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Employment Programs for Refugee Youth

A Practical Framework to Overcome Employment Barriers

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The Atlantic Region Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies (ARAISA) is a non-profit umbrella organization that serves as a collective voice and forum for members who are committed to the settlement and integration of immigrants and refugees in the Atlantic region. We aim to amplify the impact of member organizations through engaging capacity-building activities, exciting networking events, representation at regional and national levels, and up-to-date information sharing.

With over 45 years of experience, the Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS) is the leading immigrant settlement service agency in Atlantic Canada, serving 17,000+ clients annually from over 200 countries in communities across the province. ISANS helps immigrants build a future in Nova Scotia. We bring varied languages, diverse experiences, and unique perspectives that inform our client-centred programming. We seek to empower our clients and staff to collaborate and to learn and grow together—both personally and professionally—through partnership, professionalism, and accountability. As the front door to many of Nova Scotia's immigrants, our goal is to create a community where all can belong and grow, building a stronger Nova Scotia and Canada for all.

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Executive Summary

This report provides a practical and evidence-based framework for designing employment programs for refugee youth.

It identifies obstacles to workforce inclusion and considers how employment programs can address these barriers. The framework addresses program design while also highlighting promising practices related to recruitment, curriculum, program delivery, and integration with wraparound services. While the analysis is specific to refugee youth clients of immigrant-serving organizations in Atlantic Canada, it can be adapted to support other underrepresented groups. The report is based on case studies of two employment programs delivered by the Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS). Research was guided by an advisory committee of refugee youth and involved client interviews and focus groups, as well as interviews with employers and program staff.

Refugee youth play important economic and social roles in Nova Scotia. In 2024, Canada admitted 76,960 refugees with 1,265 landing in Nova Scotia. Refugees are an especially young population; over the past decade, 44% of refugees admitted to Nova Scotia were under the age of 18. Refugees are more likely to stay in Nova Scotia than economic immigrants, suggesting that refugee youth are essential to economic growth in the region. Investing in skills training for refugees and supporting their transition to the Canadian labour market can bolster the regional workforce and economy while supporting inclusion for marginalized groups.

Refugee youth face multiple and intersecting barriers to workforce inclusion. They are likely to have experienced disruptions to education or skills-training, encounter systemic racism, and may suffer from trauma. **Participants identified several employment barriers such as a lack of familiarity with Canadian work culture; lack of Canadian education or employment experience; small social circles; and communication barriers.**

Effective programs can address employment barriers by including three **core components:**

1) content learning;
2) work placement; and
3) career action planning.

By providing youth with opportunities to develop and apply workplace knowledge, employment programs have positive outcomes for both youth and employers. **Employment outcomes** for youth include securing permanent employment; gaining work experience; building essential knowledge and skills; receiving certifications; and pursuing further education or skills training. It also includes **integration outcomes** such as expanded social networks; increased confidence; increased self-awareness; and feeling more prepared to succeed in other areas of life. Outcomes for employers include gaining reliable permanent employees; fostering more diverse and inclusive workplaces; changes to workplace policy or employment practices; changed attitudes about hiring people from underrepresented groups; and involvement in other employment programs.

Employment programs are most effective when integrated into **wraparound service supports.** Refugee youth can encounter barriers before, during, and after participating in a program. Wraparound supports, along with robust intake assessment and program referrals, help to identify and address a variety of barriers while supporting direct and indirect outcomes. In this way, employment programs support labour force inclusion for refugee youth while also contributing more broadly to newcomer integration. By building more inclusive workplaces, employment programs benefit newcomers as well as employers and other staff and set the foundation for more inclusive communities in Nova Scotia and across Canada.

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1. Introduction

This report provides a practical and evidence-based framework for designing employment programs for refugee youth.

Underrepresented populations, such as refugee youth, face multiple and intersecting barriers to workforce inclusion. Drawing on two programs with demonstrated success, this report identifies obstacles to inclusion and shows how to develop and deliver employment programs that address and mitigate these barriers. As such, it offers a general structure for effective employment programs while also highlighting promising practices related to program design, delivery, and integration with wraparound services.

The framework is intended for a wide variety of organizations. Foremost, it is intended for settlement service provider organizations that support refugee youth. These organizations may be at various stages of program development: some may be building programs from scratch while others are looking to improve existing programs. By situating promising practices within the larger context of program design, this report will be useful for both types of organization. Yet this framework also has practical value beyond the settlement and integration sector. Many of these practices can be adapted to support other underrepresented and equity-deserving populations, such as youth, racialized groups, the 2SLGBTQ+ community, and people living with disabilities, among others.

The following analysis is based on case studies of two employment programs: the Immigrant Youth Employability Project (IYEP) and the Immigrant Youth Career Exploration Project (IYCEP). IYEP is an employment- and skills-training program for refugee youth who are not in high school or post-secondary education, and IYCEP provides similar support for refugee youth currently attending high school. Both programs were developed in 2017 by the Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS), the largest immigrant- and refugee-serving organization in Atlantic Canada. This framework will have value for service providers across Canada but is especially applicable to the Atlantic context.

Given their continued success at supporting workforce inclusion for refugee youth, IYEP and IYCEP provide a useful model for other programs. The study is based on interviews with 29 former and current clients, eight staff, and five employers, as well as two focus groups with 11 client participants. Interviews and focus groups were transcribed and coded for recurring themes. The study also included in-class observation and a review of existing evaluations and program materials. The research process was guided by an advisory committee of current and former IYEP and IYCEP clients. The advisory committee convened between May and August 2025, and data collection was conducted from June to September. The resulting framework is not a literal description of these programs but rather a template based on in-depth study of IYEP and IYCEP – it is a composite of both programs as well as what clients, staff, and employers had to say. As such, this framework is an ideal model that each organization can adapt based on organizational capacity, client needs, and demands of the local labour market.

This report is structured around the core components of employment programs for refugee youth. It begins by addressing the context of refugee resettlement in Nova Scotia and identifying barriers to workplace inclusion. The report then provides a high-level description of employment programs before exploring each component in more detail. This includes strategies for client recruitment and employer engagement; content learning and curriculum design; considerations for work placements; and program completion. After addressing program design, the report explores how employment programs contribute both to employment- and other integration-related outcomes for clients and employers. Finally, it considers integration with wraparound supports and offers an evaluation framework.

2. Refugee Youth

Refugee youth are a distinct group of newcomers who play important economic and social roles as they integrate into Canadian society.

In 2024, Canada admitted 76,960 individuals as refugees and protected persons, which accounted for 16% of permanent resident admissions (Permanent Residents, Open Government). In Nova Scotia, the province admitted 1,360 refugees in 2022, 1,535 in 2023, and 1,265 in 2024; for these years, refugees represented between 8% and 13% of provincial admissions (Permanent Residents, Open Government). In comparison to the Canadian population, refugees are an especially young demographic. According to the 2021 Census, only 19% of the population in Nova Scotia were under the age of 20 (Census of Population). For refugees admitted to Nova Scotia between 2015 and 2025, however, nearly half (44%) were under the age of 18 (Resettled Refugees, Open Government). Some newcomer populations are even younger, such as Syrian refugees of whom 56% were under the age of 18 (Syrian Refugees, Open Government).

While many newcomers encounter obstacles to participating in the labour market, refugee youth can face multiple and intersecting barriers based on their age and immigration experience. In a 2023 evaluation of employment programs for newcomer youth, participants identified several challenges to workplace inclusion (YESS Project, ARAISA). These included: negative employer perceptions about youth and students; lack of awareness about employee rights; inability to meet job requirements, such as Canadian work experience; limited job opportunities, especially in rural areas; among others. Such challenges can be especially pronounced for youth with experience as refugees (UNHCR Education Report 2024). Refugee youth are likely to have experienced disruptions

to education or skills-training during crucial developmental periods. They may also suffer from trauma related to experiences of violence, conflict, or discrimination which can make it difficult to adapt to the workplace or Canadian society more broadly. Many refugees are also members of racialized groups and may encounter obstacles rooted in systemic or institutional racism.

Despite these barriers, refugee youth are essential to economic growth in Atlantic Canada. In 2024, the Public Policy Forum observed that recent high immigration levels have invigorated the Atlantic economy with "money, talent and energy" and by contributing to population growth ("Adjusting the Sails," Public Policy Forum). Continued economic momentum, however, depends on attracting but also retaining newcomers to the region. Data shows that refugees are especially likely to remain in the Atlantic provinces. For refugees admitted to Nova Scotia in 2016, most (86%) continued to live in the province after five years; for economic immigrants, only half (51%) remained (Longitudinal Immigration Database, Statistics Canada). Although rates vary for different cohorts, refugees typically have high retention rates in Nova Scotia. Investing in skills training for refugees and supporting their transition to the Canadian labour market can therefore bolster the regional economy and workforce while also supporting inclusion for marginalized populations.

2.1 Employment Barriers

Employment programs should consider and respond to a variety of barriers that prevent refugee youth from entering the Canadian workforce. During interviews and focus groups, youth participants identified a variety of obstacles that prevented them from accessing employment and entering the local workforce.

- **Lack of familiarity with Canadian work culture** was the most frequently reported obstacle to employment. It often prevented clients from knowing where to look for jobs; what to include in applications, cover letters, and resumes; or what sort of questions might be asked during an interview. Many also did not know how to acquire certifications such as First Aid or WHMIS.
- **Lack of Canadian education, employment, or volunteer experience** was a frequently reported barrier to employment. Many lacked this experience simply because of their age. Others had education or employment experience from outside Canada which was not recognized or valued by Canadian employers.
- Clients had difficulty navigating the job market because of **small or limited social circles.** Several clients noted that they rely on social networks for employment guidance, and some were only able to find jobs through friends and family. This barrier is particularly significant for newcomers living in rural areas and small centres.
- **Language and communication barriers** were an obstacle for some youth. A lack of fluency in English (or French) made it difficult to search for jobs, complete job applications, write cover letters, and attend interviews. For some clients, language fluency also impacted their confidence when applying for jobs.
- Participants identified other region-specific barriers to employment such as the **shrinking job market**, leading to more competition especially for entry-level positions. Barriers also included unreliable **public transportation**, delays with **immigration documents**, and limited employer **flexibility** to accommodate youth schedules (i.e. for youth attending school or with caregiving responsibilities).

Participant responses also pointed to the importance of early intervention. Nearly a third (31%) of past clients said that they could not think of any employment obstacles because they found a job through an existing program or service. That is, service providers helped to find employment before encountering barriers. It is therefore important to enrol clients as early as possible, although the timeline will differ for each individual; depending on factors like age, language level, and background, some youth may need two or more years before they are ready to enrol in an employment program.

3. Program Design & Delivery

Every program is unique in the way it responds to client needs while also addressing the demands, limitations, and opportunities of the local labour market. Nevertheless, some key principles can be applied to recruitment, curriculum design, and program delivery.

3.1 Program Components

Effective employment programs for refugee youth include three key components: content learning, a work placement, and career action planning. Through this combination, youth receive ongoing guidance and support with career exploration; gain knowledge of Canadian workplace culture, processes, and expectations; and have an opportunity to apply this knowledge in the workplace. *Figure 1* shows the program components along with an approximate timeline.

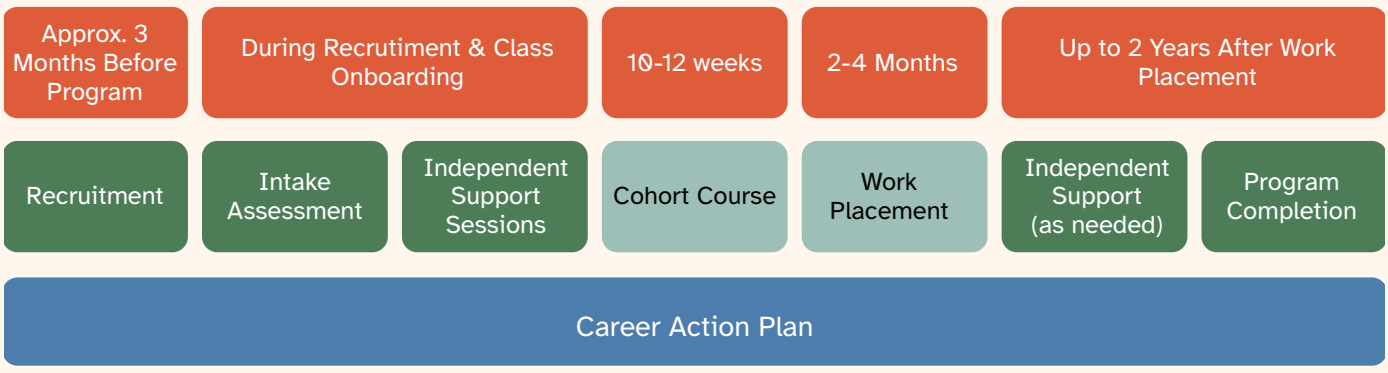

Figure 1: Overview of program components and approximate timeline.

- **Component 1: Content learning.** Content learning provides youth with the knowledge and skills needed to function in a Canadian workplace. It should help youth understand their career goals, Canadian workplace culture, and gain practical skills for finding and applying for jobs. It may also provide workplace-relevant certifications or help youth explore other career pathways such as higher education. A detailed curriculum outline is provided in Section 3.3.1.

  Content learning should be delivered in cohorts and last approximately 10 to 15 weeks. For cohorts who are not in school, learning can be 20+ hours per week spread over five days. For youth who are in school, learning may be 4 to 6 hours per week over two or three evenings, with occasional weekends for longer training (e.g. First Aid or conflict management workshops). Youth should receive a financial training allowance during content learning. This allowance becomes an incentive to stay in the program; several participants explained that the training allowance helped to cover the cost of living, support their families, and apply their financial literacy training.

  While content learning is part of the ideal program, flexibility is required based on the needs of clients and the capacity of organizations. For example, an **independent support model** may provide personalized support based on the needs of each client. Independent support provides much of the same content learning but is adapted for each client's specific needs, goals, barriers, and availability. Rather than cohorts, independent support clients will work individually with program staff – meeting every week or two – to receive specific training based on their interests, goals, and background.

- **Component 2: Work placement.** A paid work placement follows content learning. Placements should be assigned based on the interests and career goals identified by youth throughout their training and independent sessions with staff, as well as their suitability for a particular workplace and position. For youth who are not in school, work placements should be full-time for at least 600 hours (i.e. four months of full-time employment). Non-seasonal positions may be ideal because they can bridge into permanent employment. For youth who are currently in high school or post-secondary education, seasonal/summer jobs are often appropriate.

  Wage subsidies are an important part of work placements. They provide concrete benefit to employers that can help to secure their participation and ongoing involvement. Whenever possible, wage subsidies should be included in program budgets. Independent support clients receive a subsidized placement on a case-by-case basis, though they should always receive support with finding and securing employment.

- **Component 3: Career action plan.** Program staff conduct case management for each client, which includes needs assessment, developing a career action plan, and ongoing guidance. Each client will build their career action plan in collaboration with staff; this plan is based on information gathered from needs assessments and throughout content learning. For youth who are in school, career action planning can be supported by guidance counsellors. Plans can further be informed by

career development courses at school, job fairs, and post-secondary education open houses.

Similar to how portfolio-based language programs document the abilities and progress of each client, a career action plan maintains a record of each client's employment goals and aptitudes. Each plan should include a client's career choices and goals, the steps needed to achieve these goals, potential barriers to success, and overall progress or actions taken. It may include results from personality or aptitude tests, certificates and other professional development, progress on job and education applications, and copies of resumes, cover letters, or job applications. Staff should meet regularly with clients to assess the progress of career action plans and update plans as needed.

3.2 Recruitment

Employment programs involve ongoing engagement between program staff, clients, and employers; *Figure 2* shows this core network of support. As such, recruiting the right people and partners is crucial to delivering an effective program. Participants – both clients and employers – should be committed to youth and newcomer employment and meet any eligibility requirements. The following section outlines some key strategies to attract and retain the right people.

Figure 2: Employment programs involve program staff, clients, and employers. The mutual engagement between parties may be understood as a triangle of support.

3.2.1 Client Recruitment

Prospective clients may be referred to an employment program through a variety of channels, including referrals, outreach, and promotional communications. Using multiple recruitment strategies is essential to avoid reproducing barriers to workforce inclusion. For example, outreach through social media may exclude youth with lower language fluency.

- Clients may be directed to the program through an **internal referral** within the organization, which can occur during intake or while the client is enrolled in another program.
- Clients can also be directed to the program through an **external referral** from another organization or school. As such, it is important to promote programs among other service providers, organizations, and schools in the region to ensure they are aware of the program and its requirements.
- Many clients learn about programs through **word-of-mouth**, usually from a friend or family member who previously participated in a program. Program staff can also send emails to past clients and invite them to share an application. Word-of-mouth referrals are particularly effective because they involve testimonials from a trusted source.
- **Community outreach**, such as presentations at high schools or community organizations, can support recruitment. This approach can help to reach youth who are not already receiving settlement services, and it is most effective when targeted to a specific audience (i.e. high school students).
- An organization's **website and social media** can help to promote employment programs. However, this approach will primarily attract people who are already seeking services, and it may be overlooked by other eligible potential clients.
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Recruitment should be considered alongside demand and program capacity. Increasing outreach may result in increased demand for a program, which an organization may or may not have the capacity to accommodate. As such, recruitment is most effective when targeted to reach the specific populations most in need of services.

3.2.2 Employer Engagement

Businesses and employers are integral to program success because they provide the placements needed for youth to acquire workplace experience. Attracting and retaining employers can be a particular challenge, although some strategies and considerations can help to ensure their ongoing involvement.

- **Personalized recruitment** is a key way to connect with employers. Program staff should reach out to employers individually, based either on existing contacts or by cold-calling. They may contact employers by phone or email, although visiting the workplace, hosting information sessions, and attending job fairs are particularly effective ways to make connections. Staff should be prepared to explain the program, what is required of employers, and answer any questions.
- Employers should be recruited strategically based on their **alignment with program values** and **ability to support** refugee youth. Staff may want to target employers based on their reputation for inclusion and willingness to support employees with limited experience and/or lower fluency in English or French. Staff should also target employers based on their alignment with the interests and goals of currently enrolled clients (i.e. what sort of careers are clients looking for?).
- Try to understand each **employer's motivation** for being involved in the program. They may be attracted to the program for a variety of reasons, such as wage subsidies, to be more engaged in the community, or to support underrepresented youth. Knowing their motivations can support recruitment and long-term retention of employers. Obtaining and promoting **clear incentives,** such as wage subsidies, can entice employers to participate.
- Give employers **advance notice** about placements, even if they are regularly involved in the program. Employers often have other programs competing for spaces and have limited positions available. Reaching out at least three months before placements begin gives employers time to anticipate available positions and prepare for employee onboarding.
- Employers need **flexibility**. Their availability may determine when they can meet, when they can provide placements, and how often they can provide feedback or evaluations. Program staff should attempt to accommodate employers as much as possible during recruitment, placements, and evaluation.
- **Maintaining a relationship** with employers is critical to ensuring the long-term success of employment programs. Employers who understand the benefits and value of the program are likely to support multiple clients from multiple cohorts. During interviews, employers said that the ability to easily contact program staff influenced their decision to continually support a program.
- Relationships with employers should be built on **trust**. Program staff should be transparent about expectations for employers as well as clients' preparedness for the workplace. This also makes training smoother for clients by giving employers more time to prepare for a client's placement.

3.3 Content Learning

Content learning – typically delivered as structured in-class education – is a cornerstone of effective employment programs. While each work placement is different, **content learning sets the foundation for refugee youth to access and succeed in a variety of employment environments.** The following framework may be re-arranged, expanded, or otherwise adapted based on organizational and client needs.

3.3.1 Curriculum

This section provides an example curriculum for content learning. Effective curricula have three elements: self-awareness and career exploration; skill- and resume-building; and learning about Canadian workplace culture, knowledge, norms, and expectations.

Week 1: Self-awareness. Clients explore their skills, personality traits, and values and consider how these can be applied in the Canadian workplace. Activities include self-reflection activities and games, personality tests, and assessments of skills and abilities. It can also include group work to promote networking and socializing among clients.

Week 2: Career exploration. Clients are introduced to various careers and career pathways. They will learn about in-demand jobs in the region, skills or education required for certain jobs, and begin to explore career pathways that match their skills, values, and personality. Activities include career aptitude tests (Career Cruising, Holland Code, Canada Job Bank's career quizzes), learning about the National Occupation Classification, and how to develop SMART goals. Guest speakers from different sectors make this topic especially engaging.

Week 3: Career decision-making and action plans. Clients decide on a career pathway and identify the steps to achieve these goals. They begin to develop a career action plan to implement during and after the program. Activities involve identifying relevant positions, reviewing job postings and descriptions, and understanding skills and expectations (responsibilities, education, wages, etc.) associated with the role.

Week 4: Professional development. Clients complete professional development courses and training relevant to their career goals. Program staff will help to identify online and/or in-person professional development opportunities.

Week 5: Financial literacy, educational pathways, and Skills for Success. Clients attend a workshop on financial literacy where they learn about financial management, banking, and investment and savings strategies. They also learn about post-secondary training pathways and

opportunities. As with career exploration, guest speakers from post-secondary institutions are integral to this topic. Clients also learn the Skills for Success model from Employment and Social Development Canada, which teaches how to self-assess competencies, address hard and soft skills during job searches, and improve skills over time.

Week 6: Occupational health and safety. Clients receive training and certification in First Aid and WHMIS. Guest speakers, for example from the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration, can discuss laws and regulations with real life scenarios. Occupational health and safety can also be accompanied by workshops on personal wellness to explore nutrition, healthy sleeping habits, and maintaining work-life balance. Because training days may fall outside of regular class hours, these should be communicated at the beginning of content learning.

Week 7: Job search strategies. Clients begin their job search. They learn where to look and how to search for relevant job postings. They also begin to prepare cover letters, resumes, and professional emails for job applications.

Weeks 8 and 9: Interview skills and practice interview. Clients learn about strategies and techniques for job interviews, which includes anticipating interview questions, professional body language, and steps to take after an interview. This learning culminates with a formal mock interview. To best replicate the conditions of an actual job interview, mock interviews should be conducted by someone external to the program.

Week 10: Canadian workplace culture. Clients learn about Canadian workplace culture, which can include learning about Canadian history and culture. Specific topics can include equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) training, understanding soft skills, building relationships with colleagues and supervisors, conflict management, understanding employment contracts and pay deductions, and workers' rights.

Week 11: Digital literacy. Clients receive training to develop their digital literacy, technical, and cyber-safety skills. This typically involves training on email, Word, Excel, PowerPoint, among other relevant software.

Clients are especially responsive to interactive, experiential, and group activities. A combination of **independent and group learning** accommodates a variety of learning styles while developing a range of hard and soft skills. Former and current clients identified several highlights from their content learning, which included: guest speakers; certification days for First Aid and WHMIS; conflict resolution training; mock interviews; EDI training; and field trips to museums, historical sites, and other local events or recreation. Clients were particularly fond of interactive activities such as role-playing exercises or game-based quizzes.

Some career-exploration resources and tools are designed for North American audiences and may be challenging to understand for youth from other cultural contexts. Such tools are most effective when delivered by a staff member who can interpret the results within the context of clients' backgrounds and experiences.

3.3.2 Delivery and Format

A hybrid delivery model prepares clients for the Canadian workplace while also supporting client inclusion.

Hybrid delivery can help clients develop a variety of skills that may be necessary for in-person or virtual work environments. It also allows for the integration of clients living in rural and remote areas. However, a hybrid format can be adapted for the needs of clients and organizations. For programs that offer five days of instruction per week, they may require several days of in-person learning while also offering virtual learning days. Alternately, programs can deliver all classroom training in a hybrid format, providing clients with the option to join virtually for a limited number of days (while permitting clients in rural areas to participate fully virtually). Including one day per week of fully independent online learning – such as online modules or professional development – helps clients to build self-responsibility and time-management skills.

Many interview and focus group participants preferred in-person training because it was easier to pay attention, provided opportunities to make friends and network with guest speakers, and allowed them to develop communication and public speaking skills. **The physical classroom** also created a sense of community, for example, by displaying client-created artwork. However, participants also appreciated **online classes** because it provided greater flexibility (i.e. when balancing family-related responsibilities), provided opportunities to improve digital literacy, and allowed them to develop independent learning and self-management skills. In both virtual and in-person instruction, it is important to establish workplace etiquette such as punctuality, active communication with colleagues, and meeting deadlines.

For many refugee youth, **family** plays an important role in both their personal and professional lives. Clients often have family or caregiving responsibilities that impact their availability or ability to participate in programs. These needs should be accommodated whenever possible, for example through hybrid or virtual participation. Moreover, family also provides motivation to participate in and complete their program. Client families should be involved during needs assessment, career planning sessions, through "take your family to work/class" days, and at graduation ceremonies.

3.4 Work Placements

Given the diverse needs of both employers and clients, work placements are typically less standardized than content learning. Placements should be determined by the goals, interests, and abilities in each client's career action plan, but they will also be informed by the particular labour needs and opportunities in a region. Some clients may begin their placements shortly after content learning while others may take weeks or months to secure a placement. If clients are unable to find a placement during the program, they move to an independent support model to continue their search.

Program staff work with clients to find an appropriate work placement. Placements can be arranged with employers in advance or may be identified by clients through job postings during the final weeks of content learning. **Job applications** are the same as standard applications, but with additional communication to employers about wage subsidies and program-specific requirements. Clients will submit a cover letter, resume, and attend a formal job interview; the employer will determine whether a client is qualified and ready to begin the placement. Clients will continue to apply for jobs with assistance from program staff until they secure a placement. Some employers provide opportunities to job shadow before beginning a placement.

Onboarding is done by the employer and follows industry standards. Depending how long youth have been in Canada, onboarding can involve additional industry-specific training, such as training clients about Canadian currency or local produce. Onboarding also depends on whether an employer has an established relationship to the program or is participating for the first time. Repeat employers may offer **mentorship** opportunities by connecting new clients with former clients who have moved into permanent positions.

Program staff should maintain **ongoing contact** with both clients and employers. This can help to identify new or existing obstacles, mitigate conflict, and address concerns before they become problems. During interviews, employers stressed the importance of regular engagement with program staff. This can include regular check-ins via email or phone calls as well as providing brief documents to outline the expectations and requirements of employers. Staff should complete at least one **workplace visit** during the placement.

Some work placements with positive outcomes for refugee youth include science centres and museums, day camps and daycares, city halls, grocery and retail stores, restaurants, credit unions and banks, hotels, government departments, and automotive shops.

3.4.1 Intercultural Awareness Training

Intercultural awareness, anti-racism, or EDI training can be an important component of employment programs. While most employers felt equipped to build inclusive workplaces, they also noted that misunderstandings or conflict can occur because of cultural differences. In these situations, employers usually contacted program staff to intervene and help resolve the issue. Nevertheless, providing intercultural awareness training for employers – whether as an optional or required part of the program – can be an important way to build inclusive workplace culture for all staff. Such training can be provided by the organization, in partnership with another organization or program, or by providing access to online learning or resources.

While intercultural awareness training is important, it may not be possible for every program. It depends on an organization's capacity to provide training; large organizations may have developed training materials but smaller organizations may not have the necessary resources. Furthermore, asking employers to commit to training can inhibit them from participating in the program. At minimum, program staff should be available, responsive, and prepared to address concerns related to cultural differences or conflict.

Training should address a range of topics including: culture, religion, and ethnicity in Canada and the local community; the experiences of and challenges faced by newcomers; forms of discrimination; human rights and anti-discrimination laws; how culture can shape work and relationships; culturally-appropriate communication; and concrete practices for building more inclusive workplaces and communities.

3.5 Program Completion

Clients have completed an employment program once they have: 1) completed the content learning; 2) completed a work placement; and 3) received an employment offer that aligns with their goals and/or are admitted into a training, apprenticeship, or education program that aligns with their goals. The exact criteria for program completion will vary depending on funders, so organizations should structure their program around these expectations.

Attending a **graduation ceremony** is an important part of program completion. Employment programs help refugee youth find meaningful employment that aligns with their career goals by building practical skills and knowledge. However, such programs also help youth build confidence in themselves and their competency within the Canadian workplace. As such, programs should include a graduation ceremony to recognize their growth and accomplishments. Ceremonies may include compilation videos of youth in their workplace, positive quotes from employers, and create space for clients to share their future plans.

4. Outcomes

Employment programs have a variety of outcomes for both youth and employers. For refugee youth, programs support workforce inclusion but also their integration into Canadian society. For employers, program participation can help to recruit and retain qualified staff, inform employment practices or policies, and create a more inclusive workplace environment. Overall, employment programs help to ensure Nova Scotia is a more inclusive and welcoming place for newcomers, youth, and other underrepresented groups.

4.1 Client Outcomes

Employment programs have many positive outcomes for youth. Since these programs prepare youth to enter and thrive in the Canadian workforce, many outcomes are directly related to employment. Outcomes can include **job-specific skills** or experience based on a client's career action plan but also include **transferable skills** to help youth succeed in any Canadian workplace.

- For most clients, the most important outcome is a **permanent job** or continued employment. After completing placements, many clients are offered a permanent position with their employer. In this way, employment programs are often a direct pathway to employment.
- Clients gain Canadian **work experience**. This experience helps to enhance familiarity with and skills in the Canadian workplace, increasing the likelihood of long-term employment success. It also helps to build client resumes.
- Clients gain **essential skills, knowledge, and competencies** for working in Canada. Many refugee youth are unfamiliar with the expectations of Canadian workplace culture (i.e. how to write a resume or cover letter) or the unwritten rules of the workplace (i.e. how to set boundaries). Through instruction and experience, clients develop competency in leadership, teamwork, communication, time management, setting boundaries, accountability and responsibility, and self-trust, among others. Clients also reported gaining **language fluency** more easily than in other programs. Increased language fluency can be attributed to the program's immersive design (i.e. 20+ hours per week of classroom instruction); opportunities for applied and contextual language learning; and by increasing client confidence.
- Many clients pursue **skills-training or education** that aligns with their employment goals. Interview and focus group participants reported changing their high school course selections, pursuing high school equivalency, and applying to and enrolling in postsecondary education. Some participants did not consider these educational opportunities until presented with options during the course, through career exploration, or by guest speakers.
- Employment programs can provide youth with a variety of recognized **certifications** such as First Aid or WHMIS. Such certifications may be necessary for some jobs but also provide youth with certifications and experience for their resumes.

Employment programs can have more general **settlement and integration outcomes**. In addition to supporting youth on their employment journeys, these programs also have a positive impact on clients' personal lives, social networks, and overall well-being. By broadly contributing to a sense of stability and belonging in Canada, employment programs can support integration into Canadian society as well as success in the workplace.

- Most clients expanded their **social networks** through participation in an employment program. During focus groups, participants explained that it was easier to make friends in an employment program than in other settings. For youth enrolled in high school, they did not always feel accepted or welcomed by their Canadian-born peers. For youth who were not in school, it was difficult to make friends because of language barriers, financial constraints, or lack of familiarity with the local community. Employment programs provided opportunities for youth with similar backgrounds to meet, share their experiences, and build friendships while working towards similar goals. Employment programs also offered mentorship, care, and encouragement from program staff and co-workers.

- The majority of youth participants reported **increased confidence**. Before joining an employment program, many clients lacked self-confidence because of limited language fluency and communication skills, small social circles, lack of work experience, among other factors. Employment programs helped clients nurture a sense of confidence, both in the workplace and in other aspects of life, by making them feel capable and prepared while also enabling them to see concrete progress towards their goals.
- During interviews and focus groups, many participants noted **increased self-awareness**. Through classroom activities and workplace experience, clients became more aware of their passions, goals, and abilities, and many explained that they "opened up" personally and socially. The increase in self-confidence and self-awareness helped youth feel hopeful about and excited for their futures in Canada.
- Clients reported feeling more **prepared to succeed in other areas of their lives**. With an increased awareness of their goals and aptitudes, along with a boost in confidence, some clients decided to pursue further education after joining an employment program. Others gained the confidence to earn their driver's license, take up extracurricular activities at school, or volunteer in their communities.

4.2 Employer Outcomes

Employment programs have several positive outcomes for employers. These include shifts in **employment practices or policies** as well as greater **community involvement**. Such outcomes support workplace inclusion for refugee youth but also contribute more broadly to social inclusion for other underrepresented groups. These benefits have resulted in many employers becoming repeat participants in employment programs.

- Employers were more sensitive to **diversity and inclusion** as a result of their involvement. While corporate policies often remained unchanged, local management felt more culturally aware and better equipped to support employees from diverse backgrounds. Some employers updated training and orientation practices to include culture-specific information, such as Canadian currency or common supermarket items. Program involvement also fostered a climate of inclusion and cultural awareness among staff.
- Employers gained reliable, **permanent employees** through program involvement. Many clients transitioned from their work placements to permanent full- or part-time positions. That is, placements offered employers with an extended period of subsidized training that resulted in qualified employees.
- Positive experiences with program staff and refugee youth led some employers to participate in **other employment programs** for equity-deserving groups, such as Indigenous youth or African Nova Scotians. For many employers, the program **challenged assumptions** about the workplace readiness of youth and newcomers, making employers more willing to hire youth, newcomers, and people from other underrepresented populations.

5. Wraparound Support & Case Management

Effective employment programs identify and address multiple employment barriers.

These include **direct barriers** that prevent refugee youth from entering and thriving in the local workforce. Direct barriers can include limited work experience, lack of familiarity with Canadian work culture, the need for skills development or certification, and limited language fluency. However, employment programs should also consider **indirect barriers** that can impact employment success. These barriers may be related to social isolation, mental and physical health, housing stability, and caregiving responsibilities, among others. Such challenges can limit a program's effectiveness even when employment supports are strong.

Integrating employment programs with other services can help to address both direct and indirect barriers. Refugee youth encounter barriers before, during, and after their involvement in employment programs. Providing a suite of wraparound supports, along with robust intake assessments and program referral, helps to ensure the short-, medium-, and long-term effectiveness of employment programs. *Figure 3* shows the various points where employment programs can address barriers.

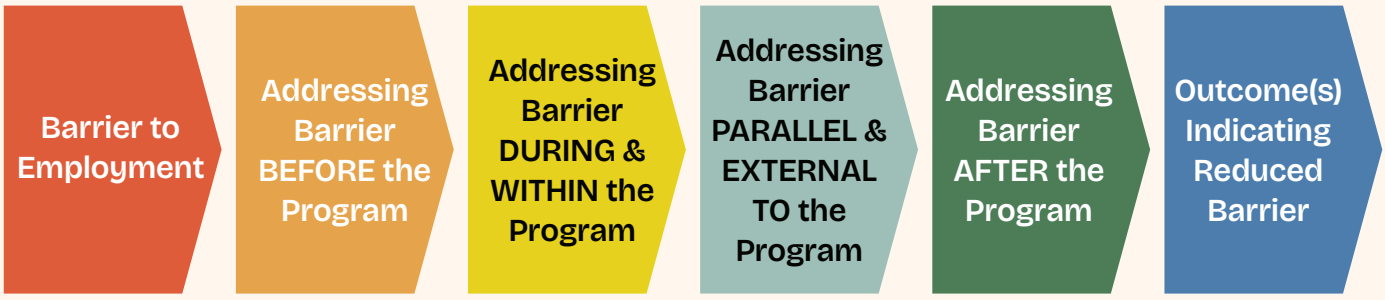

Figure 3: Barriers to employment and program participation for refugee youth.

- **Identify barriers.** Staff and clients will collaboratively identify barriers and conduct a needs assessment during intake. During individual meetings, self-exploration activities, and discussions with individuals connected to youth (i.e. family members, guidance counsellors), staff can document a client's needs and challenges. Staff and clients create a personalized strategy to address each barrier at the appropriate stage. This may involve referral to an employment program and/or other services.
- **Before the program.** It may be necessary to address certain barriers before referral to an employment program. These can include the need for improved language skills, community orientation, housing or health support, or life skills support.
- **Within the program.** Employment programs address a variety of direct employment-related barriers. Key barriers include clients' limited awareness of their own employment interests, goals, and competencies; lack of familiarity with Canadian workplace culture; and the need for practical job-related skills.
- **Parallel to the program.** Some indirect barriers do not prevent refugee youth from participating in employment programs but should nevertheless be addressed alongside the core programming. These barriers may be identified during intake, or they can be identified by program staff as clients develop their career action plans. They may pertain to mental health and wellness, childcare needs, learning disabilities, school support, among others. Parallel referrals can enhance participation and retention by reducing external stressors that might otherwise interfere with a client's success.
- **After the program.** To ensure the continued success of clients, it may be necessary to address barriers after completing the program. Staff should regularly follow up with former clients to identify and address new or emerging issues in the workplace. Clients may also need sector-specific language training, employment bridging or mentorship, or support with applying to education or apprenticeship programs.

6. Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation for employment programs should capture a range of outcomes for clients and employers.

At minimum, employment programs should track a few key performance indicators related to client outcomes. These include:

- # of clients admitted to the program
- # of clients who complete the program
- # of clients who are employed
- # of clients who return to school

Tracking completion/employment/education rates can help to assess a program's efficacy from year to year, while absolute numbers can measure program growth. Other performance indicators can be identified for each program and might include the number of certifications completed, professional development opportunities attended, employer assessments of client preparedness, among others.

Several indicators should be tracked for employers. Key indicators include the number of participating employers and unique placements offered. Other possible indicators include the number of preferred placements offered, repeat employers, and sectors or industries represented.

Surveys can be used throughout the program to gain more nuanced feedback from clients and employers. Surveys can be short, Likert-type questionnaires to assess impact and satisfaction with the program. For clients, surveys should assess both content learning and work placements, and they will likely include questions concerning: degree/increase in learning; usefulness of content learned; application of content; and satisfaction with learning/placements. Employer surveys can evaluate satisfaction with clients (job knowledge, work quality, punctuality, communication, reliability), the program (overall satisfaction, staff support, wage subsidies, willingness to participate again), and shifts in employment practices (policy changes, hiring practices, participation in other programs).

7. Conclusion

Employment programs support workforce inclusion for refugee youth while also contributing more broadly to newcomer integration.

On the one hand, employment programs help youth find jobs that match their skills, aptitudes, and interests. This is the main goal for any employment program, and it is essential to building a strong labour force and thriving local economies. However, employment programs also address a variety of direct and indirect barriers that can emerge before, during, or after a client enrols. In this way, these programs contribute to newcomer integration by improving language fluency, building confidence, growing social networks, and mitigating other barriers that prevent newcomers from fully participating in Canadian society. Employment programs can also help build more inclusive workplaces which benefit newcomers but also employers and other staff. Workforce inclusion thereby becomes a pathway to more inclusive communities and improved immigrant retention.

Effective employment programs can be built on a few key principles and practices. Career- and self-exploration, the importance of setting goals, and gaining real-life experience all help to prepare youth for the job market. Ongoing engagement with clients and employers is also crucial to program success. With clients, it helps to identify and address challenges before they become problems. With employers, ongoing engagement helps to establish partnerships and good relationships that enable a program's long-term viability.

While this study is specific to refugee youth in Nova Scotia, many findings have application for other newcomer communities and beyond the immigrant-serving sector. Refugee youth and other newcomers may face similar challenges: language fluency, lack of Canadian work experience, limited familiarity with Canadian workplace culture. With minor adjustments, this model can be used to support the integration of diverse newcomer populations living in other parts of the country. Yet many practices can also support workforce inclusion for other underrepresented groups. For example, the importance of social/peer networks, the need for self-confidence, and the challenges of living in rural or remote regions are by no means unique to newcomers. When employment programs address a range of direct and indirect barriers, they position employment success as one aspect of a client's well-being, creating a more holistic approach to inclusion. Moreover, inclusion for refugee youth creates more inclusive communities for everyone. After participating in IYEP or IYCEP, for example, employers were more willing to hire youth and newcomers and to participate in other employment programs. Providing a robust system of employment support for all residents of Nova Scotia, and especially for underrepresented and equity-deserving groups, is key to unlocking economic and social prosperity in the province and beyond.

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