**YWCA HAMILTON BRIDGING FOR INTERNATIONALLY EDUCATED PERSONS
PROGRAM EVALUATION**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The YWCA Hamilton's Bridging Internationally Trained Individuals Program, in operation from 2011 to 2014, aimed to provide training and support for Internationally Educated Persons (IEPs) to bridge soft skills, communications, and cultural awareness issues as well as identify and access opportunities for technical upgrading to improve employability in the environmental and information and communications technology (ICT) sectors.

The goals of this evaluation are to explore and offer recommendations for strengthening several elements of the Bridging program, including the effectiveness of recruitment and marketing strategies, partnerships, participant commitment, differences in employment between streams, relative merits of a community agency delivering the program, and eligibility requirements. Evaluation data collected included background data analysis and literature review, participant surveys, and interviews with staff and community partners.

Stakeholders identified advantages to having a bridging program delivered by a community agency including an accessible environment and the possibility of increased opportunities for participants to gain soft skills. Potential disadvantages identified included less credibility and weaker connections to the business community than academic institutions, and the competitive environment among non-profit organizations. Participants identified referrals from other agencies or from other YWCA staff members as the primary points of connection to the program, while staff highlighted online recruitment tools. Face to face encounters with employers and industry associations through events were seen as crucial to marketing the program effectively. 77% of participants felt that the program would help them secure employment in their field, and 87% of participants indicated that they would not have participated if tuition fees had been charged. This reflects a common challenge among bridging programs as identified in the literature, namely that of unstable funding. Transportation, financial pressures to secure employment, discrimination, and child care were among barriers to full participation identified by participants. Program partnerships were seen to be strong and offering a variety of benefits. Findings also suggest that differences in employment opportunities between the streams are likely influenced more by differences industry trends and demand for skilled labour in ICT than in the environmental sector, as well as a possible greater demand for soft skills in the environmental sector.

Based on these and other findings, this report recommends that this Bridging program continue to be housed within the YWCA, that caution be applied when considering charging tuition fees, and that a range of financial supports be made available should such fees be introduced.

1.0 INTRODUCTION AND METHODS

1.1 Introduction

The YWCA Hamilton's Bridging Internationally Trained Individuals Program aims to provide training and support for Internationally Educated Persons (IEPs) to bridge soft skills, communications and cultural awareness issues as well as identify and access opportunities for technical upgrading to improve employability in the environmental sector and information and communications technology sector in particular. YWCA Hamilton has engaged the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton to conduct an evaluation of this program as it has operated from 2011 to 2014.

1.2 Evaluation Objectives

The goals of this evaluation are to explore and offer recommendations for strengthening the following program elements:

- Effectiveness of participant recruitment strategies

- Effectiveness of employer marketing strategies

- Partnerships with other organizations delivering various program components

- Factors influencing participants' commitment to completing all elements of the program

- Factors affecting differences in placement and employment opportunities between Environmental and ICT streams

- Possible benefits and drawbacks of a community agency delivering this program

- Recommended eligibility requirements for bridging programs

These elements are explored in the context of YWCA Hamilton having an agreement in place with the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship, Immigration and International Trade (MCI) to continue the bridging program with reduced staffing and moving towards financial self-sufficiency.

1.3 Methods

The following methods were used to consult stakeholders on the program elements and issues outlined in section 1.2 (above):

- **Surveys with participants** – 53 out of 119 participants contacted by email completed the online survey, yielding a response rate of 45%. 55% of respondents were from the environmental stream and 45% were from the ICT stream. Participants were offered the chance to win a $50 gift card to Tim Horton's as an incentive to complete the survey. Survey questions focused on recruitment, factors supporting and challenging participants in completing all program elements, and potential impacts of tuition fees (see Appendix A for the participant survey.)

- **Interviews with staff** - Two meetings with YWCA Hamilton management representatives were held to determine the scope and objectives of the evaluation. Three (3) current and former front-line staff members from the program were interviewed. Interview questions explored recruitment, marketing, challenges to participant commitment, popularity of one stream over another and influencing factors, and benefits and drawbacks of similar programs being housed in a community agency (see Appendix B for the staff interview guide.) Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes.

- **Interviews with partners** – Nine (9) partners, representing institutions such as Mohawk College, local and national industry associations, local service providers, and employers were interviewed by

phone. Interview questions covered various aspects of partnership within the program, challenges to participant commitment, factors influencing the popularity of one stream over another, benefits and drawbacks of similar programs being housed in a community agency, and marketing the program to employers (the latter was asked only of employer/placement hosting organizations). (See Appendix C for the partner interview guide.) Partner interviewees were asked subsets of questions from the guide as relevant to their knowledge and experience. Most partners were able to answer all questions. Interviews generally lasted between 15 and 45 minutes.

- **Background literature and data review –** Statistical information about employment and training in the two industries that are part of this bridging program was examined for possible influences on employment opportunities between the two streams. Canadian literature on best practices for bridging programs, particularly in terms of eligibility, was also explored. These reviews sought to provide context beyond the local scale rather than to represent exhaustive research elements in their own right.

Data from each method was analyzed with a view to addressing the evaluation objectives listed in section 1.2 above. Findings from all sources are discussed by program element or issue in this report.

2.0 FINDINGS

Findings from data collected are presented in this section under each program element or issue included in the evaluation's objectives. Other emergent themes, including partner recommendations for alternative program structures, are presented at the end of this section (2.8).
1.1
2.1 Recruitment Strategy

Table 1 below shows the six most common ways that participants who responded to the evaluation survey found out about the bridging program. The most common way was through another service provider, followed by through a YWCA staff referral.

Table 1 – Most common ways that participants learned of the program

How did you find out about YWCA's Bridging program?	Responses
Referred by another organization	19
Referred by YWCA staff member	9
Friends/family	9
In-person presentation	5
Other	5
At an event or conference	3

One respondent found out about the program through each of the following methods: a news story, email, Kijiji, Linkedin, and a flyer. No survey respondents learned of the program through Facebook or Twitter.

Table 2 below offers more detail on where respondents learned of the program.[1] Categories are listed in descending order from most common to least.

Table 2 – Detailed means by which participants learned of the program

Category	Specific organization, location, or website
Other service provider or organization	- Red Hill Library, Hamilton - Mohawk College Language Classes, Hamilton - Goodwill Career Centre, Hamilton - YWCA, St. Catharines - Immigrant Women's Centre, Hamilton - EcoCanada - The Centre for Skills Development and Training, Burlington - Newcomer Centre, Oakville - YMCA - ICTC
YWCA Hamilton	- Particular YWCA staff members - Through YWCA Woman Alive program
Website	- EcoCanada website - TCET (Centre for Education and Training) website - Minister of Citizenship, Immigration, and International Trade website
Internet searches	- Google - Searched for bridging programs - Searched for YWCA

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[1] N.B. Only 42 of 53 respondents answered the second question about where specifically they learned of the program. Therefore it is not possible to compare responses from these two questions directly. The information contained in Table 2 reflects only the 42 responses to Question 2 of the survey. See Appendix A for the full survey.

At an event	• Hamilton Job Fair • Mohawk College LINC program • IEP conference
In person	• YWCA Hamilton Bridging program staff • City Councillor
Flyer	• Location(s) not specified

In contrast to these participant responses, staff reported that Kijiji and social media (ie. Linkedin, Facebook) were the most effective means for recruiting participants. Attending ethno-cultural community events was another important recruitment method identified by staff, as was offering information sessions hosted by other service providers. Staff reported that print ads and posters were not very effective recruitment tools. Again, in contrast with the participant survey responses, there was a sense from staff that participants who connected to the program through other service providers represented a fairly small portion of total participants, whereas other service providers' referrals was the most common response from participants.

This difference in perception may be explained by one of two main factors. First, survey respondents represented less than half of total participants, so that those who did not complete the survey could have learned of the program predominantly through Kijiji and/or social media, as described by staff. Second, staff may underestimate the proportion and significance of referrals from other service provider partners as well as their own organization's staff. In either case, the most effective recruitment strategy is likely one that uses a variety of means of reaching out to potential participants.

Staff also identified the EcoCanada website and newspaper stories about participants among the most effective recruitment strategies, a finding that is affirmed by participant survey findings.

2.2 Marketing Strategy

Consensus from staff was that attending and hosting events was a crucial way to market the program to potential employers. Staff emphasized the importance of having face time with employers, particularly people with decision making power within organizations. For example, one staff member described going to sector organization events and meet face to face in a group environment, but not broaching the topics of placements or the program at first. Gradually relationships were built through attending sector events and offering support as relevant to members. Bridging program graduation ceremonies were also seen as important marketing opportunities by generating publicity that promotes the program, but also by providing chances to have conversations with potential employers and answer their questions about the program.

Another important marketing strategy identified by staff was social media, which was seen as a useful platform for helping small (particularly ICT) companies to spread the word about benefits of the program. One suggestion considered but not pursued to date by staff has been to host a networking event for existing program supporters who would invite their contacts to attend to learn more about the program. While the consensus so far has been that such an event would not offer sufficient incentive to supporting organizations/employers to participate (and therefore to warrant investing staff time and resources into organizing such an event), YWCA Hamilton may wish to consider gauging interest in this type of event with currently connected organizations before taking further action. Alternatively, there may be ways to ask current supporters to reach out to one organizational/employer contact each to connect them with program staff at small meetings rather than through a larger event. This approach could focus on the valuable face time identified by staff while also growing the employer base without investing significant time and resources into event planning and logistics.

Two suggestions related to marketing the program were offered in interviews with partners: The first was to highlight the accomplishments/productivity/projects that can be carried out by participants in placements that would otherwise require diversion of staff time and resources to complete. The second was to establish a committee of major institutions and companies in Hamilton who would make a

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commitment to each other in that forum to hire program participants, showing leadership and an understanding of larger context of immigration within Hamilton's economy as well as barriers faced by many IEPs. This was seen as way to leverage local leadership and build publicity and broader awareness of the program among employers.

Staff also discussed challenges in marketing the program to employers: Some employers are concerned that participants will not have sufficient facility with English or may have difficulty fitting in with the culture at the organization. Through conversations about the language requirement for participant eligibility (CLB 7), staff felt they were able to help allay employers' concerns and give them a better understanding of the skills and abilities of participants. Another challenge for staff in terms of marketing is simply having adequate time to undertake marketing and outreach activities to employers.
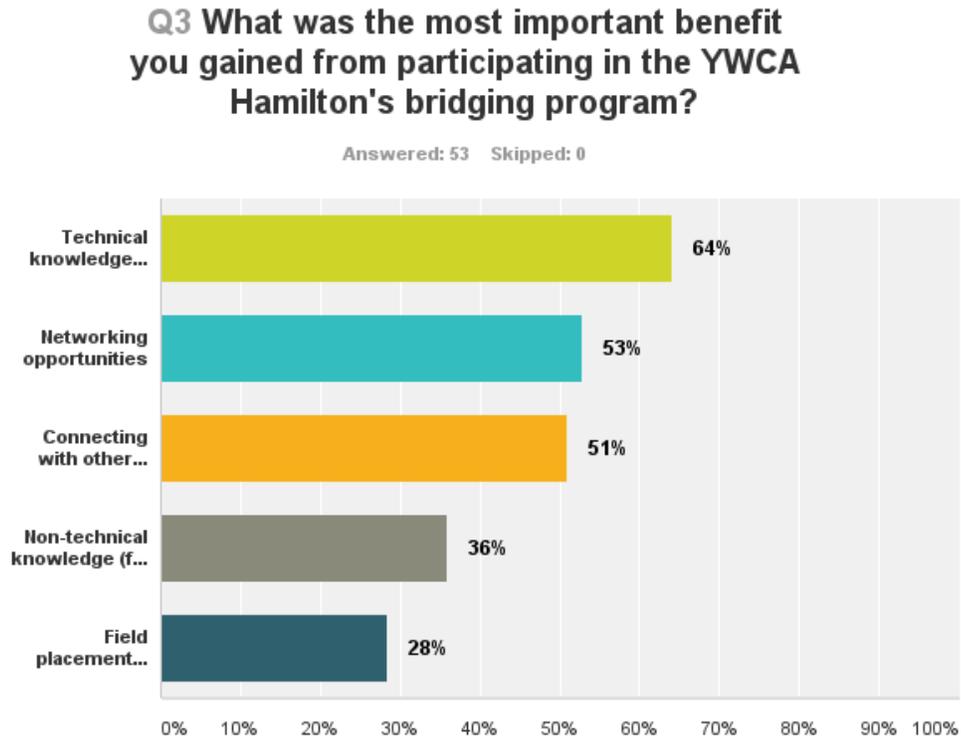
2.3 Partner organization relationships

All partners interviewed described positive relationships with YWCA Hamilton in the program. Communication was seen to be clear and sufficiently frequent. Most partners consulted felt that roles and responsibilities were clear, though one felt that they were not well defined and that their involvement was fairly limited. Most partners felt that their involvement in the program was mutually beneficial to their organizations and to YWCA Hamilton. The partnership with Mohawk College was seen as particularly strong, though some partners reported having experienced differences in organizational culture initially between the YWCA's relative flexibility and the more rigid structures of a college. Partners described various benefits such as connecting participants to employers, boosting participation in programs, providing Canadian employment-type references for participants, offering an understanding of relevant legislation, and connecting partner organizations with IEPs as their organizations' workforces diversify.

2.4 Questions of participant commitment

The question of participant commitment to completing all elements of the program was explored by asking participants about the most important benefits from the program, the degree to which they felt that completing all elements was an important part of securing employment in their field, and what may have made participating challenging. Participants experienced a variety of benefits from enrolling in the program, as seen in Figure 1 below. The most commonly valued aspect of the programs that participants identified was attaining technical knowledge relevant to the Canadian context (by 64% of participants). This was followed by networking opportunities (52.9%) and connecting with other internationally trained persons (50.9%). Just 36% of participants felt that non-technical knowledge (such as Canadian workplace culture) was the most important benefit of the program. Finally, 28% of respondents indicated field placement opportunities as the most valuable benefit.

Figure 1

Q3 What was the most important benefit you gained from participating in the YWCA Hamilton's bridging program?

Answered: 53   Skipped: 0

Category	Percentage
Technical knowledge...	64%
Networking opportunities	53%
Connecting with other...	51%
Non-technical knowledge (f...	36%
Field placement...	28%

Over three-quarters of participants (77%) strongly or somewhat agreed that all of the elements of bridging programs were important, and felt the program would help them secure employment in their field (see Figure 2 below). 15% of respondents somewhat or strongly disagreed, and 8% neither agreed nor disagreed. Overall, participants from the environmental stream had a slightly less positive view of the program than those in the ICT stream.

Figure 2

Q6 Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statement: Completing all of the elements of YWCA Hamilton's bridging program was important to me. I believe each aspect of the program will be helpful to me in securing employment in my field.

Answered: 53   Skipped: 0

Response	Percentage
Strongly agree	42%
Agree somewhat	36%
Neither agree nor disagree	8%
Disagree somewhat	11%
Strongly disagree	4%
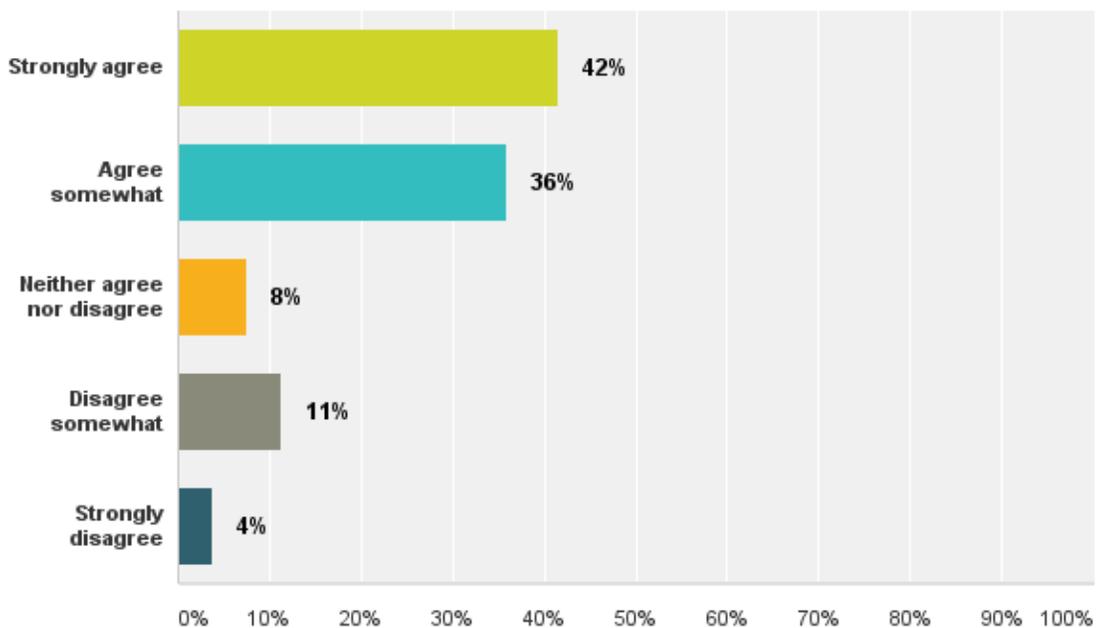
Participants also faced challenges with enrolling in the bridging programs (see Figure 3 below). The most common challenge indicated by participants was seeking paid employment (47%), followed by family responsibilities (38%) and distance to the program sites (30%). 13% of participants did not experience any challenges with enrolling in the bridging program.

Figure 3

Q5 Which of the following factors made it challenging to participate in the program?

Answered: 53   Skipped: 0
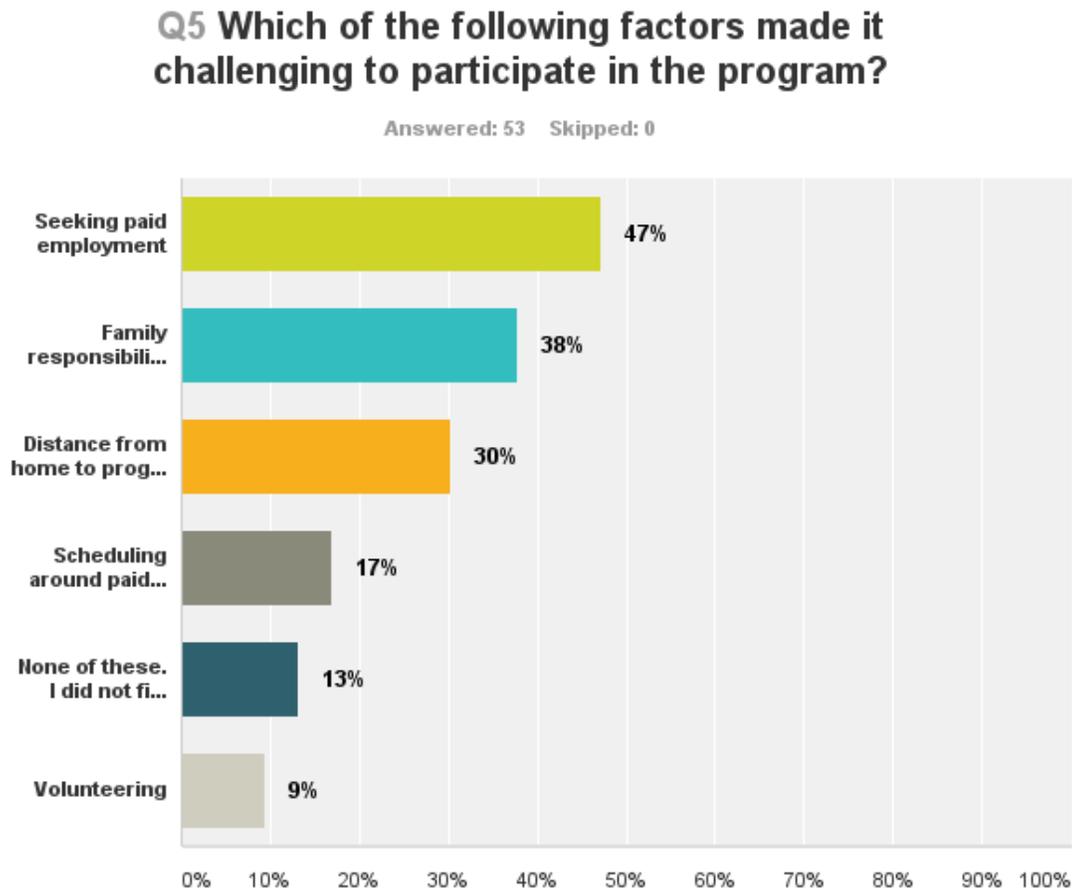
Partners and staff were also asked about this issue in interviews. One common perspective among interviewees on the issue of participants not completing all elements of the program was that IEPs may not feel they need further education, many having attained high levels of education outside of Canada. In such cases, some interviewees posited, participants may be bored by the program curriculum and may wish instead to focus on mentoring and networking opportunities. On the other hand, several interviewees discussed many participants' lacking (and/or not valuing) soft skills such as networking (discussed further below.) One interviewee recommended tracking demographic and other characteristics of participants who 'drop out' or do not complete the full program, suggesting that this may point to systemic barriers and offer clues about how to support fuller participation.

Transportation

Transportation from participants' home locations and the program was one of the most common challenges to participation in all program elements cited by interviewees, in terms of both time and financial costs to participants. Because the program serves participants from communities such as Niagara and Mississauga, transportation barriers can make it difficult for participants based outside of Hamilton to take advantage of placement opportunities within the program. Inclement weather during winter sessions can be a further barrier to transportation, though one staff interviewee felt that participants find ways to attend each week if they see the benefit. The program has increasingly been shifting to online modules and webinars in order to reduce this common and significant barrier for some participants.

Employment

Challenges to full participation from participants' employment commitments were cited by several interviewees. Interviewees reported that many participants face the challenge of balancing taking courses, working in paid employment (often full time) to meet expenses, and going out and network with potential employers. Interviewees noted that participants in survival jobs, particularly those with unpredictable schedules or night shifts, had an especially challenging time taking part in the program. Flexibility at some placement-hosting organizations can mitigate this challenge, though, when placement project schedules can be worked around to accommodate work schedules. The bridging program itself has also made scheduling adjustments such as moving from 3 concurrent courses to 2 at a time, some of which are online, to reduce this barrier and make participation easier.

Soft skills

Lack of soft skills – or not valuing soft skills highly – among participants was mentioned by many interviewees as an explanation for participants not completing all program elements. Most interviewees observed that participants tended to value educational activities over elements that are more soft skills-focused. Interviewees had varying estimates of how common such a perspective was among participants, with some as high as 60%. This perception is supported by participant survey findings (above), in which participants valued technical skills at roughly double the rate of participants who valued non-technical skills such as those related to Canadian workplace culture. Staff interviewees all felt that the networking and workplace culture elements, which are part of soft skills, had greater impact in terms of participant outcomes than the academic courses.
Interestingly, two interviewees suggested that soft skills may be more important in the environmental sector than in ICT settings because of the nature and degree of social interaction required by each context. In the words of one partner, "installing a program is installing a program," whereas environmental sector jobs often require more observation of norms around verbal communication and interpersonal relationships.

IEPs' expectations

Another factor undermining participant commitment to the program that several interviewees identified was IEPs' discouragement when their expectations of Canadian employment in their field after having to meet stringent criteria to immigrate are not met. In the words of one interviewee,

> *The crime of it is that [IEPs] have come here because they think they have a skill set in high demand but find they have to jump through more than a few hoops. Bu in the early stages they feel "I was chosen to be here because I have this certain skill set" but they have to also deal with the reality, which is somewhat different.*

Another expectation among IEPs identified by interviewees that may undermine commitment to completing all elements of the program is a focus on academic credentialing, thinking that more schooling will lead to improved employment outcomes and discounting the potential benefits of non-academic program elements.

Child care

Two interviewees noted that child care and other family responsibilities may make participating in all elements of the program difficult, particularly for women who may face greater expectation of taking on such responsibilities due to gendered social norms.

Discrimination

Just one interviewee raised the issue of discrimination, saying that many participants feel they face discrimination against their educational credentials, both in the job market and to some extent through the

program as well. Although the program aims to support participants as they transition into the Canadian workforce, the inclusion of academic training as a key program component could be seen as devaluing participants' existing educational accomplishments. These perceptions may undermine participants' commitment to the program.
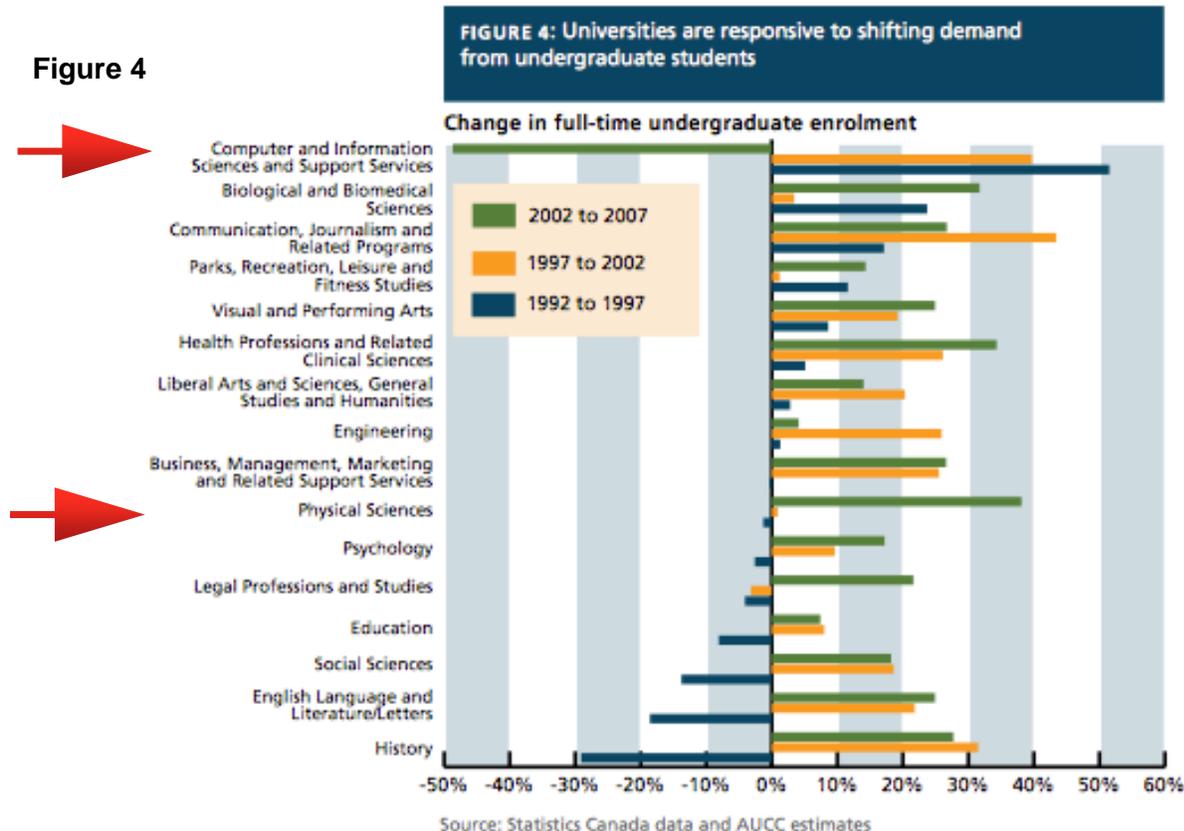
Improving participant commitment

One important way to promote the value of completing all of the program's elements that interviewees suggested was to capture and demonstrate the ways that employers value the program. If, for example, an employer felt that having the program on a resume makes a candidate stand out, participants may be more convinced of the program's benefit as a complete package. Messaging to participants could be strengthened by including testimonials or presentations from employers describing the ways or reasons that the employers value the program and its participants.

2.5 Differences in placement and employment opportunities by stream

Differences in finding placements and employment that were more pronounced at the time of a previous program report to the funder have evened out somewhat, with near equal employment rates for each stream. Still, participants in the environmental stream are generally taking longer to secure employment in their field than their colleagues in the ICT stream. Statistical data and interview findings offering some insight into factors that may be contributing to this trend are presented below.

The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) studied changes in full-time undergraduate enrolment based on field of study. Between 2002 and 2007, enrolment in Computer and Information Science and Support Science decreased over 45%, while Physical Sciences, which include Earth and Atmospheric Sciences, increased over 35%. If these two fields are seen as rough proxies for the ICT and environmental industries, respectively, the

Figure 4

FIGURE 4: Universities are responsive to shifting demand from undergraduate students

Change in full-time undergraduate enrolment

Source: Statistics Canada data and AUCC estimates

graph below shows that Canadian enrolment in the ICT-related field experienced a dramatic decrease, while the environment-related field had a significant increase between 2002 to 2007.[2] This suggests that there may be a skilled labour shortage in the ICT field among Canadian-trained workers, which can be part of the strength of demand for IEPs in these occupations.

A brief search on the Government of Canada's Job Bank for Hamilton showed that job opportunities for individuals with a background in environmental studies were 0. For the same area, the search yielded 17 opportunities for individuals with a background in information and communication technology.[3]

Interviewees discussed several factors contributing to differences in employment opportunities between the two streams. First, there was a sense that the environmental sector jobs require more soft skills than ICT positions. ICT sector tasks were seen as more uniform and easily transferable between countries and languages, whereas environmental sector work was seen as typically more dependent on communication skills, which may create barriers to employment for participants in the environmental stream. One interviewee explained that employers tended not to have great concern for particular credentials in terms of ICT, but were instead focused on whether workers can complete the technical duties of a given position.

Differences in size and growth trends between these two sectors locally were also cited by some interviewees as a key factor affecting employment opportunities for participants. The environmental sector in Hamilton was described by some interviewees as having "less money," and being "slower right now," and "[not] particularly growing," which may delay or limit employment opportunities. The specific types of labour that are in demand in the environmental sector was also discussed by one interviewee, saying

> "[Firms working in the green economy] don't need more workers; they need more flexible workers because they're always learning about new technology and adapting what they do… [These firms are looking] for people willing to learn."

This quotation also underscores why the environmental sector typically requires more soft skills than the ICT sector.

In contrast, interviewees described the local ICT sector as simply having "more demand, more jobs" and "booming." Staff described the experience of having three participants scheduled in placements finding employment before their placements actually began, demonstrating the strength of demand for skilled labour in that sector.

In the context of recent changes to environmental legislation at the federal level, many Canadian-born workers in the environmental sector are being laid off, according to one interviewee, possibly flooding the labour market with highly skilled labour as employment opportunities shrink.

One interviewee also wondered whether there were undercurrents of gendered dynamics between the sectors, with women being more concentrated in the voluntary sector (in which many environmental organizations are situated) and men being more concentrated in the ICT sector. This picks up a common feminist argument that professions typically dominated by men tend to be more highly paid than those typically dominated by women.

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[2] The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (2011). *Trends in Higher Education Volume 1 – Enrolment.* Retrieved from: http://www.aucc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/trends-2011-vol1-enrolment-e.pdf
[3] Job Bank (2014). *Explore Careers by Occupation.* Retrieved from http://www.jobbank.gc.ca/occupation_search-eng.do

2.6 Benefits and drawbacks of a community agency delivering bridging programs

Benefits

Several partners talked about a community agency such as YWCA Hamilton offering a more ==accessible point of entry== into the bridging program than a post-secondary institution would. Interviewees felt that participants may feel more at ease at a community agency and saw such organizations as being more embedded in communities, whereas post-secondary institutions are often seen as "detached from day-to-day life," in the words of one interviewee. Another interviewee described perceiving a community agency such as YWCA Hamilton "as having these tentacles into so many areas in the community and [a post-secondary institution as] this monolith."

Interviewees also offered more specific ways that these perceptions can influence whether and how participants access program elements. For example, one partner from a post-secondary institution said "we've tried to narrow down an immigrant program and it's just never happened because it's just not the main focus of what we do." Another partner stated that their organization may not have thought of a placement project if the request had come from an academic partner. Still another interviewee viewed the fact that a community agency host can approach other service providers on more equal ground and "can speak their language" as a benefit of this model. Part of the perception of accessibility may also come from IEPs being flooded with information such that they may not know where or how to access information in a post-secondary institution, as described by two interviewees.

Connections to other services offered by community agencies were also seen by interviewees as an important benefit of this model. In such a setting participants may have opportunities to learn of the bridging program through participating in another program, or vice versa. One interviewee suggested that this chance to take part in other programs participants may feel more comfortable "walking in" to a community agency than into a post-secondary institution.

Another interviewee suggested that hosting a bridging program in a community agency ==may offer more opportunities for participants to gain soft skills==, whereas a post-secondary institution hosted program may emphasize more course-based and technical learning.

Drawbacks

The most common drawback of having a bridging program led by a community agency cited by interviewees was the risk that community agency host may be perceived as having ==less credibility== than at a post-secondary institution. Partners suggested that participants may worry that a community agency may be seen as too casual, would not offer as high quality training as a post-secondary institution, or would create the impression the information and credential offered in such a program would not be legitimate. Beyond perceptions, some interviewees felt that a post-secondary institution can in fact offer the technical skills training required by the sectors targeted in ways that community agencies may lack.

Mohawk College in particular was seen by some partners as having ==stronger connections to the business community== and greater access to specialized technology than a community agency, which could make securing placement and employment opportunities easier for participants. One interviewee countered the accessibility arguments outlined above with the view that IEPs in bridging programs by definition have post-secondary education, so that they have no reason to feel intimidated.

Another drawback to a community agency hosting the program suggested by partners was the ==environment of competition== that can exist between service providers, which could make service providers less inclined to refer in or out of their own programs to agencies.
Finally, one interviewee suggested that housing a bridging program in a post-secondary institution rather than a community based agency could offer participants an opportunity to become more familiar with the Canadian education system.

2.7 Eligibility questions

Bridging programs in Ontario currently require participants to have minimum 3 years post-secondary education and minimum 2 years' experience in the targeted sector in order to be eligible. In practice, however, definitions of what constitutes 'post-secondary' education become less clear. Further, prospective participants may have extensive experience in a program target field but education in another field, rendering them ineligible under the current model. The evaluators explored other bridging programs in search of best practices for eligibility.

Programs from Alberta and British Colombia were examined as they are the only other provinces with substantial bridging programs. Programs in Alberta generally require an educational degree, with no standard requirement for experience, ranging from zero to over five years depending on the service provider. In general, the more focused the bridging program is, and the more regulated the sector on which the program is focused (e.g. medicine, pharmacy, etc.) the greater the experience requirements are.[4]

Programs in BC are similar to those in Alberta in that requirements are not standardized. However, Employment Program of British Columbia (EPBC) may be expanding to provide a province-wide bridging program to replace the Bridging Employment Program (BEP) which was restructured in 2012. With this, standard eligibility requirements will likely be brought into place.[5]

2.8 Emergent themes

Program funding

While not explored directly in interviews, the issue of alternate funding models for the program emerged in several interviews. To explore this issue further the evaluators sought out literature on funding bridging programs.

Although funding is an important determinant of the success of a bridging program, it tends to be unstable[6]. Therefore programs must often develop methods to become self-sustaining. There are two common approaches programs take to compensate for funding deficits:

- Charging participants; and
- Developing funding relationships with participating businesses.

Charging participants is often a barrier for involvement in the program. Participants are not only faced with the costs of program fees, but also the lost income while enrolled in the program. If charging

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[4] Employment, Training and Career Services Directory (2014). *Immigrant Bridging.* Retrieved from http://humanservices.alberta.ca/documents/Calgary-etcs-immigrant-bridging-excerpt.pdf

[5] Natasha Bailey (2014). *The Immigrant Lens: A Framework for Emerging Best Practices in the Employment Program of British Columbia.* Retrieved from: http://www.mosaicbc.com/sites/all/files/publications-public/The%20Immigrant%20Lens%20FINAL%202014-03-07.pdf

[6] Public Policy Forum. Improving bridging programs: Compiling best practices from a survey of Canadian bridging programs; 2008. Retrieved from: https://www.ppforum.ca/sites/default/files/bridging_programs%20report_0.pdf

participants is unavoidable, programs can be designed to help alleviate some of the financial hardships that are associated with participation. This can be achieved through developing a schedule to allow individuals to maintain part-time jobs, whether that means only being held in the evenings, or extending the duration of the course so that it is less intensive.

Developing funding relationships with participating businesses often takes time. Businesses need to experience the benefits of employing highly-skilled foreign-workers prior to investing in the program. For some industries that have labour shortages, developing this type of relationship may be easier and less time consuming as they rely on these types of workers to fill the demand for skilled labour.

In the case of YWCA Hamilton's bridging program, a significant majority of participants (87%) said would not have enrolled in the bridging program if tuition fees were charged (see Figure 4 below). Participants felt that this would as act as a barrier as many are unemployed or dealing with difficult financial situations.

However, participants felt that if tuition was required, considerations regarding guaranteeing placements and the possibility of bursaries, such as Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP), should be made by the program, reflecting findings from the literature discussed above.

Figure 5

Q4 **If the program had charged tuition fees, would you have participated?**

Answered: 53   Skipped: 0
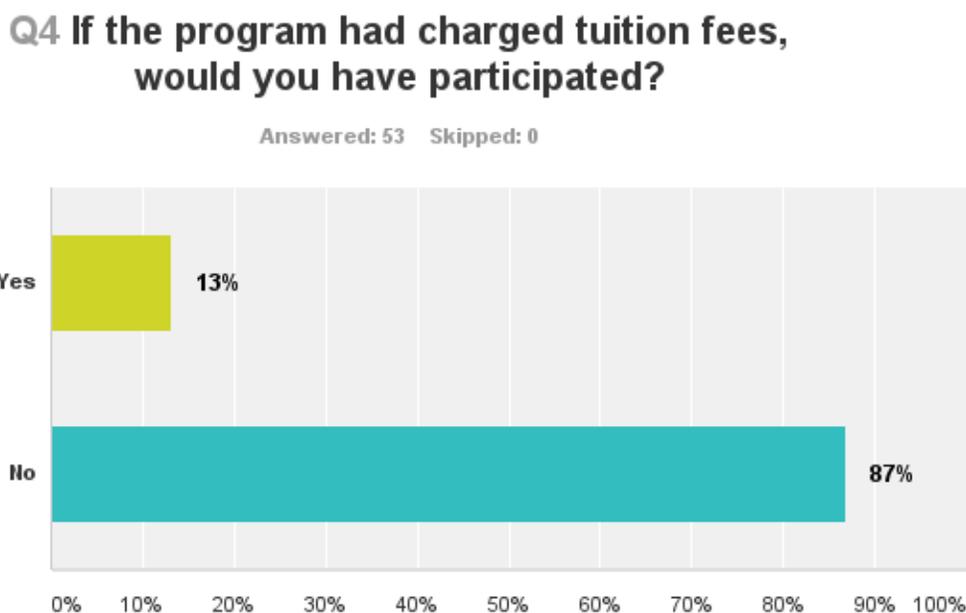
Partners also commented on possible funding structures for the program, with one interviewee suggesting that participants might be required to put down a deposit for the program and then be reimbursed by the funding ministry for each course or program activity completed. Other partners recommended some form of subsidy or other financial aid to support participants with living expenses while they complete the program. Another suggestion was that some agreement with partners/employers could be made wherein participants agree to complete a volunteer placement for a period of time and the employing organization agrees to offer paid employment to the participant at the end of the given period.

Alternative program structure recommendations

Through interviews partners also offered a range of suggestions for alternative ways to structure the program that may improve participants' experience or otherwise improve effectiveness. These included the following:

- **Take a menu approach**, in which participants are assessed in terms of technical and soft skills needs and individualized learning plans are developed;

- **Strengthen mentorships and networking opportunities**, and de-emphasizing technical courses.

- **Track participants who drop out** in terms of demographic and other characteristics (e.g. sector, level of education, years of experience), and examining these participants' reasons for discontinuing the program in order to strengthen retention strategies.

- **Boost community and participant enthusiasm** for the program by leveraging sector- or program –related events such as the environmentalist of the year awards to generate greater publicity and support for participants. Another suggestion for boosting participant commitment was to take a group photograph of participants in each session.

- **Intensify the program schedule** to move participants through the program elements – and hopefully into employment – more quickly.

- **Leverage local leadership** by establishing a committee of major institutions and companies who would commit to hiring participants (as discussed in section 2.2 on marketing).

- **Establish satellite offices** for delivering some program components, such as in outlying communities like Brampton, or at local ethno-cultural associations or gathering places where staff can meet clients on a weekly basis to further reduce transportation and cultural barriers.

- **Include a soft skills inventory** with participants as part of the intake process.

- **Continue offering more online elements** to reduce transportation barriers, while maintaining a balance of benefits that come from face-to-face interactions in classrooms and other program settings.

- **Engage employers to convey labour market information** to participants, such as what the characteristics of a given industry in Hamilton may be, or the skills required by the industry. Employer voices may offer greater credibility for participants and could improve retention.

From the employer/partner side, interviewees recommended the following:

- **Encouraging participants to use LinkedIn networking** and finding ways for employers to review resumes in bulk. These strategies could help employers evaluate prospective placement participants or employees more quickly and easily, streamlining placement and hiring processes for participants as well.

- **Explore flexible schedules with employers** to facilitate work placements for participants with a range of responsibilities.

3.0 DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to (and sometimes building on) the partner-generated recommendations for YWCA Hamilton's consideration outlined above, this section offers comments and recommendations for each of the program elements identified in the evaluation objectives (section 1.2).

3.1 Effectiveness of participant recruitment strategies

Based on the findings in this report, we offer the following recommendation:

- That YWCA Hamilton continue to use the full range of recruitment methods including in-person events, online advertisements, social media, referrals from within their own organization and beyond, and other tactics. The more diverse the outreach methods the greater chance of recruiting a diverse range of participants.

3.2 Effectiveness of employer marketing strategies

Marketing to employers was an important and at times challenging component of the program. Thus, we offer the following recommendations:

- Budget and protect staff time within the program to build crucial relationships and undertake marketing and outreach activities to employers.

- Consider ways of asking current supporters to reach out to one organizational/employer contact each to connect them with program staff at small meetings rather than through a larger event.

- Gather employer testimonials for use in promotional and outreach materials, both to other employers and participants, highlighting the benefits to employers in terms of accomplishments that would otherwise have required investment of staff and resources.

3.3 Partnerships with other organizations delivering various program components

Partnerships were viewed to be quite strong throughout all elements of the program, and so we recommend simply this:

- Continue the types of communication and relationship-building with partners currently used in the program.

This may become more challenging as program staffing is reduced in the forthcoming period of the program, and is an issue that should be monitored going forward.

3.4 Participants' commitment to completing all program elements

The time and financial pressures faced by IEPs in Canada are considerable, and bridging programs seek to reduce rather than increase these pressures, and in our view a lack of participant commitment to the program must be viewed in this context. With this view, we offer the following recommendations to increase participant confidence in the program and reduce barriers to participation:

- Invite employers to champion the program and speak to classes of participants about the program's value either in person or through written testimonials.

- Continue to offer as much flexibility as possible (i.e. online modules, evening and weekend course times) and encourage employers and other partners to do the same to minimize barriers to participation.

- Explore the possibility of offering a menu-based or individualized learning plan to participants in order to minimize unnecessary educational training.

- Use caution when implementing fees for participants, and offer the full extent of financial supports, including building partnerships with employers, to minimize financial barriers to access.

3.5 Differences in placement and employment opportunities between program streams

Based on the findings presented in this report, the factors affecting employment outcomes for participants in each stream are primarily related to labour market conditions, both locally and nationally, and are not related to characteristics of this bridging program. In that context, however, we offer the following recommendation:

- Emphasize soft skills for participants in the environmental stream particularly, as these skills may be in higher demand than in the ICT stream.

3.6 Benefits and drawbacks of a community agency delivering a bridging program

While stakeholders identified important benefits and drawbacks of having a bridging program such as this led by a community agency rather than a post-secondary institution, based on the findings presented in this report, we recommend the following:

- That this bridging program continues to be housed within YWCA Hamilton as it offers greater accessibility for participants than a post-secondary institution.

At the same time, the strengths of Mohawk College as a partner in this program could be built on further, and so we offer this recommendation:

1. Build on the strong employer relationships and perceptions of credibility offered by Mohawk College in terms of marketing and recruitment materials and establishing partnerships for participant placements.

3.7 Eligibility requirements for bridging programs

Given the diversity of requirements across Alberta's bridging programs, and the impending standardization in B.C.'s programs, we recommend the following:

- Consider consulting with representatives from other bridging programs in Ontario as well as in other provinces to explore possible barriers and best practices with respect to program eligibility, and use findings to communicate and encourage MTCU to adjust eligibility requirements based on these findings.

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APPENDIX A – PARTICIPANT SURVEY

The Bridging to Employment Program, offered by YWCA Hamilton in partnership with Mohawk College and others, provides internationally trained individuals with academic courses, field placements, and employment-related workshops in order to support participants' transition into the Canadian labour market. Two streams currently exist: Information Communication Technology and Environmental.
YWCA Hamilton has engaged the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton to conduct an evaluation for this program. This evaluation seeks to assess current marketing and recruitment strategies, and to gain further understanding of how the program is working for participants.
Since you have been identified as a participant in the program we ask that you take about 10 minutes to complete this survey to tell us about your experiences. We value your input.

1. How did you find out about the YWCA Hamilton's bridging program?

- In-person presentation
- At an event or conference
- Referred by YWCA staff member
- Referred by another organization
- Friends/Family
- News story
- Flyer
- E-mail
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Linkedin
- Kijiji
- Other
- If other, please specify:

2. If applicable, please specify where you first learned of the YWCA Hamilton's bridging program. What location, publication, website or organization?

3. What was the most important benefit you gained from participating in the YWCA Hamilton's bridging program?

- Technical knowledge relevant to my field in the Canadian context
- Non-technical knowledge (for example, Canadian workplace culture)
- Field placement opportunities
- Networking opportunities
- Connecting with other internationally trained persons
- Other (please specify)

4. If the program had charged tuition fees, would you have participated?

- Yes
- No

If you have any comments about tuition fees within this program, please add them here:

5. Which of the following factors made it challenging to participate in the program?

- Which of the following factors made it challenging to participate in the program?   Family responsibilities

- Scheduling around paid employment

- Seeking paid employment

- Distance from home to program sites

- Volunteering

- None of these. I did not find it challenging to participate in the program.

- Other (please specify)

6. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statement:
Completing all of the elements of YWCA Hamilton's bridging program was important to me. I believe each aspect of the program will be helpful to me in securing employment in my field.

- Strongly agree
- Agree somewhat
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree somewhat
- Strongly disagree
-
Please describe the reasons for your answer to question 6:_____

7. Which bridging program did you participate in?

- Environmental (ENV)
- Information Communication Technology (ICT)

APPENDIX B – STAFF INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. In your experience, what have been the most effective recruitment methods for the program?

2. What, if anything, has been challenging about recruiting participants?

3. What are some of the factors you're aware of that made taking part in the program challenging for participants?

4. (If applicable) how common are these factors?

5. If applicable, what are some ways that the program structure could change to address some of these factors?

6. I understand that placements have been easier to find in the environmental stream but employment is easier to find in the ICT stream. Has that been your sense? What do you think might explain that?

7. What do you see as some of the benefits of having a community agency delivering this type of program (versus a post-secondary institution)?

8. What do you see as some of the drawbacks of having this type of program delivered through a community agency (versus a post-secondary institution)?

9. What have been the most effective strategies to market the program to employers?

10. What, if anything, has been challenging about marketing the program to employers?

APPENDIX C – PARTNER INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Which stream have you been connected with?

2. How would you describe your organization's working relationship with the YWCA through this project? (possible prompts: What's been working well? What could be improved?)

3. How has communication between your organizations been? (possible prompts: efficient, frequent enough, timely?)

4. How well have goals for the partnership been defined and communicated?

5. Are roles and responsibilities of the program's partners clear?

6. How effective has the partnership been in meeting the program's goals?

7. How is the partnership mutually beneficial to your organization and YWCA?

8. In what ways, if any, do you think the program's effectiveness can be improved?

9. What would you see as some of the benefits of having a community agency delivering this type of program (versus a post-secondary institution)?

10. What would you see as some of the drawbacks of having a community agency delivering this type of program (versus a post-secondary institution)?

11. (For partners involved with both streams) Have you noticed any trends in the popularity of these two fields of study in general - outside of this program?

12. I understand that placements have been easier to find in the environmental stream but employment is easier to find in the ICT stream. Are you aware of any trends locally, nationally, or globally that might explain some of this?

13. Participants are not always seeing the value of completing all aspects of the program, and many are under pressure to get survival jobs. Could you comment on that? From your point of view, what would such a program need to offer to convince participants of its benefit?