



IMMIGRANT YOUTH EMPLOYABILITY PROGRAM

Evaluation Research Report



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Executive Summary

This report provides an evaluation of the Immigrant youth Employability (IYE) program of The Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia's (ISANS). Youth and employers who had previously participated in the program were interviewed. The qualitative interview provided insights into the experiences and perceptions of the participants. Drawing from their experiences, there was a high indication of satisfaction from youth and employers alike as they all would recommend the program to friends and colleagues, respectively.

For the youth, the common denominator for participating in the program is to obtain employment. Improving English language proficiency, developing skills, and learning about the Canadian workplace culture were the other rationale for participating in the program. For the employers, on the other hand, motivations include a sense of giving back to the community, government wage subsidy, labor need, and a need for diversity in the workplace. Some of the key findings that emerged from the study are:

- Paid employment programs offer both social and economic benefits to newcomer youth, organizations and the larger society
- The program serves as a foundation for the successful participation and integration of immigrant youth in the labor market.
- Offering employment to immigrant youth is beneficial to the wellbeing of businesses and organizations.
- The government wage subsidy is a significant incentive for employers' participation in the program.

The following are some recommendations to strengthen the IYE program

- An increase in the placement hours to give youth ample time to put their newly acquired skills and knowledge to work
- An effort to be made to reduce the waiting time between classroom learning and agency placement
- ISANS workers to do regular check-ins with youth and employers to identify developing concerns and monitor youth's progress and integration
- Cultural education should be organized for participating organizations to ensure smooth integration and reduce discrimination among co-workers
- ISANS to develop more connections with businesses and organizations in the larger community to provide more placement options for youth

Introduction

This study evaluates an immigrant youth employment (IYE) program of The Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia's (ISANS) Immigrant Youth Employment (ISANS). The 30- week program was developed to meet the social and economic needs of newcomer youth in Nova Scotia It offers paid 300 hours of classroom learning and 600 hours of on-the-job training across a range of sectors. ISANS has supported 108 immigrant youth to overcome employment-related barriers through IYE since 2016.

The study aims to explore the experiences of Youth and employers and to draw on their perspectives to provide a robust account of the program, its benefits, and identify ways it can be strengthened. Some of the questions this study answers are: What are the rationales for participating in the IYE program, what is the impact of IYE on labor market integration for immigrant Youth? Are participants satisfied with the program? How can IYE be improved for future learners?

Method

Data was collected through in-depth, in-person qualitative interviews. A total of 108 youth and 12 employer participants were contacted by email to request for participation in the study. Between August and September, four employers and seven youth participants were interviewed at their preferred times and locations. Interview questions were both structured to elicit specific information and open-ended, allowing participants to share their unique experiences and perception of the program. Each interview session lasted for approximately one hour and was audio-recorded after receiving consent from

participants. Data collected was analyzed using an open-ended coding approach and data grouped into descriptive sections of the interview guide.

Results

Youth participants

Background Information

Most of the youth have permanent residence status in Canada, with only a few with Canadian citizenship. The length of time in Canada ranges from one year to 10 years. Participants had a minimum of a High school diploma, and at the time of the study, they were all in paid employment. Further, they were referred to the program either through employment specialists at ISANS or friends.

Goals and the rationale for Participation

Generally, the main reason to participate in the program was to obtain meaningful employment. Youth wanted to learn requisite skills to improve their employment potentials and to leverage on ISANS's community connections for job referral and networks. Also, the need to improve English proficiency, learn about Canadian workplace culture and integrate into society, and develop requisite employability skills were other identified objectives. As one of the participants mentioned:

The program pays some money... it is a great opportunity because I would be learning, improving my communication and creating connections, and more networking and making friend as well as knowing how to integrate into society. So that's why I went through with the program.

Most of the youth participants were entirely satisfied with the program and stated that their goals were met. In the word of a youth: *"My goals were met. As I said before, I was looking for a key. And for me, it (IYE) was the key."* Youth also talked about how the program has given them the foundation to build their future job search upon. They learned how to construct perfect resumes and cover letters, interviewing, and communication skills. However, few of the Youth mentioned that they were unable to participate in the practicum component because ISANS's staff could not facilitate their placement. Some youth also wondered if the IYE program could help them obtain highly skilled employment. Despite their disappointment for not getting an internship or a highly - skilled position, they expressed great satisfaction with the classroom component of the program, which has helped them secure employment in the long run.

Classroom Learning Experience

The positive classroom experience was one common sentiment shared by Youth. They find the instructor supportive and inspiring, and their classmates respectful and supportive as well. Many praised the cultural awareness of the instructor in that she effectively managed the cohort despite their diverse cultural backgrounds. One participant stated, *"teacher knows a lot about immigrant people...we (cohorts) all come from different places, but she related well with us. She is very good"*.

The curriculum was relevant, and the use of varied teaching methods in the classroom ensured that all students, despite differing learning styles, benefited immensely. Some of the methods mentioned are group discussions and projects, guest speakers, video and

individual work. *"In 10 weeks, we learned a lot; you don't even learn that in school,"* a participant said.

All the participants spoke highly of the classroom experience. They made new friends, developed their employability skills, including interviewing and resume writing. Also, they learned about themselves, how to work with people with different personalities, and the importance of maintaining confidentiality and a positive attitude in the workplace. Talking about how they have benefited from the program, a youth stated: *"Yes, it's I improve my English, I improve my confidence I improve like everything."*

The youth spoke about the social benefits of attending the IYE program. They spoke highly of the opportunity to make friends and learn about different cultures in the classroom. According to a participant: *"I learned I can make friends; I didn't really have good experience in school, and this is soothing, and that was my best experience. It helped my mental health."* Another youth shared this sentiment saying, *"I felt happy in the class; I cannot imagine anything being better."*

Practicum Experience

While most of the participants had placement opportunities, others were unable to secure placement in agencies. Youth found the waiting time to get into placement too long, and in most cases, unbearable as they become anxious. There are indications that employers were very supportive of the Youth. Although they felt supported by their supervisors, some had experiences of discrimination while completing their placement hours. A youth described her experience at an agency: *"some clients they talk to me like, your English is*

not good, so how can you get this job"... "when I'm in the workplace I say hi good morning how are you they ignore me... they let me do the tough job".

Youth believe that the skills they acquired during the classroom training helped them in their placement, and it is currently helping them in their current employment. The job placement offered the participants the opportunity to hone their skills and learn on- the - job practical skills. Some of the Youth were offered permanent positions after the placement, while others wished their placement agency retained them.

Challenges at Current Work

Youth expressed that they feel supported by supervisors, and most of their co-workers are friendly. However, they encounter some problems such as precarious employment, lack of adequate training, discrimination. Most of them work in low- wage, contract jobs with few benefits and stability. *"Sometimes it is just a waste of time traveling to do a 1-hour job" "no benefit.no insurance. No improvement with pay...everything is the same,"* said a youth participant. Compared to the level of training offered to Youth at agencies, some youth said their employers expected more from them.

Future goals

Participants are either attending post-secondary schools or in the process of enrolling in a post-secondary program. They are hopeful for the future and anticipate more opportunities with further education.

Program Satisfaction

Generally, Youth expressed satisfaction with the program. They rated the program as "very good" "excellent" and would recommend it to newcomer youth because It would help them gain the knowledge and skills to be job - ready. For them, the program is both a foundation to build on and a key that opens doors to endless opportunities. In the words of a youth: "*they (ISANS) show me the rules, they show me the road, they show me everything ... it's up to you to work it*". Participants would recommend the IYE program to newcomer youth because it will help them gain the necessary skills and knowledge to be job-ready and integrate into the Canadian labor market.

They would prefer for placement agencies to retain Youth after the practicum to further put their newly acquired practical skills to work. There was a consensus on the need for regular check-in by ISANS staff, especially after placement, to ensure that youth are fully integrated into the labor market. Some participants wondered if the placement component could be longer than three months while reducing the classroom hours.

Employers

Background Information

Employers work in a range of sectors: Information technology, trade, legal aid in both for-profit and non- profit arena with staff strength ranging from 4 to 100. The number of years of operation range from 10 to 75 years, with all organizations indigenous to Canada.

Experience with IYE

All the employers mentioned that ISANS reached out to them for placement opportunities. Besides the attraction to the government wage subsidy and the need to mitigate the challenges of labor shortages, other motivations for engaging with the program are the sense of giving back to the community and the need to diversify the workplace. In respect of the labor shortage, an employer stated, *"so we have an aging workforce so how do we bring young people in, so sometimes we take a chance, and with the program, we get to try somebody with not a lot of money for say 4 to 5 months"*.

While employers had a diversity of experience with the Youth, there was a strong indication of positive experiences with the program. As one of the participants put it: *"I have had two very positive experiences... I like the program. I like what it does; I like what it represents. They don't all work out; that's fine. I like what it represents... I'm actually looking forward to next year."* In the same vein, another employer spoke: *"more than ever, I like I embrace these programs by ISANS, and I hope to have more placements for the youth."*

All the employers have been involved with the IYE program since its inception and accepted an average of three students so far. Some of these students went on to become permanent staff. There are several reasons why employers would offer permanent positions to certain Youth and not others. Work ethics, job and language skills, ability to fit into the organizational culture, timing, and student interest are some of the reasons highlighted by employers.

Training and orientation programs at the agencies are somewhat basic, with attention to health and safety. Youth are generally started off with easy front line and back-office tasks and later moved on to additional roles as they develop their confidence. Most of the training is acquired by learning on the job and through mentorship. Some organizations pair youth with mentors who guide them through business operations.

There was a trajectory of learning that employers spoke to. They noticed increased confidence, better language skills, and interaction with co-workers, and by the end of the placement, many students were better at doing the job.

Values of the IYE program

In their opinion, employers believe that the program is valuable to Youth and employers alike and extremely needed for Nova Scotia's economy growth. There is a strong indication that they would participate in future programs and recommend it to their colleagues and other organizations.

Regarding the value to the student, many believed that youth could develop transferable skills and gain work experience needed for the labor market. Besides, the placement provides an opportunity for those who would otherwise have difficulty accessing paid employment due to several barriers, including language barriers and cultural accommodations. The program also allows Youth to showcase their talents and potentials and open doors for potential employment at the placement agency or elsewhere. *"Well, she was able to get a lot of experience that will help her for her future career because it is the domain that she wants to be in," an employer said about a youth participant... It's good for her, and it's good for us, too,"* they added.

Some of the values of the program to employers are the opportunity to meet labor needs, diversify the workforce, and access government wage subsidy. Some employers retained Youth after placement to fill vacant positions. The government wage subsidy provided enormous relief for employers, especially non-profit organizations. According to a participant, *"definitely I would encourage the non-profit industry because it's such an amazing opportunity to get free money which is often what the non-profit people are looking for."* The value of immigrant Youth in the workplace cannot be overemphasized. A diversified workforce reflects the diversity of the society it serves, creates a culture of tolerance, and contributes to the bottom line in the long run. *"I mean, it's important to us as an organization to be representative of the clients we serve in terms of demographics....it (IYE program) would be an opportunity for organizations to diversify"*, a participant stated. Another employer mentioned that they had experienced sales growth as an increasing number of immigrants patronize their business because of the presence of immigrant youth at the front desk. In their words: *"another good part of that is that diversity and inclusion will help your business. And we have seen this firsthand...the amount of business that has increased from the immigrant community because he's (immigrant Youth) there has just blown us away"*.

All echoed the high value of the immigrant youth employability program to the economy of Nova Scotia. It provides an opportunity to recruit workers to fill labor shortages and improve the overall growth of the province. Arguing for the need for immigration, an employer participant notes that *"with our aging population like it's (the economy) not sustainable... the numbers show that immigration is necessary for Canada demographically... it's completely beneficial and absolutely necessary."*

Recommendations

- An increase in placement hours to give youth ample time to put their newly acquired skills and knowledge to work
- An effort to be made to reduce the waiting time between classroom learning and agency placement
- ISANS workers to do regular check-ins with Youth and employers to identify developing concerns and monitor Youth's progress and integration
- Cultural education should be organized for participating organizations to ensure smooth integration and reduce discrimination among co-workers
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Conclusion

While there are aspects of the Immigrant youth employability program that need to be strengthened and improved, overall, the program met the economic and social goals of its participants- youth and employers. Youth improved their English language skills, learned about the Canadian workplace culture, and developed both soft- and hard- skills needed to obtain meaningful paid employment. The majority of the youth are currently employed while others are attending post-secondary schools for further education. Employers derive satisfaction from the opportunity to give back to the community, meet their labor needs, and diversify their workforce.

Immigration is crucial in meeting the unique demographic and economic needs of the province. Therefore, there is a need for programs that offer social and economic benefits, programs that encourage successful integration of youth immigrants in the labor market as well as their retention in Nova Scotia.