes at the remaining site (Group C) were eligible for up to 30 per cent of the maximum funds, reflecting an anticipated larger number of youth compared to other sites.

Rather than focus on the amount of change observed (e.g., how much skills improved, were goals achieved), CFBC decided it was most appropriate to focus on outputs. If individuals completed the activity and were able to express a goal, or express the baseline skills that they had, the milestone would be considered achieved. This avoided the need to make judgements and put value on how much gain is meaningful, and respects that each youth experiences the program differently. CFBC also built flexibility into the model – specifying that the milestones can be achieved in any order and outside of structured activities. For example, facilitators often work one-on-one with youth, and in these personal conversations, youth may reflect on goals or skills.

Milestones can also be achieved past the end of program, allowing opportunity for staff to return to the community to continue working with youth if possible.

Table 20 Customized performance payment structure

Milestone	Objective	Data collection tool	Calculation	Weight of payment	Target response rate
1 – Personal goal	Develop a personal goal, ideally related to participation and engagement in the program	Documentation in individual workbooks by youth or facilitator. Presentation can include tangible or shareable products (e.g., artwork, recordings)	Full payment if milestone is achieved (i.e., activity completed, and output observed or documented)	20%	100%
2 – Baseline skills portfolio	Reflect on skill strengths at the beginning of the program			20%	100%
3 – Updated skills portfolio	Reflect on skills gained or strengthen at the end of the program			20%	100%
4 – Revised goal	Revisit goal and set a new goal moving forward			20%	100%
5 – Presentation	Present or share what has been learned and who you are to the community			20%	100%

Implementation challenges and changes

During implementation, CFBC identified and adapted to changes related to program delivery and evaluation.

Program delivery

Adapting to communities

> *"We came up with the outline of milestones to create the program. We realized those things, not went out the door, but definitely needed to be realigned with on a daily basis."* (facilitator)

Each community of youth brings different characteristics, backgrounds, interests, and needs that impact how programming can be delivered successfully. For example, in Community A, youth were quite young and more disengaged than anticipated (e.g., were not attending school regularly). Few would speak in circle or make eye contact and facilitators quickly realized the youth were not ready to reflect and share. More time was needed to build trust. In comparison, the youth in Community B tended to be older, and living in a transition housing complex, they had more experience being in programs. They were open to engaging in self-reflection and sharing in circle. Furthermore, one of the facilitators had existing relationships with some of the youth which made trust-building proceed more quickly. Facilitators were able to jump right into reflection activities on the first day. Facilitators were guided by overarching objectives each day, but they adapted the schedule and activities to the energy and needs of the youth in each community. This included shortening or extending the days, and in Community C, the program itself was extended by two days so facilitators could have more time to work with disruptive youth who were showing significant progress.

Part of adapting programming to youth involved shifting the order or focus of activities or even letting youth take the lead. In Community A, facilitators shifted away from reflection activities toward carving on the first day. Facilitators described how working with traditional materials and tools on something concrete was very effective in helping youth feel more comfortable:

> *"Those moments of working one-on-one, they start opening up, working with their hands – such a great way to get them to be engaged. They don't realize they're talking about stuff. They're working with their hands."*

The process of learning to carve and working through a project itself exercises many skills and is a natural activity that supports self-reflection on different parts of life. It also gave youth a chance to work at something and experience success. In Community A, facilitators also let youth take the lead and show them their land school and community. Facilitators noticed an immediate change in openness:

> *"We did a community walk with students…They were completely different outside of school compared to inside. They were waving to neighbours and sharing their cultural upbringing (e.g., naming flowers, mountaintops)."*

Facilitators highlighted the importance of being on the land and many of the group activities were held outdoors whenever possible.

Adapting to individual youth

Facilitators allowed individual youth the space to engage in ways that felt comfortable and safe. Youth were not forced to participate – they could simply sit and observe or take a break in other activities. Even if they were not actively engaged, facilitators could see they were listening, and

connections were happening. In one community, youth who did not want to carve chose to do schoolwork in another classroom. With multiple facilitators, youth could break into smaller groups to pursue different activities. Facilitators also relied on non-structured one-on-one interactions to connect with youth and have meaningful conversations, including milestone-related reflections, whether it was during a walk or a truck ride through the community. Each facilitator had something unique to offer, allowing youth to connect and engage in ways that worked for them.

The facilitators described how they did not set rigid behavioural expectations but allowed youth to be:

> *"Do we chase them? No, we just let them be – the first day they were all over the place, disruptive and in and out of circle. We didn't correct them. The other staff were more worried about it. They probably got sent home all the time. We didn't want people to have to come sit nice and sit well. We didn't send them away – they're the ones who got the most out of the program."*

If youth were being too disruptive, the facilitators gave them "a kind option" to leave. It was not meant to be punitive or mean but gave them space to choose where they wanted to be. They were welcome to rejoin at any time. Because there was an option, the majority of youth stayed.

Personal reflection was challenging for youth

The milestone activities rely on self-reflection and facilitators quickly learned that this was not easy for youth. The project manager described how youth had trouble expressing their experiences:

> *"The language within the milestones was challenging as was relating it to their personal experiences. This challenge was not only be cause of the language that the milestones were phrased in, but also how they were being asked to self-reflect on their strengths. Many were uncomfortable with the entire idea of looking at themselves in a positive way. To get them to that point, we needed to build some substantial trust in a very short time."*

Youth were not familiar with the language of goals or skills. Facilitators had to explain what a goal was, drawing on their personal experiences (e.g., washing your teeth the next day, reaching a high level in a video game), and show them that there was skill in what they did everyday (e.g., what skills do you use to meet up with your friends?). This affected how many youths were able to meet milestones as defined by the pay-for-performance model. This varied across individuals as well as communities. For example, the young and very disengaged youth in Community A were not quite ready for this level of reflection, and this was shown in the number of milestones achieved. In contrast, the youth in Community B and Community C were more ready and able to engage in reflection.

Measurement and evaluation

Documenting youth reflections was difficult

As part of the evaluation and pay-for-performance model, facilitators needed to document youth's reflections as an output of the activities. The plan was to have youth write their reflections in workbooks, but many youth were either unable to express their thoughts in writing (e.g., not familiar with the language of goals and skills, lack of skills or confidence in writing) or not interested to do so. Even when facilitators offered to help youth write in their workbooks, this was not very effective. Facilitators noted that this could in part reflect cultural ways of interacting. First Nations peoples have an oral tradition, and some youth may observe first and build trust before speaking.

To address this challenge, SRDC and CFBC relied on facilitator observations and conversations with youth. If youth were unable or unwilling to record their reflections in their workbooks, facilitators could document the achievement of a milestone based on verbal sharing by the youth during activities, in circle, or one-on-one conversations. In Community C and D, facilitators felt that the youth were more capable or willing to share written reflections and created several reflection questions linked to the milestones (e.g., Did you have a goal when starting the week?), which was presented as a research activity. As such, youth were offered an incentive of $100 to thank them for their time. Seeing some success with Community C, the facilitators reconnected with youth from Community B and offered them the opportunity to complete reflection questions after the program had ended.

This challenge of capturing youth reflections pinpointed one of several key tensions identified in this project. CFBC felt it was important to have youth express their own successes. In practice, however, many youths were either unable to engage in that level of reflection or unable or unwilling to articulate and express it to others. While we could rely on facilitator observations, the successes are always filtered through the lens of another person, and they may be perceived as more or less meaningful than by the youth. Through discussions with SRCD, facilitators brainstormed solutions, including having a third-party observer or recording youth speaking. However, this could be at odds with CFBC's approach to facilitation that focuses on trust and relationship building. Sometimes those reflections may only emerge within the context of a safe conversation with a facilitator, and recording or having an outsider nearby may detract from the relationship.

Facilitators need to be evaluators

Although integrating evaluation activities into programming carried some advantages (e.g., more meaningful for youth, avoiding assessments that may seem intimidating or irrelevant), it also placed facilitators in a position where they had to play the role of evaluator. Facilitators might

typically support evaluation activities such as administering surveys, but in this case, data collection spanned the entire delivery period. Because the activities were now linked to evaluation, there was more pressure to complete them. Facilitators commented on the mental and emotional struggles of trying to provide what was needed in the moment to each individual youth, but also worrying about not capturing what was needed for the evaluation:

> *"How to capture those sacred moments? How do you describe it, when you're in the moment, in a position of connecting and sharing, and there's a shift. I never know how to write about it."*

Being an evaluator also requires a different skillset that put additional demands on facilitators at an added cost to the project, as described by the project manager. It was a challenge for facilitators to learn the terms and concepts related to evaluation and use them to articulate observations and outcomes they experienced intuitively with youth.

LEARNER OUTCOMES

Response rates and attrition

A total of 63 participants registered for Indigenous Skills across the four communities (see Table 21). In general, participation rates were high with the exception of Community A where two never attended after registration, and six others attended less than two of the five days. For purposes of the evaluation, only those who attended at least two of the five days are included, with a total of 50 participants.[12] For the purposes of pay-for-performance payment calculations, youth who were outside the age range of 15 to 30 years were also excluded, leaving a total of 40 participants.

[12] In Community D, the facilitators extended the program by two days because they felt that some of the youth would benefit from extra days to support their growth and progress. In this case, only youth who attended three of the seven days were included.

Table 21 Program sample

Delivery site	Total registered	Did not participate or dropped out	Not in age range	Total for evaluation	Total for pay for performance
Community A	11	8	2	3	2
Community B	11	0	0	11	11
Community C	22	3	8	17	12
Community D	19	0	4	19	15
Total	**63**	**10**	**14**	**50**	**40**

Note: Those who never participated or dropped out (i.e., less than two days out of five or less than three days out of seven) were excluded from the evaluation. For the pay-for-performance calculations, we also excluded those not within the age range of 15 to 30 years. In Community A and C, there was one individual in each community who both dropped out and was not in the age range. In most cases, those outside the age range were younger than 15 (minimum of 12), with only two individuals in Community C who were older (e.g., 30-45). These two individuals were also excluded from the evaluation to maintain a focus on youth.

Demographics

Across the four communities (N = 50), there was a total of 27 female and 23 males ranging from 12 to 27 years of age included in the evaluation, with a mean age of 17. All of the participants were Indigenous. In Communities A and C, program was held in rural communities while in Communities B and D, program was held in urban schools/housing for youth that included individuals from multiple Nations.

Overview of milestone outcomes

The number of milestones met within each community is presented in Table 22. The percentage of youth who met Milestones 1 and 4 were similar, and while the lower percentage of Milestone 5 likely reflects missing data from Community D (see Table 22 note). Meanwhile, the percentage who met Milestone 2 was particularly low whereas the percentage for Milestone 3 was almost double that. Thinking about baseline skills may have been more difficult because it was typically completed earlier in the program, when less trust had been built, and youth were still learning to self-reflect and see themselves from a place of strength. Milestone 3 occurred later in the program after trust had been built, and youth could draw on concrete program activities to identify areas of improvement (e.g., carving). In general, facilitators felt that earlier milestones were more difficult for youth than later milestones.

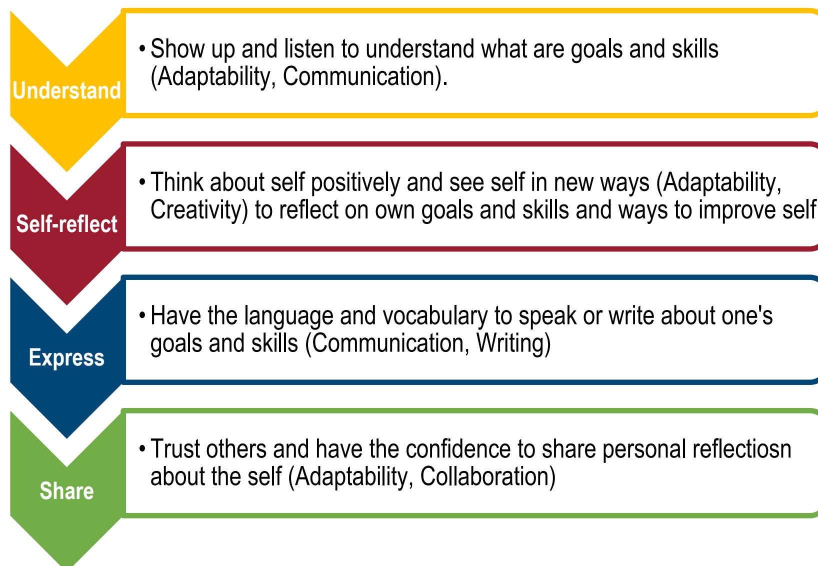
Table 22 Number of youths who met milestones (*N* = 50)

Delivery site	Milestone 1 – Personal goal	Milestone 2 – Baseline skills	Milestone 3 – Updated skills	Milestone 4 – Revised goal	Milestone 5 – Presentation
Community A	0	0	3	2	3
Community B	7	6	11	8	8
Community C	12	4	12	11	8
Community D	8	7	8	5	1
Total	**28**	**17**	**34**	**26**	**20**
Percentage	**54.9**	**33.3**	**66.7**	**51.0**	**39.2**

Note: Due to illness, only two facilitators were available to deliver program in Community D, and one also fell ill towards the end of the week. The remaining facilitator went unexpectedly on leave after the program and was not available for interview or consultation about the milestones. CFBC was only able to recover partial data leading to missing milestone data for 10 youth, and missing data for milestone 5 for most of the youth.

While there were some successes with using this milestones framework as part of program delivery (e.g., activities focusing on goals and skills), as a data collection tool, it likely did not fully capture youth outcomes. The main challenge was that it relied on youth ability and willingness to engage in and share self-reflections. In doing so, the milestone framework likely underestimated youth gains. A milestone was only considered met if it could be verified by CFBC staff either verbally (e.g., shared in circle or conversation) or written on paper. Other youth may have met milestones (e.g., had a goal, thought about their skills), but it could not be documented. This focus on expression and sharing also failed to acknowledge the learning and progress that might have occurred. Figure 25 illustrates the various steps and skills involved in sharing self-reflections and facilitators have commented how each step has been challenging for various individuals or groups of youth. While some youth may not have shared goals or skills, they may still have made progress towards that ability (e.g., gained understanding of goals, learned to think about themselves positively). Overall, these challenges demonstrate that while these milestone activities and outputs may seem simple on the surface, they require significant effort and work from both youth and facilitators.

Figure 25 Steps to sharing milestone self-reflections



The next sections describe youth outcomes for the milestones, grouped into three pathways: Pathway A social-emotional skills (Milestones 2 and 3), Pathway B goals (Milestones 1 and 4), and Pathways C and D presentation (Milestone 5). The focus will be on qualitative data from youth themselves, either written in their own words (e.g., reflection sheets from Communities C and D) or shared verbally with facilitators and the groups. The outcomes will include facilitator observations as well to describe changes that were not captured in youth expressions.

Pathway A: Social emotional skills (Milestones 2 and 3)

Youth reflection on skills

Many of the youth who shared their existing strengths (Milestone 2) focused on concrete activities. For example, youth spoke or wrote about activities that they did well, such as drawing, carving, making bracelets, cultural activities, or caring for their family. One youth shared his passion for dirt biking:

> *"General skills I kinda started with or generated were working with my hands – being creative and enjoying engaging into activities like dirt biking. I've always amazed myself and others with my dirt biking skills."*

One youth shared that they never realized they could look at things in that way – that skills were involved in the activities they liked doing. Although less common, some youth spoke or wrote

about their skills more directly, such as having leadership qualities, encouraging others, being hard-working, managing their time, willing and eager to learn, able to plan out strategies, being creative, and understanding new ways of doing things. Several youths mentioned coping skills and cultural skills (e.g., drumming, carving). Some youth also stated that they did not believe they had any skills or could not name any.

When prompted to reflect on skills gained at the end of the program (Milestone 3), many youths highlighted their carving skills (e.g., learning to carve, using tools, making bentwood boxes). Some youth also shared that it required a lot of effort, they learned they were capable of doing it, and they enjoyed it. Some youth expressed gains in cultural skills beyond carving, including gathering materials in nature and learning how to navigate trails. Youth were also more likely to use skill-based language for Milestone 3, emphasizing gains in Adaptability, such as having a more positive outlook (e.g., being more positive and happy, having a better attitude), being ready to learn or learning about oneself (e.g., that they enjoyed carving), managing time (e.g., building routines, having patience, timing), and having self-discipline and perseverance. For example, one youth wrote about a new way of looking at life:

> *"I learned how to use my voice, and to look at the brighter side of things. I learned there's nothing I could do about my past but I can keep moving forward."*

Youth also shared gains in other skills. Related to Communication, youth shared they were talking more and had found their voice. Related to Collaboration, youth were able to stay or share in circle, bring someone else into the circle, share in a group setting, work with different people they did not know, and trust others in activities. Some youth shared gains in multiple domains and expressed their gratefulness for the experience:

> *"Ye[ah] I got a lot [of] new skills. I feel more positive and happy and talkative than before we started. I feel more alive. I'm more out of my shell and I got to learn how to carve. It's really fun and calming and all. The workers will have a big impact on my life overall. This was the best experience of my life."*

Facilitator observations of skills

> *"Watch and witness the transformation."* (facilitator)

Facilitators reported seeing immense growth in youth, including many gains in social emotional skills that were not captured by the milestone framework for the reasons discussed above. Facilitators shared these observations with SRDC during post-program interviews and documented them in their notes.

Adaptability: One of the most common transformations observed in youth was the building of confidence across the week. For example, facilitators saw some youth move away from the

influence of others and begin making independent decisions. They also observed greater confidence to engage in new activities. One youth was reported by school staff to have had very poor attendance for the past month, but she showed up every day for the program. Even more noteworthy was that she had never once participated in the weekly drumming circle at the school, and on the second day of the program, she drummed there for the first time. Facilitators described another youth who wanted to sing but was nervous as she had not done so since she was little:

> *"The one afraid to sing, she came back to sing by herself – the courage to ask for help – she asked for help and got help – that's beautiful, and then found courage to sing by yourself, that's strength, that's leadership."*

The carving workshops provided youth a unique experience where they could work with their hands, try something new, and experience a sense of accomplishment. Facilitators saw increases in focus and concentration and in problem-solving and perseverance as youth worked through setbacks to complete their projects. It was not always easy learning to carve, and youth might start off grumpy and uninterested, but as they engaged and got closer to finishing their project, their attitude shifted, and they became excited about painting it or who they would gift it to. One facilitator shared the change in the energy of the room:

> *"[There's a] recognition of success – from I can never do that – initially [they] don't think it matters, but once they see the capacity to succeed, see they're getting close, they have time to finish it, they double down on the work…and then the questions start, the concentration increases….the energy changes in the room, their interaction changes with each other and with facilitators, more high energy…it makes sense to them, working with their hands and learning that way."*

Facilitators described how one youth, after a setback, wanted to walk away and do something else or start a new spoon. They discussed how projects may not always turn out the way you expect – the same is true of cooking or changing jobs – and the youth was able to look at the positives of her project rather than what failed. The next day she changed her approach and was able to complete her project.

Collaboration: Facilitators observed significant changes in youth's ability to trust. Being able to trust others is the foundation of relationships and facilitates getting along well with others. This increase in trust allowed youth to open themselves up to the facilitators and the group and be more comfortable to share and participate. For example, some youth started off the week as "moons" as described by one facilitator – they sat on the edge of the circle and did not actively participate. Over time some of these moons began to join the circle. Other youths had meaningful on-one-on conversations with facilitators where they shared their personal experiences and thoughts. Often trust was built in those moments of connection. In some cases, group activities designed to explore trust helped youth make significant gains, as illustrated by one of the facilitators:

> *"One was with [the other facilitator], he was asking him how he felt. He said I'm surprised I still have my blindfold on because I don't trust anybody, and he participated in the whole exercise with the blindfold for 8 minutes, allowing [the facilitator] to lead him around."*

Sometimes trust can also be shown in different ways. For example, by the end of the program, youth would be comfortable teasing facilitators or having fun with them (e.g., taking funny videos with filters). Indeed, humor can be considered an indicator that a relationship and trust is building (Brooks-Cleator, Lee, Halpenny, Howard, & Palameta, 2023).

Facilitators also shared examples of youth supporting each other. Youth helped each other in their carving projects, building fires, and assisting the Elder. In one community, a youth took the initiative on her own to enter a detox centre, which itself was a significant step, but ended up returning the same day. Facilitators were impressed by how supportive youth were, showing no judgement or negativity toward the individual, and welcoming her back into the group.

Youth also demonstrated leadership skills throughout the week, even youth who were part of disruptive groups. For example, one youth within a disruptive group often tried to calm the others down. Another youth led by example, moving away from blocking the television after the facilitators asked them to, and the others followed him. The facilitator had a chat with the youth about how he was showing leadership qualities. Facilitators described another case where a youth already had a leadership role in the community and built on his strengths during the week:

> *"One of the younger guys – one of the younger captains, opened things up with smudging – the skill set he talked about was culture. When he talks, the kids listen – so we talked about leadership, and he shared how he leads by example, by showing up, by doing what needs to be done. It was great to listen to him and see other kids listen to him. They really connect with their peers."*

Communication: Many of the reflection activities and the circles invited youth to speak and share with others. Some youth remained very quiet and did not speak at the beginning, but facilitators again observed significant changes across the program. For example, about halfway through the week, one of the quiet youths spoke eloquently during one of the group activities. In one-on-one or small group conversations, facilitators described how youth were learning to communicate more about their skills, who they are, and what they are proud of. For example, one youth who was quite young spoke about learning to clean and take care of her home and how it could transfer to the workplace. In an activity where they had to find themselves in nature, one youth brought back a flower and spoke about how she can be delicate but also strong and talked about who she is today. Another youth was particularly struggling with mental health returned and voiced that he needed "serenity". Another two youths discussed their connection to culture and how they were proud of it. They came from a household where many people passing through were taken in and accepted, and they saw that as their strength of not turning people away.

Communication can also extend beyond the spoken word. Facilitators shared multiple stories of youth who may have been very quiet during the week, or alternatively very disruptive, who at the end of the program came to give the facilitator an unexpected hug, which was incredibly meaningful and communicated without words.

The facilitators also engaged youth in activities that directly explored communication. One facilitator shared how he led youth through exercises where they experienced what it feels like to communicate when others are not listening or not showing that they are listening. They discussed the importance of eye contact, leaning in, using your hands, and paying attention. Later, at a local fair introducing different supports and services for youth, although they needed some encouragement (e.g., facilitator took them around as a small group), youth put those skills into action, speaking to strangers at booths, asking questions, and receiving information.

Creativity: Examples of creativity showed up in different domains. There was creativity in how youth were able to communicate. For example, facilitators led youth through an activity where they had to identify what group they belonged to that was indicated by a sticker on their back that they could not see. They were not allowed to speak to others and had to find non-verbal ways to communicate (e.g., pointing to colours on a pride flag). There was also creativity observed in their growing ability to see themselves in a different light and applying reflection in different contexts. For example, two youth shared that they were learning to self-reflect more outside of the program and in other parts of their life. A facilitator noted how one youth showed growth in depth of sharing and more comfort in exploring ideas. This aspect of exploring oneself in different ways was also highlighted as a way to be creative in previous consultations with practitioners serving Indigenous learners (Palameta, Nguyen, Lee, Que, & Gyarmati, 2021).

Facilitators also observed creativity in problem-solving, particularly related to carving activities. Problem-solving is inherent in carving – facilitators described how whether they were working on feast spoons or bentwood boxes, youth had to ask questions, ask for help, go through instructions again, or work through the problem. One facilitator described a youth's creativity in addressing a challenge that arose in her project:

> *"[The youth] powered through all of the projects so started an additional paddle pendant, broke it near the end before finishing it… a part snapped off. The youth figured out how to carve a hole through it and attach it to lanyard, really created an interesting way to problem-solve and not walk a way from a project that they worked on – because one little piece broke and it was ruined."*

Youth also demonstrated creativity in how they individualized their projects. For example, one youth carved the handle of the spoon into a heart. Another individual struggled with trying to make the project perfect. A facilitator talked to him about how projects reflect what you have done to it, and each person's project will look different but there is no right way for it to look. This helped the youth see individuality and creativity in how projects turn out.

Pathway B: Goal setting (Milestones 1 and 4)

Youth reflections on goals

When youth expressed a goal for the beginning of the week (Milestone 1), they were often concrete responses related to attendance, especially showing up everyday, and to carving, such as learning to carve or completing their projects. This provides a little insight into what youth saw as success for themselves – showing up and participating. It also suggests that since youth named these as goals, perhaps they also saw them as a challenge (e.g., it would not necessarily be easy to show up each day and to work until their project was complete). One youth described it simply:

> *"I didn't think much until the end. The goal was to get up every day with a positive attitude and to get my carving project finished by the end of the week."*

Some youth had goals related to other areas in their life, such as completing an art project or going to treatment. Several youths wanted to reconnect with their culture or be a knowledge keeper. A couple of youths focused on social goals such as meeting new people, making friends, or learning to deal with people from different backgrounds. Some spoke more generally about having fun, getting work done, or learning more. A few commented that they had no goal, with one youth explaining "I knew I had to take it slow and learn the process." Several other youths commented on simply making it through the week. Interestingly, both framed as a goal and a lack of a goal, two different youth shared that they simply wanted to get away from home, highlighting the importance of a safe space for youth (see section below).

Overall, the range of goals expressed by youth illustrate how individuals were at different starting points. Some were likely not ready to focus on goals and were simply coping with the present and looking for a safe place to be. Others were able to develop goals focused on concrete tasks they could work toward in the week. Less commonly, some youth had goals more explicitly related to personal growth (e.g., social connections, culture).

Consistent with what was shared in their other milestone reflections, when asked about their new goals after the program (Milestone 4), most answers centred on carving – continuing to carve or learning hands-on, making or buying new tools, and working on hand-eye coordination. Sometimes youth were able to express the importance carving had for them, sharing that their goal was to "start carving to a new life change" or "continue carving for my culture." Some youth focused on more social emotional goals, such as "to join different circles, like big house and pow-wows" or "finding places that feel like home." A number of youth conveyed a sense of momentum for the near future, writing about moving forward, continuing to work and learn, updating goals, and keeping focus and perseverance:

> *"To keep a positive mindset, to grow taller in my learning journey, to help others in the program."*

A few youths wanted to get their drivers license and several shared career goals such as becoming a photographer, a mechanic, having a job or their own company. However, some youth said they did not have any new goals or did not make goals. Others were still focused on coping and getting through the present or wanting to simply "get it done" or "finish my stuff:"

> *"For this week, goal is to make it through the week."*

Facilitator observations of goals

While facilitators could not observe the formation of goals, they shared how youth increased their understanding of goals. For many youths, goals can seem farfetched, as described by one facilitator. Facilitators shared their own goals, talked about what a goal is, how you make a goal, how you achieve it, and what it feels like. They connected the idea of goals to activities that youth engage in on a regular basis. Some youths were then able to generate examples of their own, even if they were not related to goals for the week or always positive goals. For example, some talked about wanting to be a captain in their community, doing well in an Xbox game, doing better tricks on a BMX bike, or even getting drunk. Facilitators built on these ideas to illustrate to youth the steps one takes towards reaching a goal, regardless of whether it is positive or negative. Although not all youth were able to develop a goal for the week or were willing to express and share it, youth seemed to have gained a better understanding of goals. One facilitator even noted how at the end of the week, a youth shared, "the best way to make goals is to break them up into small steps."

Pathways C and D: Presentation (Milestone 5)

Youth presentations

The initial intention with the presentation (Milestone 5) was that youth would present to the community in some way to share what they had learned, what they had accomplished, or who they had become. This could be their carving projects, but it would also include other forms of presentation such as drumming, singing, or artwork. In practice, youth struggled to present or share their projects with others, sometimes even to other youth in the group. In most cases, youth shared their carving projects with one or more of the facilitators. They talked about their experiences or how much they enjoyed it. One youth shared how the cedar smelled good and reminded him of his community. Others talked about their plans for their bentwood boxes, what they planned to draw on it or other designs to be added to them. A handful of youth were comfortable enough to present their carving projects to the youth group in addition to the facilitators. A few youths drummed and sang for the group on different occasions.

Facilitator observations on presentations

Although not all youth could show their gains through a presentation of their project to others, facilitators saw tremendous growth during the week. As already highlighted in the above discussion on skill gains, facilitators observed youth gain confidence in themselves, and confidence and trust in others to share their thoughts and participate in group activities. Youth showed great pride in their projects and in completing them when few had prior carving experience.

Attendance and engagement

When facilitators reflected on what they observed as successes for youth, many stories of skill gains emerged, especially related to increased confidence, trust, perseverance, communication, and sharing with others. However, facilitators also emphasized that simply showing up was a key achievement for youth and was associated with gains whether they could be measured or not:

> *"That youth who was quiet and never talked – there's obvious growth, even if he didn't write that down, I could see the growth – there's no way they're not getting anything out of it...Everybody grows – the ones who are not reachable – they leave the room and walk away."*

It was always made clear to youth that it was not mandatory to attend. Youth who seemed uninterested or disruptive could leave with no judgement and were welcomed back when they felt ready. Many of the disruptive youth who were asked or encouraged to leave returned the following day and continued to participate in the program. Those who showed up were interested to be there. Of those included in the evaluation (attended at least two days), 40 per cent attended every day and 60 per cent attended at least four of the five days. The importance of showing up is consistent with the youths' own perspective as attending every day was one of the top goals that youth articulated for themselves.

Facilitators also discussed how participation and engagement were important outcomes for youth, in particular, engagement as measured by the ability to complete a carving project. Seeing a project through to the end calls upon a host of skills – showing up, listening to instructions, learning to use tools, problem-solving, asking for help, not giving up, creatively addressing setbacks, and believing in one's own efficacy. Excluding Community D, where there is a lot of missing data, 80 per cent completed a project as could be confirmed by facilitator notes.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

How did the milestone model perform?

Payment results

The results of the pay-for-performance model are shown in Table 23. Overall, 58 per cent of the performance payment budget was paid to CFBC, with payments ranging from 38 per cent to 73 per cent across the five milestones.

Table 23 Pay-for performance results

	Percent of milestone payment received
Milestone 1: Personal goal	58%
Milestone 2: Baseline skills portfolio	38%
Milestone 3: Updated skills portfolio	73%
Milestone 4: Revised goal	65%
Milestone 5: Presentation	57%
Total	**58%**

These payment results mostly mirror the milestone achievement outcomes presented earlier in Table 22. The payments earned for Milestones 1, 4, and 5 are similar. The payment earned for Milestone 2 was the lowest (38 per cent), reflecting the difficulty youth had focusing on existing skills ands strengths, especially at the beginning of the week. In comparison, it appeared easier for youth to describe skill gains at the end of the week. By the end of the program, youth had more experience engaging in self-reflection, a better understanding of skills, and could refer to concrete program activities when thinking about their gains.

What are the lessons learned?

Defining successes

One of CFBC's goals in testing a pay-for-performance model was to develop outcome measures that prioritized youth definitions of success and held the program accountable to participants

and not only to the funder. The intention was that the milestone activities would allow youth to express the goals that were meaningful to them and the skills they felt improved from the program. A key learning from the project, however, was that defining success itself requires skills such as communication, adaptability, creativity, and collaboration. These skills underlie the ability to self-reflect, express those reflections, and share them with others. Many youths were not ready or were just learning to define their own successes and their progress in doing so was not fully captured by the milestone framework. For example, youth likely increased their understanding of goals and skills and learned to see themselves more positively, but these gains were not directly assessed. The framework may have also failed to capture other significant outcomes for youth as experienced and observed by the facilitators:

> *"This super powerful growth in participants...[is] not quantifiable. This person looked me in the eye. They answered my question. Like the hug is huge. But even just to be able to say, you know, that from day one to day five, that person looked me in the eye, that's huge for some of these participants...we saw it over and over and over again in these weeks."*

Overall, the milestone framework was likely not a completely effective tool for participant accountability or describing the full spectrum and diversity of youth successes. Interestingly, one of the key successes described by facilitators was their ability to create a space for youth where they felt safe to be who they are, where they felt like they mattered, and they had the unconditional attention and kindness of several adults for an entire week:

> *"It's tough being some of our young people. It's tough. It's tough for them to go home. Tougher for them to express themselves. It's tough for them to live in this kind of place with the kind of history that a lot of our Indigenous people have. Just to be able to have a place where you can just be yourself and be safe. And then to think about what you want more of in your life. That's sacred work."*

This focus on building relationships and creating safety and trust reflected an interesting shift away from a conversation based solely on youth outcomes and our ability to articulate them. Having youth show up and feel safe and heard was considered a significant success in the eyes of facilitators, regardless of other measurable gains. When working with disengaged youth facing many personal and systematic barriers, perhaps it is more appropriate to focus on creating a space for them to grow and explore at their own pace rather than trying to document change that can be very personal, not easily observed, or shared at this point in their journey (see description of open versus closed models below). It may perhaps involve faith that if the space is created, youth will come, and youth will grow in their own way.

Consistent with this view, one facilitator suggested that concrete outcome indicators such as attendance (e.g., showing up regularly) and engagement (e.g., finishing project) might be more effective. Youth are likely to only show up if they feel safe in the space and see relevance in the activities. Youth are likely to only complete projects if they can engage skills like communication, problem-solving, creativity, and perseverance. These indicators may not directly measure

feelings of safety or building of skills, but they are useful proxies that place minimal demands on youth. While attendance and engagement are not individualized for each youth, they appear to reflect common definitions of success. Many youths who shared goals and skill gains focused on showing up each day, carving, and completing their projects. These indicators might be most useful when asking youth to define their own success is premature or not appropriate.

Responding to youth needs

Another goal in this test of the pay-for-performance model was to explore whether it could be inclusive to youth at different stages in their journey, including very disengaged youth. One of the innovations explored was to integrate youth defined successes. The other was to build flexibility into the model. Milestones were output based and could be achieved in any order, outside of structured activities, and even beyond the end of official program delivery. As described in the implementation section above, facilitators were able to use a flexible program delivery model to address the needs of individual youth as much as possible. Nonetheless, or perhaps because delivery was only one week long, facilitators still felt a constant tension between knowing what was important for connecting and supporting vulnerable youth and trying to meet pre-defined targets and complete activities. The program manager described how the team felt the pay-for-performance structure was not a good fit:

> *"In many cases, the people participating were demonstrating behaviours that indicated they had experienced significant trauma. Respecting and adapting to their needs often meant not being attached to a prescribed agenda. With pay-for-performance, the necessity of a structured series of milestones with pre-determined requirements was perceived by the implementation team as not in support of our priority goal: that of meeting young people where they are at in the given moment and proceeding at their pace. In some cases, the need to be reactive to a participant's needs on a specific day was seen as antithetical to a pay-for-performance concept."*

One facilitator described this tension as the contrast between an open versus closed delivery model. An open model involves moving at the pace of participants and having flexibility to adjust program activities and program goals to support individual growth as it emerges. Participants are given the space to arrive at milestones on their own and express them in an authentic way. In an open model, participants have more power to direct their own learning and experience. In a closed model, there are more constraints on participants to engage and make progress within a timeline and within a specific set of structured activities. Sometimes this can be a problem when it takes longer for trust to be established – without that trust, youth may not show up, not participate, or become disruptive.

Recommendations

Based on their experience in this project, CFBC concluded that a pay-for-performance model might be best suited for more structured programs with clear goals (e.g., post-secondary enrolment, work experience) and perhaps serving youth who are more ready to meet those types of goals. For a program like Indigenous Skills that was designed primarily as a pre-pre-employment workshop focused on building trust, relationship, and confidence without any prescribed outcomes, pay-for-performance was not a good fit.

Nonetheless, CFBC suggested that some of the innovations from this project, such as the milestone framework focused on youth-defined goals and skills, could perhaps be explored in a longer program. Youth would have more time to develop the skills to define their own success at their own pace and lessen the pressure on facilitators to deliver activities on a tight schedule. Using multiple outcome measures and indicators, including attendance and completion of project activities, could also help capture a greater range and diversity of youth outcomes and experiences. However, CFBC commented that funding models that support extended interventions and individualized supports that vary dramatically between participants are rare. It can be difficult to integrate that amount of flexibility into delivery and outcomes when the time and resources required to support personal growth and development is challenging to anticipate.

How did evaluation capacity change as a result of this project?

The design phase of the project was particularly valuable for enhancing CFBC's ability to articulate what they do and why it works. The program manager described a new way of thinking and speaking:

> *"The development of a solution to comply to the pay-for-performance model increased our team's ability to speak the language of evaluation and to describe the intention, process (methodology), and impact that we create through the project."*

This was previously rooted in the intuition and experiences of the facilitators and not easily communicated to those unfamiliar with the context. It was challenging to describe the abstract and theoretical concepts that shape programming in ways that are tangible, practical, and amenable to evaluation. The exercise of verbalizing how safety, connection, trust, and confidence are built over time and how its success is naturally monitored in the field brought greater awareness to the team and more intentionality in the way they discuss and define activities.

The experience of developing and implementing a new data collection approach enhanced the team's capacity to monitor, describe, and document indicators of progress. The facilitators had to identify and articulate the types of behaviours that indicated the growth and learning that they

intuitively felt and experienced. Facilitators had a significant role to play in data collection and as evaluators because of the unique approach taken in this project where evaluation activities were integrated into program delivery. While this enhanced the skills and experience of facilitators, it was also an extra load that sometimes detracted from their primary goal of delivery.

Despite the challenges and shortcomings of the milestone framework as a data collection method, the experience brought to light key issues related to measuring success in disengaged Indigenous youth. This has informed evaluation for other programs, plans for staff development, and will continue to be explored in future projects. While it is meaningful to integrate individual definitions of success for accountability back to those served by a program, not all youth are ready and able to undertake this type of self-reflection and expression. If youth are not able to share the successes they experience, we need better methods to track personal growth that is not easily observed or linked to clear outcomes (e.g., employment), that may seem small but is in fact significant and meaningful. We need to better understand appropriate measures of success for programs serving youth, especially those with an open model. There needs to be balance between the need for accountability, both to the youth and funder, and the need to provide a safe, supportive, and responsive environment for youth to be themselves.

Career Trek

Participants

52 high-school aged youth enrolled in Career Trek programs.

Program goals

- Increase social emotional skills
- Engage youth in applied learning activities
- Focus on supporting youth wellbeing and pathfinding

Program model

Guest speakers, including employers from different sectors

In-program meals and transportation to and from program

Supported exploration and planning for education and employment

Financial literacy development workshops

Opportunities to engage with the local community

In-house childcare

Key outcomes

Participants built relationships with staff and peers.

Participants reported significant increases in career pathfinding (e.g., job search) skills.

Participants developed and implemented a community service project.

CAREER TREK

SITE INTRODUCTION

Founded in 1996, Career Trek is a charitable organization that helps young people in Manitoba discover the importance of education and career development. They offer career education programming to multi-barriered youth, with a focus on experiential learning to inspire youth and make them feel empowered to explore their interests and the mission of "inspiring life-long learning today, for a just and equitable tomorrow". Their goal and rationale for testing a pay-for-performance model structure was to explore the model's ability to serve underrepresented youth an in inclusive manner and the model's flexibility for defining success.

Career Trek programming is guided by their own unique four-step learning model designed to guide young people through a progression of education and career development learning. Youth first increase their **self-awareness**, then engage in **career exploration**, followed by **career discovery**, and finally employment **preparedness and preparation**. At the core of this learning model is the belief that hands-on and career-related programming maximizes participant engagement and inspires youth to become more invested in their own learning, growth, and development.

Through all four steps of training, Career Trek emphasizes hands-on education, empowerment, increased confidence, and skill development that is directly relevant to participants. This process supports engagement in hands-on career exploration that helps students recognize the links that exist between their interests and future educational or career opportunities, while promoting confidence and willingness to engage in self-discovery and growth.

Target population, recruitment, and eligibility

Career Trek supports a diverse group of participants who identify with equity-deserving groups, including Indigenous, Black and other racialized groups, and newcomers – groups that often experience lower labour market outcomes. Career Trek also works with other groups facing multiple barriers, including young mothers who face additional layers of barriers to education and employment, compounding identity-based barriers.

Career Trek recruits participants through community outreach and partnerships with schools. To increase accessibility for youth, some Career Trek programs are delivered in-schools, reducing transportation and other accessibility barriers. High school age youth that attend

schools where Career Trek programming is delivered are nominated by school staff to participate in programming if they meet the following criteria:

- Have the potential to graduate high school and pursue a post-secondary education or training program, with interest or potential to become a community leader but could use extra support and guidance to help them get to that point.
- Identify as a member of a marginalized, equity-deserving group (i.e., Indigenous, Visible Minority, Newcomer, LGBTQ2S+).

Training programs

Career Trek offers several programs in several communities in Manitoba, each with different goals and target youth populations. To ensure programming is useful and relevant to participants, Career Trek tailors the employment-related training content to the community and local labour market in which the training is delivered.

Programs

Three Career Trek programs were selected for this project:

1. **Career Readiness & Amazing Volunteer Experience (CRAVE).** A 10 to 12 week program for students in grades 10 to 12. This program is delivered through partner facilities in Winnipeg and Brandon. Programming is focused on community service, development of social emotional skills, career exploration, and promotion of self-awareness, and includes guest speakers from the community (i.e., local employers, activists, and advocates). The core activity of the program is a community project that youth develop, implement, and eventually present, with support from program staff. Through this active learning opportunity, youth can increase engagement in social and community issues, while building confidence and skills, and gaining connections with local services, organizations, and employers.
2. **MPower Winnipeg.** A 10 to 12 week program developed to specifically support young mothers who are currently in high school, with the aim of fostering self-discovery and skill development. To reduce barriers to participation, onsite childcare and transportation to and from schools and Career Trek offices is provided to participants and their children. Program activities include career exploration, career education (e.g., resume writing), self-development activities, and ongoing opportunities to engage with peers and program staff to build a network of social support.

3. **MPower North.** Using a similar training schedule and structure as MPower Winnipeg, this program is delivered in communities in northern Manitoba, and the training content incorporates land-based education and Indigenous perspectives in training, tailored to the local communities. Similar to its Winnipeg counterpart, MPower North aims to support self-discovery and skill development and provides onsite childcare and transportation to and from schools and Career Trek offices.

The curricula for the aforementioned programs are flexible, responsive, and adapted based on the learning needs and goals of learner cohorts to ensure that programs are accessible, relevant, and effective. Training sessions are characterized by the delivery of a PowerPoint presentation followed by hands-on and practical activities to increase participant engagement and promote effective learning. Learning resources (e.g., hand-outs, fact sheets) are also provided so that participants have resources to take home with them. In addition, Career Trek programs regularly host guest speakers to talk with youth about different topics or career paths, and staff regularly facilitate site visits to industry and community locations to enhance the learning experience.

Responsive training approach

Career Trek training instructors prioritize relationship development and adjusting programming to “meet youth where they are at”. This requires skilled instructors that can adjust their training approach to the learning styles, needs, and interests of participants in the room and are able to adapt and tailor programming activities to different cohorts of learners. To facilitate this approach, Career Trek has a team of curriculum developers that develops a variety of lessons related to the core training content. Instructors are provided the autonomy to select the order of lessons, and to further adapt lesson activities and formats to ensure maximum participant engagement.

Target program outcomes

The overall aim of all Career Trek programs is to set youth up for success in their chosen educational or career paths while supporting them in developing the skills and knowledge required to successfully transition to adulthood. As described in Table 24, the specific outcomes of the CRAVE and MPower programs vary slightly and reflect the program purpose and the target populations.

Table 24 Program outcomes

CRAVE	MPower (Winnipeg & North)
Target of 80 per cent completion rate	Target of 70 per cent completion rate
Increased understanding of how their future career outlook connects to their community	Commitment to complete high school
Increased hands-on experience through community service project	Increased awareness of career opportunities
Enhanced personal and professional skills (i.e., Skills for Success)	Increased awareness of education needed for careers
Increased confidence related to education and career planning	Increased self-awareness and confidence
Expanded peer and community network	Increased financial literacy and knowledge of education savings
Increased civic and community engagement	Improved problem-solving and communication skills

Program support

To further the aim of setting youth up for success, Career Trek offers supports and services to reduce barriers to training participation. In both the CRAVE and MPower programs, Career Trek provides transportation for all participants (and their children) to and from programming. In-program meals and onsite childcare are provided for MPower participants. These supports are designed to remove financial and logistical challenges that would otherwise prevent participants from engaging in programming, allowing Career Trek to serve participants that are often unable to access more traditional training and employment services.

Supplementing these practical supports, participants in all programs receive social and emotional support from staff that prioritize relationship development and recognize that youth who feel supported are more likely to engage with staff in a meaningful way. Career Trek implements an open-door policy, encouraging participants to come to staff to help resolve challenges. For example, staff are consistently available to assist youth when they need help with scholarship or post-secondary school applications.

Integrating Skills for Success to enhance programming

During this project, the Skills for Success framework was integrated into the selected program curricula and training activities by the curriculum developers to enhance social emotional skills training. In addition to social emotional skills, both programs supported other Skills for Success (i.e., Reading, Digital, Numeracy) through employment and life skills activities (i.e., cover letter writing, resume building, budgeting).

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN, CHALLENGES, AND CHANGES

What was the implementation plan?

Training delivery

One cohort of training was delivered for the CRAVE and MPower Winnipeg programs. While MPower North programming was originally planned to be included in the evaluation, it was not delivered during this evaluation timeframe due to logistical challenges (see more information in the implementation challenges and adaptation section below). In the CRAVE program, approximately 15-20 learners were expected to participate in 10 to 12 of weeks of training. Some flexibility in training schedule was incorporated to account for potential program cancellations due to weather, holidays, and professional development days. The training was delivered in partnership with a local school using their facilities. Similarly, approximately 15-20 learners were expected to participate in 10 to 12 weeks of training for MPower Winnipeg, delivered in Career Trek facilities.

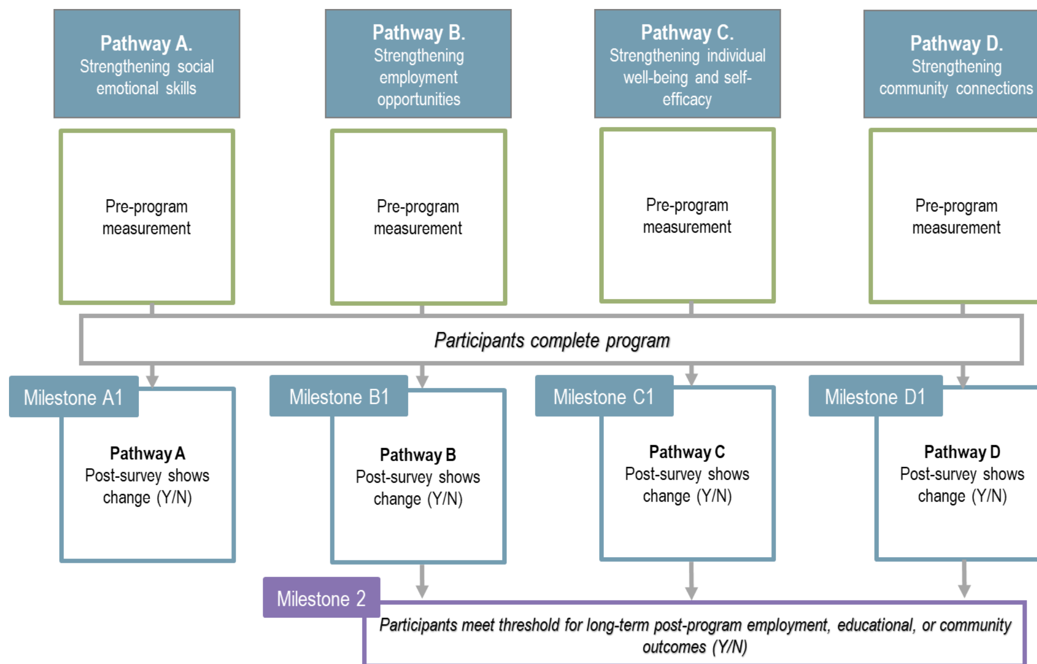
Customized milestone framework

SRDC and Career Trek staff worked together to tailor the generic milestone-based pathway to create a customized pathway that better reflected Career Trek's program priorities and intended outcomes (see Figure 26). Milestones were identified in each of the four pathways identified in the generic model – strengthening social emotional skills (Pathway A), career pathfinding (Pathway B), self-efficacy (Pathway C), and community connections (Pathway D).

The first set of milestones were related to skill gains (milestones A1 and B1), perceived positive change in self-efficacy (milestone C1), and social connections (milestone D1). The self-efficacy measured in Pathway C focused on self-efficacy as it related to educational aspiration and awareness and financial literacy. These milestones were measured by assessing change between the pre-program and post-program surveys.

Milestone 2 included longer-term outcomes for pathways B, C, and D, measured through engagement in activities related to seeking employment, further education, or community engagement, respectively. These activities, while relating to different pathways, were included in a single milestone to reflect the understanding that different youth may take different things from the program and use the training to pursue different goals. These long-term outcomes were assessed through the administration of a follow-up survey. While Career Trek originally planned to include an additional series of mid-term outcomes, collected slightly earlier, due to implementation challenges described below, the mid and long-term outcomes were merged into a single series of milestones to streamline data collection and minimize the response burden for participants.

Figure 26 Customized milestone-based pathway



Customized pay-for-performance structure

Building on the milestone framework described above, Career Trek and SRDC developed a performance payment structure to align milestones with performance payments. When considering which milestones to attach to performance payments, emphasis was put on milestones that reflected the most prominent aspects of their programming: the development of social emotional skills and career pathfinding skills. The long-term outcome milestone was also attached to a performance payment, as increased engagement in education, employment, or community activities was a central goal of the programs. While it was not the central focus,

training also promoted identifying educational aspirations, enhancing financial literacy skills, and increasing social capital. Measures related to these areas were included in the evaluation, although they were not attached to performance payments. While program staff understood development in these areas as contributors to youth's progress towards long-term outcomes (e.g., increased education, employment, or community engagement), there was a preference for attaching only the more key components of programming (i.e., social emotional skills, career pathfinding) to the payment structure. Table 25 shows the payment structure and estimated response rates for short and long-term outcomes associated with each milestone. Table 26 shows breakdown of activities included in Milestone 2.

Table 25 Customized performance payment structure

<table>
<tr><th>Milestone</th><th>Objective</th><th>Data collection tool</th><th>Calculation</th><th>Weight of payment</th><th>Target response rate</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="6">Short-term outcomes</td></tr>
<tr><td>A1</td><td>Positive change in social emotional skills</td><td>Adapted BESSI scale mapped to Skills for Success</td><td rowspan="2">Gradient payment based on mean gain in scale score from 0-0.5</td><td>40%</td><td>70%</td></tr>
<tr><td>B1</td><td>Positive change in career pathfinding skills</td><td>Job search clarity and self-efficacy
Student Career Construction Inventory
Career Trek's career pathfinding scale</td><td>40%</td><td>70%</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="6">Long-term outcomes</td></tr>
<tr><td>2</td><td>At 4-6 months, completed 7/14 activities on post-program outcomes list</td><td>Follow-up survey</td><td>Gradient payment based on engagement in activities</td><td>20%</td><td>50%</td></tr>
</table>

Table 26 Long-term outcome activities (Milestone 2)

Focus	Activity
Long-term outcomes	
Employment	Spent time thinking about or exploring career paths or jobs that you might like
Employment	Submitted job applications
Employment	Attended any jobs interviews
Employment	Obtained employment (specify with Career Trek or otherwise)
Education	Spent time thinking about further education or training or exploring programs you might be interested in
Education	Spent time thinking about or looking into different funding options that could be available to you for further education or training
Education	Applied to further education or vocational training program
Education	Accepted to or enrolled in further education or vocational training program
Community engagement	Re-engagement with Career Trek (started a new Career Trek program)
Community engagement	Started new program with another community organization
Community engagement	Searched for or applied for volunteer opportunities
Community engagement	Secured, started, or completed a volunteer position

Evaluation activities

SRDC and Career Trek collaborated to develop a series of evaluation tools to measure participants' success in reaching the milestones defined above. An overarching program consent form, individual survey consent forms, pre-program survey, post-program survey, and a follow-up survey (intended to be administered twice) were developed (see Table 27). The survey measures included a combination of pre-existing measures identified by SRDC (see Appendix A) and custom measures created to measure long-term outcomes specific to Career Trek programming. In addition to participant data collection, program staff were engaged in an implementation interview and in a two-session virtual all-partners meeting with representatives from SRDC and all four participating partner organizations.

Table 27 Data collection tools

	What	Who	When	How
Pre-program survey	Demographic information and data collection for short-term outcomes (Milestones 1)	All evaluation participants	First week of training	New survey developed for project. Administered as an online survey.
Post-program survey	Data collection for short-term outcomes (Milestones 1)	All participants who remained in the program and continued participating in the evaluation	Last training session	
Follow-up survey	Data collection for long-term outcomes (Milestones 2)	All participants who remained in the program and continued participating in the evaluation	June-August 2023 & August-Sept. 2023	

The consent forms and the pre- and post-program surveys were administered by Career Trek training instructors during programming. The pre-program surveys were administered to youth in the second or third sessions, depending on youth attendance. Program staff dedicated the first training session to building trust, participant engagement, and relationships between participants and staff. They introduced the evaluation component of the program in later sessions once a level of trust and comfort was established. The post-program surveys were administered during the final session. The follow-up survey was originally planned to be administered twice, once 2 to 4 months after youth had completed training, and again 4 to 6 months after youth had completed training This structure was developed to provide the opportunity to track mid- and long-term outcomes, although in practice the mid- and long-term outcomes were merged into a single data collection point as a result of data collection challenges.

All surveys were completed online, with the support of training instructors. During the pre- and post-program surveys, instructors were present during the survey completion. For the follow-up surveys, Career Trek staff offered the opportunity to schedule Zoom calls with youth so that instructors could be available to support youth while completing the follow-up surveys online.

Evaluation measures

SRDC and Career Trek collaborated closely to develop the aforementioned surveys and ensure that they were closely aligned with the customized milestone framework and Career Trek's training curricula and target outcomes. The surveys were carefully screened to minimize the risk that questions could trigger emotional reactions from participants. Program staff reported that youth seemed comfortable completing the survey, although there was variable time and effort spent on survey completion. Some youth required assistance from program staff, while others moved through the surveys quickly.

Implementation challenges and adaptations

There were several challenges that occurred during program delivery and data collection that resulted in changes to the implementation plan, described below.

Programs included in evaluation

Initially, Career Trek selected three programs to be evaluated – CRAVE, MPower Winnipeg, and MPower North. However, the majority of youth in the community where MPower North was delivered were not able to attend during the project timeline. As a result, the program delivery schedule was delayed several months, and the program was removed from the evaluation. The MPower Winnipeg program was delivered as planned but had lower enrollment and evaluation participation rates than expected. While 15-20 participants were expected to attend, five participants enrolled and only two participants consented to participate in the evaluation. These participants completed the baseline survey but did not complete the post-program or follow-up surveys. As a result of the small sample size and incomplete data, MPower Winnipeg was also removed from the evaluation. Out of the three programs initially selected, only the CRAVE program was included in the evaluation.

Response rates

While there were high levels of engagement in evaluation consent and pre-program data collection, Career Trek had challenges collecting post-program and follow-up data, with 25 per cent of participants that completed the pre-program also completing the post-program survey, and no participants completing the follow-up survey. The small sample size of participants that provided responses at two data collection points and the lack of follow-up data made it challenging to identify skill gains that occurred during the training program and limited the performance payments that Career Trek was able to earn. Career Trek went through a series of implementation changes to address data collection challenges, including contacting youth with survey reminders and incorporating survey incentives. Through this process of trial and error,

Career Trek and SRDC were able to engage in reflection on how to continue to build data collection capacity and procedures for future projects. The key challenges and lessons learned are described below.

Communication barriers

Services provided to the CRAVE cohort included in this evaluation were delivered within the facilities of a partnered school for the first time. While this program change was introduced to reduce barriers to accessing programming and to support participant engagement, it resulted in challenges communicating with youth participants. As opposed to programs delivered through the Career Trek facilities, program staff did not have direct access to participants' contact information and, outside of program hours, were dependent on school staff to communicate with participants. As a result, this meant that invitations and reminders to complete the follow-up survey were communicated to the partner school staff, who then passed on the information to participants. This additional step resulted in delays providing survey reminders and placed an addition burden on the partner school staff in addition to their existing workloads. Compounding this challenge, the primary staff member within the school responsible for supporting the evaluation activities (i.e., contacting participants), left the position during the follow-up data collection period. The staff turnover resulted in Career Trek losing the ability to contact program participants. As one staff member shared:

> *"Top of the list [of challenges], is connecting with program participants after the program. This may have been different if we had delivered the program outside of a high school course, as we were unable to get participant contact information, to follow up with them directly. We had to work through school staff, who were often unresponsive and unhelpful. We were unable to connect at all when school wasn't in session over the summer, and when the primary contact moved to another school we were informed the school was no longer able to help us with communicating with the students."*

Career Trek also had challenges collecting follow-up data from the two MPower participants for whom they did have contact information. Clearer and more consistent communication around the purpose and importance of data collection, as well as contact information and clear protocols for the timing of survey invitations and reminders may support participant engagement in follow-up data collection in the future.

Incentives for participation were only offered later in the evaluation

Initially, Career Trek staff were optimistic about participation and response rates, particularly because the pre- and post-program surveys were offered during programming, and thus did not include participant incentives in the original data collection plan. Following challenges collecting data for the post-program and mid-term follow-up survey, a participant incentive ($25 Amazon gift card) was introduced as an incentive for completing the follow-up survey. Career Trek staff

attempted to communicate the addition of the incentive to participants through the partner school staff but did not receive survey responses. In future programming, including participant incentives in the data collection plan and communicating the opportunity to receive survey incentives to participants earlier in the program may be useful strategies to support data collection.

Staff resources and turnover

Career Trek staff are incredibly skilled and committed to working with youth and helping them achieve success. Their focus on developing relationships with youth and comprehensive structure through which instructors tailored programming to participants in each cohort means that instructional staff have a full and intensive workload. Finding staff to fill a dedicated research and evaluation coordination role proved to be challenging, resulting in program instructors taking on additional responsibilities. These difficulties were compounded by staff turnover that occurred during the project, particularly because evaluation responsibilities were not included in onboarding materials. These challenges highlight the resource demands of evaluation, the importance of identifying clear roles and responsibilities, and the positive impact that dedicated evaluation coordinating staff can provide.

Adapting the performance payment structure

As challenges collecting follow-up data began to emerge (i.e., a lack of responses to the mid-term survey), SRDC adapted the performance payment structure to remove milestones related to the mid-term follow-up survey and to collect data for Milestone 2 through only a single long-term follow-up survey. This adjustment was made in recognition of the implementation challenges Career Trek faced and as a way to support and encourage Career Trek staff to engage participants in the long-term follow-up survey. While ongoing challenges resulted in no follow-up data being collected, Career Trek continued to devote time and resources to data collection and learned lessons that will support future evaluation and data collection activities. By using a flexible pay for performance structure and making adjustments based on emerging challenges, this funding structure was able to incentivize ongoing data collection efforts and capacity building throughout the full duration of the evaluation.

As a result of learning from this project, future evaluations are likely to include a staff member whose primary role is managing and administering evaluation activities and reminders. Future evaluations will also carefully consider the role of schools and school staff in program delivery and their implications for lines of communication with program participants. Establishing clear communication, particularly for follow-up data collection is crucial, and can be supported through creative approaches such as in-person outreach activities to encourage completion of follow-up data collection. Additional thought should also be given to specific incentives that could motivate youth to participate in evaluation activities and how these should be

communicated to youth. Much like staff, youth participant time is valuable, and the offering of incentives acknowledges the value of their contribution and compensates youth for their attention, time, and engagement.

LEARNER OUTCOMES

Response rates and attrition

A total of 51 participants completed the pre-program survey and 19 participants completed the post-program survey; only 16 participants completed both pre- and post-program surveys (see Table 28). As described above, no follow-up data was collected.

Table 28 Survey response rates

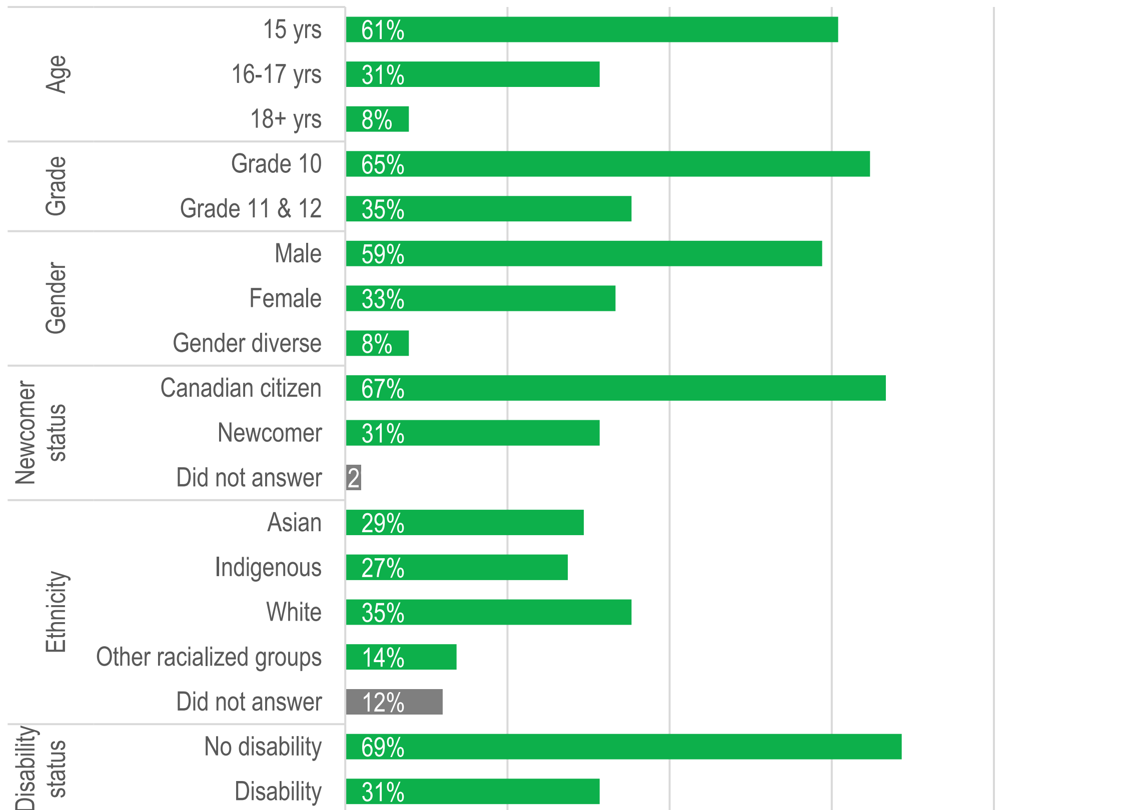
	Pre-program surveys	Post-program surveys	Both surveys	Long-term follow-up surveys
Number of responses	51	19	16	0
Response rate	100%	37%	31%	0%

Demographics

Figure 27 shows the demographic data of the 51 participants who completed the pre-program survey. The majority of participants (92 per cent) were youth under 18 at the time of program completion. Many of these participants were several years from high school graduation, with approximately two thirds (65 per cent) of these participants in 10th grade. Slightly over half (59 per cent) of participants identified as male, 33 per cent identified as female, and 8 per cent identified as gender diverse. Participants were predominantly white (35 per cent), Asian (29 per cent) and Indigenous (27 per cent), with 14 per cent identifying as a member of other racialized groups.[13] Participants with disabilities were over-represented in the sample, with 31 per cent of participants reporting a disability, compared to the national average of 20 per cent for youth aged 15-24 (Statistics Canada, 2023). Similarly, 31 per cent of participants identified as newcomers.

[13] Note that the ethnicity data adds up to over 100 per cent as participants were allowed to select multiple ethnicities.

Figure 27 Demographic characteristics of participants (*n* = 51)



SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

Short-term outcomes were evaluated by comparing responses to the pre-program and post-program surveys for the 16 participants that provided data at both time points. Paired sample t-tests were conducted to identify statistically significant changes between the two time points (e.g., skill gains). The outcomes for each pathway are described below.

Pathway A

Pathway A was assessed using an adapted version of the Behavioural, Emotional, and Social Skills Inventory (BESSI) mapped to the Skills for Success. Participants reported how well they could complete social emotional skill related tasks. Each item was scored on a scale of one to five, with one being low, and five being high. When necessary, response items were adapted to make them more appropriate for the target youth population. The Pathway A results are organized into higher-level skills (i.e., Adaptability, Collaboration, Communication, Creativity and Innovation, and Problem Solving) and skill components. Scores were calculated by taking the

average of the questions associated with each skill or component, for participants who responded to at least half of the questions.

Significant skill gains were reported for two skill components — confidence regulation and stress regulation — both related to Adaptability (see Table 29). Given the small sample size, it is not unexpected to observe few statistically significant changes – however, there was a general positive trend within most of the skills, notably Communication, Problem Solving and Adaptability.

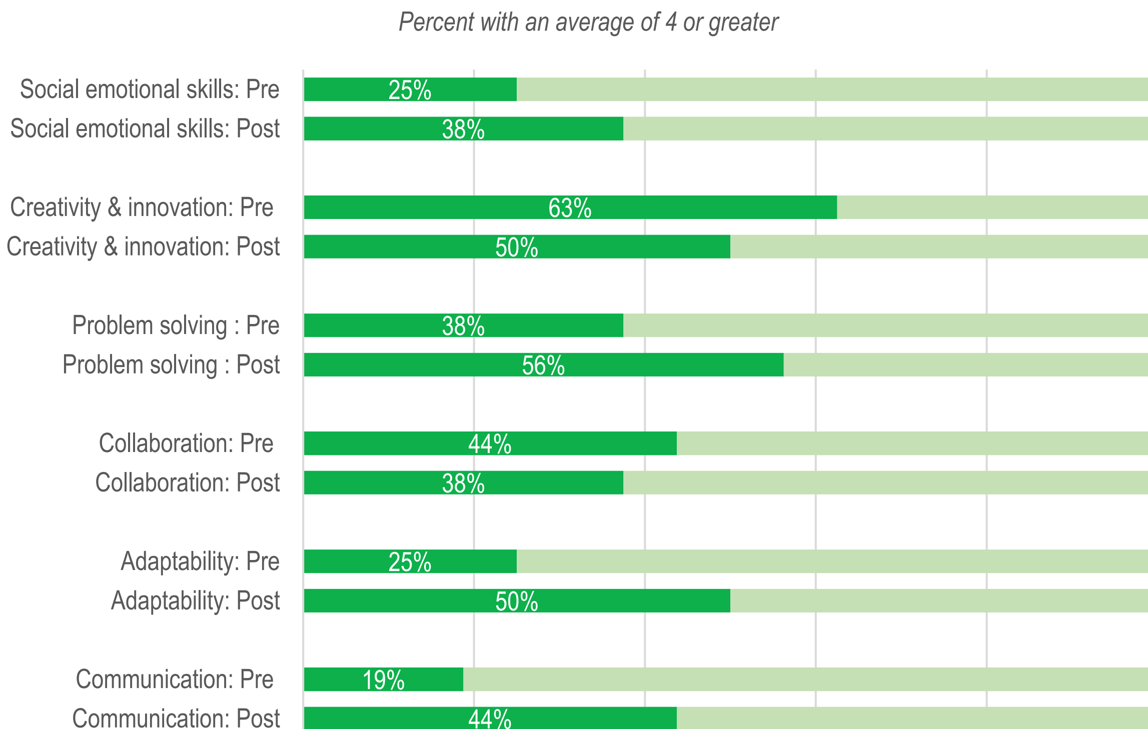
Table 29 Change in pathway A skill measures among participants (*n* = 16)

	Pre-program survey	Post-program survey	Pre-to-post gain	T-Test p-value
Social emotional skills	3.32	3.44	0.12	0.17
Creativity and innovation	3.58	3.52	-0.06	0.61
Creative skill	3.58	3.52	-0.06	0.61
Problem solving	3.48	3.65	0.17	0.13
Capacity for independence	3.79	3.85	0.06	0.71
Decision making skill	3.46	3.60	0.15	0.37
Information processing	3.19	3.50	0.31	0.10
Collaboration	3.33	3.40	0.06	0.61
Capacity for trust	3.02	3.23	0.21	0.18
Cultural competence	3.58	3.58	0.00	-
Perspective-taking skill	3.19	3.35	0.17	0.33
Teamwork skill	3.54	3.48	-0.06	0.77
Adaptability	3.27	3.41	0.14	0.13
Adaptability	3.54	3.40	-0.15	0.35
Confidence regulation	2.81	3.27	0.46	**0.05****
Goal regulation	3.71	3.60	-0.10	0.63
Stress regulation	2.81	3.35	0.54	**0.00*****
Task management	3.48	3.42	-0.06	0.68
Communication	2.83	3.08	0.25	0.22
Conversational skills	2.83	3.08	0.25	0.22

Note: T-test significance levels: * ≤ 0.10, ** ≤ 0.05, *** ≤ 0.01.

Additional insight into skill change is provided in the Figure 28, which illustrates the change in percentage of participants who reported high scores (4 or higher on a 5-point scale) pre-program vs. post-program.

Figure 28 Pathway A pre- and post-training short-term outcomes (*n* = 16)



The proportion of participants that reported high scores increased for social emotional skills overall, and especially for Communication, Adaptability, and Problem Solving. The largest changes were in the proportion of participants that reported high Communication and Adaptability skills, both of which increased by 25 percentage points. The skills with the largest proportion of high scores pre-program, Collaboration and Creativity and Innovation, actually decreased post-program by 6 and 13 percentage points, respectively. This could be a result of participants initially reporting high scores in these areas without fully understanding the contexts in which these skills were to be deployed, and then re-evaluating after working with others and engaging in creativity while developing and implementing their community projects during the training program.

Pathway B

Pathway B was assessed using survey questions adapted from the Student Career Construction Inventory, as well as standardized job search clarity and self-efficacy measures used previously by SRDC and customized items developed by Career Trek. All questions used a 5-point Likert scale, with one indicating the lowest possible score and five the highest.

Table 30 illustrates the pre-to-post-program changes. Three scales – crystallizing, skilling and job search self-efficacy – showed significant positive change. These skill gains reflect Career Trek's focus on introducing career exploration that helps youth recognize the links that exist between their interests and future educational or career opportunities (i.e., crystallizing vocational identity), defining and developing job-related skills in areas of interest (i.e., job skilling), and facilitating job search skills (i.e., job search self-efficacy). Minimal change was reported for job search clarity, decision making, and motivation, which may because these scales relate more closely to later stages of finding and obtaining employment, such as searching for and deciding on a job or career. Many of the youth in the program were further from the labour market and earlier in their skilling and job exploration journeys.

Table 30 Change in pathway B skill measures among participants (*n* = 16)

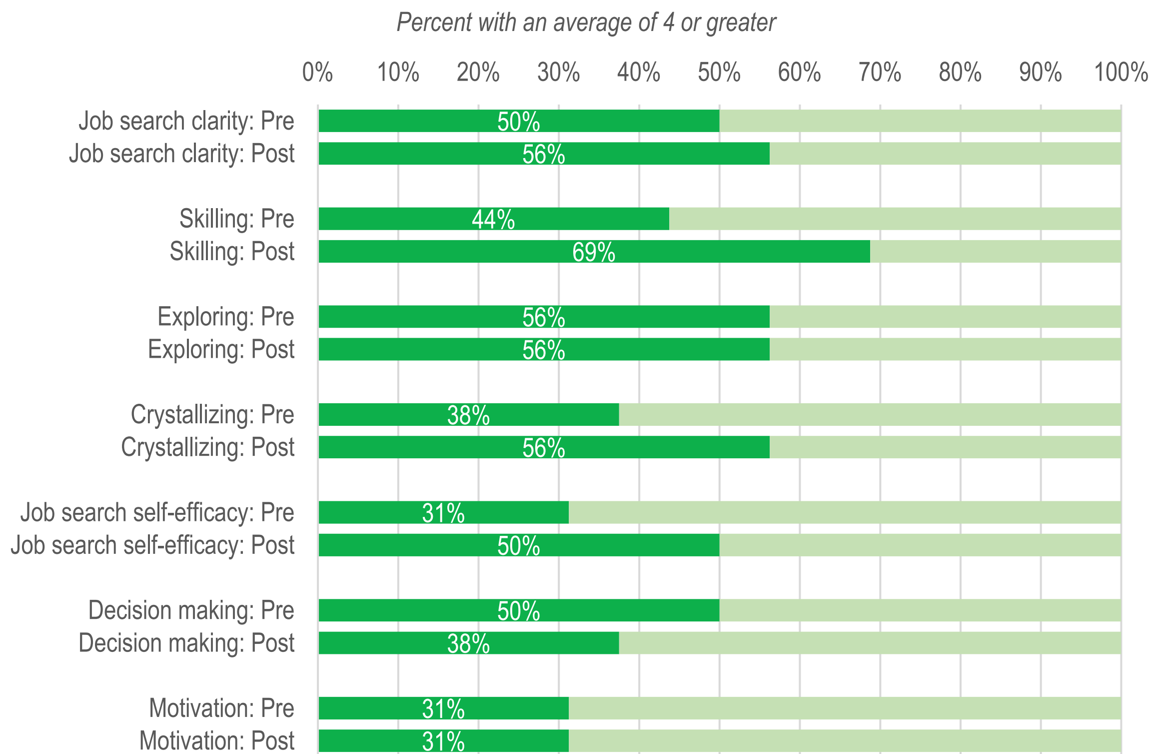
	Pre-program survey	Post-program survey	Pre-to-post gains	T-Test p-value
Pathway B[14]	**3.28**	**3.52**	**0.24**	**0.03***
Job search clarity	3.52	3.60	0.08	0.79
Job Skilling	3.43	3.79	0.36	**0.04***
Exploring career options	3.36	3.54	0.18	0.33
Crystallizing vocational identity	3.24	3.58	0.34	**0.03***
Job search self-efficacy	3.22	3.54	0.32	**0.03***
Decision making	3.17	3.13	-0.04	0.81
Motivation	3.06	3.10	0.04	0.81

Note: T-test significance levels: * ≤ 0.10, ** ≤ 0.05, *** ≤ 0.01.

[14] Note that the overall Pathway B results should be interpreted with caution as it combines three validated Student Career Construction Inventory measures (Crystallizing, Exploring, and Skilling) with two custom-developed measures created by Career Trek (decision-making and motivation).

Figure 29 shows the percent of participants that reported a high score (a score of 4 or greater on the 5-point response scale) for each measure pre- and post-program. Crystalizing, skilling, and job-search self-efficacy showed increases in the proportion of participants that reported high scores (18, 25, and 19 percentage points, respectively), mirroring the increases in the mean scores in these scales. Job search clarity also showed an increase of 50 to 56 per cent of participants reporting high scores, suggesting that some participants experienced gains in this area, even if the program mean did not change. Exploring and motivation scales showed no change. The proportion of participants that reported high decision-making skills declined from 50 to 38 per cent. This may be because, as participants were introduced to new career opportunities throughout the program, they became less certain of the type of career or job they were interested in pursuing.

Figure 29 Pathway B pre- and post-training short-term outcomes (*n* = 16)



Pathway C

While Pathway C and D outcomes were not included in the pay for performance model, some were targeted by the program (though less emphasized than Pathway A and B outcomes), and thus we include them as part of the broader evaluation.

Pathway C assessed self-efficacy with respect to educational aspirations, funding opportunities for post-secondary education and financial literacy skills. Items pertaining to educational aspirations were adapted from the Youth in Transition Survey (YITS) and financial-related items were adapted from the UK Financial Capability Survey and the 2018 National Financial Capability Study (NFCS) State-by-State Survey Instrument. When necessary, items were adapted to be more appropriate for a younger population. While most educational aspiration-related items were Yes/No formatted items, most finance-related items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale.

Some positive trends were observed with respect to financial literacy, including a marginally significant gain in saving (see Table 31). However, many of the items on this scale related to financial practices and responsibilities which may not have yet emerged as centrally relevant for the young population group. In some cases, participants may not have had any income or had a limited income. In future evaluations, these evaluation questions may be further adapted to also capture increases in skills and knowledge related to financial literacy.

Table 31 Change in pathway C skill measures among participants (*n* = 16)

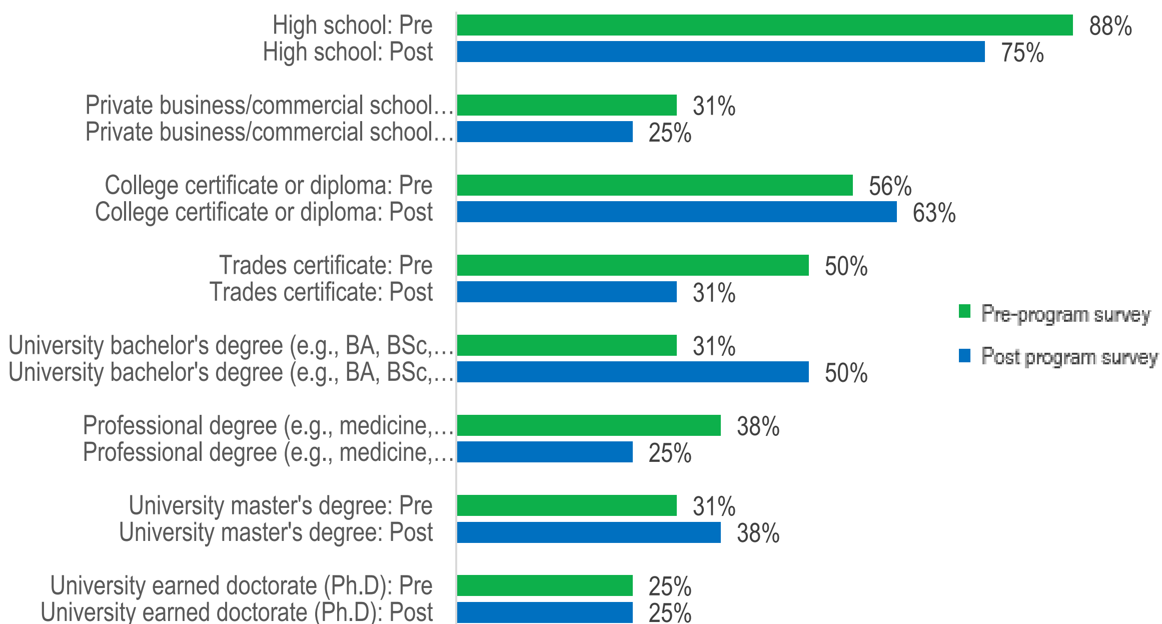
	Pre-program survey	Post-program survey	Pre-to-post gains	T-Test p-value
Pathway C (select milestones)				
Financial literacy: Confidence	3.25	3.41	0.16	0.50
Financial literacy: Savings	2.63	3.13	0.50	**0.09***
Financial literacy: Spending	2.31	2.38	0.06	0.83

Note: T-test significance levels: * ≤ 0.10, ** ≤ 0.05, *** ≤ 0.01.

Participants were also asked to respond to a series of items related to awareness of funding opportunities for post-secondary education in the pre- and post-program surveys. Participants reported lower awareness of funding opportunities and confidence in applying for funding opportunities in the post-program survey, as compared to the pre-program survey. While these results were unexpected, it may be because prior to the program participants “don’t know what they don’t know” and feel more confident that they are aware of funding opportunities. As participants are introduced to the wide variety – and complexity – of funding opportunities during the training program, they may recalibrate and report a lower confidence in their awareness and ability to apply.

Pathway C also assessed educational aspirations and reported barriers to pursuing further education. In both the pre- and post-program surveys, the vast majority of participants (88 per cent) reported interest in pursuing further education, and the rest of the sample reported that they were unsure. No participants responded that they did not want to pursue further education. Figure 30 shows a detailed breakdown of participants' educational aspirations as reported in the pre-and post-program survey. At baseline, participants were most likely to report that they expected to complete high school (88 per cent), a college certificate or diploma (56 per cent), or a trades certificate (50 per cent).

Figure 30 Educational aspirations

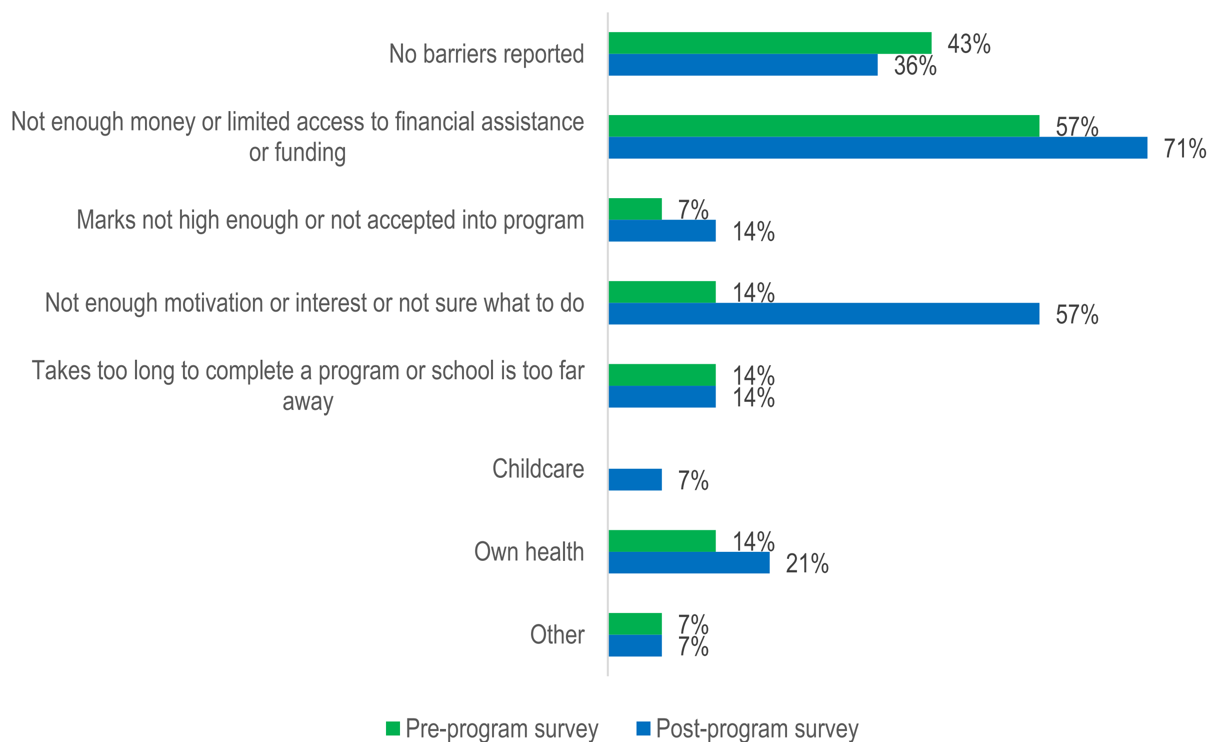


The changes in expected educational attainment in the post-program survey, compared to the pre-program survey, may reflect participants' experiences in the training program as well as in their regular schooling. For example, challenges at school (e.g., receiving poor marks on final exams) may explain the decrease in proportion of participants that expect to complete high school (dropping from 88 per cent to 75 per cent). Conversely, the increases in participants that expect to receive a certificate or diploma (56 to 63 per cent), Bachelors degree (31 to 50 per cent), or Masters degrees (31 to 38 per cent) may be because the Career Trek training program introduced participants to funding opportunities and incorporated planning for further education in the training curriculum. The exposure to a range of career opportunities in the program may also account for the decrease in the proportion of participants that expected to obtain a trades certificate (dropping from 50 to 31 per cent). For example, participants may have

been considering a career in the trades prior to training but learned about computer or automation fields that interested them that required a college certificate or diploma, leading to a change in their educational aspirations.

Participants were asked to report on the barriers to education they face in the pre-program and post-program survey (Figure 31).

Figure 31 Barriers to education (*n* = 14)



The reported barriers remained consistent or increased during the training period. This may be because as participants began seriously exploring and considering options for further education during the program, they identified challenges and barriers they had previously not considered. In the post-program survey, the most commonly reported barriers were "*not enough money or limited access to financial assistance/funding*" (71 per cent, increasing from 57 per cent pre-program) and "*not enough motivation or interest or unsure what to do*" (57 per cent, increasing from only 14 per cent pre-program). These increased barriers related to financial considerations, uncertainty and lack of motivation could be the result of career exploration activities that resulted in participants becoming interested in multiple fields, understanding the higher educational and financial requirements associated with some of these fields, and becoming

indecisive about which of these pathways they could realistically pursue. These results suggest that ongoing support to address financial barriers and to support youth in identifying educational goals and paths may be beneficial.

Pathway D

Career Trek instructors prioritize relationship development between youth and staff for several reasons. First, feeling supported encourages youth to reach out for help when needed and enhances youth engagement. Secondly, social capital can support an individual's identification and pursuit of career-related and educational goals. Participants were asked to report on their levels of social capital on a 5-point Likert scale, thinking of people in their lives who can help in achieving education and career goals, both within and outside of Career Trek (e.g., instructors, family, friends, teachers, peers). However, the average social capital score did not change significantly (Table 32).

Table 32 Change in pathway C skill measures among participants (*n* = 16)

	Pre-program survey	Post-program survey	Impact	T-Test p-value
Pathway D				
Social capital	3.65	3.43	-0.23	0.28

Note: T-test significance levels: * <0.05, ** <0.01, *** ≤ 0.001.

This may have to do with the fact that while social support is provided by Career Trek through their commitment to developing supportive and trusting relationships with youth, support specifically related to connecting youth to individuals that can help them with educational or employment opportunities is not a core component of the curriculum.

In all four pathways, the small sample size presented a significant challenge to assessing participant change and program effectiveness. Despite this challenge, the results for short-term outcome analysis showed positive trends related to gains in career pathfinding and social emotional skills, key components of the CRAVE curriculum. Additional evaluations with larger samples would allow us to better understand program outcomes.

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

No data for long-term outcomes was collected. As described in more detail above, the 16 participants who completed pre- and post- program surveys could not be successfully reached to completed follow-up surveys that would have provided long-term outcome data.

PAY-FOR-PERFORMANCE MODEL OUTCOMES

How did the milestone model perform?

As a result of the challenges with participant engagement in data collection, it was challenging for Career Trek to reach the response rate targets included in the pay for performance payment structure. While there were some significant skill and other gains tied to the payment structure, high rates of missing post-program and follow-up data meant that Career Trek earned only 24 per cent of the performance payment budget. The most successful milestone was Milestone B1, associated with increases in Career Adaptability skills (35 per cent of budget earned). Challenges related to the collection of follow-up data resulted in no payment being made for Milestone 2, associated with long-term outcomes. One of the key lessons from these results is the importance of aligning the performance payment structure with organizational data collection capacity to minimize the negative impact of missing data on performance payments.

Table 33 Pay-for-performance outcomes

	Percent of budget	Hit target response rate?	Full payments	Partial payments	No payments
Total Pay for performance	**24%**	-	-	-	-
Milestone A1: Strengthen social emotional skills	24%	N	25%	38%	38%
Milestone B1: Strengthen career adaptability skills	35%	N	13%	63%	25%
Milestone 2: Long-term outcomes	0%	N	0%	0%	0%

How did measurement capacity change as a result of this project?

Prior to this evaluation, Career Trek's data collection and measurement capacity was limited. While surveys were conducted with each cohort of learners, they focused on collecting data to report on funding outcomes (i.e., demographics) or to gain an understanding of youth interests or motivation rather than to assess program outcomes. The type of information collected did not particularly allow for an evaluation of program components or effectiveness. This evaluation was an opportunity for Career Trek to expand this existing experience to co-develop and implement a more fulsome evaluation of their program. During the consultations and evaluation development that occurred during this project, Career Trek had an opportunity to explore new data collection procedures and measures, and generally gain experience with data collection. Program staff enhanced their capacity to align results measurement indicators with program outcomes and contribute to the development of data collection tools.

Following the consultation period, executive staff gained familiarity with a range of youth-focused scales and measures introduced by SRDC (see Appendix A). Program staff also gained experience administering surveys and, through navigating the evaluation challenges that arose during the program, identified new strategies to engage participants in data collection. For example, dedicating staff time and resources to evaluation and creating clear lines of communication with participants were key lessons learned.

Overall, the development of the pay for performance model resulted in increased clarity in what outcomes were being tracked, and why these outcomes were selected. Through the evaluation implementation, Career Trek also gained experience communicating the value of data collection to frontline staff and creating open lines of communication among different program staff and departments. In the words of one staff member:

> *"The Pay for performance model subtly enhanced Career Trek's measurement capacity, in that it required us to identify what we wanted to, and could measure, in terms of outcomes relevant to our program offerings. While it didn't change the program delivery model in anyway, it led to increased clarity regarding what we're tracking, why we're tracking it, and communicating it to the staff responsible for ensuring the surveys are being done."*

Career Trek reported an overall satisfaction in the pay for performance funding model's ability to allow for an expanded definition of success by way of its milestone approach. Staff acknowledged that the model recognize progress towards success, for example by providing partial payments for reported skill gains under the +0.5 threshold required for a full payment. However, program staff reported that the performance model was limited in its ability to capture more subjective or qualitative measures of success such as youth engagement or relationship development between staff and participants. In particular, staff felt the model was not able to capture early successes and progress made by participants beginning to engage in programming.

REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

In the four cases studies of Needs Inc., NPower Canada, The Construction Foundation of British Columbia (CFBC), and Career Trek presented above, we document the sometimes unique challenges, successes, and lessons learned when implementing and evaluating training with diverse groups of youth across Canada. In this section, we focus on common experiences and highlight the collective learning and reflections that emerged from the demonstration project, particularly around the use of pay-for-performance models and effective practices when serving vulnerable youth. These shared experiences were particularly apparent during the virtual all-sites meetings where staff from partner organizations had their first opportunity to connect with one another. Below we first summarize the experience of our partner organizations with the pay-for-performance model, discussing the successes, challenges, and final results of the demonstration project. Second, we describe several key considerations for program delivery that emerged during discussion, involving practices or priorities that organizations identified as important for supporting youth, but that sometimes may involve trade-offs, requiring careful balancing to ensure the best outcomes for youth.

PAY-FOR-PERFORMANCE MODEL

One of the key objectives of this demonstration project was to test the effectiveness of pay-for-performance funding models in encouraging best practices and innovation in the delivery of employment programming and skills training for vulnerable youth. As part of our implementation research, we documented the experiences of our four partners and highlight below the success, challenges, and final results. Many of the themes that emerged (e.g., capacity building, data collection struggles) were quite consistent with those reported in the earlier Pay for Success project (SRDC, 2017).

Successes

Capacity building

Staff shared that one of the most challenging aspects of testing a pay-for-performance model was designing a customized milestone-based outcome pathway and data collection tools appropriate for their program and youth population. Yet this was also what staff perceived as the most valuable experience of the project. The design phase involved each site working closely with SRDC to understand their program models, build theories of change, identify areas of enhancement for program activities, articulate meaningful program outcomes in the short-,

intermediate- and long-term, and develop customized milestone-based pathways. Staff shared that this process gave them time to reflect on their programs and define success in new ways they had intuitively known were important but had previously been unable to articulate or operationalize. This had significant effects on program development, highlighted areas for curriculum enhancement, supported communication between staff members, and allowed flexibility to tailor pay-for-performance models to program priorities. Staff expressed gratitude and appreciation for the opportunity to engage in this type of supported reflection and conceptualization, build their skills, and bring greater focus to their work.

However, staff attributed these benefits primarily to the development of the milestone-based outcome and evaluation framework and data collection tools rather than the parallel development of the pay for performance funding structure. While performance payments may have brought greater focus to discussions on how define key measures of success, they may also have led to conflicting motivations in some cases (see below).

Staff also reported that being introduced to new measurement tools, as well as collecting and reporting on data improved their outcome measurement capacity and put them in a position to better capture key outcomes in the future. This was especially true for frontline staff that were significantly involved in data collection and following up with youth, developing new skills in the process. Furthermore, staff were often able to develop new strategies to respond to data collection challenges (described below) and address lower-than-expected response rates.

Innovations in Skills for Success programming

For all four partner organizations, opportunities for extended engagement and reflection during the design phase allowed them to fully explore enhancements and innovations to their program models. The primary area of innovation for all partners was the integration of social emotional Skills for Success into their learning materials and program activities. While the project was underway, the importance of social emotional skills was being increasingly recognized more broadly across the national skills and training sector, culminating in the launch of Canada's new Skills for Success framework in 2021. Skills for Success modernizes the previous Essential Skills framework in several ways to reflect current and future labour market needs, including a greater focus on in-demand social emotional skills.

Social emotional skills training was already being delivered in some ways by the four organizations, but all agreed that they needed to build these skills into their training models with more focus and intentionality. All four partners explored how social emotional skills were already present in their training, how they aligned with employability skills required by employers, and how to strengthen these areas accordingly. For example, NPower Canada integrated aspects of social emotional skills into their professional development curriculum. CFBC integrated reflection activities that focused on different social emotional skills into their

Indigenous carving workshops. Both Needs Inc. and Career Trek leveraged the structure of the Skills for Success framework to integrate social emotional skills more intentionally into their training activities. Innovation in program design was accompanied by innovation in assessment and measurement to develop data collection tools aligned with program goals and activities, document learner progress, and demonstrate program value. In all cases, organizations demonstrated that social emotional Skills for Success can be successfully integrated into training for vulnerable youth and that gains in these skills can be demonstrated in multiple ways (e.g., surveys, youth reflections, facilitator observations).

Challenges

Recruiting youth

Although we consulted intensively with each organization to forecast recruitment numbers as accurately as possible, unexpected challenges often made these numbers were difficult to attain. This can pose a problem for pay-for-performance models and payment structures that are based on pre-specified recruitment targets. Recruitment challenges are commonly reported by service providers working in this sector, particularly those serving participants facing multiple barriers or those experiencing fluctuations in service demand – especially in the context of unforeseen external events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, training organizations working with newcomer populations frequently experience surges and slumps in client populations based on national and local immigration targets. In other cases, for organizations scaling programs to new populations, or in new locations – as was the case with NPower Canada – recruitment numbers can be challenging to predict.

Collecting data from youth

NPower Canada, Needs Inc., and Career Trek all collected data through surveys and faced a range of challenges that resulted in lower-than-expected response rates. This was especially true for surveys occurring towards the end of the program (post-program surveys) and after program completion (follow-up surveys). Following up with youth post-program requires staff hours and resources which are often lacking. Response rates for surveys can also be affected by learner retention in programs. Highly disengaged or barriered youth often have competing life responsibilities or barriers that can make it difficult for them to consistently engage in programming. If youth drop out of a program, they are usually difficult to reach for post-program and follow-up surveys. CFBC's data collection looked very different from that of the other partners, but they had their own challenges as youth struggled with completing milestone activities, making their reflections on skills, goals, and progress difficult to document.

Organizations implemented a variety of strategies to reach and encourage more youth to complete data collection activities, with some success (e.g., by providing incentives to youth, decreasing survey burden, creating post-program get-together events). CFBC facilitators tried different methods to engage youth and document their milestones (e.g., one-on-one conversations, recordings, reflection sheets). However, as described below, staff reported that data collection increased the workload of instructors, facilitators, and other frontline staff who sometimes took on a double role as trainers and evaluators. The role of frontline staff is often critical in facilitating data collection because of their existing direct relationships and trust with participants. This is especially true for post-program follow-up data collection. In some cases, data collection required additional learning for staff, and while it built organizational capacity, it also added cost to the project.

Collecting data from employers

For some organizations, the pay-for-performance model included milestones based on employer feedback. While it is often difficult to engage employers in data collection, the effort may be worthwhile when employer data can serve to inform the need for providing ongoing supports, to learners and/or employers. For example, at NEEDS Inc., the expectation was that youth would enter probationary short-term work placements or internships, so input from employers on job performance was seen as necessary (e.g., to offer job retention supports where required). In practice, however, due to high local labour needs following the COVID-19 pandemic and the high skill level of participants, the vast majority of youth were hired directly by employers without the need for a probationary period. As a result, it was more difficult to make a case for employers to complete surveys – though the data would have been interesting from an evaluation perspective, the implications for ongoing service delivery were less clear. This highlights that pay-for-performance models may need to be modified to accommodate unexpected changes in program delivery, even when these are positive (e.g., youth hired into permanent rather than probationary jobs).

Final results

Overall, we found that the pay-for-performance funding structure worked better when organizations had higher pre-existing data collection capacity; concrete, measurable target outcomes; and more engaged participants that consistently attended and completed programming. The funding structure presented more challenges when data collection methods were more exploratory and open-ended; when potentially important outcomes were more intangible and difficult to measure, or when participants were less engaged in the program.

Performance payments

After adjustments (see below), partner organizations earned on average 47 per cent of their performance payment budgets (ranging from 24 per cent to 61 per cent). The training organizations had widely varying success reaching targets for both short-term and long-term outcomes, ranging from below 20% to over 70%, depending on the outcome. This was similar to results seen in the Pay for Success project (2017), where results varied across organizations and programs, as well as across individual milestones.

Payment formulas were based on dividing the total pool of possible incentive dollars for each organization into payment amounts per individual learner outcome attained. This required initial estimates/forecasts of a) total number of learners who would be recruited, and b) proportion of those recruited who would complete data collection activities. Higher estimates for a) and/or b) generate formulas with lower payment amounts per individual learner outcome – thus if unanticipated recruitment or data collection challenges lead to lower numbers for a) and/or b) than were initially forecast, it would negatively impact incentive payments, even if a high proportion of learners achieved desired outcomes.

As implementation challenges related to recruitment and data collection emerged at most sites, SRDC revisited the initial pay-for-performance payment structures designed at the beginning of the project. These challenges were largely beyond the control of organizations and had disproportionately punitive effects on pay-for-performance results, considering the positive outcomes that were being observed with youth.

On average, partner organizations earned **47 per cent** of their performance payment budgets.

For example, initial recruitment targets were difficult to realize given that the focus was on diversity youth who were particularly vulnerable to ongoing pandemic-related disruptions to their education and employment opportunities and activities. For similar reasons, though we applied a high 80-90% standard for expected survey response rates across sites, in practice youth completion rates and partner data collection capacity varied significantly, with actual response rates varying from 30% to 70%.

These considerations led SRDC to implement a more flexible payment model that included some limited adjustments in response to challenges encountered in the field:

- **Recruitment:** NPower's goal to recruit 500 youth participants while the trajectory of the pandemic was still unpredictable proved unrealistic – instead they were able to recruit 305, many of whom were able to attain multiple desirable outcomes. Thus, to avoid the punitively low rates of payment per individual outcome attained brought about by an unrealistic

recruitment forecast. SRDC adjusted the recruitment target from 500 to the actual number of 305.

- **Response rates:** The high expected survey response rate (80 to 90 per cent) was adjusted to 70 per cent for short-term milestones and 60 per cent for mid- and long-term milestones to reflect realistic targets that are more commonly observed within the sector. In addition, for Needs Inc., and Career Trek, mid- and long-term milestones were captured in one survey rather than two to address challenges in engaging youth to complete follow-up surveys.

- **Employer milestones:** Milestones attached to employer surveys for NPower Canada and Needs Inc. were removed and the remaining milestones were reweighted proportionally. In both cases, youth were successfully placed in permanent rather than probationary employment, implying that youth were successfully demonstrating required skills in the workplace without the need for employer feedback – in fact most employers saw the surveys as irrelevant and didn't respond.

These findings highlight the significant role recruitment and data collection challenges can play in determining pay-for-performance results and underscore the need to build data collection capacity at each organization before applying a pay-for-performance payment structure. Devoting funding and resources toward capacity building in data collection (especially when applied to post-program outcomes) gives training providers the support and tools to demonstrate program outcomes and impact.

Another approach is to make more realistic or flexible predictions for recruitment and response rates when developing pay-for-performance payment structures. For example, CFBCs payment structure was finalized after those of other partners because of a longer design period required to engage Indigenous communities and develop a culturally responsive data collection methodology. As a result, they benefited from lessons learned with other organizations. Instead of specifying a target recruitment number, SRDC worked with CFBC to estimate a range and set a minimum number of participants. The actual number of participants recruited or the specified minimum number, whichever was higher, was applied to the calculations. If volume of youth served and their outcomes are parallel priorities, another option would be to design a pay-for-performance payment structure in such a way that recruitment volume is rewarded independently of outcomes achieved.

Capturing meaningful outcomes

Participating staff provided positive feedback on the process of tailoring outcome-based performance models to their training programs and objectives, sharing that the process was an opportunity to identify and explicitly define target outcomes that had not previously been fully examined or operationalized. Defining a full spectrum of target outcomes using a milestone-

based pathway approach was useful in supporting communication within training organizations on curriculum enhancement and development of measurement frameworks tailored to program priorities.

However, when discussing program impacts on youth with diverse lived experiences and the meaningful successes that they observed, staff sometimes struggled with the fact that certain outcomes – especially relational outcomes that were key in engaging youth with training in the first place– were not included in the pay-for-performance model. These kinds of outcomes are built on establishing positive connections between instructors and youth, and are often difficult to articulate or measure. Nonetheless, many of these outcomes, including trust, motivation, self-worth and hope, are foundational to engagement in further training, career pathfinding, and education, especially for learners furthest from the labour market who may be reluctant to access and engage on training as a result of a history of negative experiences.

The staff who worked most closely with SRDC in designing the pay-for-performance structure were typically managers, directors, coordinators, or research staff. Instructors and facilitators who directly served youth were not informed about the details of the pay-for-performance model – in most cases this was intentional, to prevent instructors from feeling more pressured or stressed about achieving outcomes. The several adaptations, adjustments, and in-program innovations that instructors made in response to emerging challenges reflected their dedication to meet youth needs and facilitate positive outcomes, even without knowing about pay-for-performance financial incentives. In fact, instructors later reported that had they known about the financial incentives, it may have conflicted with their intrinsic motivation to prioritize youth well-being.

For example, incentivizing outcomes that are "measurable" may risk inadvertently demotivating, devaluing, or distracting service providers from focusing on other kinds of success, and from serving youth who are struggling and need more time and support to engage with program activities (including data collection). In certain situations, pay-for-performance models may be most appropriate for youth who are closer to the labour market or where the outcomes measured are clearly a good fit for the youth goals and reasonably attainable within the timeframe provided.

PROGRAM DELIVERY

Throughout this project, SRDC and partners grappled with a series of potential trade-offs related to program design and delivery. Each of these areas benefitted from deep reflection and ongoing discussion as partner organizations sought solutions that aligned with their program models and participant populations. There were no one-size-fits-all solutions. Rather, through reflection and experience, trial and error, partners navigated a path that best served their participants and

communities. The key trade-offs that emerged and how practitioners attempted to balance them are briefly described below, to shed light on the intentional decision-making that occurred throughout this project and to encourage similar reflection on these topics for other organizations that serve multi-barriered youth.

Providing ongoing support to youth while promoting autonomy and independence

Providing ongoing access to supports after programming can help promote continued progress towards education and employment goals. This can include post-employment coaching and retention support to help youth troubleshoot challenges that arise in the first months of employment; pathfinding support for youth seeking to identify employment and educational goals; ongoing social emotional support for youth that have developed trusting relationships with program staff; and continuity of access to resources and wraparound supports. While partner organizations prioritized ongoing supports, they also recognized the importance of building autonomy in youth. They focused on helping youth independently solve problems, self-advocate, locate and access other resources in their communities, and develop supportive social networks and relationships. Although it may appear initially to be contradictory, access to ongoing support often contributes to youth independence, as youth have the space to build confidence and move towards independence at their own pace.

Facilitating employment and educational outcomes while supporting individual and alternative pathways

Organizations often provide skills training and career pathfinding activities that have employment or further education as an ultimate goal, and indeed, these are often the goals sought by funders as well. However, organizations also recognize that not all youth may be ready for these goals. For example, youth who are especially disengaged and have complex needs may need more time to work on building trust, self-confidence, and social emotional skills. As illustrated in a milestone-based approach, focusing on mental health, wellbeing, and self-determination can be important stepping stones to employability or ability to engage in further education.

Furthermore, not all youth may want to pursue employment or education in the traditional sense. Some youth may prioritize working towards self-employment or exploring further education opportunities over engaging in job placements or early work experiences. For others, formal post-secondary education might not be a good fit. For Indigenous youth, their priority might be to remain in community to continue connecting with their culture and learn from and take care of Elders. Training organizations can encourage youth to articulate, set, and work toward their own goals, and recognize that progress looks different for individual youth. For

example, organizations can provide safe spaces for youth to build wellbeing and pre-employment skills; self-reflection activities for youth to identify their own interests and skills; guest speakers to learn more about different careers and network with different employers; pathfinding and navigation supports; and customized job matching that aligns with youth goals. Incorporating flexibility into program activities allows youth to explore education and employment options, but also gives them space to carve their own pathway forward.

Valuing attendance and engagement while respecting youth boundaries and social emotional needs

Engagement, active participation, and consistent attendance are often important for youth to experience the full benefit of programming and create conditions for them to achieve target outcomes. However, delivering training to youth with complex needs often requires flexibility. For example, trauma-informed training approaches may allow participants to choose how much they want to engage in each activity and provide explicit permission and space for participants to step out of programming to regulate as needed. Participants may also have responsibilities or competing priorities that can make consistent attendance challenging. This includes caring for children, family members, personal health, or dealing with housing, legal, or settlement activities. Similarly, behaviour in the classroom may vary as participants learn to balance setting boundaries and self expression with appropriate behaviour. While safe, respectful, and focused learning spaces are important for program delivery, building emotional regulation and constructive ways to express frustration or other emotions can be a part of the learning that occurs in programming. Achieving a balance between setting behaviour and engagement expectations while maintaining flexibility and understanding looks different for every program and is often different for each cohort of participants. In this project, experienced staff who shared lived experiences with youth or had training in trauma-informed approaches were well-placed to navigate through these kinds of dynamics.

Documenting program value through data collection while minimizing burden on participants and staff

While ongoing and detailed data collection can produce a full and nuanced understanding of program implementation and outcomes, inform opportunities for enhancement and further development, and engage learners in opportunities for self-reflection, data collection also requires time and resources and often adds to staff responsibilities. Qualitative or arts-based activities that may be more accessible or appropriate for youth distant from the labour market require significant time and effort from training delivery staff. Surveys can be easier to administer, but collecting data at regular intervals to track changes can be repetitive for participants. Furthermore, collecting follow-up data requires dedicated time and resources for

staff to re-engage with youth that are no longer actively involved in programming. All partner organizations reported that having outcome data was valuable for program planning and for communicating program value to funders and community stakeholders. In addition, all reported benefitting from being flexible, responsive, and intentional in data collection activities (e.g., by dedicating resources to coordinate evaluation activities, such as planning follow-up data collection and embedding data collection within program activities) though there was variability in their capacity to carry out such activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the experiences, reflections, and lessons learned from our four partner organizations, we identify several key recommendations for supporting projects to achieve positive youth outcomes. These recommendations are all consistent with findings from the Research Synthesis report, especially those related to providing tailored flexible supports for youth and providing a continuity of supports along the entire employment pathway, from pre-employment to retention in the workplace. The recommendations can be applied broadly to programming for vulnerable youth but are also especially relevant to the application of pay-for-performance models. The recommendations also all point to a core concept: **training programs that are customized to their participant population and responsive to evolving community and individual needs are optimal for supporting youth success.** However, flexibility in funding agreements is needed to ensure that service delivery organizations have the resources, time, and skills to apply these recommendations (listed below).

1. **Allow for customization of pay-for-performance models and consider their appropriateness for youth population(s) served, and responsiveness to data collection challenges and other contextual factors.**

   Building flexibility into pay-for-performance models and allowing for some degree of organization-level customization of milestone outcomes, data collection methods, and payment structures, increases their likelihood of success. Our demonstration project showed that a flexible approach allowed organizations to track – and receive incentives for reaching – outcomes aligned with their program priorities, participant populations, and unique training contexts. The process of building customized models was also valuable to organizations as an opportunity to build their capacity and deepen their understanding of their own program models and desired outcomes. Our partners also found that the milestone-based approach worked well, distributing payments across multiple outcomes, and recognizing different types of success. The lessons learned, however, also highlight the need to consider when a pay-for-performance model may not be a good fit (e.g., if learners are distant from the labour market and/or important outcomes are not easily measurable), and carefully define payment parameters to minimize or be flexible to the challenges of data collection and other contextual factors.

2. **Consider funding activities that support post-training labour market transition and retention, and tracking of associated longer-term outcomes.**

   Post-program supports (e.g., job coaching, wraparound supports, ongoing employer engagement) can be as important as in-program supports. They can promote continued skill

development and application of skills in a workplace setting, reinforcing what was learned during training, increasing the likelihood that youth enter and remain in the labour market, and facilitating positive experiences for both youth and employers. Partner organizations also recommended bridging programs as examples of incremental activities to facilitate alternative pathways into post-secondary education. Without a plan and resources to develop these kinds of post-training supports, "hoped for" learning transfer from training to application contexts such as workplace or higher education is less likely to occur. Continuing to track participant outcomes post-training, and indeed after initial employment, can help establish an evidence base for best practices to facilitate learning transfer, and encourage continuous improvement in program design and delivery.

3. **Consider incorporating flexibility and capacity building into funding structures to support program models that can effectively meet the needs of diverse youth.**

   All partner organizations voiced and demonstrated the importance of flexibility in training delivery, not only in day-to-day activities, but in the length, size, and number of cohorts delivered. This kind of flexibility allows organizations to tailor their delivery to immediate and emerging needs of the youth and communities they serve. For example, working with vulnerable youth who face multiple barriers requires providing them the time and space to build trust, engage and learn at their own pace. The constraints of typical program funding and especially in a time-limited pay-for-performance context were sometimes difficult to reconcile with the approach of putting youth needs first. Supporting diverse youth needs may also require building organizational capacity – for example, training in effective approaches such as trauma-informed care and hiring staff with similar lived experience to connect with youth and serve as role models.

4. **Consider supporting organizational measurement and data collection capacity, to document meaningful outcomes aligned with program priorities and participant needs.**

   Across all organizations, staff highlighted the need to develop quantitative and/or qualitative data collection tools that were customized to the youth they served. Tailored surveys and where appropriate more learner-centred tools were seen as more engaging for youth and allowed organizations to take ownership over the data collection process and measure outcomes that made sense for their program and learner objectives. Within this project, organizations greatly benefited from capacity building funding and activities, as well as on-going support from SRDC and time to engage in developing and implementing customized outcome measurement frameworks.

5. **Recognize the value of diverse measures of success, including earlier milestones that may act as precursors to support later education and employment outcomes.**

   As highlighted in the Research Synthesis report and the results of this demonstration project, it is important to set training goals and expectations of what constitutes "success" against the backdrop of youth lived experience – in some cases, pathways to success may require a range of outcomes that precede transition to education or employment. Adopting a milestone-based approach can help us articulate how early steps (e.g., building trust, developing social-emotional skills, gaining self-confidence, improving mental health) set the conditions to support youth as they progress toward the labour market. This approach recognizes the important role of organizations and staff in defining what success looks like for youth they serve, which in turn enables fuller and more detailed documentation of the value of programs and how they support youth.

CONCLUSION

This project offered an opportunity for service providers to co-create a performance funding model aligned with their organizational activities and desired outcomes. The results build on the findings of Pay for Success (SRDC, 2017) and demonstrate that pay-for-performance models can be implemented successfully in a youth-specific skills training and employment context.

Consistent with previous findings, a key positive experience for organizations was being given the time, resources, and supports to articulate and measure key outcomes aligned with program objectives, including early and intermediate outcomes that may support subsequent transitions into education and employment. Program staff also reported increased familiarity with the Skills for Success framework, which facilitated the development of enhancements and innovations in program delivery, including the integration of social and emotional skills into training curricula. In general, while the training models implemented and outcomes assessed were customized to target populations at each site, there was evidence of success in all programs. However – also consistent with previous findings – organizations encountered challenges in recruitment and data collection that impacted pay-for-performance results, especially those related to longer-term outcomes.

Overall, this project underscores the importance of **considering the fit of pay-for-performance models for each organization and its unique training context**. The overarching goal is to design pay-for-performance outcomes and data collection tools to align broadly with program goals and activities, while also sparking the development of innovative approaches and continuous improvement. However, in some cases, for example when youth are distant from the labour market and have challenges engaging with program activities including data collection, questions may arise as to whether outcomes that are meaningful for them can or should be measured in a pay-for-performance context. Another key finding is that working with vulnerable youth in a post-COVID-19 world brings many challenges, both expected and unexpected – the ability to meet these challenges effectively may require flexible rather than prescriptive funding models. In general, **building flexibility and responsiveness into pay-for-performance models** will further increase the feasibility and value of such models going forward, in terms of fostering and recognizing rather than constraining innovation in program delivery.

While testing pay-for-performance models was an important element of the project, many of the lessons learned and recommendations extend beyond pay-for-performance and apply to serving youth more broadly. For example, the importance of building **milestone-based pathways** was a theme that emerged early in our background research and carried over to the design and implementation of the demonstration project. As illustrated by the conceptual framework in the Research Synthesis Report, it can be helpful to think about sequences of youth outcomes that

define success, and the program activities and resources that are needed to support each outcome, as part of an interconnected pathway toward employment and retention. This approach highlights the need for building program supports and data collection tools and methods along the entire pathway.

For example, some partners highlighted the effectiveness of ongoing post-training supports that help youth enter and remain in the labour market once employed. Collecting follow-up data from youth and employers can challenging, but it can also provide valuable information about continuing progress and the efficacy of ongoing supports. Other partners brought attention to the flexible and tailored approaches needed for youth distant from the labour market, who may find it challenging to engage in training and data collection, making meaningful and impactful early outcomes, such as learning to trust, building connections and confidence, and gaining motivation, challenging to measure. Viewing youth outcomes in terms of a holistic pathway and applying flexible methodologies to capture meaningful outcomes at each point along the pathway acknowledges the work and effort made by both service providers and youth, and demonstrates the full value of a program.

Another key theme that emerged is the importance of the funding for generalized **capacity building** each organization received, that was not directly tied to pay-for-performance but that nonetheless allowed each of them to add incremental and innovative components to their existing program models. As documented above each organization was able to enhance their training content and program delivery in specific ways, to better provide flexible supports to diverse youth and set the stage for the achievement of pay-for-performance outcomes, including skill development, employment, wellbeing, and social connection. Each organization also grew the capacity to develop enhanced data collection methods and tools to document these outcomes, and more effectively communicate the successes of their youth and programs.

We hope that the stories shared by our project partners as well as the reflections and recommendations in this report will inform and inspire funders and providers to continue to expand the sector's capacity to support youth and document the varied ways they achieve successful outcomes.

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APPENDIX A: BANK OF SURVEY MEASURES

Measure	Description	# of items	Career Trek	NEEDS Inc.	NPower Canada	Source
Pathway A						
Behavioural, Emotional, And Social Skills Inventory (BESSI)	A validated inventory of social emotional skills items. SRDC is in the process of pilot testing the alignment of BESSI items and Skills for Success.	192	Y	Y	Y	Soto, C. (2021). The Behavioural, Emotional, and Social Skills Inventory (BESSI).
Pathway B						
Career Decision-making Self-efficacy	Items related to finding employment that is aligned with your skills and interests.	8		Y	Y	Koen, J., Klehe, U.-C., Van Vianen, A. E.M., Zikic, J., & Nauta, A. (2010). Job-search strategies and reemployment quality: The impact of career adaptability. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 77(1), 126-139.
Job Search Clarity	Items related to identifying clear job search goals.	4	Y		Y	Koen, J., Klehe, U.-C., Van Vianen, A. E.M., Zikic, J., & Nauta, A. (2010). Job-search strategies and reemployment quality: The impact of career adaptability. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 77(1), 126-139.
Job Search Self-efficacy	Items related to job search activities.	10	Y	Y	Y	Teye-Kwadjo, E. (2021). The job-search self efficacy (JSSE) scale: an item response theory investigation.

Measure	Description	# of items	Career Trek	NEEDS Inc.	NPower Canada	Source
Student Career Construction Inventory	**An inventory of scales related to job search and career planning activities, developed specifically for youth.**		**Y**	**Y**		Savickas, M. L., Porfeli, E. J., Hilton, T. L., & Savickas, S. (2018). The Student Career Construction Inventory. Journal of Vocational Behaviour, 106, 138-152.
Crystalizing Vocational Identity	Items related to learning about your abilities, interests, and how others perceive you.	7	Y	Y		See source for Student Career Construction Inventory.
Exploring	Items related to exploring different career options.	7	Y	Y		See source for Student Career Construction Inventory.
Deciding	Items related to selecting an occupation that aligns with your interests and abilities.	5		Y		See source for Student Career Construction Inventory.
Skilling	Items related to obtaining the experience and training required for your target occupation.	4		Y		See source for Student Career Construction Inventory.
Transitioning	Items related to transitioning into employment after education or training.	2		Y		See source for Student Career Construction Inventory.
Career Motivation	Items developed by Career Trek, customized to program-specific outcomes.	3	Y			Developed by Career Trek.
Career Decision-making		3	Y			
Job Satisfaction	Items related to workplace satisfaction.			Y		Statistics Canada (2022). Canadian Social Survey–Well-being and caregiving.

Measure	Description	# of items	Career Trek	NEEDS Inc.	NPower Canada	Source
Pathway C						
Beliefs in Alternatives to Post-secondary Education	A set of sub-scales related to perceptions of the benefits and challenges of obtaining a post-secondary education.	24		Y		Acumen Research Group (2008). Do perceptions matter regarding the costs and benefits of a post-secondary education? A summary report of the research program Development of measures of perceived returns on investment from post-secondary education.
Readiness/ motivation to learn					Y	Gorges, J., Maehler, D. B., Koch, T. et al. Who likes to learn new things: measuring adult motivation to learn with PIAAC data from 21 countries. Large-scale Assess Educ 4, 9 (2016).
Engagement in Meaningful Activities	Items related to the activities that participants do. High scores on this scale are associated with higher wellbeing.	12		Y		Eakman, A. M. (2012). Measurement characteristics of the Engagement in Meaningful Activities Survey in an age diverse sample. American Journal of Occupational Therapy, 66, e20-e29. doi: 10.5014-ajot.2012.001867
General Self-Efficacy Scale	Items related to self-efficacy.	10			Y	Measure Wellbeing (n.d.). General Self Efficacy Scale (GSE).
Financial literacy (developed for this project)	Items taken from three different financial literacy survey scales to align with target outcomes in Career Trek's financial literacy curriculum.	16	Y			Statistics Canada (2009). Youth in Transition Survey. Statistics Canada (2014). Canadian Financial Capability Survey. Potrich, A. G., Vieira, K., & Parabonia, A. (2020). Measuring financial literacy: Proposition of an instrument based on the Item Response Theory. *Ciencia Natura.*

Measure	Description	# of items	Career Trek	NEEDS Inc.	NPower Canada	Source
Pathway D						
Sense of Belonging for Newcomers	Items related to belonging to school, community, and city.	3		Y	Y	Statistics Canada (2021). Canadian Social Survey–Well-being, activities and perception of time.
Peer Belonging	Items related to feelings of belonging with peers.	3		Y	Y	Schonert-Reichl, K., Guhn, M., Gadermann, A. et al. (2012). Development and validation of the middle years development instrument (MDI): Assessing children's well-being and assets across multiple contexts. Social Indicators Research, 114(2): 345-369.
Caring Adults	Two scales–caring relationships at school and high expectations at school – that include items related to adults at school.	9		Y		Hanson, T. & Kim, J. (2007). Measuring resilience and youth development: The psychometric properties of the Health Kids Survey.
Social Capital Assessment and Learning for Equity (SCALE)	**A set of youth-focused survey scales related to youth social capital and peer relationships that can support youth as they work towards employment and life goals.**		**Y**	**Y**	**Y**	Search Institute (2021). Social capital assessment and learning for equity (SCALE) measures: User guide.
Network Strength	Items related to the people in your life that can connect you to employment or educational opportunities or provide practical support.	5	Y	Y	Y	See source for SCALE.
Self-initiated Social Capital	Items related to building social networks and asking for support.				Y	See source for SCALE.

APPENDIX B: PSYCHOMETRIC PROPERTIES OF MEASURES: NPOWER CANADA

OVERVIEW OF NPOWER CANADA SCALES

Our study used three groups of scales to measure participants' social-emotional skills, career pathfinding ability, and various scales examining self-efficacy, learning, and network strengths. At the NPower Canada implementation site, we:

- Adapted the Behavioral, Emotional, and Social Skills Inventory (BESSI) to measure key social-emotional skills, including Communication, Collaboration, Adaptability, Problem Solving, and Creativity.
- Used career pathfinding scales adapted by SRDC that focused on the clarity of participants' job search, as well as confidence in their ability to make career decisions and search for jobs.
- Used a collection of existing scales — as discussed further below — to measure relevant strengths, including overall self-efficacy and network strength.

Adapted Behavioral, Emotional, and Social Skills Inventory scales (BESSI)

We adapted the BESSI to create five scales assessing participants strengths in key skill domains from the Skills for Success framework (i.e., Communication, Collaboration, Adaptability, Problem Solving, Creativity and Innovation). Each skill domain was composed of two to four smaller facets, with three items per facet. For example, the Collaboration skill domain was composed of three facets: managing difficult interactions (e.g., "positively engage in difficult discussions"), perspective-taking (e.g., "understand how other people feel"), and teamwork (e.g., "Cooperate with other people"). For each skill item, participants rated how well they believed they could perform that activity on a five-point scale (endpoints 1 = Not at all well and 5 = Extremely well). The table at the end of the appendix describes each BESSI item that participants responded to.

Career pathfinding scales

Career pathfinding was measured with three scales tapping into related constructs: career decision-making self-efficacy, job search clarity, and job search self-efficacy. These were pre-existing scales developed by the SRDC for a prior project. The career decision-making self-

efficacy scale contained eight items measuring participants' confidence in their ability to make different types of career decisions (e.g., "Choose a career that will fit your abilities and interests?"; endpoints 1= Not at all confident to 5 = Completely confident). Similarly, the 10-item job search self-efficacy scale measured participants' confidence in their ability to perform tasks related to acquisition (e.g., "Write resumes that will get you interviews"; endpoints 1 = Not at all and 5 = Completely confident). Finally, participants' job search clarity was determined by their agreement with four statements (e.g., "I have very clear job search goals"; endpoints 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree).

Self-efficacy and networking scales

The last set of scales measured individual constructs that might be relevant to skills development, job finding, or social strengths. These scales were pre-existing scales that SRDC borrowed from external researchers.

- The first scale measured **general self-efficacy** by asking participants to rate how much they identified with nine statements (e.g., "I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort"; endpoints 1 = Not at all true and 5 = Exactly true).
- The second scale measured **readiness to learn** by asking participants their level of identification with six statements (e.g., "I like learning new things"; endpoints 1 = Not at all true and 5 = Exactly true).
- The third scale measured **network strength** through participants' agreement with five items describing their network's characteristics (e.g., "I have people in my network who help me when they say they are going to help me"; 1 = Strongly disagree and 5 = Strongly agree).
- The fourth scale measures **self-initiated social capital scale**, a three-item measure asking participants whether they were able to use social connections to achieve their career goals (e.g., "I go out of my way to meet new people to achieve my continued learning or career goals", endpoints 1 = Strongly disagree and 5 = Strongly agree).

SCALE ANALYSIS

Our analyses focused on confirming expected scale characteristics to ensure no major deviations (e.g., very low factor loadings) and consistency between youth and adult NPower Canada respondents. To do this, we analyzed each scale's factor loadings, reliability, and inter-

correlations using scale data from the pre-program survey.[15] Because of the sample's wide age range, we split the data to create a youth sample (ages 18-30, n=213) and an adult sample (age 31+, n=393), conducting separate analyses for each and comparing their results for notable differences.

Scale alphas and correlations

We analyzed scale reliability by calculating Cronbach's alpha for each scale (see Tables 34 and 35). For most scales, reliability was high to very high ($.80 =< \alpha$), with near-equivalent results for both the youth and adult samples. There was a minor exception: self-initiated social capital's reliability was slightly lower for youth ($\alpha=.74$) compared to adults ($\alpha=.80$), but still within an acceptable range. We also calculated reliability for the full BESSI for youth ($\alpha=.97$) and adults ($\alpha=.98$). Though both scores were higher than a recommended maximum alpha ($\alpha =< .95$), indicating item redundancy, this score is likely inflated by the high number of items in the full scale (n=45).

Correlations between each scale were significant in both samples. All correlations were positive, with most being of moderate to high strength. BESSI factors were highly correlated with each other (all=>.63), which is partly expected, given that skill strength in one area is likely related to skill strength in another area (e.g., communications skills can bolster Collaboration skills). In the adult sample, however, the problem-solving factor had undesirably high correlations (>=.80) with both the Adaptability factor and the Creativity and Innovation factor. When combined with the full BESSI high Cronbach's alpha, this may indicate that the Problem Solving measure could be refined to better distinguish Problem Solving from related BESSI scales. Similarly, career decision-making self-efficacy and job search self efficacy were also very highly correlated, which is to be expected given that the career decision-making scale incorporates job search self-efficacy in its items (e.g., "change jobs…", "find employers…", "pick an occupation").

BESSI skills had moderate to high correlations with each career pathfinding measure, each general self-efficacy measure, and the self-initiated social capital measure. BESSI scales had comparable correlations to each non-BESSI scale (within a 0.1 difference), with the most notable difference being the relatively strong association among Adaptability and each self-efficacy measure (both job-specific and general). In general, associations did not differ between samples with one notable exception: network strength.

Each of the correlations with the network strength measure in the youth sample were just over half the strength of the adult sample's corresponding value. The sole exception was the

[15] For the BESSI, scale analyses were conducted for constructs at the domain level (e.g., "Adaptability") because that was the level examined in our main analyses.

correlation between network strength and the BESSI Creativity and Innovation scale. Network strength correlations were each just over half the strength of those in the adult sample. Given that network strength likely accumulates over time, it seems likely that a recently graduated 18-year-old might have had less chance to form networks than a 40-year-old professional. Consequently, one might expect that network strength would be less dependent on social and emotional skills in youths compared to adults, as even highly collaborative youths may not have had as much time to build out their professional networks. In support of this interpretation, the item "I have people in my network who I am less close to but who are influential in helping me reach my continued learning or career goals" had a lower factor loading for youths (.67) than for adults (.80).

Table 34 Scale correlations and alphas (in parenthesis), youth participants

	(1)	*(2)*	*(3)*	*(4)*	*(5)*	*(6)*	*(7)*	*(8)*	*(9)*	*(10)*	*(11)*	*(12)*
(1) Communication	(0.91)											
(2) Collaboration	0.76	(0.92)										
(3) Adaptability	0.72	0.74	(0.93)									
(4) Problem solving	0.69	0.74	0.79	(0.93)								
(5) Creativity & innovation	0.63	0.67	0.67	0.76	(0.91)							
(6) Career decision-making self-efficacy	0.61	0.57	0.70	0.69	0.60	(0.90)						
(7) Job search clarity	0.43	0.30	0.40	0.39	0.39	0.48	(0.81)					
(8) Job search self efficacy	0.59	0.52	0.69	0.60	0.56	0.80	0.51	(0.93)				
(9) General self efficacy	0.53	0.52	0.62	0.62	0.55	0.62	0.50	0.56	(0.91)			
(10) Readiness to learn	0.52	0.47	0.49	0.57	0.60	0.49	0.42	0.45	0.68	(0.85)		
(11) Network strength	0.19	0.15	0.14	0.13	0.21	0.25	0.34	0.34	0.16	0.15	(0.90)	
(12) Self-initiated social capital	0.51	0.41	0.52	0.39	0.47	0.57	0.49	0.65	0.51	0.40	0.36	(0.74)

Table 35 Scale correlations and alphas (in parenthesis), adult participants

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
(1) Communication	(0.93)											
(2) Collaboration	0.78	(0.94)										
(3) Adaptability	0.73	0.75	(0.95)									
(4) Problem solving	0.73	0.76	0.81	(0.93)								
(5) Creativity & innovation	0.66	0.66	0.68	0.80	(0.92)							
(6) Career decision-making self-efficacy	0.65	0.62	0.73	0.64	0.61	(0.90)						
(7) Job search clarity	0.47	0.40	0.48	0.40	0.37	0.61	(0.88)					
(8) Job search self efficacy	0.58	0.53	0.59	0.53	0.54	0.80	0.67	(0.94)				
(9) General self efficacy	0.52	0.52	0.56	0.56	0.56	0.58	0.41	0.53	(0.91)			
(10) Readiness to learn	0.41	0.43	0.40	0.54	0.51	0.45	0.28	0.40	0.70	(0.85)		
(11) Network strength	0.32	0.26	0.32	0.24	0.26	0.46	0.52	0.57	0.34	0.23	(0.93)	
(12) Self-initiated social capital	0.46	0.41	0.45	0.38	0.40	0.55	0.54	0.64	0.46	0.37	0.58	(0.80)

Scale reliability

As each scale was borrowed or adapted from a prior study, our factor analysis focused on confirming that each scale's items loaded adequately onto its underlying factor ($\lambda >= .3$). We estimated a single factor per scale (or, for the BESSI, per skill domain) using Stata's "factor" command with varimax rotation. As with our other scale analyses we conducted separate factor analyses for each age sample to compare their factor loadings. A relatively low factor loading would suggest that factor explains less of that item's variance in that specific age group.

As shown in the tables below, factor loadings for all items in each sample were adequate or high. Both samples had similar loadings for most items, with a few notable exceptions. As discussed above, one networking item ("I have people in my network who I am less close to but who are influential in helping me reach my continued learning or career goals") had a much stronger loading in the adult sample (.80) than the youth sample (.67). Similarly, the Adaptability scale "show up for things on time" item had a lower loading in the youth sample (.56) than in the

adult sample (.74). Conversely, the learning motivation item "If I don't understand something, I look for additional information to make it clearer" loaded stronger in the youth sample (.71) than the adult sample (.58). Finally, most job search clarity items had lower loadings in the youth sample than in the adult sample, except for one item: "I have very clear job search goals" (youth λ=.81; adult λ=.85). It may be that youths feel their overall job search goals are clear even if they are still figuring out more concrete job search goals (e.g., type of job, type of company).

SCALES AND FACTOR LOADINGS

Table 36 Adapted Behavioral, Emotional, and Social Skills Inventory Scales

	Factor Loading (Adults)	Factor Loading (Youth)
Communication (9 items)		
Listening Skills		
Listen attentively	.65	.65
Ask questions to confirm your understanding	.78	.69
Understand and summarize key points	.78	.71
Expressive skills		
Express my thoughts and feelings	.84	.79
Tell people how I am feeling	.75	.76
Explain what's on my mind	.83	.75
Communication adaptation		
Help others understand new information	.74	.74
Present ideas in a format that appeals to your audience	.80	.73
Choose the appropriate approach to share information with other people	.79	.74
Collaboration (9 items)		
Managing difficult interactions		
Positively engage in difficult discussions	.79	.72
Anticipate and address different views and perspectives	.81	.76
Manage difficult interactions in a sensitive and helpful manner	.77	.77

	Factor Loading (Adults)	Factor Loading (Youth)
Perspective taking		
Sympathize with other people's feelings	.76	.69
Take another person's perspective	.76	.75
Understand how other people feel	.76	.71
Teamwork		
Work as part of a group	.85	.79
Cooperate with other people	.83	.86
Work with people toward a shared goal	.83	.76
Adaptability (12 items)		
Adjusting to change		
Try new things	.75	.73
Try something that's unfamiliar	.67	.66
Adapt to change	.78	.75
Confidence regulation		
See my good qualities	.81	.76
Have confidence in myself	.73	.78
Find reasons to feel good about myself	.75	.74
Responsibility management		
Manage my responsibilities	.86	.81
Fulfill my duties and obligations	.84	.83
Follow through on commitments	.79	.79
Time Management		
Show up for things on time	.74	.56
Plan out my time	.78	.68
Follow a schedule	.80	.64

	Factor Loading (Adults)	Factor Loading (Youth)
Problem solving (9 items)		
Identify the issue to be addressed		
Identifying issues that need to be addressed	.84	.82
Recognize if you need to address a problem	.76	.72
Determine your goal when solving a problem	.82	.83
Information processing		
Make sense of complex information	.78	.76
Learn things quickly	.71	.76
Find logical solutions to problems	.83	.78
Decision making		
Make careful decisions	.78	.76
Think before acting	.73	.69
Think things through carefully	.78	.81
Creativity and Innovation (6 items)		
Identify opportunities for you to innovate		
Look for opportunities to innovate	.86	.80
Seek new ways to do things	.82	.83
Search for different solutions	.81	.76
Creative		
Use my imagination	.75	.71
Invent things	.76	.80
Come up with new ideas	.85	.84

Table 37 Career Pathfinding Scales

	Factor Loading (Adults)	Factor Loading (Youth)
Career decision-making self-efficacy (8 items)		
Accurately judge how well your skills fit the kind of work you want to do	.72	.78
Talk with a person already working in the field you are interested in	.68	.73
Pick one occupation from a list of possible occupations you are thinking about	.78	.83
Choose a career that will fit your abilities and interests	.83	.84
Find employers, firms, and organizations related to the career you are interested in	.71	.79
Change jobs if you did not like your job	.74	.60
Decide what steps to take if you are having trouble with your job	.75	.77
Pick another occupation or career if you cannot get your first choice	.68	.64
Job search self-efficacy (10 items)		
Get people you know to connect you with employers	.74	.62
Write resumes that will get you interviews	.78	.75
Impress interviewers during job interviews	.76	.71
Contact employers to get a job interview	.84	.80
Talk to other people to find out about careers and jobs you are interested in	.76	.73
Talk or write about your skills and experience in a way that will make employers interested	.83	.74
Plan and carry out a weekly schedule to look for jobs	.78	.72
Find out where there are job openings	.83	.79
Use many different ways to find job opportunities	.82	.83
Search for and find good job opportunities	.84	.81
Job search clarity (4 items)		
I have a very clear idea of the type of job I want	.81	.69
I have very clear job search goals	.86	.81
I have a clear idea of the type of company I want to work for	.79	.66
It is very clear to me where I should be looking for a job	.74	.68

Table 38 Self-efficacy and Networking Scales

	Factor Loading (Adults)	Factor Loading (Youth)
General self-efficacy (9 items)		
I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough	.69	.68
It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals	.64	.62
I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events	.77	.78
Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations	.77	.72
I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort	.75	.67
I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities	.68	.67
When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions	.79	.76
If I am in trouble, I can usually think of a solution	.77	.80
I can usually handle whatever comes my way	.72	.80
Readiness and motivation to learn (6 items)		
When I hear or read about new ideas, I try to relate them to real life situations to which they might apply	.70	.63
I like learning new things	.67	.69
When I come across something new, I try to relate it to what I already know	.67	.71
I like to get to the bottom of difficulty things	.71	.66
I like to figure out how different ideas fit together	.79	.78
If I don't understand something, I look for additional information to make it clearer	.58	.71
Network strength (5 items)		
I have people in my network that I can trust to help me pursue my continued learning or career goals	.89	.87
...that introduce me to others who can help me reach my continued learning or career goals	.89	.86
…who I am close to that help me pursue my continued learning or career goals	.90	.88
…who I am less close to but who are influential in helping me reach my continued learning or career goals	.80	.67
…who help me when they say they are going to help me	.74	.71
Self-initiated social capital (3 items)		
I ask for help when I need it	.64	.54
I go out of my way to meet new people	.79	.75
I form strong relationships with people who are useful for helping me reach my continued learning or career goals	.75	.72

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