

Evaluation of the Cook to Connect Project

DRAFT REPORT

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Association for New
Canadians

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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. The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint ADE, and The Conference Board of Canada

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Introduction

Goss Gilroy Inc. (GGI) was engaged by the Association for New Canadians (ANC) to conduct an evaluation of the Cook to Connect project. The evaluation assesses the implementation and outcomes of Cook to Connect to date and provides considerations and recommendations regarding the project going forward.

Approach

The evaluation focused on the key evaluation topic areas of relevance, efficiency and effectiveness – those recommended by the Government of Canada Treasury Board Policy on Results. The methodology included the following components:

- 1. Review of documents and data:** GGI reviewed available data regarding the project. This included participant information gathered at intake. Documents, including the original project proposal, were also reviewed.
- 2. Management and staff interviews (5):** Interviews were used to gather in-depth information regarding the project’s design, delivery and outcomes. GGI conducted interviews with five members of the project’s management and staff.
- 3. Participant interviews (24):** Interviews were conducted with participants from Cohorts 1, 2 and 3. Of the total 32 participants, 24 were interviewed (the number per Cohort is presented in the table to the right). Participants from Cohorts 1 and 2 were interviewed in-person, by telephone or virtual platform, as they had already completed the project. Cohort 3 participants were interviewed in-person - at the project site - while the project was ongoing. All participants were provided with an honorarium of \$20 for their participation.
- 4. Case studies (5):** Case studies were conducted with five participants (across all three Cohorts) who were identified by project staff as having particularly positive outcomes as a result of the project. All case study participants were provided with an honorarium of \$20 for their participation.

Cohort 1	6
Cohort 2	6
Cohort 3	12

Findings

1. The Cook to Connect Project

Cook to Connect was developed as a pilot project, funded by the Government of Canada’s Future Skills Centre. First launched in 2021, the project consisted of three main components, delivered over a one-year period. As identified below, participants first completed culinary training and English language training during the first six months while the second half of the project was dedicated to workplace training.



During the first six months, training was provided Monday to Thursday for six hours per day (three hours of culinary training in the morning, led by culinary instructors; and three hours of English language training in the afternoon, led by an English language instructor). A stipend was provided covering participants’ time spent completing culinary training.

English language training was also tailored to the project, delivering a curriculum focused on “English for a special purpose” or ESP – in this case, focused on language specific to the food industry (for example, kitchen language, kitchen protocols, and recipe reading and writing).

During workplace training, participants were provided opportunities to work shifts either in the ANC’s Global Eats food truck or the catering business. Participants were paid an hourly rate, and available shifts were divided evenly among participants based on their availability.

1.1 Project design and development

The ANC first secured funding in 2019 to launch a food truck social enterprise business as a means of training newcomers interested in working in the food services sector. Food services was considered a promising area of focus due to the role that food tends to play in different cultures and in helping newcomers integrate into the community. This initial project trained ten newcomer participants and focused on exposing them to new cuisines as well as providing foundational food services skills. As the funding period concluded, the Manager at the time saw an opportunity to expand the project to include in-class culinary training, as well as help participants obtain food safety certification while incorporating the existing workplace training component.

The culinary curriculum was developed specifically for the project by the instructor and based on existing culinary training programs. However, the material was tailored to the needs of newcomers (for example, covering the laws and regulations related to operating a food establishment in Newfoundland and Labrador and in Canada). The content was also parsed down from the typical two-year length of culinary programs, focusing on what was felt to be the most important skill development areas.

1.2 Profile of participants

As identified in Table 1 below, the project accepted a total of 35 participants. Three participants left early due to personal reasons (illness, moved away, caring for their dependents).

Table 1: Participation by Cohort

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Cohort 3	Total
Accepted into the project	12	11	12	35
Left the project early	2	1	--	3
Completed the project	10	10	12	32

Participation numbers align with the targets initially set for the project aimed at training a total of 36 participants over the three cohorts.

As part of the evaluation, 24 of the 32 participants were interviewed (6 from Cohort 1; 6 from Cohort 2; 12 from Cohort 3). The following provides a profile of these 24 participants.

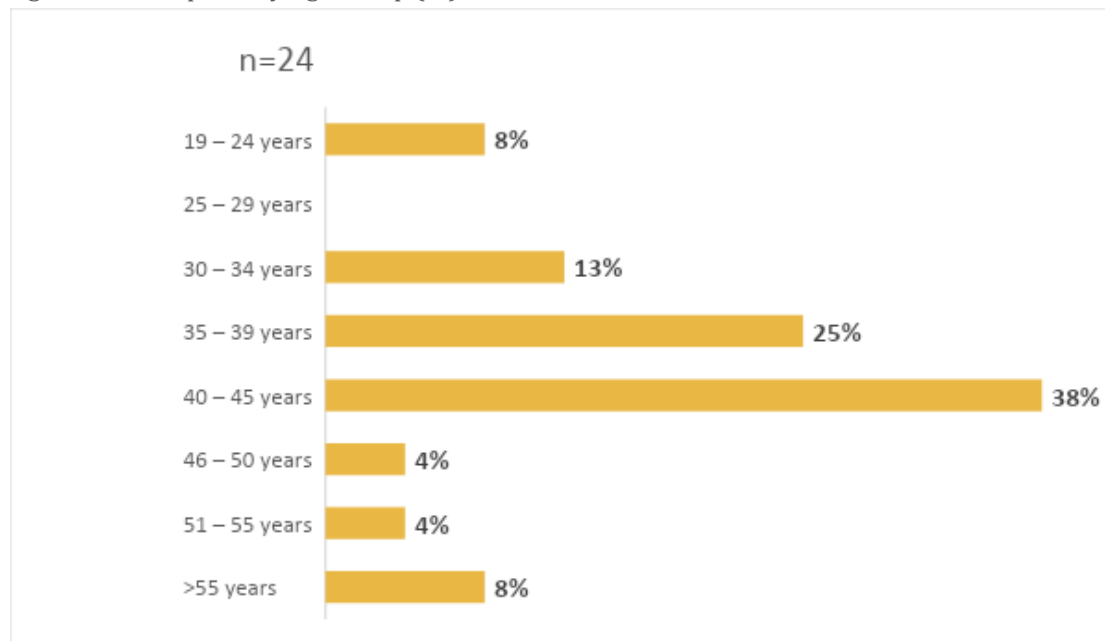
Gender

Of the 24 participants interviewed, most (83%) were female.

Age Group

Participants were distributed across age groups, with the largest proportion between the ages of 30 to 45 (see Figure 1 below).

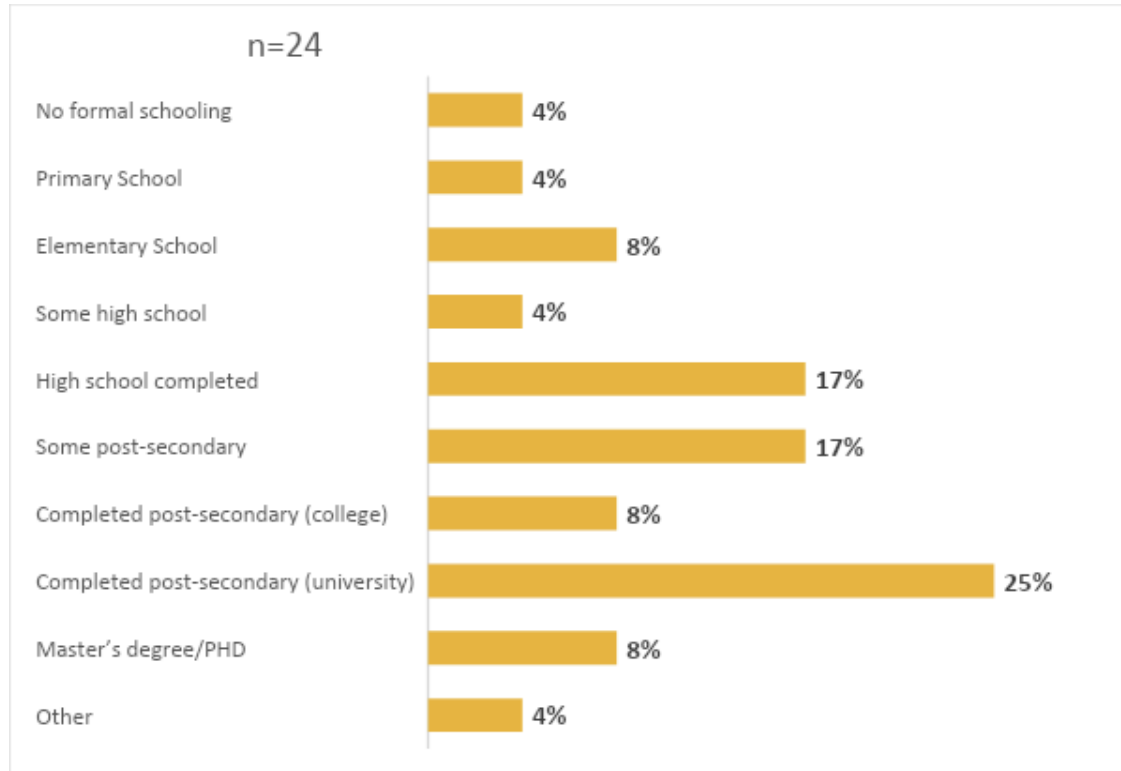
Figure 1: Participants by Age Group (%)



Highest Level of Education Completed

Participants varied in their level of education, ranging from no formal schooling to a graduate-level degree. The largest proportion (25%) reported obtaining a university degree (see figure below).

Figure 2: Participants by Highest Level of Education Completed (%)



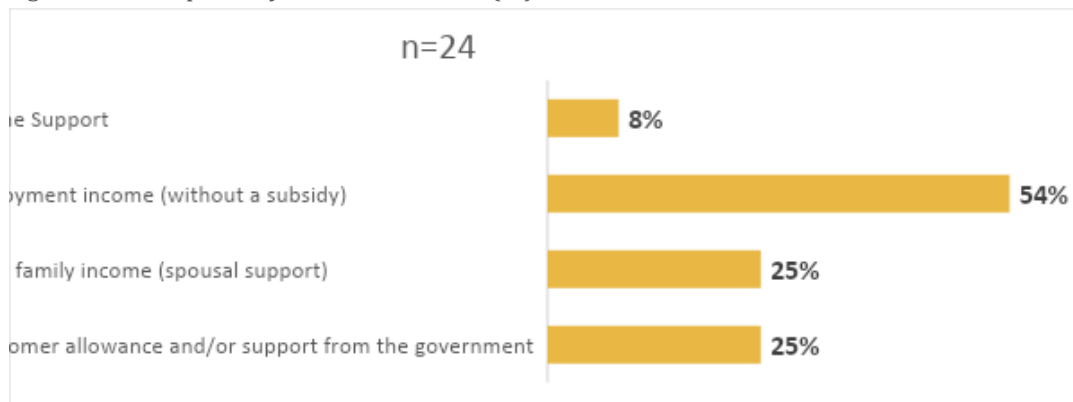
Level of English Language

At the time of the participant interviews, most categorized their English as intermediate (Canadian Language Benchmark or CLB levels 5-6) and nearly a third identified as having basic English (CLB levels 3-4). Some others were already English speakers when arriving in Canada.

Source of Income

Participants were asked to indicate their source(s) of income before the project. As shown in the figure below, the majority reported being employed before the project. Some had a partner contributing income, and some were receiving government support such as a Newcomer Allowance. A few participants (8%) indicated receiving Income Support.

Figure 3: Participants by Source of Income (%)



Diversity

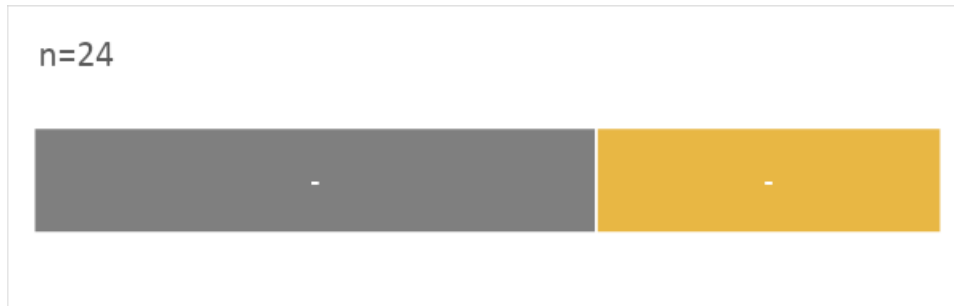
Of the 24 participants interviewed, almost all identified as an immigrant/refugee/newcomer to Canada. Additionally, five self-identified as a racialized person/person of colour and one identified as LGBTQIA2S+. The project also aimed to support diversity by accepting participants from a range of different countries (e.g., China, Syria, Sudan, Chile, Venezuela, Turkey, Nigeria, Ukraine).



Past Work Experience in Food Services

The majority of participants who were interviewed (62%) indicated that they did not have any previous experience working in the food services industry. However, a third of these further explained that they enjoyed cooking; often cooked for their family and friends; and/or cooked as a hobby. The other 38% reported working in food services, either in their home country and/or since arriving in Canada.

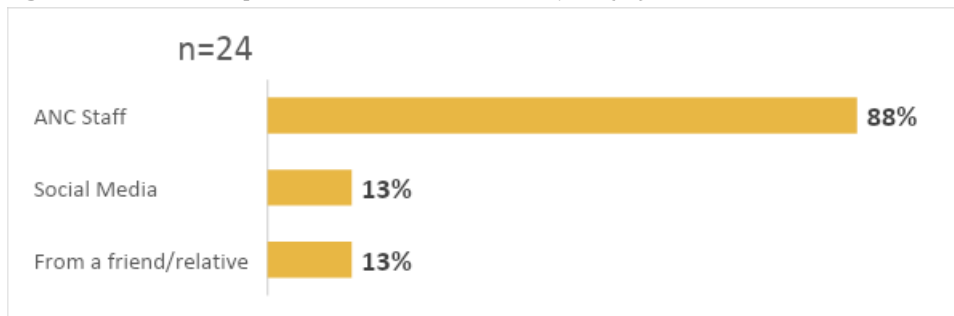
Figure 4: Participants' Past Work Experience in Food Services (%)



How Participants Learned about Cook to Connect

Most participant respondents reported hearing about Cook to Connect from ANC staff, including teachers in the language school or from the original Food Truck Social Enterprise staff. Others heard about the project through social media and/or from a friend/relative.

Figure 5: How Participants learned about the Project (%)



2. Relevance

2.1 Extent there was a need for a project like Cook to Connect

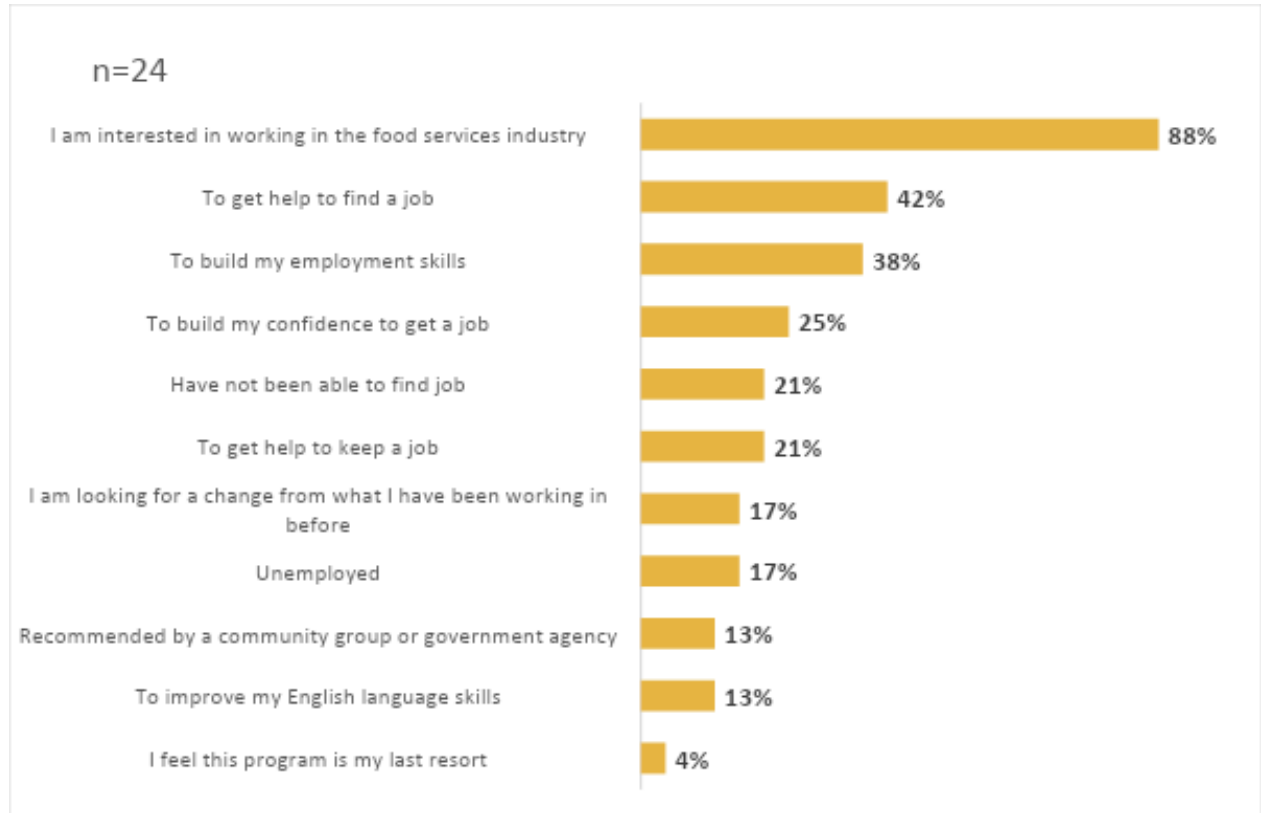
All staff respondents felt that the need for a project like Cook to Connect in the region was evident. The project received a high number of referrals and expressions of interest, particularly during the third cohort (25+ received in the last few months of the project timeframe). It was felt that there is both a need for more workers in the food services sector, as well as programming tailored to support newcomers.

It was also noted that the province is welcoming increasing numbers of newcomers, and finding employment can be challenging. This was further evidenced in the project proposal outlining the impacts of the pandemic on the food services industry, where, as of 2018, immigrants made up nearly 35% of the food services and accommodations labour force (Statistics Canada). Newcomers also tend to be the first to be laid off and are generally underemployed, often due to language barriers. For these reasons, the project was established with the intent to support lower-level English language participants to obtain training and work experience to facilitate employment in the sector or help them to pursue entrepreneurship opportunities. Staff felt that the project helped to provide participants with a “competitive edge” to pursue and secure employment.

Alignment with the needs of participants

When asked why they decided to participate in Cook to Connect, participants identified a number of reasons (as shown in Figure 6 below). However, most often (88%), participants indicated that they took part in the project because they were interested in working in the food services industry. Participant respondents further explained that they had previous experience working in the sector; they wanted to learn more, especially about food and cooking in Canada; and/or that they felt it was a good employment area to pursue. As referenced in the figure below, participants also referenced other reasons, including that they wanted help to find a job and to build their employment skills.

Figure 6: Reasons Participants Decided to Participate in the Project (%)



Participants were also asked to identify the types of barriers to employment that they have faced. Of the 24 respondents, 10 stated that limited English language skills have impacted their ability to obtain employment. Other participants identified one or more of the following:

- Lack of recognition of work experience outside of Canada (4)
- Limited Canadian work experience (3)
- Lack of education (2)
- Lack of/limited employability skills (2)
- Few work-related skills (1)
- Limited work experience (1)
- Family responsibilities (1)
- Lack of confidence/low self-esteem (1)
- Financial issues/debt (1)
- Limited computer skills (1)

Participant case studies (see Appendix) describe in more detail participants' barriers to employment including that their educational credentials were not recognized in Canada, and/or because they lacked Canadian work experience or experience working in food services. The project's key components supported participants to address these challenges – helping some improve their language skills and providing others with relevant work experience to pursue employment.

Staff informants also spoke to both the “Cook” and the “Connect” aspects of the project and how both have supported participants. As one informant explained, the hands-on nature of cooking resonated with many participants regardless of English language skills, and food tends to be a key cultural component for many newcomers. A few other staff informants explained that the project helps to offset

social isolation as it creates a space where participants can meet other newcomers, some of whom also are new to Canada.

Alignment with the ANC

Broadly, the ANC aims to support newcomers to settle and integrate in the region by helping them gain skills and knowledge to become independent. As noted by one staff informant, the project aligned well with the objectives of the ANC in delivering programs that support different aspects of immigration integration, in this case providing supports and programming specific to language skills, learning and employment.

The program is promoted as an opportunity to gain “culinary and industry ready training, mentoring and practical work experience and skills development for refugees within the food services industry”. As such it is well situated as one of the ANC’s AXIS Career Services offerings.

Uniqueness of the project

Staff informants were asked whether they felt Cook to Connect was duplicating or complementing other existing programs available in the area. All agreed that the project offers something unique, particularly as it was designed from the ground up and is tailored to the needs of newcomers.

While there are other culinary/cooking programs available in St. John’s, these are offered by colleges, require a fee, and they have minimum language requirements. Other local programs have a similar design in that through social enterprise initiatives they provide training and workplace experience to individuals experiencing a myriad of challenges (e.g., Stella’s Circle). However, these are not specific to newcomers and do not incorporate language skill development.

3. Efficiency

3.1 Extent that the project was implemented as planned

Broadly speaking, the project was delivered as planned in terms of the key components – food services training, English language training and workplace training. However, the COVID-19 pandemic was the main factor that impacted some aspects of implementation. Due to lockdowns at some points in the project, the participants could not engage in in-person learning. Instead, the culinary instructor recorded videos during this time which participants could watch at home, providing students with the curriculum in a different format than what was planned.

The pandemic also impacted the workplace component of the project for Cohort 1 and 2 participants as the demand for catering was dramatically reduced in the absence of social gatherings and in-person events. Participants were still able to gain workplace experience when catering opportunities emerged and were also provided the opportunity to continue supporting catering jobs after they graduated from the project. Currently, when a catering event is planned, Cohort 1 and 2 participants are still invited to participate. One informant explained that during the most recent event, about 50% of past participants contributed, even though some have since secured employment elsewhere.

The project also encountered turnover with the language instructor during Cohort 2, creating a gap in training for part of the six-month period. Informants indicated that Cohort 3 was less impacted by COVID and was delivered as planned.

3.2 Project resources and administrative processes

Staffing

The project is staffed by a lead culinary instructor and certified chef, overseeing an assistant culinary instructor and an English Language teacher. A catering/food truck supervisor was also added to the team as a need was identified part-way through the project. Oversight for the project is provided by the ANC's Manager of Social Enterprise Programs. There was consensus among staff informants that Cook to Connect had the right staffing structure to support project delivery.

Several informants, however, noted that staff had to be flexible in their roles and sometimes took on additional roles and/or worked overtime, especially during busy catering events. Informants did not, however, identify any issues contributing to the project in other capacities outside of their set duties, noting their dedication to the project and the participants.

Staff Informants described the staff as a "tight knit group", always willing to support one another, with passion for what they are achieving through the project. All staff informants were satisfied with the project and their involvement in it. They described their experience as "rewarding" and "fulfilling" and noted feeling privileged to be part of such a project and to gain a better perspective of the immigrant community in the area. Participant respondents described staff as supportive, encouraging, patient, passionate and helpful.

One staff informant recommended that, as the project increases its catering and food truck activity now that Covid restrictions are no longer a factor, an additional staff be engaged to support this work particularly during the summer period.

Project Funding

All staff informants indicated that the amount of funding allocated to the project was sufficient and additional funding needs were not identified. However, one informant said their level of pay was quite low and salary increases would be appreciated. It was also noted that project funding is needed to continue Cook to Connect once the funding period concludes in March 2023.

Administrative Processes

Given its small staff complement, the project did not incorporate administrative processes to guide the project's communication, reporting, or data collection. The Manager of Social Enterprise Programs fulfilled reporting requirements to the funder, providing regular updates.

A participant application form was also implemented for Cohort 3, given the increased interest in the project and the need to develop criteria for participation. This was considered a positive addition to project processes.

3.3 Partnerships

Informants explained that the project has led to several successful partnerships. The St. John's Farmers Market has provided Cook to Connect with a space from which to operate over the last few years, first at no cost. However, the project has been paying to use the space during the latter part of the project. Because the project was delivered from the Farmers Market site, this also sometimes resulted in additional catering referrals to the Cook to Connect group. The project also successfully delivered a collaboration with Bannerman Brewery by offering a "pop up" event catered by Cook to Connect.

Further Opportunities for Partnerships and Collaborations

Staff informants saw the potential for other future collaborative opportunities. Several recommended future partnerships with other community-based organizations or community-based events. For example, it was suggested that Cook to Connect could partner with the Hungry Heart Café on catering events in forming a social enterprise coalition. The two groups could provide reciprocal guidance and support as well as partner on catering opportunities (Hungry Heart could provide options for morning/breakfast events and Cook to Connect could provide lunch options).

Another informant noted that existing restaurants have identified an interest in hiring the Cook to Connect group to develop and provide canapes on certain evenings, showcasing different genres of food. It was felt that this could be further explored.

One informant also suggested collaborating with existing colleges offering culinary or cooking programs such as the College of the North Atlantic and/or Academy Canada as both groups could mutually benefit from sharing resources and best practices, particularly with the intent of better supporting newcomers training to work in the food services sector. There may also be opportunities to transition Cook to Connect graduates towards additional post-secondary training opportunities, should participants wish to pursue further accredited courses.

3.4 Challenges faced in implementing the project

Informants identified a few key challenges in addition to those posed by COVID-19, as discussed in section 3.1. With a number of Muslim participants, the project had to quickly learn to adapt during Ramadan, when some participants did not eat or drink during daylight hours. In an effort not to place participants in a situation in which others would be preparing or tasting food, the project offered training during Ramadan through recorded videos which could be watched by participants at any time, and the food safety training was also conducted during this period, so as to minimize time in the kitchen. Another informant noted that care was also taken to respect the dietary needs of participants such as using halal chicken or beef, and/or respecting vegetarian needs.

While it was anticipated that participants would have limited English language proficiency, the project faced some challenges, particularly during Cohorts 1 and 2, as some participants had difficulty understanding the curriculum, and/or studying for the Food Safety Certification exam. In advance of Cohort 3, the project recommended that participants have a minimum Canadian Language Benchmark level of 3 or 4 in order to participate. As one informant explained, this change made a significant difference to the project training.

Three of the five staff informants also felt the project faced unique challenges during training arising from some cultural norms. In the workplace, some participants had more of a lackadaisical approach while working among customers or they did not understand the importance of indicating that they would not be able to show up for a scheduled shift. Once this need was identified, staff adjusted the training to include a focus on building understanding of work culture.

Finally, the project struggled without a dedicated space to meet teaching and catering needs. The project was delivered from the St. John's Farmers Market space. However, because it is used for other purposes, Cook to Connect staff had to store their equipment in an on-site storage space after each use, requiring staff to rewash it, and set it up each time and then put it away again. Also, because of limited space, the project could not order ingredients in bulk and instead had to order smaller quantities at a time. When catering opportunities emerged, the team had to ensure food could be prepared during hours amenable to the Farmer's Market space (they could not use the space after hours or on weekends).

Staff informants explained, however, that they tried to mitigate these limitations by providing additional shifts to participants in the food truck if catering jobs were reduced. The project also rented a kitchen in another location for a short period. At the time of the interviews, informants were hopeful that a recently acquired space would help ease some of these concerns and allow the project to pursue more catering opportunities, in turn providing more workplace training to participants.

3.5 Supports provided to participants

Participants were provided with the following supports:

- Stipend for 3 hours per day, Monday – Thursday (this was added for Cohorts 2 and 3 only based on an identified need)
- Transportation to and from the training location
- Access to a Chromebook during the project
- Access to chef equipment and tools (e.g., knife kit)
- Chef uniform and apron (and appropriate footwear if need was identified)
- Food ingredients

Participants were also invited to take home the food they cooked everyday. The stipend covered half of the time participants spent in training each day (3 of the 6 hours). Staff informants felt that this financial support helped participants with limited income.

One staff informant recommended that the project identify an existing ANC resource that could help participants with non-project related matters such as challenges with residency status, renewing a driver's license and/or other day-to-day trouble shooting. Participants sometimes came to culinary instructors with such questions; however, they were not trained or qualified to provide such guidance and navigational support.

Perspectives of the participants

Participant respondents identified that, as referenced above, they received all of the needed materials, a uniform, as well as transportation to facilitate their participation in the project. Several also noted the ongoing support they received from project instructors, with one participant explaining that they “went the extra mile”. All 24 participant respondents indicated that the supports provided were helpful, explaining that everything needed was provided and that no one was excluded. Several participants emphasized the importance of transportation support as they did not have their own vehicle.

When asked whether project supports could be improved in any way, one participant recommended that the project allow participants to keep some tools, such as the knife kit, following participation in the project. Another suggested that the project support participants to find a job in food services after completing the project. Additionally, one participant noted that the transportation support became unreliable at times when one of the Cohorts included a large group of participants who required transportation leading to delays.

3.6 Challenges faced by participants

Half the participant respondents identified facing one or more challenges while engaged in the project. Most often, participants noted challenges associated with language barriers (identified by 6 of 24 participants). One participant specified that the tests in particular were challenging due to the use of

more technical language and another noted that the language instructor left part-way through Cohort 2, impacting their learning. Another participant explained that, arising from the limited English language capabilities of some participants, it took longer to cover the course material.

Most staff informants also cited language as a challenge faced by many participants in the Cook to Connect project. Both culinary instructors could converse in other languages such as French, Spanish and Arabic, helping with some interpretation. Participants and staff also used Google Translate when needed. Overall, staff explained they had to be mindful of language throughout the project, speaking slowly, and repeating information if it was evident participants did not understand what was being said. One staff informant also emphasized the need to provide information to participants in written format, if at all possible, going forward (for example, providing project information or updates verbally, as well as in an email). Despite the challenges faced, staff felt that participants' English improved over the course of the project and most still had a positive experience, despite the language barrier.

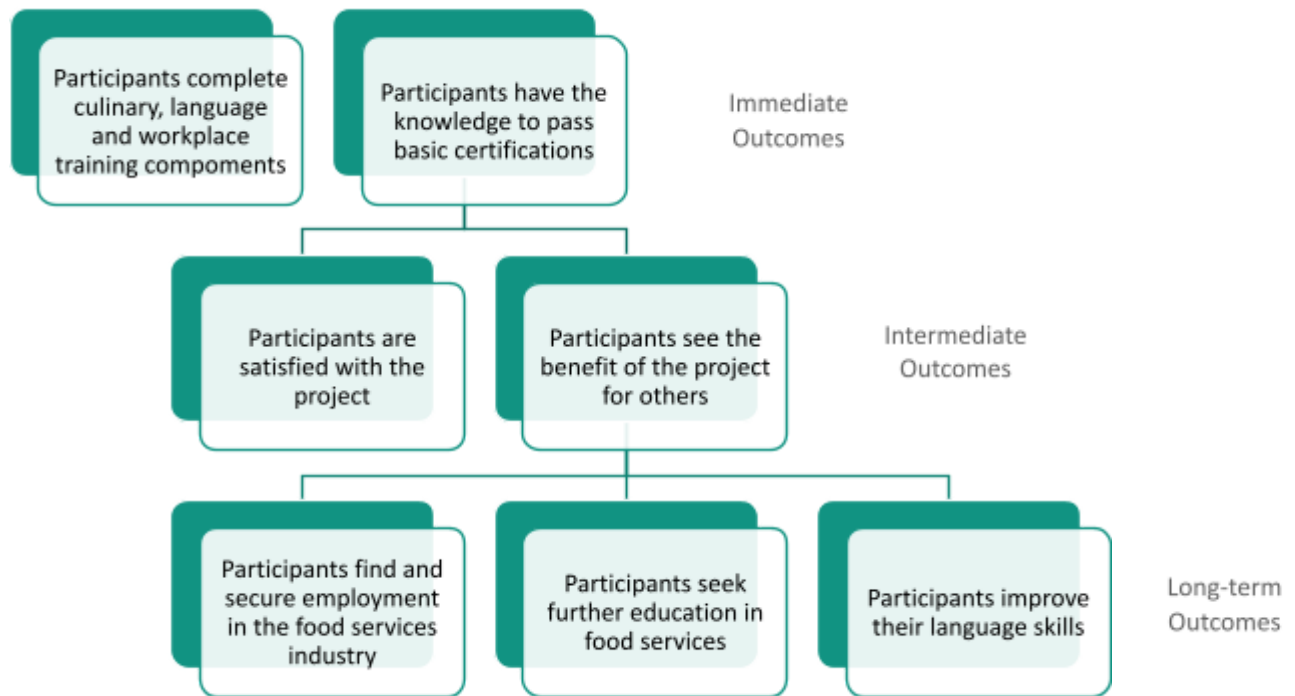
Another participant explained that she faced challenges due to her need for childcare, particularly during the summer when school is closed (the participant was later provided space for her children in the ANC summer camp). Staff informants also highlighted this challenge, explaining that participants with children face added challenges when school is closed (e.g., for spring break, Christmas break), when children are sick, and/or if they have to pick up their children from school in the afternoon.

Other participants mentioned that they sometimes struggled to balance the project with other commitments such as medical or legal appointments, working or school. In advance of Cohort 3, however, staff implemented an application form which outlined project hours and asked participants the extent that they could commit to participating. Staff informants indicated this helped to identify the best candidates for the project.

4. Effectiveness

4.1 Key outcomes achieved

The project proposal identified the primary intent of Cook to Connect as being to “leverage newcomers existing skills set and provide the necessary supports to secure meaningful employment”. More specifically, the following immediate, intermediate and longer-term outcomes were identified at the outset of the project:



Immediate Outcomes – Participants Complete Training Components

The project achieved a high participation and completion rate. The project successfully completed three cohorts, graduating 32 participants. Although the project was a full year in duration, very few participants left early and of the three participants who left part-way through the project, they exited due to personal reasons (illness, moved away, caring for their dependents).

Participants were asked to rate each of the three main project components using a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is “not very helpful” and 5 is “very helpful”. Overall, participants provided positive ratings, as shown in the figure below where average ratings ranged between 4.67 and 5.

Figure 7: Extent that Each Project Component was considered Helpful (Average Rating)



Food Services Training

As outlined in Figure 7 above, all participant respondents rated food services training as helpful or very helpful explaining that:

- it provided a good foundation of culinary training including food preparation and presentation;
- the instructors were helpful;
- they learned about food safety;
- they learned about different cultural and international foods;
- they shared cooking experiences with the other participants; and/or
- they gained experience preparing food, important to getting a job.

From where I come from, this opportunity is too good to be true.

Very necessary to work in the industry. Some things we learned were basic knowledge, but others were really important, but I didn't previously know.

All participant respondents referenced the value of the culinary training they received, providing them an opportunity to learn practical skills and techniques with the ongoing support of project staff.

Basic cooking skills – one class dedicated to cooking a chicken and everything about that, for example. Knowing these basic skills is so important.

The experience I was getting in the project I began applying immediately as I started working in a restaurant as a prep cook. I very quickly began doing things that were not necessarily part of my job because I was learning them [in the project]. I am now a lead chef because of the extra experience the program has provided and how impressed the restaurant was. The restaurant also really liked the food safety certification we got here which helped as well.

English Language Training

Referring back to Figure 7 above, participants provided slightly lower average ratings regarding language training. Almost all participant respondents rated the language training as “helpful” or “very helpful”. However, two respondents provided a rating of 2 out of 5.

Respondents indicated that through language training they had the opportunity to practice conversations, reading labels and writing measurements and recipes. They also described the language instructor as being particularly helpful and encouraging, speaking slowly and explaining the meaning of words.

Our English teacher was really supportive and helped us with the workplace training – how to understand and not rush.

Some participant respondents noted that, despite their challenges with the language barrier, the language training they received was helpful to them and supported their participation in the project. A few respondents felt that the project helped them the most in this regard. One participant respondent explained that they had never spoken English before the project.

Others felt that, while the training was helpful, they needed more language training in order to continue improving. One participant noted the language instructor left part-way through their cohort explaining that the transition to a new instructor was challenging. Finally, one participant explained that because their English level was higher than the others, the language training was too basic and therefore not helpful to them.

Workplace Training

All participant respondents rated the workplace training as being “very helpful”. They said that this component of the project provided important hands-on and on-the-job experience with one respondent stating that it taught them how to manage a team in the food truck. They also gained helpful tips which were later found to be widely applicable while working in the food services sector.

Some participant respondents explained that the training helped them to be more confident and ‘cook under pressure’ and to better understand how to interact with people. Some respondents also said the project helped them to gain Canadian work experience, considered important in securing future employment as a newcomer to Canada.

Many participants continued to contribute to catering jobs with the project even after graduating. When a catering opportunity arises, all previous participants are provided the opportunity to work shifts and many continue to do so, even though some are otherwise employed.

A few staff described a pop-up event that the group hosted at Bannerman Brewery last summer featuring a full menu. Many former students contributed through several days of lead-up prep, delivery, execution of the menu, breakdown and clean up. The level of effort and professionalism demonstrated by the former students was emphasized by several staff informants.

Immediate Outcomes – Participants Obtain Relevant Certifications

The project provided participants with training in key areas and dedicated project time to help participants prepare and study for the Safe Food Handling Certificate exam. All participants across the three cohorts passed their exam, with a minimum of 90%. This is considered a key achievement by several staff informants given the certificate requires understanding of content related to biology, in some cases - in a language other than their primary language. Participants also obtained a Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) Certificate during the project. As referenced by one staff informant, having food safety training is critical, especially for securing future employment in the food services sector.

If you're an employer and have people who don't understand the language and you're not sure if they will be putting things in the right place - the project covers that. They have an advantage over others.

A number of respondents also noted the value of the food safety certifications.

In the restaurant we learn less details. In the class you learn about temperatures and stuff like that. I can explain it to people in the restaurant and teach them.

In Canada, there are slightly different standards with the food industry. The program helped me to understand this as I intend to work in this area.

Intermediate Outcomes - Participant Satisfaction

All participant respondents were satisfied and noted that the project met their expectations. Comments included:

- they learned what they expected to learn both in terms of culinary skills and language skills;
- they gained knowledge and experience cooking both Canadian food and food from other cultures;
- the culinary training reinforced and expanded their existing cooking skills;

- the training challenged them in a positive way;
- the training helped them to make a move into a new employment sector; and/or
- they were more confident about finding employment and living independently.

Others stated that the project surpassed their expectations, noting the new friendships they developed. A few others explained that they were satisfied, yet one had expected the project to place them in a job after completion and another had hoped to progress further with their English language skills.

Overall, staff informants felt the project met expectations and resulted in positive outcomes. The project received a high number of referrals and applications, especially in the third year.

Intermediate Outcomes - Perceived Benefit of Project to Others

All participant respondents said they would recommend the Cook to Connect project to others. They specified that the project is of value to those seeking to meet others and improve their skills, as well as to those interested in working in the food services sector and/or individuals settling in Canada. Staff informants indicated that they received applications based on referrals from past participants.

A few participants, however, said that the project is not for everyone, because it is a one-year commitment on a full-time basis, and some individuals are already working or going to school.

Long-term Outcome - Participant Employment

Participant respondents from Cohorts 1 and 2 were asked about their current work status. Of the 12 participants from Cohorts 1 and 2, six were working (see below). Of these, three participants were working in food services – two in a restaurant and another as the lead Chef in a care home. One of these participants explained that the Cook to Connect project made it possible to obtain their current job, highlighting they were hired two days after completing the project. This participant said that the project helped them realize that they could successfully pursue employment and support themselves.



Another five participants were looking for work (three in the food services sector). One had successfully pursued several jobs as a chef since completing Cook to Connect, but had recently left after deciding to revisit a sector they worked in before moving to Canada. One other participant was on maternity leave and completing further English language classes virtually and remained interested in cooking.

At the time of the interview, the 12 participants from Cohort 3 were completing their classroom training component and moving on to the workplace training component. When asked what they hoped to do after the program, **all 12 respondents planned to work in the food services sector**. One

participant was already working part-time as a line cook in a restaurant while participating in the project and hoped to continue advancing their career in the restaurant industry and/or furthering their education. All others planned to look for work in food services, with a few noting that they may also pursue further culinary training.

Staff informants spoke broadly to participant outcomes providing several examples of past participants having successfully secured employment in the food services sector. Participant case studies also demonstrate that, while some participants were not currently working in the food services sector, three of the five case study respondents were considering opening their own restaurant in the future, or their own business focused on food from their home country. A fourth case study respondent stated their intention of owning their own small business in the future, yet they did not specify what type.

Long-term Outcome – Participants Pursuing Further Training

While none of the participant respondents were pursuing further culinary training at the time of the interview, three participants in Cohort 3 who were still engaged in the project referenced an interest in completing further training in the future.

Long-term Outcome – Improved Language Skills

Staff informants noted improvements in participants' language skills. As an example, in a span of four or five months, participants relied less on translation apps. It was noted that, for the most part, they could comprehend full-page worksheets in English, and had increased confidence in their English language capability.

4.2 Other Key Outcomes

Social Connections

Although not a targeted outcome, almost half the participant respondents mentioned that meeting new people and the diversity of the group were favourite aspects of the project. Participant respondents explained that they made new friends and learned about different cultures.

Several staff informants also described the social connections formed as a result of the project. As one informant explained, for some participants, building social connections was, in some respects, more important than learning culinary skills.

It was definitely beneficial. Having a space they can come to and meet a circle of people who are in similar circumstances as newcomers. Breaks down isolation.

Each cohort becomes like a family. During the second cohort, there were tears when it was over because participants didn't want it to end. Some said it's been the best six months of their life. The former Manager must have had that vision when he called the project Cook to Connect.

Students were always giving their 100% - to each other and to the program. It was really nice that they supported each other. Not like a contest. It was always support, support, support.

Staff informants also spoke to the privilege they felt in being a part of the participants' learning, and in having the opportunity to learn more about the immigrant community and their cultures. Staff and past participants still maintain contact through a WhatsApp group.

Knowledge of International Cuisines

Almost half the participant respondents indicated that their favourite part of the project was learning about the food and flavours of different countries. Some also liked learning more about Newfoundland and Labrador, as well as Canadian, cuisine and culture.

Learning new cooking skills and things I never tried before.

I've learned about so many new types of food since the project began - for example, we had a Christmas party, and everyone brought food from their own cultures. It brings a lot of different perspectives to your palette when working with food.

Improved Self-Confidence

Participant respondents said the project helped them to gain more confidence personally, as well as in their skills, and ability to secure employment in the food services industry.

I realized I can take care of myself, work/find a job, and live like [others].

The project helped me see that I can do more than I think of myself. I gained confidence and I never knew I had such energy. It brings out the best in me in being patient and concentrating.

By providing language supports and a financial stipend, staff informants also agreed that the project helped some participants gain a sense of independence and security as they settle in Canada.

4.3 In what way do you think the project helped you the most?

We asked participants in what way they felt the project helped them the most. Participant respondents identified multiple ways in which the project had an impact on them with more than half indicating that the project helped them most in improving their culinary skills. For other participants, the project helped them improve their self confidence and/or provided them with practical work experience.

Figure 8: How the Project Helped Participants the Most (%)



5. Overall Approach

5.1 Lessons learned and effective practices

Of note, much of what is discussed in this section has been referenced herein.

Staff informants identified the following as **lessons learned**:

- While the project helps participants to improve their English language skills, several informants noted the importance of participants beginning the project with a base level of English. During the first two cohorts, the project did not include an application or intake form, and it was assumed that participants, regardless of English language proficiency, would benefit from the project. However, staff informants explained that, in some cases, challenges arose because participants had limited English language skills. In some instances, it led to participants misunderstanding the information provided and more time required to teach the curriculum. In an effort to address this issue, an application form was used during the third cohort, asking participants to indicate their level of English and seeking participants with a minimum level 3 or 4 on the Canadian Language Benchmarks scale. Another informant also explained that staff learned over time the importance of providing participants with the information in written form so they would have more time to digest the information while also allowing some to use translation apps if required.
- Several informants spoke to the importance of recognizing cultural differences in the context of culinary and workplace training. For example, during the workplace component, staff noted the importance of cultural sensitivity, leading participants with respect and ensuring they did not appear patronizing in any way. Specific to culinary training, staff learned to identify training components that required more time and detail based on cultural backgrounds. One example was the need to educate participants regarding types of cheese, an ingredient not often used in some cultures (i.e., Asian countries, some Arabic and African countries). To increase participant's understanding of cheese as an ingredient, the culinary instructors added a cheese tasting component to the curriculum, providing information on the different types, their origin, and their use in cooking. This was described as an "eye opener" for many participants.

One or more staff informants identified the following as **effective practices**:

- Several informants identified setting up a WhatsApp group for each cohort as a best practice – it improved communication among the group, helped participants get to know each other and allowed a venue for instructors to celebrate participants' accomplishments.
- As part of the curriculum, the culinary instructors asked participants to develop a recipe representing food from their home country, complete with written measurements, and were asked to teach it to the rest of the class. It was noted that some of these dishes have gone on to be added to the catering menu. This was highlighted as a particular success by several informants. They explained that this activity, presented near the end of the classroom training component, became something that participants looked forward to in the project. It provided them the opportunity to act as Head Chef, while applying their communications skills and culinary terminology learned in the project.
- Being flexible and adaptable; recognizing that, as a new project, you can't plan for everything.

- Establishing participant criteria and an application form to support the intake process, particularly in gauging the level of commitment of prospective participants, as well as their level of English.
- Taking the time to speak to each participant individually at the beginning of the cohort to learn about them, gauge their level of English and identify any of their concerns.

5.2 Suggested areas for improvement

Three of the five staff informants said project space and location are key priorities going forward. As described in section 3.4, the project did not have a dedicated space, leading to inefficiencies such as having to store all the equipment when not in use, and limited kitchen time available to take on catering events. The ANC recently purchased a restaurant which will provide a dedicated space for food preparation and workplace training. However, a larger space will still be required for in-class training.

One staff informant felt that the Cook to Connect project should be celebrated more publicly. The project has helped a number of students, yet it is not widely known or publicized.

Another informant recommended that the project model be re-visited, based on what has been learned with the first three cohorts. Although participants received a stipend for some of their time, it was felt that a full year in a project could be unrealistic for some individuals. Rather than 6 months in the classroom and 6 months completing workplace training, one informant suggested 3 months of classroom training and 3-6 months of workplace training. This would also allow additional time to recruit students and more than one cohort could be completing the project per year.

Participants provided the following perspectives on changes to program components:

Culinary Training

A few participant respondents would have liked more time spent on culinary training, either lengthening the culinary training period or lengthening the project hours per day. One of these participants felt that there was not enough time to study and practice what was being taught.

Other participant respondents recommended more time focused on basic skills (e.g., chopping) and two others recommended more in-depth instruction, both practical and theoretical.

A few participant respondents also recommended that the project focus on improving the flow of the training and following a syllabus. One participant suggested that the training begin with more basic concepts applicable across dishes, rather than shifting from one dish to another.

Finally, a few participants noted that they would have liked to learn about food from more countries – one noted that the project did not cover very much relating to their home country, and another wanted to learn more about Western cuisine.

English Language Training

Three participant respondents felt that more opportunities were needed to practice speaking English including conversational practice, or less formal opportunities such as games, to help make the experience more fun and less intimidating. One participant also suggested a language assessment of some kind be included.

A few participant respondents noted that the project should be more mindful of the English language capabilities of all participants so everyone can learn and benefit. Some English-speaking participants found little value in the language training component.

Workplace Training

Three participants recommended that the project incorporate more on-the-job training and support to help individuals transition to a real workplace.

Overall

A few participant respondents identified other areas of potential improvement. One stated that the project should begin with activities focused on team building so that participants can get to know one another, particularly as participants come from different cultures and backgrounds.

Another participant respondent noted that some others in their cohort did not intend to work in the food services sector following the project. Due to the demand for such a project, it was recommended that only individuals with interest in working in the sector be eligible to participate. Of note, staff informants expressed similar views, noting that during the project, it was evident that some participants were not committed to working in the food services sector. Prior to Cohort 3, a question was added to the participant application form asking participants to identify whether they have an interest in pursuing a career in food services.

5.2 Sustainability of the project

At the time of staff interviews, the funding period was set to conclude within a few months. All felt it was a worthwhile project that needed to continue in some form, especially now that the project foundation and structure has been established and piloted. Several informants acknowledged that further funding would be needed to sustain the project going forward. While attempts had been made to secure further funding, additional funds had not yet been confirmed.

One informant felt that the ANC could transition to a business model with the recent purchase of a restaurant space from which the project can continue to operate catering services, as well as the restaurant. While it takes time for a new restaurant to be profitable, additional funding would still be needed, however, to ensure salaries of project staff are covered.

Conclusions and Considerations

Based on GGI's in-depth review of the project, it is evident that Cook to Connect was a success and led to positive outcomes. The project was established based on a demonstrated need (both among the food services industry and among newcomers seeking skill development and employment) and developed from the ground up – meaning that the training curriculum and project components were tailored specifically to meet the needs of newcomers in the region.

Overall, staff and participants were very satisfied with the project and their involvement, identifying few areas for improvement. Project management and staff also continued to make small adjustments as the project progressed, further improving the model.

The project was felt to have appropriate staffing and funding. In particular, staff were invested in the project, maintained a flexible approach to best support participants in each cohort, and went above and beyond their stated roles. However, some challenges were faced due to the lack of dedicated space to support both classroom and workplace training.

The project was a resounding success in terms of meeting its participation and training objectives. Despite logistical challenges brought on by the pandemic, the project successfully trained and supported 32 participants. The project experienced a very low rate of attrition, and the few participants who left early, exited due to personal reasons rather than project-related reasons.

Participants found great value in each project component, and all participants passed their Safe Food Handling certification exam. As a result, the project helped increase participants' employability skills and Canadian work experience, providing participants with greater opportunities for employment in Canada.

Based on this assessment, it is recommended that the project continue. Below are further considerations:

1. The project should identify and build further partnerships, such as those recommended by informants, to expand Cook to Connect's reach and opportunities for collaboration.
2. An existing ANC resource should be assigned to support Cook to Connect participants in instances when they are seeking navigational support unrelated to the project. Such support should be identified and communicated to participants early in the project.
3. In advance of Cohort 3, an application form was established and was felt to have improved the participant selection process. Cook to Connect should further develop the application/intake process to support project implementation:
 - a. Basic demographic information should be gathered (e.g., gender, age group), as well as the current barriers to employment individuals face. This will help to further inform the project regarding participant needs. While the current form asks participants whether they will require transportation to and from the classroom site, this should be expanded to also ask whether they require any other supports.
 - b. All information gathered should be maintained in a simple applicant and participant database (i.e., in Excel) so that information can be easily compiled and expanded upon based on participant progress (for example, if a participant leaves the project early or finds employment).

4. While most participants valued the English language training component, some participants were already English speakers and noted that this training component was not useful to them. Going forward, the project could consider designating specific aspects of the language training as optional for those participants with more advanced English skills.
5. The project should increase its profile in the community and publicly celebrate its achievements and impacts, as was recommended by one of the staff informants. More outward communication regarding the success of participants may also help increase awareness of the project among potential employers.
6. Now that the project has successfully supported three Cohorts, project management and staff should re-assess the overall project model (i.e., 6 months dedicated to culinary and language skills training and 6 months focused on workplace training) to identify whether any adjustments could better meet the needs of participants, while maintaining the integrity of each project component.

Appendix – Participant Case Studies

The following provides a more in-depth account of the experiences of five participants in the project across all three cohorts. Please note, pseudonyms have been assigned to each participant in order to support anonymity.

Anna – Cohort 1

Anna took part in the first cohort of the Cook to Connect project. In her home country - Venezuela - she completed a Bachelor's degree and worked in the business intelligence field. She came to Canada as her partner secured employment; but despite having the same educational background as her partner and having received a work permit, Anna's English was not strong enough to work in a position equivalent to the one she had.

Once in Canada, she began learning more about cooking and gained knowledge surrounding food. She found cooking to be enjoyable, therefore she made the decision to begin a career in cooking while working to improve her English language skills. Anna learned about the Cook to Connect project through staff at the ANC. She decided to participate because she had been unable to find a job in her field and saw the project as an opportunity to continue to pursue her cooking interests. The project also provided a good fit as she was also able to continue furthering her English language skills.

Anna spoke very highly of the project, including the staff, and felt taking part in the Cook to Connect project was a good choice. It allowed her to try work in a new sector and provided an outlet for her to prove to herself that she could succeed, making her feel 'complete'. Since the project, Anna has held various positions in the food services industry including at a restaurant, a hotel, two seniors retirement facilities, and with a local school lunch organization. She considered each of the three project components helpful. Anna's favorite part was learning about the different dishes and flavors from around the world.

Anna did, however, struggle to find childcare as the project took place over the summer months when her children were not in school. She was eventually able to get space in the ANC summer camp.

Anna felt she gained valuable work experience in the food services industry, as well as furthering both her language and cooking skills. The project met her expectations of bridging a gap while she focused on securing employment in the business intelligence field, in particular by providing an opportunity to improve her English. She identified feeling more secure in, and confident with, her skills and hopeful for the future as a result of the project. Anna indicated that she would, without a doubt, recommend the Cook to Connect project to others.

At the time of the interview, Anna was not working as per her own decision. She is hoping to find a job that is more relevant to her educational background, and, in particular, one that pays more than the food services industry. In five years, she hopes to have a job in business intelligence and have more financial stability. She also mentioned the possibility of starting her own business, focused on food from her home country, should her financial situation allow.

Jane – Cohort 1

Jane came to Canada in 2016 and participated in Cohort 1 of the Cook to Connect project. She has five children, and in her home country – Syria – Jane worked at a restaurant and as a farmer. Jane's participation in the project was motivated by an interest in furthering her work experience in the food

service industry. As well, the project provided an opportunity for her to improve her English language skills, and she appreciated that the project was offered at no cost. Jane learned about the Cook to Connect project through staff at the ANC and believes taking part was a good choice. In particular, she highlighted the project staff as well as the opportunity to make friends, learn a new language, and learn about a new country.

Each component of the project – the culinary training, language skills training and workplace training, were all considered helpful. Jane felt she was well supported throughout the project, and she was grateful to have gained Canadian work experience and improved English language skills. She also enjoyed the opportunity to try foods from different countries and, overall, indicated the project met her expectations. Jane would recommend the project to others, stating it was overall a great experience. The only drawback was she would have liked to have more opportunities to work in the ANC's food truck following the Cook to Connect project.

At the time of the interview, Jane was not working, but she was waiting to hear about a potential job opportunity. In five years, she hopes to finish language school at the ANC, have steady employment, and be able to provide the best for her children.

Maria – Cohort 1

Maria, who took part in Cohort 1 of the Cook to Connect project, is originally from China where she worked in foreign trade. Upon arriving to Canada, Maria attempted to find a similar job, however faced challenges as her post-secondary diploma was not recognized in Canada.

As she was struggling to find employment in her former field, Maria began working in the food services industry while also doing occasional acting jobs. She heard about the Cook to Connect project from a friend/relative and made the decision to participate. She felt this was a positive choice and was happy with her decision.

Maria referenced both the food services training and the workplace training components as most helpful. However, because her English language skills were already good, she did not gain as much from the basic language skills taught as part of the project.

Overall, Maria spoke very highly of the project, highlighting the cooking skills she learned and having the opportunity to try things she otherwise would not have. Maria also enjoyed meeting people from different backgrounds and places around the world as well as being introduced to new types of food, in particular, Western and Newfoundland dishes. Maria stated she would absolutely recommend the project to others, reiterating that she learned a lot and it was a great experience.

At the time of the interview Maria was not working as per her own choice. She indicated wanting to take some time to work on planning, but she did not elaborate further. In five years, Maria hopes to obtain a local diploma and start her own business making and selling handmade jewelry as well as maintaining acting as a hobby. She eventually hopes to explore owning her own restaurant, a path she can now see based on being in the project.

Sarah – Cohort 2

Sarah took part in Cohort 2 of the Cook to Connect project. She is from Afghanistan where she completed high school and worked in the finance field before coming to Canada approximately seven years ago. She completed a foundations program with the ANC and briefly worked in the esthetics field, but a lack of Canadian work experience and limited English language skills proved to be barriers to employment for her.

Prior to Cook to Connect, Sarah participated in a smaller-scale food services program initiated by the ANC which trained 10 newcomers. She had never worked in the food services industry but became interested as a result of this initial program and decided to further pursue work in this field. Sarah joined the Cook to Connect project as she required culinary experience in order to complete a certification with a local college. She feels this was a good choice for her as it further confirmed that she enjoys working in this sector.

Sarah indicated both the food services training and the workplace training were helpful. However, part-way through the cohort, the language instructor left, and she felt this negatively impacted her language skill development. She said that learning the culinary skills while also learning the associated English cooking language was most effective.

In addition, the project provided her with the opportunity to gain work experience, make friends, learn about food from around the world, improve her English language skills, and help her to realize she can take care of herself and be independent. Sarah has already referred some friends to the project and feels it was incredibly beneficial. Sarah also appreciated the supports provided by the project such as the stipend and materials and she also availed of the transportation support.

At the time of the interview, Sarah was working full-time in the food services sector at a senior's retirement facility. She received this job only a few days after completing the Cook to Connect project and feels the project undoubtedly helped her with this achievement by providing work experience as well as an opportunity to improve her English. Sarah is content with her current job but hopes to eventually explore the idea of opening her own restaurant.

Alex – Cohort 3

Alex participated in the third cohort of the Cook to Connect project. Originally from the Maldives, he came to Canada approximately one year ago through the refugee program and worked as an activist and a freelance artist prior to coming to Canada. He also had some experience in the food services industry working at a café prior to enrolling in the project. However, Alex explained that he faced challenges obtaining a job due to his limited Canadian work experience and limited experience working in the sector.

After learning about the Cook to Connect project through a friend/relative, Alex decided to participate because of his interest in pursuing work in the food services sector with a goal of gaining experience in the field and eventually pursuing cooking at a higher level.

Alex indicated that both the food services training and the workplace training were valuable. However, given his strong English language skills, the language training component was not as relevant to his needs.

Alex availed of the transportation provided by the project and indicated that all required materials were provided. Because he began the project soon after arriving to Canada, he sometimes had other obligations to tend to (e.g., appointments) during project time. However, project staff were very understanding.

The diversity of the project and the way it brought together so many different people from various cultures and backgrounds was what Alex appreciated most about the project. In addition, he enjoyed the opportunity to learn about and try so many different types of food, explaining that it opened his mind and palette to foods he had not been exposed to before.

Alex credits the project with helping him develop the skills and expertise needed to begin his career in the culinary industry. In addition to this practical knowledge, Alex also gained confidence in his cooking, and he valued being around other people who were in a similar situation to him as a refugee. He recommends the Cook to Connect project to anyone looking to gain invaluable skills and who want to get ahead in the culinary field.

At the time of the interview, Alex was still in the process of completing the project and was working part-time as a line cook at a local restaurant. Alex confidently feels the Cook to Connect project helped him to not only get a job in the food services industry, but also to quickly advance within the workplace due to the experience and skills/techniques he was gaining in the project. He utilized the support of an employment assistance agency to obtain his current job. Overall, Alex described his job as a stable position with a great environment, adding that he was very content there. In five years, Alex hopes to have his own small business – he did not elaborate further.