Facilitating Access to Skilled Talent (FAST) Evaluation

Evaluation Report – February 2022

Future Skills Centre Centre des
Centre **Compétences futures**

Blueprint

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About the Future Skills Centre

FSC is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce.

As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure, and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead.

FSC was founded by a consortium whose members are Ryerson University, Blueprint and The Conference Board of Canada, and is funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.

About Blueprint

Blueprint was founded based on the simple idea that evidence is a powerful tool for change. We work with policymakers and practitioners to create and use evidence to solve complex policy and program challenges. Our vision is a social policy ecosystem where evidence is used to improve lives, build better systems and policies and drive social change.

Our team brings together a multidisciplinary group of professionals with diverse capabilities in policy research, data analysis, design, evaluation, evaluation, implementation and knowledge mobilization.

As a consortium partner of the Future Skills Centre, Blueprint works with partners and stakeholders to generate evidence to help solve pressing future skills challenges.

Edited by: Stacey Berquist, Q Editing

Executive Summary

Achieving employment that is meaningful and commensurate with an individual's prior experiences and expertise is an important milestone for a newcomer's settlement journey in Canada. However, newcomers often face a variety of challenges in accessing the Canadian labour market.

In order to address these challenges, the Immigrant Employment Council of BC (IEC-BC) designed Facilitating Access to Skilled Talent (FAST), an online skills assessment and development platform. It aims to help newcomers overcome barriers related to international credential recognition, lack of Canadian work experience and unfamiliarity with Canadian workplace cultural norms, while simultaneously helping Canadian employers find skilled talent.

In the spring of 2019, IEC-BC received a grant from the **Future Skills Centre (FSC)**. The grant was used to expand the delivery of FAST into new sectoral streams and to newcomers in other provinces, including Manitoba, Ontario and Nova Scotia.

FSC is a pan-Canadian organization that works with partners across the country to understand how global trends affect the economy, to identify what skills working-age adults need to thrive within an ever-evolving environment and to prototype, test and measure new and innovative approaches to skills development and training. As a consortium partner of the FSC, **Blueprint** works with partners and stakeholders to generate evidence to help solve pressing future skills challenges.

Blueprint worked with FAST to conduct an evaluation of the platform from November 2019 to March 2021. This report shares the results of that evaluation.

Key findings

Most participants found value in FAST, particularly modules on workplace culture.

Despite this, most participants expressed that they would have appreciated greater specificity in the technical training component of FAST.

Participant outcomes reflect the promise of the program and point to opportunities for the future:

Our evaluation demonstrated that half of FAST participants were employed five months after registering for the program. Along with this success, there is a need for further work to understand how FAST can be better tailored to address the varying and specific employment barriers faced by newcomers.

Partner organizations recognized FAST's potential to address gaps in current programming, but identified important opportunities for improvement:

For many providers, FAST fills a gap in existing programming by offering sector-specific information that can be accessed flexibly and remotely. In addition, providers perceived FAST to be complementary to general employment services. At the same time, partners would benefit from having access to additional information about the program curriculum and enhanced features to monitor and track their clients' progress through FAST.

Implications for program design and delivery

Invest in sustainable partnerships with regional service delivery partners:

Our evaluation findings demonstrate that partnerships with service delivery organizations to deliver platform-based programs like FAST can support participant success. Our findings also highlight the importance of working with delivery partners to figure out where FAST best fits in a newcomer's journey through other employment programs and services.

Explore opportunities to provide more targeted sectoral content:

Our findings highlight the importance of ensuring that the sectoral content is aligned with the technical competencies of specific occupations. Collaborating with curriculum developers with technical expertise in common occupations within a sector is one potential strategy for ensuring content is targeted enough to be useful to partners and participants.

Target employment supports based on occupation stream:

Our findings indicate that participants in some streams find it easier to obtain employment commensurate with their previous experience than other streams. This finding highlights the importance of providing employment supports that are customized to the particular challenges or barriers that newcomers might face in a given sector and occupation. Ways to address this could include finding more ways for participants to connect with industry partners in sectors where newcomers face more barriers, such as through mentorship opportunities.

Next steps

Using additional funding received from the FSC in May 2021, IEC-BC is expanding delivery of FAST in a new long-term care stream to respond to the skill and labour needs of the long-term care sector, especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As part of this investment, Blueprint is also conducting more evidence generation activities, building on our evaluation work to date and extending the work to the new long-term care stream. In addition to the ongoing outcomes and process evaluations, Blueprint will conduct an in-depth implementation study of participant experiences and use rapid-cycle evaluation to support continuous program improvement. Final results from these evidence generation activities will be available in 2023.

Introduction

Newcomers to Canada often face a variety of challenges in accessing the Canadian labour market. Yet achieving employment — particularly employment that is meaningful and commensurate with an individual's prior experiences and expertise — is an important milestone for a newcomer's settlement journey.

Facilitating Access to Skilled Talent (FAST) is an online skills assessment and development platform designed by the Immigrant Employment Council of BC (IEC-BC) and launched in 2016 to help newcomers enter the Canadian labour market. It aims to help newcomers overcome barriers related to international credential recognition, lack of Canadian work experience and unfamiliarity with Canadian workplace cultural norms, while simultaneously helping Canadian employers to find skilled talent.

In the spring of 2019, IEC-BC received a grant from the **Future Skills Centre (FSC)**. The grant was used to expand the delivery of FAST into new sectoral streams and to newcomers in other provinces, including Manitoba, Ontario and Nova Scotia.

As a consortium partner of the FSC, **Blueprint** works with partners and stakeholders to generate evidence to help solve pressing future skills challenges. Blueprint worked with FAST to conduct an evaluation of the platform from November 2019 to March 2021. This report shares the results of that evaluation.

In the spring of 2021, IEC-BC received an additional grant from FSC as part of an investment in Scaling Up Skills Development. This additional funding was awarded based on FAST's strategic relevance to FSC's goals, as well as high levels of demand for the service. This additional funding is being used to expand delivery of FAST to a new long-term care occupational stream in collaboration with the BC Care Provider's Association, to respond to the skill and labour needs of the long-term care sector.

As part of this additional investment, Blueprint is continuing to collaborate with FAST to generate evidence on model outcomes, strengthen the FAST platform and support the model's expansion. We will also be conducting a rapid-cycle evaluation to iteratively improve model design and implementation. Final results from these additional evidence generation activities will be shared in 2023.

Report structure

This report is organized as follows:

1 **About FAST:**
Overview of the FAST platform

2 **Evaluation Approach:**
Description of our approach to the evaluation

3 **Findings from the Outcomes Evaluation:**
The outcomes achieved by FAST participants

4 **Findings from the Process Evaluation:**
How participants and delivery partners experienced FAST and its implementation

5 **Conclusions:**
Summary of key findings and implications

6 **Appendices:**
Additional details on research methodology and findings

1. About FAST

FAST is an online skills assessment and development platform designed by IEC-BC to help newcomers better understand how their skills and abilities can be applied in the Canadian labour market and to reduce the time taken to find meaningful and commensurate employment. FAST provides access to occupation-specific labour market information (LMI), competency assessments, resources to address knowledge gaps and training or career pathways. Figure 1 illustrates the program logic model, including the key program activities and associated outcomes. As of June 2020, FAST included five sectoral streams, each with customized content: IT & Data Services, Biotechnology & Life Sciences, Skilled Trades, Accounting and Culinary Arts. The contents of the platform include:

- **Workplace cultural competency modules:** Information on the soft and essential skills needed to succeed in Canadian work environments
- **Technical competency modules:** Stream-specific modules that allows for skills assessment and review as well as additional training materials
- **Credentialing:** For the IT and Biotechnology streams, participants are referred to industry partners to receive credentialing services at no cost, including the Information Technology Professional (ITP) designation and BioTalent certification
- **Employment supports:** FAST participants are connected to other IEC-BC services such as BC JobConnect (online job board) and a mentoring program

FAST was one of the six inaugural projects funded through the FSC that tested innovative approaches to skills development. FSC funding was used to expand the regional reach of FAST to Manitoba, Ontario, and Nova Scotia, and to develop new learning content and competency assessments for two new streams: Accounting and Culinary Arts. To expand the reach of FAST and achieve project targets, IEC-BC engaged regional delivery partners across Canada and held platform training sessions during the project. Figure 2 provides an overview of the key project milestones.
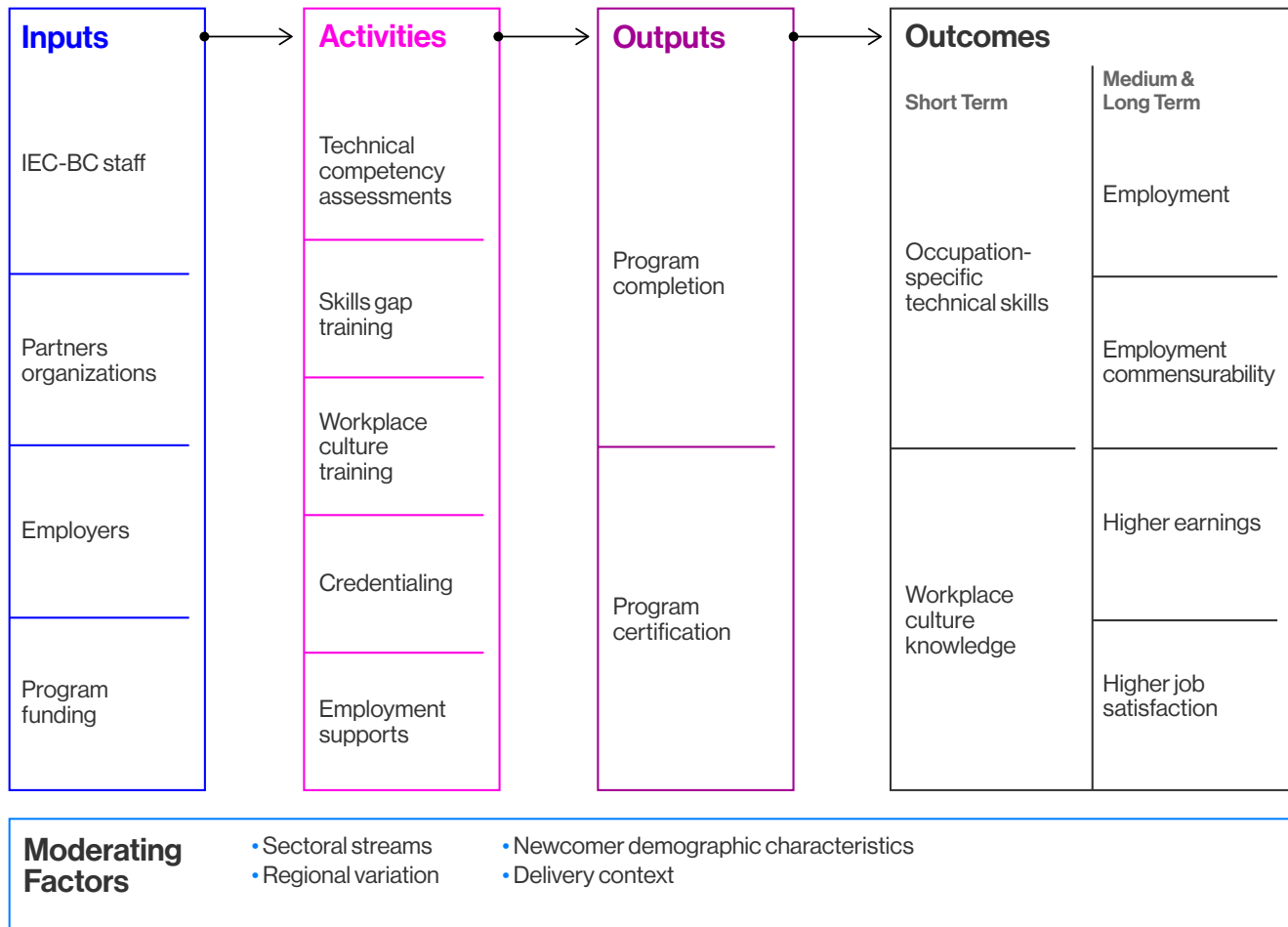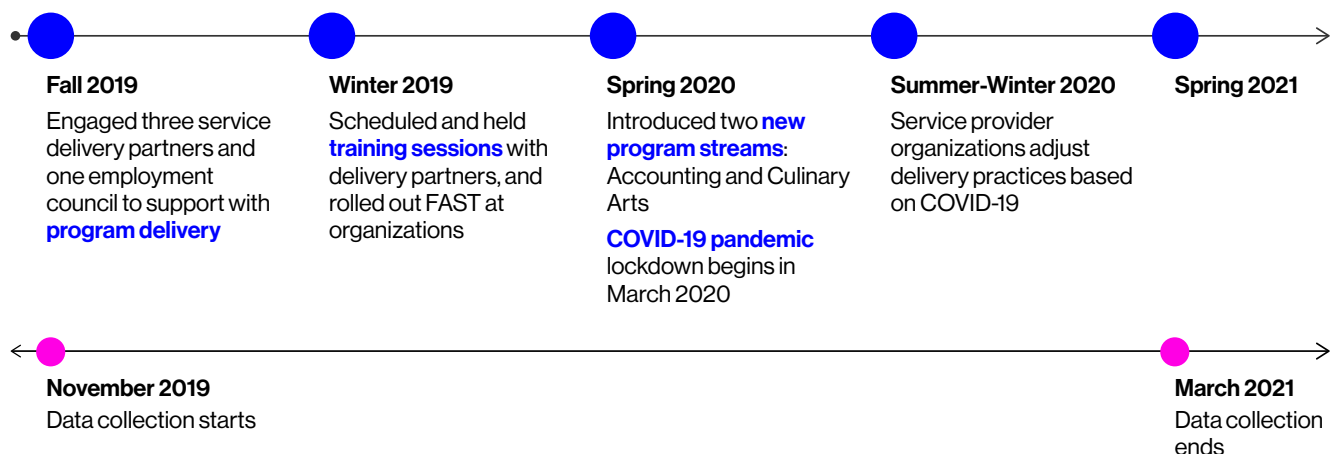
Figure 1: FAST Logic Model

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	
			Short Term	**Medium & Long Term**
IEC-BC staff	Technical competency assessments	Program completion	Occupation-specific technical skills	Employment
Partners organizations	Skills gap training			Employment commensurability
Employers	Workplace culture training			Higher earnings
Program funding	Credentialing	Program certification	Workplace culture knowledge	
	Employment supports			Higher job satisfaction

Moderating Factors	• Sectoral streams • Regional variation	• Newcomer demographic characteristics • Delivery context

Figure 2: Timeline of FAST Program Delivery During Evaluation Period

Fall 2019
Engaged three service delivery partners and one employment council to support with **program delivery**

Winter 2019
Scheduled and held **training sessions** with delivery partners, and rolled out FAST at organizations

Spring 2020
Introduced two **new program streams**: Accounting and Culinary Arts

COVID-19 pandemic lockdown begins in March 2020

Summer-Winter 2020
Service provider organizations adjust delivery practices based on COVID-19

Spring 2021

November 2019
Data collection starts

March 2021
Data collection ends

2. Evaluation Approach

Overview of approach

During the summer of 2019, Blueprint held discovery workshops with the IEC-BC team to learn more about the FAST program, understand IEC-BC's evidence needs and goals and to collaboratively design the FAST evaluation plan.

Blueprint worked closely with the IEC-BC team to design an outcomes evaluation and a process evaluation to generate evidence on changes in key outcomes that participants experience after taking part in FAST, and to better understand user experiences and perceptions of the platform. Focusing on outcomes and process evaluations at this point supported FSC's goal of designing evidence generation approaches that reflect the stage and evaluation readiness of pilot projects. Given that the project had a well-developed program design, an established implementation process and an existing evidence base, we also piloted an encouragement design. In this design, incentives to join the program were randomly assigned to potential participants. See Appendix D for additional information on our piloting of the encouragement design.

Throughout the evaluation, Blueprint developed learning reports for IEC-BC to summarize early evaluation findings from our process and outcomes evaluations. We also shared ongoing data memos with IEC-BC to provide a snapshot of survey data collected on a set of key metrics, including socio-demographic characteristics, employment outcomes, and participant satisfaction. This allowed IEC-BC to understand and monitor their progress and adjust as needed.

Our data collection was guided by our **Common Outcomes Framework**, which is a set of outcomes and participant socio-demographics that we are using to generate consistent, comparable evidence across FSC-funded projects.

Evaluation questions

Our evaluation sought to answer the following questions:

Outcomes evaluation

1. How many participants complete FAST programming, and how does completion vary across program streams and by participant characteristics?

2. What employment outcomes are achieved by participants?

3. For participants who are employed, what are their earnings and to what extent is their employment commensurate with their prior experience?

4. How do employment outcomes vary across streams and participant characteristics?

Process evaluation

5. How satisfied are participants with the program overall? What do they see as the strengths of the platform, and what are areas for improvement?

6. What do delivery partners need in order to successfully implement the platform with their clients?

7. How does FAST fit in with other employment services offered by delivery partners, or that participants may be receiving?

Methodology

To address these evaluation questions, Blueprint used a mixed-methods approach to data collection and analysis. Between November 2019 and March 2021, we collected quantitative data through surveys administered to participants, and through administrative data shared by the IEC-BC team on a bi-weekly basis. Surveys were administered at two points in time: an exit survey was administered two months after FAST registration to capture program satisfaction and participant socio-demographic characteristics, and a follow up survey was administered three months after the exit survey to capture individuals' employment outcomes.

Between February 2020 and January 2021, the evaluation team also collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews with program participants and representatives from regional partner organizations. Participant interviews were designed to generate evidence on participant experiences and satisfaction with FAST and the perceived effect of the program on their employment outcomes. Partner interviews were intended to better understand perceptions of the value of FAST, perceived bright spots and pain points in implementation and program adaptations. For more information about our methodology, including our analytical approach, please see Appendix A.

3. Findings from Outcomes Evaluation

This section presents findings from our outcomes evaluation of FAST.

Our outcomes evaluation sought to answer the following questions:

1. How many participants complete FAST programming, and how does completion vary across program streams and by participant characteristics?

2. What employment outcomes are achieved by participants?

3. For participants who are employed, what are their earnings and to what extent is their employment commensurate with their prior experience?

4. How do employment outcomes vary across streams and participant characteristics?

Employment outcomes were measured five months following each participant's registration on FAST via a follow-up survey. Participant characteristics and completion rates were analyzed from administrative data collected by the FAST platform and shared with the evaluation team by IEC-BC.

Since FAST is a light-touch and flexible online intervention that is unique compared to other intensive skills training programs, our evaluation team opted not to compare outcomes of FAST participants with those from other skills training programs in the workforce development ecosystem. Instead, our evaluation team compared the outcomes of FAST participants who enrolled in the program at different points in the evaluation, to better understand the potential implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on participants' employment outcomes. In addition, median earnings of FAST participants were compared against the broader population of post-arrival immigrants in Canada, to help situate the employment patterns observed for FAST participants within the context of recent employment trends amongst immigrant populations in Canada.

Participant characteristics

To understand the backgrounds of FAST participants and the reach of the program, we first analyzed administrative data collected by the FAST platform and shared with our team by IEC-BC. During the time period covered by the data set (November 1, 2019 to December 18, 2020) 646 participants registered for FAST and consented to the evaluation (a further 14 registered but did not consent).

From the administrative data, we focused on three characteristics of interest:

1. **Sex:** defined as "Male" or "Female" [1]

2. **Programming stream:** Biotechnology, IT, Trades, Accounting or Culinary Arts

3. **Arrival status:** whether at time of registration, the participant had landed in Canada

Table 1 presents the findings. Participants were close to an even split across sex, but that the majority came from the IT and Biotechnology streams. Furthermore, most had already arrived in Canada when they registered for FAST.

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[1] The administrative data included a question about gender, though sex categories (i.e., male and female) were provided as response options. The phrasing of that question was co-designed with the evaluation team and is identical to the approach used in evaluation surveys. For clarity and transparency, we used "sex" throughout this report.

Table 1: **Participant Characteristics (Administrative Data)**

Sex	
Female	43%
Male	57%

Arrival status	
Pre-arrival	23%
Arrived in Canada	68%
Unknown	9%

Program Stream	
Trades	6%
IT	48%
Biotechnology	31%
Accounting	14%
Culinary Arts	<1%

To further understand the characteristics of the program participants in alignment with the FSC common frameworks, we additionally included a set of demographics questions in the exit survey (for details on the survey approach, see Appendix A).

Table 2 presents these results. Overall, we found that:

- The median age of participants in the sample was **34**
- Most participants were from **BC** (17 percent), **Ontario** (29 percent) and **Nova Scotia** (30 percent)
- Three-quarters of participants were **legally married** (76 percent)
- Half of the sample **had children** (50 percent)
  - Of those with children, most had just one (47 percent) or two (33 percent)
- The sample was highly educated. Almost everyone (92 percent) in the sample had at least a **Bachelor's degree**; 60 percent of the sample had a **degree higher** than a Bachelor's
- As expected, most participants were landed immigrants
- Four percent of the sample were Francophones

Table 2: Participant Characteristics (Exit Survey)   Percentage of full sample (N = 278)

Age	
18–29	17%
30–39	62%
40–49	16%
50–59	2%
60+	<1%
Unknown	3%

Province	
Alberta	3%
British Columbia	17%
Manitoba	4%
New Brunswick	<1%
Newfoundland and Labrador	0%
Nova Scotia	30%
Ontario	29%
Prince Edward Island	0%
Quebec	2%
Saskatchewan	2%
Yukon/NWT/Nunavut	0%
Not in Canada	14%

Marital Status	
Never legally married	19%
Legally married (and not separated)	76;%
Living with a common-law partner	2%
Separated, but still legally married	1%
Divorced	2%
Widowed	<1%

Children	
Yes	50%
No	50%

Number of Children Under 17	
Zero	50%
One	23%
Two	16%
Three	8%
Four or more	1%
Unknown	2%

Number of Children Under 6	
Zero	61%
One	26%
Two	9%
Three or more	1%
Unknown	3%

Highest Education	
Less than high school diploma	0%
High school diploma	1%
Registered Apprenticeship or Trades Certificate	<1%
College, CEGEP, or other non-university certificate	2%
University certificate/diploma/degree below Bachelor	4%
University Bachelor's degree	33%
University certificate, diploma, or degree above Bachelor	59%

Newcomer Status	
Canadian citizen by birth	0%
Canadian citizen by naturalization	1%
Landed immigrant	83%
Refugee claimant	2%
Other[2]	15%

Francophone	
Yes	4%
No	93%
Unknown	3%

2 Of the 15 percent of respondents who selected "Other" and provided written-in responses for their immigration status, the vast majority appeared to hold permanent residence and are thus "landed immigrants." This term is a previously used classification and its usage appears to have confused a number of survey respondents.

Enrollment and completion

To understand program completion, we analyzed administrative data collected by the FAST platform and shared with our team by IEC-BC. Of the 646 participants, we found that 245 completed FAST — **a completion rate of 37.9 percent.**

We also examined how completion rates differed across the three characteristics — sex, program stream and arrival status — available in the administrative data set and of interest.

Figure 3 presents the results. We found little difference in completion rates when comparing male to female participants. However, we did see differences in completion rate across program streams. **Biotechnology participants were the most likely to complete FAST:** based on interview findings, this may have been because of that stream's promise to refer participants to BioTalent Canada's BioSkills Recognition Program. Accounting had the lowest completion rate, but it (along with Culinary Arts) is also one of the newest streams; it may take additional time for partner organizations to better understand these streams and articulate the benefits to their clients in order to encourage completion. The data set only had two individuals in the Culinary Arts stream, and neither had completed FAST by the end of the data collection period.

Finally, we saw a slight difference (12 percentage points) in completion rates between pre-arrival clients and clients who had already landed in Canada, with the former group having higher rate of completion.

Figure 3: Program Completion by Characteristics
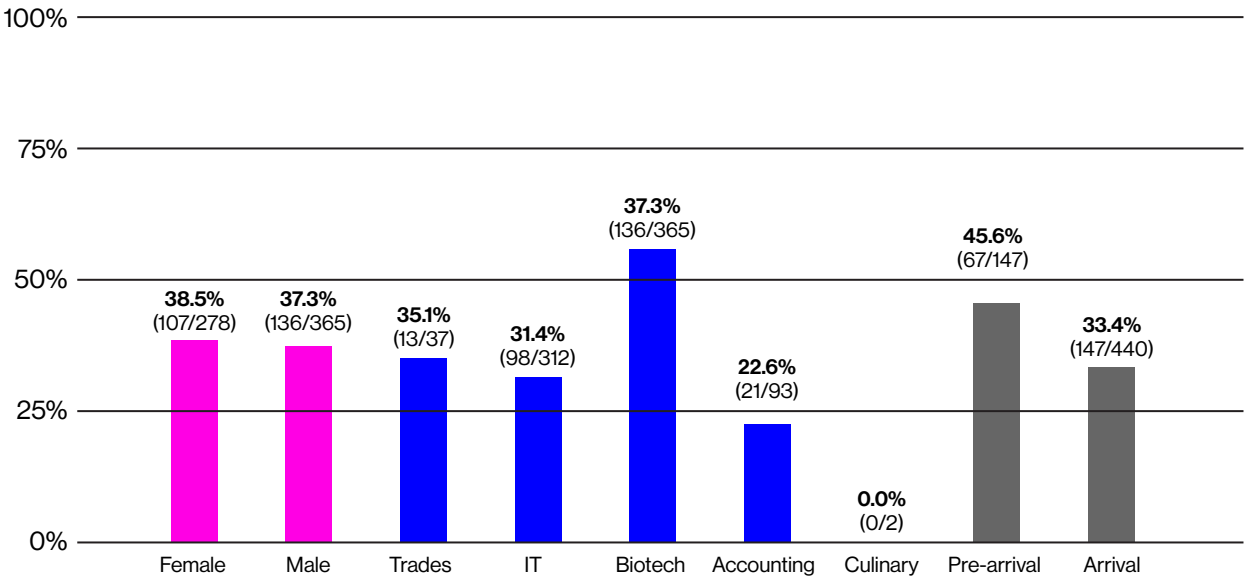
Figure shows FAST completion rate for each subgroup available from the administrative data set. Completion rate as a percentage is depicted; number of completers in each subgroup out of all individuals in that subgroup is presented in brackets.

Employment outcomes

This section focuses on outcomes measured five months following each participant's registration in FAST via a follow-up survey. The five-month period represents a "three-month follow-up," under the assumption that most individuals will complete the program within two months (for additional details, see Appendix A). Because IEC-BC was able to share the exact date each participant registered for the program, we were able to customize the timing of data collection to each participant, ensuring consistency in data collection for the sample overall. In addition, we found that 12 of the 179 individuals who responded to the follow-up survey had not yet landed in Canada. Consequently, the outcomes described below are only for individuals who were in Canada (i.e. they had landed since registration, or they were already in Canada at time of registration) when they received the follow-up survey.

We focused on three key outcomes of interest:

1. **Employment status:** Whether the respondent was employed

2. **Earnings:** For respondents who were employed, their estimated yearly earnings

3. **Commensurability:** For respondents who were employed, the extent to which their job was commensurate with their work experiences prior to arriving in Canada

Employment status

We found 84 out of 167 landed respondents in the follow-up survey indicated that they were employed: **an employment rate of 50.3 percent.** This rate represents a notable increase from trends observed earlier during the evaluation, which coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on labour demand. For example, preliminary analysis of outcomes in August 2020 found an employment rate of 31.1 percent.[3]

Earnings

Participants are traditionally hesitant to report earnings information on surveys. We measured earnings through a number of ways in the follow-up survey (see Appendix C for details). In total, 77 out of the 84 employed individuals provided earnings information for this analysis.

Among this group, we found **average (median) yearly earnings of $31,680**. This is similar to the median of $30,100 one year after entry reported by Statistics Canada for immigrants admitted to Canada in 2017.[4] About half of the respondents had yearly earnings between $24,960 and $49,920. The highest earner in the sample reported earning $95,000 per year.

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[3] To understand the potential implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on participants' employment outcomes, we compared the employment rates of FAST participants earlier in the evaluation (between November 2019 – August 2020) to those reported by FAST participants in the full evaluation period (between November 2019 – March 2021).

[4] To situate the employment outcomes of FAST participants within the broader employment trends of immigrant populations in Canada, we compared the median earnings reported by Statistics Canada for only employed immigrants who entered in Canada in 2017 one year after entry, and the median earnings of FAST participants who were employed at the time of the evaluation. For more information about income and mobility of immigrants in 2018, please see: https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/210201/dq210201a-eng.htm.
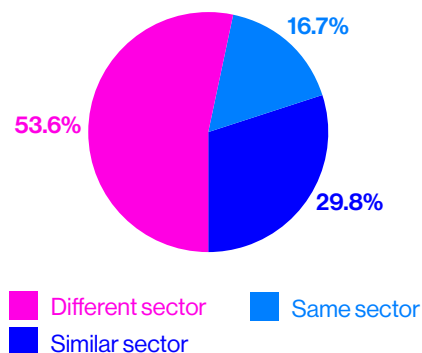
Commensurability

One of the many challenges newcomers face in the Canadian labour market is not only finding a job, but finding one that matches their experience, skills, and expertise. In order to understand whether participants are achieving employment commensurate with their work experiences prior to arriving in Canada, we asked four questions of employed respondents:

1. Whether their job is in the same or similar sector they worked in prior to arrival
2. Whether their job duties are similar to their last job prior to arrival
3. How much of their prior work experience they use in their current job
4. Whether the education/credential requirements for their job matches their educational background

The pattern of responses to these questions presented **mixed evidence as to whether respondents were achieving commensurate employment** (see Figure 4). On the one hand, most respondents who were employed were working in a different sector than the one they worked in prior to arrival, and very few were performing the same types of duties on the job. On the other hand, a majority of employed respondents also said that they were able to leverage at least some prior experience in their current role, and most found roles that had education requirements matching the credentials that they possessed.
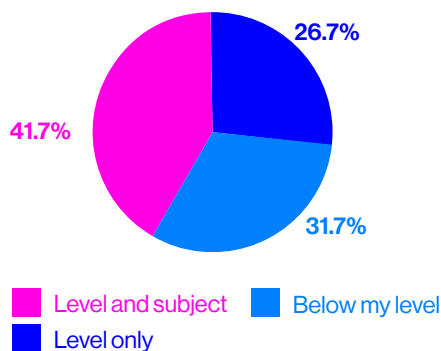
Figure 4: Job Commensurability

Same sector?

16.7%
53.6%
29.8%

- Different sector
- Similar sector
- Same sector

Are Duties Similar?

11.9%
46.4%
41.7%

- Very few duties
- Some duties
- All duties

Prior Experience Used?

28.6%
34.5%
21.4%
15.5%

- A lot
- Some
- Very little
- None

Education Req. Matches?

26.7%
41.7%
31.7%

- Level and subject
- Level only
- Below my level
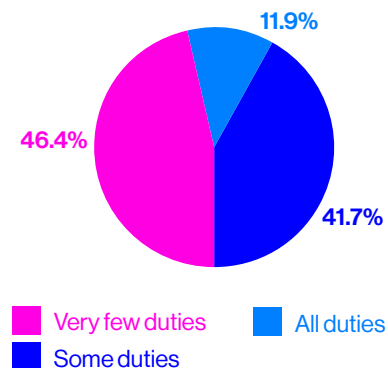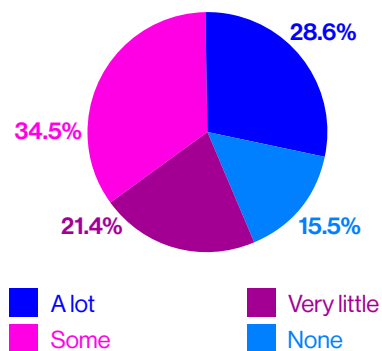
Employment outcomes by subgroups

In examining these key outcomes, we also conducted subgroup analyses to understand whether participants with different characteristics achieved different levels in outcome.

Sex

We failed to find evidence that male and female participants differed in the outcomes they achieved following FAST. The two groups achieved similar levels of employment: 51 percent of both female and male participants were employed. Employed individuals in both groups also demonstrated similar levels of earnings, with median yearly earnings of $32,640 for female participants and $31,680 for male participants. Because gender pay gaps are well-documented elsewhere,[5] the similarity of earnings between female and male participants observed here should be further explored in subsequent data collection.

Figure 5: Employment Rate by Sex

Figure 6: Median Yearly Earnings by Sex
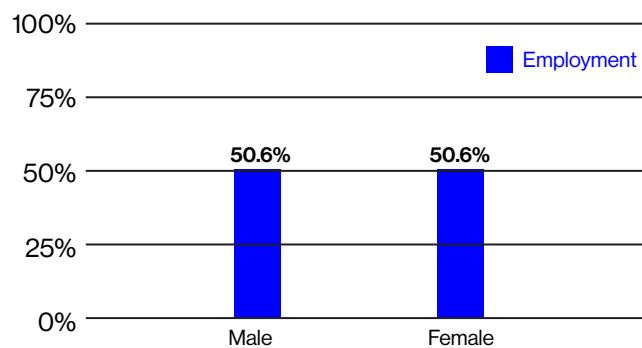
There was some evidence that female participants may have struggled more than male participants in finding similar roles to those they previously held (see Figure 7), though this pattern does not necessarily hold for the other questions assessing employment commensurability.

Overall, male and female participants of FAST generally achieved similar job market outcomes.
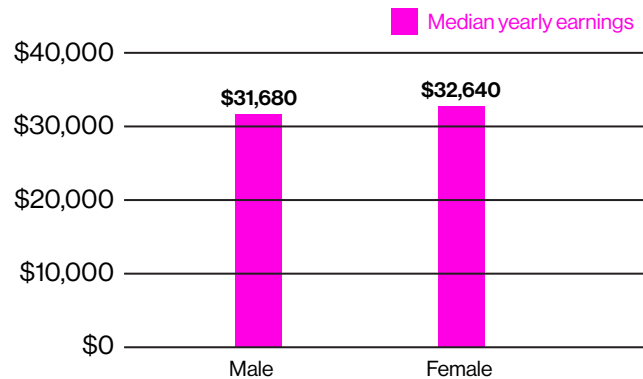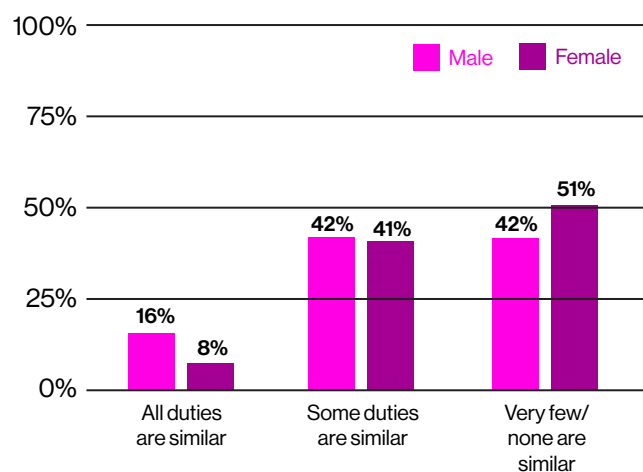
Figure 7: Similarity of Duties in Current vs. Previous Job by Sex

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5 For more information about the gender wage gap in Canada between 1998 and 2018, please see:
https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-004-m/75-004-m2019004-eng.htm

Program stream

Participants in different streams of FAST did appear to achieve different employment outcomes (see Figure 8). Those in the Accounting stream were slightly more likely to be employed (58 percent) compared to Biotechnology (50 per cent) and IT (48 per cent) stream participants. This may simply be due to sectoral differences in labour demand (if, for example, there is greater demand for those in accounting than in IT). Additional research can help shed further light on why we observed differences in employment outcomes across streams.

Unfortunately, due to small sample sizes, we are unable to say whether participants in Skilled Trades or Culinary Arts achieved outcomes different from their counterparts in other streams.

Figure 8: Employment Rate by Stream
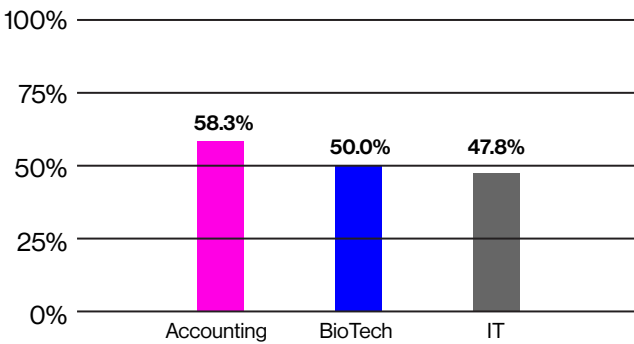
When examining earnings, we found participants in IT had the highest median yearly earnings ($39,200), followed by Accounting ($35,748) and then Biotechnology ($28,800). The difference in earnings between IT and Biotechnology is statistically significant.

Figure 9: Median Yearly Earnings by Stream
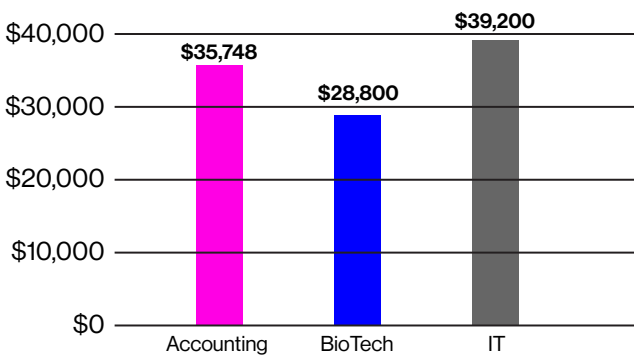
Results from the commensurability questions suggested one possible explanation for this earnings gap. Participants in the Biotechnology stream were less likely than those in IT to say that the duties of their current job were similar to the one they last held. In addition, Biotechnology participants were less likely to say that they were able to use their prior experience in their current role, compared to IT and Accounting participants (see Figure 10). This suggests that **participants in the Biotechnology stream in particular face challenges in finding roles that are commensurate** with their prior experience.

**Figure 10:** How Much Prior Experience Is Used in Current Job by Stream
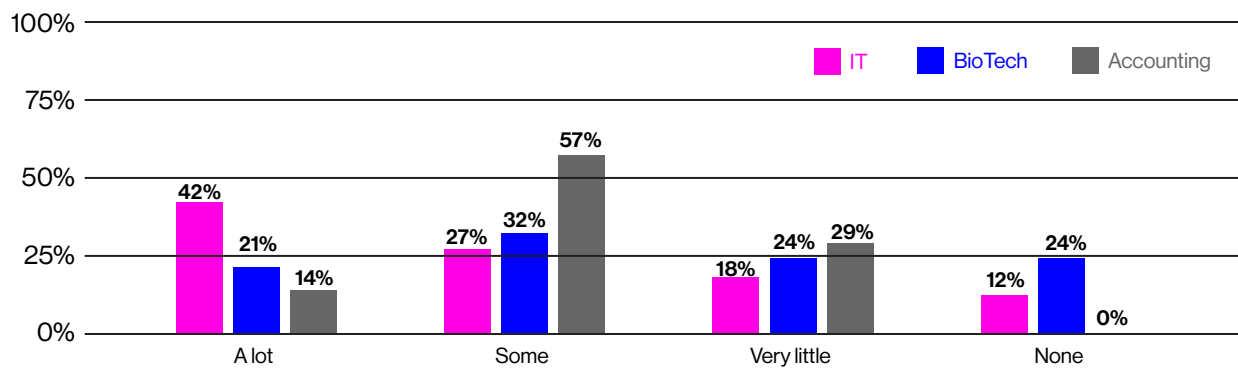
Arrival status

Historically, FAST was used by pre-arrival individuals to assess competencies and become familiar with Canadian workplaces prior to their arrival. As part of the engagement with FSC, IEC-BC tested partnering with service delivery organizations to administer FAST with newcomers already present in Canada but who struggle to have their competencies recognized in the labour market. Because of this innovation in program design, we also compared outcomes achieved by individuals who had not yet landed when they registered for FAST against outcomes achieved by individuals already in Canada upon registration.

We found that **participants already present in Canada at point of registration for FAST were more likely to be employed** (54 percent) than those who had not yet landed when they registered for FAST (37 percent). This result is consistent with the challenges that newcomers must navigate when they first arrive in Canada. Insofar as participants referred to FAST by delivery partners are more likely to already be in Canada, this finding may also suggest the value of the supports, services and complementary programming offered by these partner organizations.

**Figure 11:** Employment Rate by Arrival Status
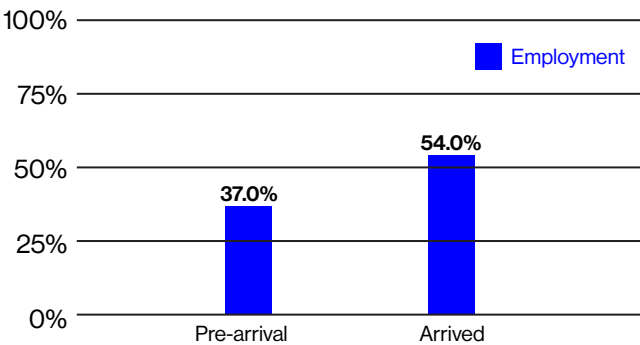
However, among respondents who were employed at follow-up, we found evidence suggesting that **pre-arrival participants were more likely to be in commensurate employment**. For example, pre-arrival participants were much more likely to say that they use "a lot" of their prior experience in their current role (see Figure 12). This may suggest the presence of "survival jobs" among employed landed participants, and speaks to the need to further support these participants in achieving commensurate employment.

Figure 12: How Much Prior Experience Is Used in Current Job by Arrival Status
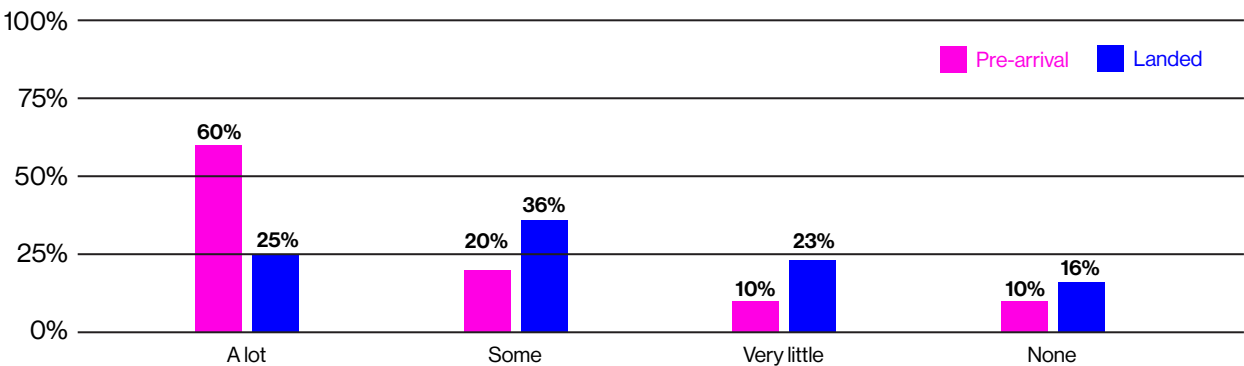
Finally, when examining earnings for employed individuals in the follow-up survey, we found that participants who were pre-arrival when they registered for FAST appeared to have slightly higher median earnings ($36,288) than those who were already in Canada when they registered for FAST ($31,080); this difference is not statistically significant however.

Figure 13: Median Yearly Earnings by Arrival Status
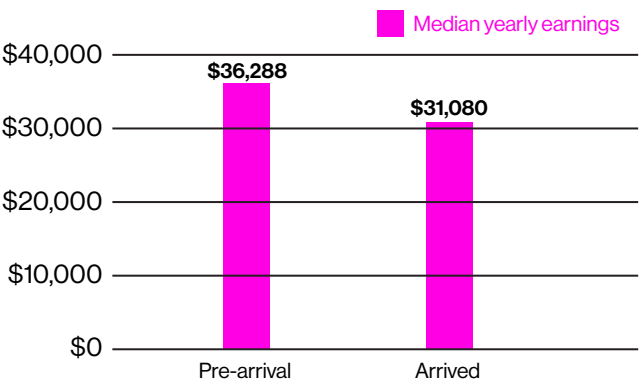
Program completion

In a final subgroup analysis, we examined whether outcomes differed for participants who fully completed FAST compared with those who did not. Surprisingly, we found that participants who completed FAST had a lower employment rate (45%) than those who did not complete (54%). Similarly, participants who did not complete had higher median yearly earnings ($35,154) than those who completed ($30,720). Among those who were employed, we did not find differences in commensurability between completers and non-completers.

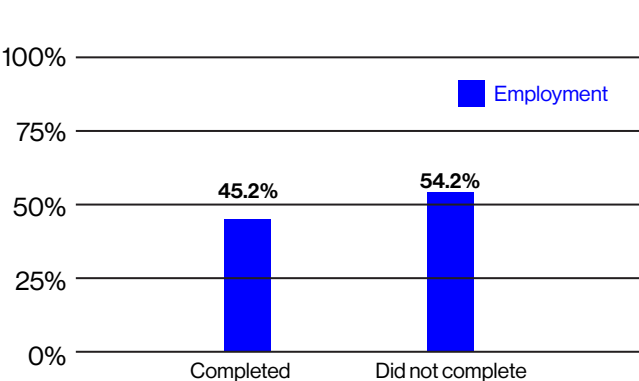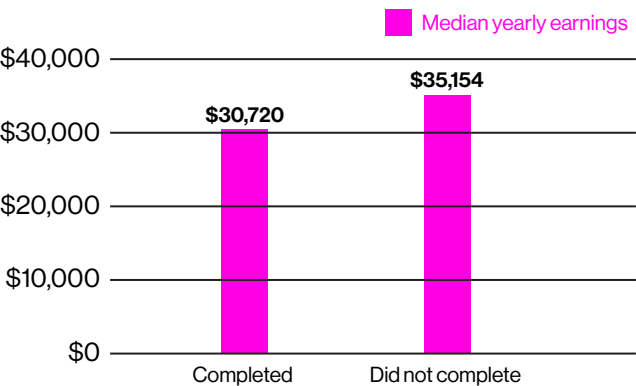**Figure 14:** Employment Rate by Program Completion

Figure 15: Median Yearly Earnings by Program Completion

Much of the explanation for this pattern of results is likely due to individuals choosing not to complete FAST when they successfully find a job. Under From this perspectiveview, the slightly lower rate of employment among FAST completers is understandable, as it is precisely those individuals who struggle in the Canadian labour market who stand to benefit the most from engagement with FAST and therefore are more likely to complete the program.

Box 3 : Encouragement Design Pilot

For this evaluation, our team also explored the feasibility of an encouragement design for estimating the impact of FAST and to assess what kinds of levers can incentivize program completion (for additional details on the approach see Appendix D).

In this pilot, we randomly assigned participants to one of three experimental conditions:

1. **Non-financial encouragement:** Participants received an email message encouraging them to complete FAST by reminding them of the benefits of the program

2. **Financial encouragement:** Participants received the same message as the above, with one additional sentence that promised a $25 gift card upon program completion

3. **Control condition:** Participants received no encouragement messages from the evaluation team

Figure 16 presents FAST completion rate by encouragement condition. We found that both encouragement conditions displayed higher rates of program completion than the control group, with the financial encouragement achieving the highest completion rates. The financial encouragement condition had 11 percentage points higher rate of program completion than the control group, while the non-financial condition had 7 percentage points higher completion.

The results did not achieve statistical significance at conventional levels. However, we did observe differences in completion rates, the observed differences are in expected directions and the gap between financial and non-financial encouragement is small. Given the relative ease with which non-financial encouragement reminders can be sent — either automatically or en masse at regular intervals — **we suggest IEC-BC continue sending reminder messages encouraging participants to complete FAST** once they register for the program.

Figure 16: FAST Completion by Encouragement Condition
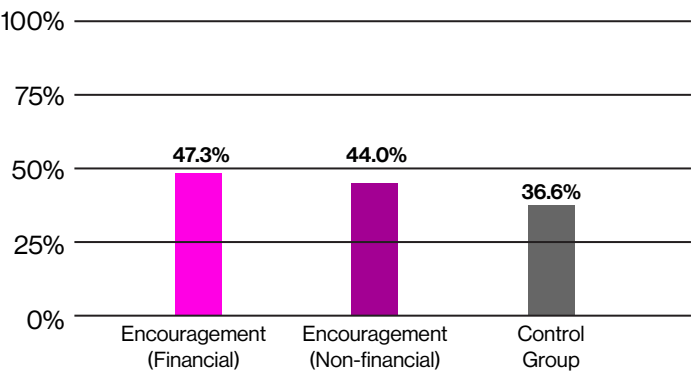
4. Findings from Process Evaluation

This section provides an overview of the experiences of FAST participants and service delivery partners who played a role in the program's implementation.

Our process evaluation sought to address the following evaluation questions:

1. How satisfied are participants with the program overall? What do they see as the strengths of the platform, and what are areas for improvement?

2. What do delivery partners need in order to successfully implement the platform with their clients?

3. How does FAST fit in with other employment services offered by delivery partners, or that participants may be receiving?

We conducted semi-structured interviews with four partner organizations who were engaged by IEC-BC to deliver FAST. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 participants and drew on exit survey data on satisfaction with the program.
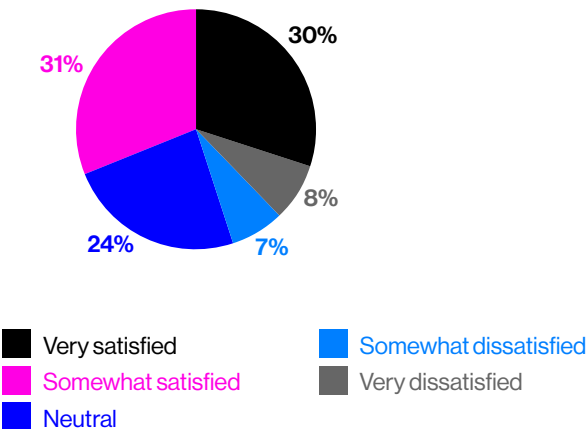
Participant satisfaction

Respondents to the exit survey generally reported high levels of satisfaction with the FAST program (Figure 17). On satisfaction overall, 61 percent of respondents indicated that they were somewhat or very satisfied with FAST, and only 15 percent reported being unsatisfied. This is consistent with findings from participant interviews, where 16 out of 30 interviewees (53 percent) shared that they had a positive experience taking part in FAST, and 6 out of 30 interviewees (20 percent) reported not feeling satisfied with their experience in FAST.

In addition, 70 percent of survey respondents reported that they would recommend FAST to someone looking for a job in Canada, with a further 14 percent reporting that they had already recommended FAST to someone (see Figure B2 in Appendix B for details).

Figure 17: Overall Satisfaction with FAST Program

"Overall, how satisfied are you with FAST?"

Legend:
- Very satisfied (black)
- Somewhat satisfied (magenta)
- Neutral (blue)
- Somewhat dissatisfied (light blue)
- Very dissatisfied (grey)

What did participants like about FAST?

On the exit survey, we asked respondents to tell us how useful they found different components of the FAST program for their job search. The results from the exit survey are displayed in Figure 18. For each of the components we asked about, a majority of respondents felt they were somewhat or very useful for their job search.

Figure 18: Usefulness of FAST Components

Legend: Not useful, A little useful, Somewhat useful, Very useful
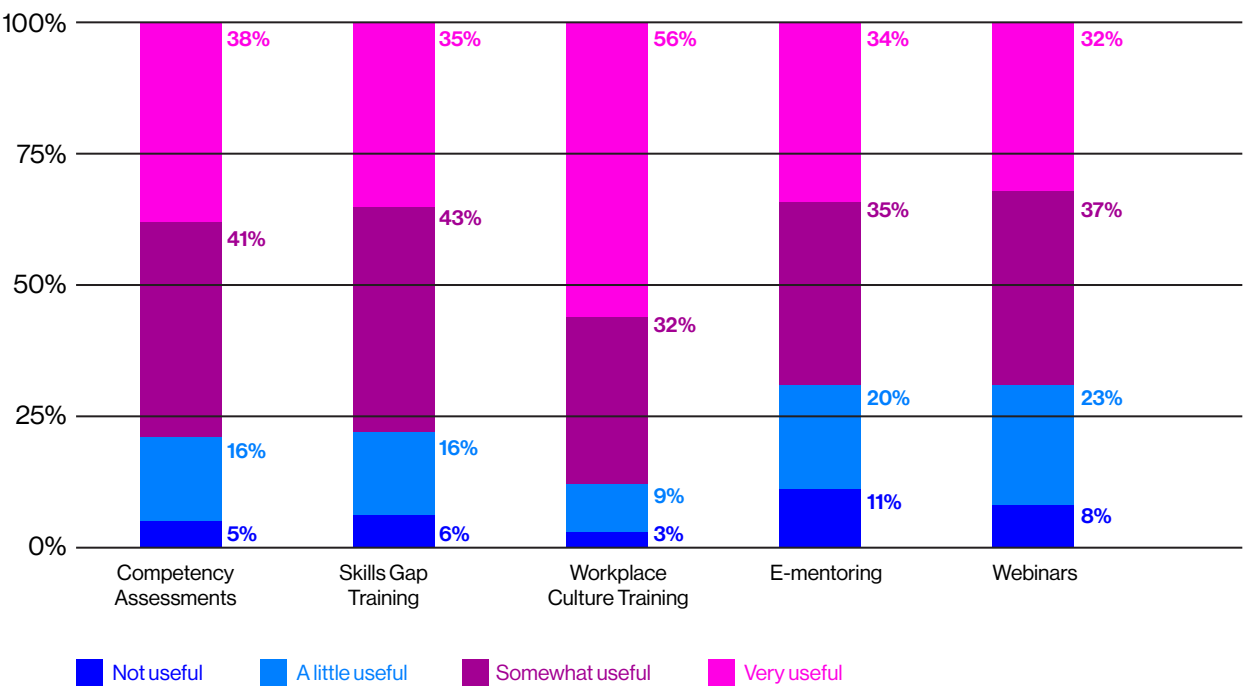
"I think FAST is an excellent initiative. It helps calm the nerves a bit in terms of moving to a new country and I'm happy that it's available to help me prepare."

- Interviewee 19

Across the sample, **workplace culture training** was identified as being the most useful: a result consistent with what we heard during interviews, where 20 out of 30 interviewees reported that the workplace culture training was the most useful component of FAST.

Several interviewees who were recent immigrants and were unfamiliar with Canadian culture reported that the workplace culture content provided valuable insights about the work style in Canada and the expectations for professional communication and etiquette in Canada. For example, four interviewees shared that the assessments in the workplace culture module in FAST helped them to understand the norms of non-verbal communication in Canada, including active listening,

maintaining eye contact and maintaining personal distance. This suggests that the lessons from the workplace culture module in FAST helped to prepare participants to integrate into the Canadian workplace.

In addition to the core FAST program components, participants shared other highlights about their experience participating in the program:

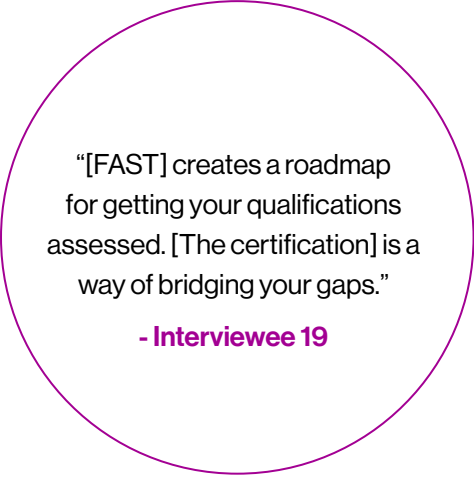- **User-friendly and supportive platform:** 72 percent of survey respondents indicated that they found the FAST platform's user friendliness to be "above average" or "excellent." Interviewees provided additional context for these responses, with four out of 30 interviewees noted that the FAST interface was easy to navigate, it was easy to access external links and resources and the content was well organized. One interviewee reported that the IEC-BC team was very responsive when they experienced technical issues in the platform, while another interviewee reported that there was limited need for additional technical support, as the platform was straightforward to use independently.

"The robust system-based material [gives] FAST... an edge, because they are covering a good amount of material and they are delivering it well."

- Interviewee 29

- **Valuable access to industry-recognized certification:** Nearly half of the interviewees in the Biotechnology stream (four out of nine) reported that they appreciated the referral to BioTalent Canada to assess their qualifications and to bridge their skills gaps, as the certification is well recognized and respected in the Biotechnology industry. Two interviewees also shared that they enrolled in courses offered by BioTalent Canada following their participation in FAST, which they anticipated would provide valuable insights to prepare for the job market.

"[FAST] creates a roadmap for getting your qualifications assessed. [The certification] is a way of bridging your gaps."

- Interviewee 19

Box 4 : Sampling Limitations

There are a few key limitations to keep in mind when thinking about the study sample for this evaluation of FAST. Sampling limitations associated with the outcomes and process evaluations are summarized below:

Outcomes evaluation

- The relatively small sample size of participants in a few industry streams in FAST limited our statistical power in identifying outcomes for these program participants. For example, since there were few participants in the Skilled Trades and Culinary Arts streams, we were not able to determine whether participants in these streams achieved outcomes different from their counterparts in other streams.

- Our exit survey was administered two months after registration to all participants who registered for FAST and consented to take part in the evaluation. This time frame was selected based on the assumption that most participants could take up to two months to complete FAST. However, given the diverse range of participants enrolled in the program, participants might have been at different points in their journey with FAST before they completed the exit survey. This could have resulted in issues with participant recall of FAST, depending on proximity to program participation.

- Our evaluation focused on outcomes measured using a follow-up survey administered five months after each participant's registration on FAST. This corresponds with a "three-month follow-up" given that the exit survey was administered two months after FAST registration. Although this timing was chosen to ensure a sufficient sample for analysis, it does not capture the longer-term effects of FAST. If it takes a longer time for participants to fully realize the benefits of FAST, then the analysis presented in this report may understate the outcomes of the program.

- The survey was administered in English, reducing the likelihood that newcomer participants with low English language proficiency were captured in our survey.

Process evaluation

- Our qualitative analysis leveraged data from a total of 30 participants, out of 300 participants invited to interview. Given our small sample size, interview findings should be interpreted with caution as they might not be representative of the experiences of the full population of participants who use FAST.

Despite these caveats, our evaluation findings provide promising evidence for the value of FAST and point to opportunities for improvement going forward (see Section 5).

Participant experiences

This section provides an overview of the experiences of participants on FAST. We conducted semi-structured interviews with participants to capture feedback on the challenges they experienced with FAST and ideas for improvement, and to learn about the types of employment services and programs they used to gain employment in addition to FAST. We also sought to better understand what groups of participants might be well-suited to FAST by understanding interviewees' backgrounds, their experiences with FAST and any potential relationships between the two.

What types of employment services do participants use, and how do these services interact with FAST?

During interviews, we asked participants to share the employment programs and services they used to support their job search in Canada, in addition to FAST. Two thirds of interviewees (20 out of 30) reported using at least one employment program or service other than FAST, including:

- **General job search support and preparation**, such as workshops on preparing a resume or cover letter, or mock interview sessions (used by 11 out of 30 interviewees)

- **Mentoring programs and networking opportunities,** such as employer networking sessions or formal programs that match a participant with a professional who acts as a mentor (used by 8 out of 30 interviewees)

- **Bridging and sector-specific programs** (used by 6 out of 30 interviewees)

We also sought to understand how employment services interacted with FAST by asking participants to share the services they accessed to support their job search, their satisfaction with the services, and their perceived usefulness in finding employment compared to FAST. We found emerging evidence that some employment services worked well with FAST:

- **Job search supports provided complementary information to FAST:** Five out of 11 interviewees who received general job search support reported that resume and cover letter workshops provided them with valuable information to address their immediate needs in Canada. Of these five interviewees, two reported that FAST and job search supports provided complementary pieces of information that were helpful in seeking employment. For example, one interviewee reported that they were actively using resources from BioTalent and job search workshops to obtain employment. Another interviewee also noted that, although resume workshops and mock interviews were the most useful services to secure employment, the FAST workplace culture module was valuable to learn about Canadian culture and the skills needed to keep a job. This suggests that there is an opportunity to position FAST as a suitable offering for newcomers who have already received job search supports, to equip them with essential cultural knowledge and soft skills to gain and retain employment.

- **Bridging and sector-specific programs were less well aligned with FAST:** Three out of six interviewees who took part in a bridging or sector-specific program in addition to FAST found that these programs helped them to address a wider range of needs compared to FAST. Of the three interviewees, one reported that since bridging programs provided them with a comprehensive range of personalized employment supports, including credential recognition, one-on-one case management, job search guidance, and access to financial supports, these programs were more likely to help them move closer to employment. This suggests that FAST might be redundant for participants who are participating, or have taken part in, bridging programs.

What types of participants are well-suited to FAST?

Our evaluation team also sought to explore what groups of participants might be well-suited to FAST by understanding interviewees' characteristics, their experiences and satisfaction with the program and any relationships between the two. We found evidence that the following groups of participants might be well-suited to FAST:

- **Participants who have taken part in job search training:** Most interviewees who had previously participated in job search support programs reported that they were highly satisfied with FAST (7 out of 11). This was particularly evident for interviewees who had taken part in resume and interview workshops before starting FAST, and therefore had a foundational knowledge of how to tailor their resumes and interview style to the Canadian labour market. This suggests that, for individuals who have a basic understanding of the job search process, FAST might be a valuable next step to gain more information about working in a Canadian workplace.

- **Newcomers with limited experience in Western business environments:** The majority of interviewees who were recent immigrants and had no prior exposure working in a Western context found the workplace culture modules in FAST very useful (seven out of eight). These interviewees saw the modules as providing useful information on expected cultural behaviors and norms in the Canadian workplace, while also underlining the importance of professional communication with colleagues. On the other hand, some interviewees with extensive Western work experience found that the workplace culture content did not provide new insights about Canadian workplace culture.

- **Participants with work experience aligned with FAST streams:** A third of the interviewees we spoke to were in the engineering and environmental industries (10 out of 30), despite the program's focus on biotechnology and life sciences, IT, skilled trades, accounting and culinary arts. Although some of these interviewees found that they were able to gain new information from the workplace culture training in FAST, the majority (7 out of 10) found that the sectoral modules lacked the industry-specific information that they were looking for, indicating poor fit with participants in these industries. This suggests that it would be valuable to delineate the target population for FAST to support its deployment in employment services.

What are participant views on areas for improvement?

During interviews, we asked interviewees to provide feedback about the challenges they experienced in FAST and changes they would recommend to improve the program. Interviewees noted that they see promise for FAST, with some modifications:

- **Provide practical industry insights in the sectoral training module:** A third of the interviewees we spoke to (10 out of 30) reported that the industry-specific content in FAST did not meet their expectations. Five interviewees reported that the industry-specific content provided a high-level understanding of their fields, rather than targeted advice. Although the industry-specific content covered how to work within organizations in their industry, a few interviewees in the Biotechnology stream indicated that the content could also be relevant to other sectors, as there was limited information about the specific technical expertise and training required to gain employment in the biotechnology sector. In addition, one interviewee in the IT stream reported that the questions in the technical skills assessments focused on the broader IT field rather than specific roles. This suggests that there is an opportunity to delve deeper into the specific skills areas within each field to help participants assess their technical skills, and to add further information about recommended certifications and designations for each field in Canada.

- **Improve platform technical support and accessibility:** A few participants noted that they had issues using the platform and accessing the technical assistance. A few participants suggested that it would be valuable to provide hands-on technical support to ensure that participants are able to complete the program successfully, such as a chat box for technical queries.

- **Clarify program expectations early on:** During the interviews, several interviewees reported that they were unclear about what to expect in FAST, including the length of the modules, referral to industry-specific certification, post-program supports and how to connect with employers. Two interviewees reported that they would have appreciated additional information about the assessment duration in the modules, as the assessments were more time-consuming than they had anticipated.

"There was… information about the IT industry, but more generalized. I do databases, but not programming, so the content [in FAST] was not specific to the job that I was previously doing."

- Interviewee 25

"Before starting every test, I would like to know how long it is. [For example] It might take 1 hour… That was not included, so it was difficult for me to understand."

- Interviewee 14

Partner experiences

This section provides an overview of the experiences of partner organizations who referred their clients to FAST, or collaborated with IEC-BC and client-facing organizations to deliver FAST. The evaluation team conducted two rounds of semi-structured interviews with representatives from four partner organizations, when they first started FAST delivery and after partners had one to two years' experience delivering the program. Our interviews focused on program partners' experiences implementing FAST, including successes they experienced, opportunities to strengthen delivery and perceptions of how FAST interacts with other employment programs and services.

What were partner views on what worked well?

During our interviews, we asked representatives from partner organizations to talk about their perceptions of what went well in the implementation of FAST. Interviewees pointed to some core features of FAST that they found valuable, including:

- **Thorough competency-based assessments:** During our initial partner interviews, a few interviewees noted that the technical competency-based assessments helped to fill a gap in the existing employment program offerings for newcomers, especially for pre-arrival clients. Although many programs focus on helping newcomers to understand the Canadian workplace culture and labour market, one interviewee noted that the technical competency assessment results in FAST helped clients to identify their strengths and learning gaps. In later interviews, one interviewee also reported that the competency assessments in the Accounting stream were particularly valuable compared to the other streams because the assessments were specifically tailored to the profession, and helped participants to understand the technical scope of the field in Canada.

- **Connection to employer-recognized certification:** In the initial round of interviews, one interviewee reported that one of the most valuable components in the program was the access to industry certifications, particularly the BioReady certification. The interviewee noted that the certification guarantees to the employer that the job seeker meets an industry-recognized threshold of knowledge and competency.

Interviewees also reported some factors that contributed to the successful implementation and delivery of FAST at their organizations:

- **Referral from an immigrant-serving employment and settlement organization:** In the second round of interviews, two interviewees reported that FAST delivery through an immigrant-serving organization is critical to encourage participant engagement and program completion, as staff can support with screening and follow-ups with participants. One interviewee noted that the screening process at their organization before FAST referral helps to ensure that newcomers are well suited for the program. This includes having intermediate language skills, a working resume, basic industry knowledge and commitment to participate in a self-directed online course. Another interviewee noted that the referral process from their organization is also vital to ensure that their staff can follow up with participants, particularly clients who face multiple barriers and have limited time for programming. The interviewee reported that newcomers are more likely to commit to FAST if they have a go-to person they can reach out to for questions, compared to those who go through FAST independently.

- **IEC-BC collaboration and responsiveness:** In our initial round of interviews, all interviewees indicated the IEC-BC team were extremely communicative when they had questions, required support or requested updates. Interviewees also noted that they were particularly appreciative of the IEC-BC team's openness to feedback

and speed in troubleshooting technical issues. In the later interviews, two interviewees also reported that they valued the ongoing collaborative partnership with IEC-BC. One interviewee also appreciated that the IEC-BC team was willing to provide a FAST orientation directly to their clients, as they found that this practice contributed to higher registration numbers.

How do FAST components interact with other employment services and programs offered by IEC-BC and other organizations?

In our first round of interviews, we asked representatives from partner organizations to share insights about how FAST fits in their portfolio of employment services and programs. During the second round of interviews, we asked interviewees whether there had been any changes to the integration of FAST in their service offerings. Interviewees shared that FAST was:

- **Somewhat aligned with sector-specific and bridging programs:** In our first round of interviews, two out of the four interviewees reported that FAST helped to address the needs of newcomers in sector-specific and bridging programs. One interviewee noted that if newcomer clients were on the waitlist for IT and healthcare bridging programs, they were commonly referred to FAST, as the program provides a comprehensive set of resources about Canadian workplace culture and technical skills. However, in the second round of interviews, two interviewees noted that the 'complementary' integration of FAST in bridging programming was limited to sharing high-level information about the curriculum, and providing the registration link to clients. This suggests that there might be an opportunity for further coordination between IEC-BC and service provider organizations to integrate FAST into their bridging programs in a more meaningful way.

- **Complementary to job search supports:** In our second round of interviews, two out of the four interviewees reported that newcomer clients benefited from taking part in job search programs and workshops either before, or in tandem with, FAST programming. For example, one interviewee reported that it is critical to ensure that clients are prepared to navigate the labour market and have demonstrated some soft skills before taking part in FAST. The interviewee noted that enrollment in FAST is an appropriate next step once newcomer clients have developed their Canadian resume, analyzed their strengths and skills and learned about the National Occupation Classification system and industry associations. Despite this, one interviewee reported that FAST could be repetitive of job search services at their organization, including resume-building, interviewing and networking workshops. The interviewee noted that service provider staff are careful to refer participants who have taken part in job search workshops to FAST, to limit information overload and ensure that clients receive impactful programming.

Box 5 : **COVID-19 Impact on FAST Delivery Partners**

During interviews, we asked representatives from partner organizations to share how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their services, including FAST. Interviewees shared several organizational challenges brought on by the pandemic, including:

- **Prior remote work experience affected ability to transition online:** One out of the four interviewees shared that the COVID-19 social distancing restrictions and the need to move to the online setting severely affected their capacity to deliver programming. As external funding streams collapsed shortly after the start of the pandemic, the interviewee reported that their organization faced staffing shortages and had to shut down most of their operations for several months, before transitioning online. Despite this, two interviewees shared that their organizations were able to transfer programming to Zoom and return to "business as usual" within a few weeks. This streamlined transition to a virtual environment was possible because staff had been working online for years before COVID-19, and the organization already offered online programming for clients.

- **COVID-19 had mixed effects on FAST referral numbers:** One out of the four interviewees shared that the number of program referrals from their organization declined at the start of the pandemic, including FAST referrals. Since their organization was only able to offer one program to prepare newcomers to take part in FAST, it took longer for clients to become ready to enter the program, which contributed to a drop in FAST referral numbers. Despite this, another interviewee reported that their FAST referral and enrollment numbers increased during the pandemic, as newcomer clients exhibited greater interest and willingness to participate in self-paced online programs to upskill.

- **Securing and sustaining outcomes has been more challenging:** Two out of the four interviewees reported that the COVID-19 pandemic has made it particularly difficult for their organizations to achieve and maintain target employment outcomes. Given the limited number of opportunities available in the labour market, one interviewee shared that clients have become less motivated to participate in employment programs, which has made it more challenging for staff to reach desired outcomes. Although some clients were able to secure jobs and internships during the pandemic, another interviewee reported that service provider staff have received poorer employer feedback about the performance of hires, which could be due to challenges assessing candidates virtually.

What were partner views on areas for improvement?

During interviews, we also asked representatives from partner organizations to share their suggestions for strengthening FAST going forward, including possible adaptations that could facilitate better delivery. Our interviews revealed a number of areas for improvement:

- **Improve tracking of client registration and progress:** In the first round of interviews, two interviewees indicated that it would be useful to monitor their clients' experiences more closely after the referral process and to receive regular updates about referred clients' enrollment and completion of FAST. Although one interviewee reported that staff at their organization had access to a portal to track client progress at the start of FAST delivery, many staff members at partner organizations were not aware that portal access was available, or did not know enough about the portal to use it. In our second round of interviews, two interviewees reported that they would still find it valuable to track whether referred clients have registered and completed FAST, and to understand the lessons learned during the program. In particular, interviewees reported that receiving frequent updates about referred clients' enrollment and progress would allow them to follow up with clients who have not registered for the program, and those who have dropped off. This suggests that quarterly reporting to partner organizations on referred clients' engagement with FAST could support program uptake.

- **Clarity of program curriculum and expectations:** In our first round of interviews, two interviewees expressed a desire to gain access to the FAST curriculum before implementation, to help their staff prepare to deliver the program. Partners indicated that earlier access to summary documentation would have enabled them to become more familiar with the program components and more clearly describe FAST to clients. During our second round of interviews, one interviewee noted that it would still be useful to provide additional information to referral partner organizations and newcomer clients about the FAST curriculum and requirements, to limit content repetition for clients who have already taken part in similar programming.

- **Enhance technical support:** In the second round of interviews, one interviewee reported that their clients sometimes experience delays in receiving responses to their FAST technical inquires, including issues with registration. The interviewee indicated that since the referral organization does not have access to the FAST platform back-end, staff are not equipped to support clients with technical issues directly, and therefore send FAST client inquiries to IEC-BC. However, the interviewee reported that this chain of communication has resulted in a lag in response times to client questions, and discouraged potential participants from registering and following through with the program. To address this, the interviewee suggested hiring a dedicated FAST employment developer from IEC-BC who could provide direct support to clients and answer technical questions about the platform.

5. Conclusions

This section summarizes the key findings of our evaluation and the implications for IEC-BC and the FAST program as well as other stakeholders interested in better supporting newcomers ion their employment journey.

Key findings

Most participants found value in FAST, particularly modules on workplace culture:

Our findings showed that 61 percent of participants were satisfied with their experience in FAST, with most participants reporting that the workplace culture training modules were particularly valuable for understanding the Canadian work environment. Despite this, most participants expressed that they would have appreciated greater specificity in the technical training component of FAST.

Participant outcomes reflect the promise of the program and point to opportunities for the future:

Our evaluation revealed that 37 percent of individuals who registered for FAST completed all components of the program, and 50 percent of participants were employed five months after registering for the program. Given the relatively light-touch and flexible nature of the FAST program relative to other more intensive skills development programs, FAST has shown promise even during the COVID-19 pandemic.[6] As such, these findings highlight the need for further work to understand how FAST can be better tailored to address the varying and specific employment barriers faced by newcomers.

Partner organizations recognized FAST's potential to address gaps in current programming, but identified important opportunities for improvement:

For many providers, FAST fills a gap in existing programming by offering sector-specific information that can be accessed flexibly and remotely. In addition, providers perceived FAST to be complementary to general employment services. At the same time, partners would benefit from having access to additional information about the program curriculum and enhanced features to monitor and track their clients' progress through FAST.

Overall, our evaluation shows promising evidence that FAST can meet a need across service provider organizations by providing sector-specific and workplace culture information to support newcomers in finding employment. In addition, our evaluation demonstrates that there are opportunities to continue to iterate on the FAST program and delivery model by engaging partners to understand how FAST fits with existing services, providing additional information to support delivery and increasing the specificity of sectoral content. As FAST transitions to the scaling phase, our evaluation will aim to generate additional evidence on the employment outcomes FAST produces for participants in existing program streams and the new long-term care stream, and continue to identify areas for improvement in program delivery and participants' experience in the FAST platform.

[6] Participant employment rates experienced an increase during the evaluation period from 31% in August 2020 to 50% in March 2021, highlighting that more participants were able to find employment after the effects of COVID-19 on labour demand had lessened.

Implications for program design and delivery

Our evaluation findings highlight some important implications for the program design and delivery of FAST that are relevant to other organizations seeking solutions to support newcomers in their employment journey.

Invest in sustainable partnerships with regional service delivery partners

Our evaluation findings demonstrate that partnerships with service delivery organizations to deliver platform-based programs like FAST can support participant success. Delivery partners screen clients for program fit, follow up with registered participants and offer complementary employment services and programs. Our evaluation points to ways to strengthen relationships with service delivery partners including providing detailed information to service delivery partners about program content, structure, duration and expectations so that they can assess the fit and suitability of their clients. Our findings also highlight the importance of working with delivery partners to figure out where FAST best fits in a newcomer's journey through other employment programs and services. We found that FAST is a good fit for participants who have already taken part in basic job search programs, but have not yet participated in bridging or sector-based programs.

Explore opportunities to provide more targeted sectoral content

Our findings highlight the importance of ensuring that the sectoral content is aligned with the technical competencies of specific occupations. Several participant interviewees shared that the sectoral content in FAST is more high-level than they had anticipated. In cases where technical assessments in the platform closely aligned with the competencies required for specific professions, partners found the content to be uniquely valuable. For example, partner interviewees found the technical competency assessments in the Accounting sectoral module to be uniquely valuable compared to other streams, as they focused on the accounting profession rather than the sector at large. Collaborating with curriculum developers with technical expertise in common occupations within a sector is one potential strategy for ensuring content is targeted enough to be useful to partners and participants.

Target employment supports based on occupational stream

Our findings indicated that participants in some streams found it easier to obtain employment commensurate with their previous experience than other streams. Although participants in the Biotechnology stream were the most likely to complete FAST, they faced particular challenges in gaining employment commensurate with their previous work experience. This suggests that Biotechnology participants might benefit from more focused employment supports in FAST to enter into their industry. This finding highlights the importance of providing employment supports that are customized to the particular challenges or barriers that newcomers might face in a given sector and occupation. Ways to address this could include finding more ways for participants to connect with industry partners in sectors where newcomers face more barriers, such as through mentorship opportunities.

What's next

In May 2021, IEC-BC received an additional grant from FSC. This additional funding is being used to expand delivery of FAST in a new long-term care stream to respond to the skill and labour needs of the long-term care sector, especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As part of this investment, Blueprint is also conducting more evidence generation activities, building on our evaluation work to date and extending the work to the new long-term care stream. In addition to the ongoing outcomes and process evaluations, Blueprint will conduct an in-depth implementation study of participant experiences and use rapid-cycle evaluation to support continuous program improvement. Final results from these evidence generation activities will be available in 2023.

Our Approach

The evaluation team examined both quantitative and qualitative data in creating this report. As a result, we used a **mixed-methods approach** in analyzing the data and interpreting the findings. This means that we used both quantitative and qualitative analysis techniques. This also means that where possible, we leveraged both lines of inquiry in order to generate insights and recommendations.

Data Sources	Number of Participants	Time Periods Covered	Indicators Used
Administrative data	646	November 1, 2019 to December 18, 2020	• Registration date • Completion status • Participant characteristics • Consent
Participant exit survey	274	November 1, 2019 to March 31, 2021	• Program satisfaction • Participant characteristics
Participant follow-up survey	179	November 1, 2019 to March 31, 2021	• Employment outcomes
Participant interviews	30	February 3, 2020 to January 6, 2021	• Program satisfaction • Participant experiences

Quantitative analysis

Our quantitative analysis uses two sources of data:

- **Administrative data** collected by the FAST platform and shared by IEC-BC with the evaluation team

  From November 2019 to December 2020, the IEC-BC team shared administrative data collected by the FAST system with the evaluation team on a bi-weekly basis. This was a key source of data for the evaluation, and it allowed the evaluation team to send participant surveys and conduct participant interviews. There were 660 participants in the dataset analyzed for this learning report, 646 of whom consented to participate in the evaluation (98 percent). This dataset covered participants who registered for FAST from November 1, 2019 to December 18, 2020.

- **Participant surveys** administered and collected by the evaluation team

  Participants can differ in how quickly they complete the FAST program. This means that simply measuring outcomes at completion may result in unfair comparisons between someone who finished a week after registration and someone who took a month or more. It would also mean either the inability to understand outcomes for participants who did not complete, or similarly unfair comparisons between individuals who completed and those who did not, due to differences in when measurements are taken. Finally, individuals can spend some time on the job search process and there can be a delay between an individual finishing a program and when the program's benefits positively affect employment outcomes.

For these reasons, this report focuses on outcomes measured five months following each participant's registration on FAST via a follow-up survey. This survey was sent by the evaluation team to every participant who registered for FAST and consented to the evaluation. The survey was sent five months after a participant's registration date; it represents a "three-month follow-up" under the assumption that most participants can take up to two months to complete FAST. Participants received a $10 gift card upon completing the survey.

Of the 646 registered and consenting participants in the administrative dataset, not all would have received a follow-up survey, as individuals registering for the program toward the end of data collection would have had follow-up surveys due after data collection had ended. As a result, we found that 597 participants received a follow-up survey. Of these, we received 180 responses: a survey response rate of 30 percent.

In addition to the follow-up survey, participants also received an exit survey two months after registration. This survey was unique in capturing two categories of data. First, attitudes toward the program were measured here due to proximity to program participation; hence, quantitative data on program satisfaction for the evaluation was based on the results from this survey. In addition, this survey included participant characteristics important to the FSC common frameworks but not included in the administrative data set; hence, additional socio-demographics examined in the report also uses data from this survey. All 646 participants received an exit survey and we received 274 responses: a survey response rate of 42 percent.

Qualitative analysis

Participant interviews

Between February 3, 2020 and January 6, 2021, Blueprint reached out to participants who enrolled in FAST in the previous two months with an opportunity to participate in a short interview. We recruited participants to take part in interviews based on the following sampling criteria: exit survey completion, program completion and program industry stream. During the evaluation period, we invited 300 participants to interview; 30 participants agreed to and completed interviews.

We spoke to 17 men and 13 women. Most interviewees (22 out of 30) had landed in Canada when they started FAST and were using post-settlement employment services. Their industry backgrounds were the following: engineering (7); biotechnology, life sciences, dentistry, and chemistry (10); information technology (5); environmental sciences (3), accounting and finance (3).[7]

Two Blueprint evaluation team members conducted each interview by phone. Each interview lasted for approximately 30 minutes. We captured interviewee responses either in paraphrased form or verbatim. Next, we coded the notes or transcript of each interview in accordance with a coding template.[8] Finally, we conducted qualitative thematic analysis using the coded notes in order to identify patterns and recurring themes.

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[7] Two interviewees did not share their industry backgrounds with the research team

[8] A subset of interviews were coded by both team members to assess degree of inter-coder reliability. In general, coding in accordance with the coding template helped ensure high reliability, and areas of potential divergence were identified and addressed during the coding process.

Partner interviews

Between October 15, 2019 and January 29, 2020, Blueprint conducted a first round of semi-structured interviews with representatives from four regional partner organizations who were engaged by IEC-BC to use FAST with their newcomer clients. Between January 28 and February 9, 2021, Blueprint evaluation team members conducted a second round of interviews with the same representatives from the partner organizations. Interviewees included ACCES Employment and the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) in Ontario; Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS) in Nova Scotia; and Success Skills Centre in Manitoba.

Of the four regional partner organizations we interviewed:

- Three (ACCES, Success Skills, and ISANS) were employment and settlement organizations who started referring clients to FAST in fall, 2019
- One was an employment council (TRIEC) who sub-contracted FAST referral to a client-facing employment and settlement organization

Two Blueprint evaluation team members conducted partner interviews either via phone or video call. All interviews took between 30 minutes to 1 hour. Interviewee responses were captured either in paraphrased form or verbatim during the interview. Interview notes were then used to perform qualitative thematic analysis.

Appendix B
Tables and Figures

Figure B1: Perceptions of FAST User Friendliness

"How would you rate the user-friendliness of FAST?"

- ■ Poor
- ■ Below average
- ■ Average
- ■ About average
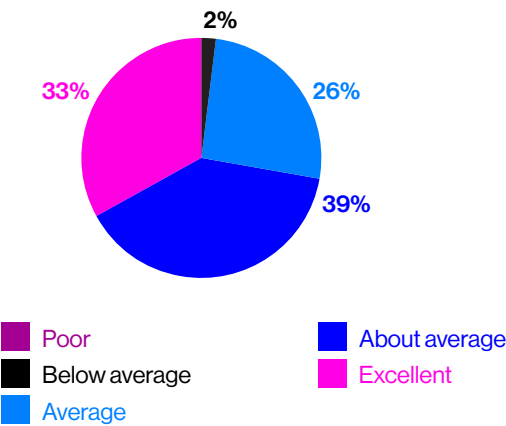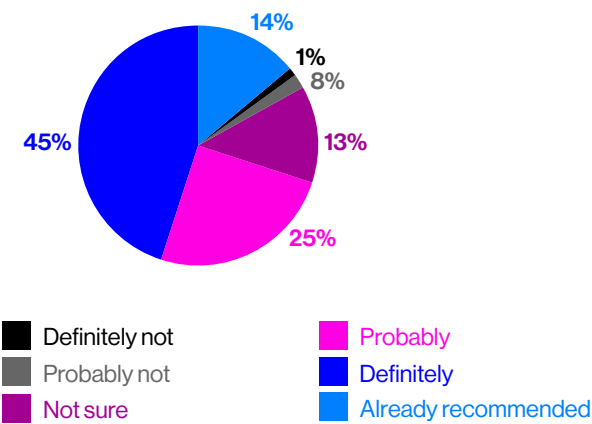- ■ Excellent

2%
26%
39%
33%

Figure B2: Likelihood of Recommending FAST

"Based on your experience in the program, how likely are you to recommend FAST to someone looking to find a job in Canada?"

- ■ Definitely not
- ■ Probably not
- ■ Not sure
- ■ Probably
- ■ Definitely
- ■ Already recommended

14%
1%
8%
13%
25%
45%

Calculating Earnings

Earnings can be challenging to measure for several reasons. First, individuals may be unable to report earnings in certain formats. For example, someone making a yearly salary may struggle to be able to report their per hour earnings, while those making an hourly wage may face similar difficulties in thinking about their earnings for the year. Second, individuals may make errors in reporting earnings information, either because of attempts to calculate earnings in the researcher's preferred format, or errors in data entry. Finally, individuals may be reticent to report earnings information, particularly in the context of their participation in workforce development programs and when engaging with service delivery organizations that have relationships with employers.

For these reasons, our evaluation sought to measure earnings in three ways:

1. For individuals who report making an hourly wage, we ask for their earnings per hour

2. For individuals who report not making an hourly wage, we ask for their yearly salary

3. For all individuals, we further ask them to report their estimated yearly earnings within one of six ordinal salary categories (i.e. "Under $20,000; $20,000 to $39,999)

We tested the third approach as a way to ameliorate participant reticence in reporting specific earnings information. However, we found only modest differences in response rates (98 percent provided a salary category, while 91 percent provided either hourly wages or yearly salary). As a result, salary categories were not used as the primary basis for analysis but were used instead to corroborate the derived earnings data.

To derive earnings data that is comparable for the sample as a whole, we calculated the yearly earnings for all individuals in the sample. For salaried individuals, this was simply their reported salaries, although in a handful of cases data from the salary category question was used to correct for apparent errors in data entry (i.e. "$40" instead of "$40,000"). For individuals who reported earning an hourly wage, we multiplied their reported hours of work per week by 48 work weeks in a year to estimate their yearly work hours, then multiplied that by their hourly wage to estimate their yearly earnings.

Appendix D

Encouragement Design

Early in the evaluation, our team tested an encouragement design to achieve two aims:

- Effect estimation: Estimate the impact of FAST on participant employment outcomes
- Continuous improvement: Investigate whether encouragements can improve program completion, as an option for improving the program model

For the encouragement design, we assigned participants to one of three groups:

1. Non-financial encouragement: participants received targeted prompts to complete FAST by reminding them of the benefit of the program.
2. Financial encouragement: participants received the targeted prompts described above, and also were incentivized with a $25 gift card for program completion.
3. Control: participants did not receive encouragements.

Both encouragements were sent 15 days after participants registered for FAST. Of the 646 participants who consented to the evaluation, 285 received an assignment as part of the encouragement design pilot.

Estimating effects

The encouragement design was intended to allow us to estimate the causal effect of FAST on employment outcomes, without limiting program access in the way that would be required with a randomized controlled trial. In theory, the encouragement design would let us estimate the effectiveness of FAST using the following logical sequence and set of assumptions:

1. Encouragements improve FAST program completion
2. If completing FAST improves employment outcomes, then the group who was encouraged should experience better outcomes due to higher completion rates
3. Based on how much the encouragement promotes completion, we can use this difference to estimate how much FAST improves employment for the average participant

The encouragement design did increase completion rates, as assumed in the first step. Participants who received the non-financial encouragement and financial encouragement completed the program at rates of 44.0% and 47.3%, respectively, compared to 36.6% of the control group.

As outlined in Section 3, completion rates were not positively associated with employment rates in this evaluation, so the assumption needed for the second step was not met. Since the group who completed FAST experienced slightly lower employment rates than the group who did not, encouraging FAST completion was not related to employment. As a result, we were unable to use the encouragement design to estimate the effects of the program.

Supporting continuous improvement

While we were not able to use the encouragement design to estimate the effect of FAST on employment outcomes, the results still yielded useful insights for program improvement. Since incentivizing completion is a key lever to improve the delivery of the FAST model, and the encouragement design offered a costless approach to improve completion via targeted encouragement emails, we continued to pilot this approach throughout the evaluation and recommend further exploration of encouragements to the IEC-BC team.