

Evaluation of the Atlantic Autism Supports and Employment Network (AASEN) Program Final Report

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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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1.0 Introduction

Goss Gilroy Inc (GGI) is pleased to present this report for the Atlantic Autism Supports and Employment Network (AASEN) Program funded by the Future Skills Centre (FSC). This report outlines the background and context of the network in supporting Autistic adults in the Atlantic Region. The purpose, scope, and objectives of this evaluation are highlighted, along with this evaluation's methodology and approach. Finally, the results of the evaluation are presented according to key evaluation questions and indicators. A brief summary with recommendations concludes this evaluation report.

1.1 Background – Autistic Adults in the Atlantic Region

About 1 in every 50 (2%) Canadian children and adolescents is Autistic, according to the Public Health Agency of Canada (CAHS, 2022). Research about the diversity of Autistic people in Canada is limited, however it is known that they face additional and unique barriers especially if they live in rural and remote areas or are part of equity-seeking groups.

Autistic individuals in the Atlantic Region were already among the most marginalized people in the labour market before the pandemic, with an unemployment rate of approximately 80% (AASEN proposal). The pandemic has aggravated pre-existing inequalities and created new barriers for adults on the autism spectrum trying to gain meaningful employment or navigate the complex and changing labour market.

Each province in the Atlantic Region faces unique challenges in engaging Autistic adults in the labour market. Prince Edward Island struggled with employers relying on subsidies to hire persons with disabilities – often temporarily – instead of hiring them in more permanent positions simply because they are the right person for the job. New Brunswick has seen challenges with potential partners being siloed within their regions and also struggling to work collaboratively. Conversely, the Newfoundland facilitator has experienced strong collaboration between partners, but has faced challenges posed by the rural and remote nature of its population, which is much the same in Cape Breton (AASEN gap analysis). Through this gap analysis the emerging network gained a better understanding of the local employment landscapes and gaps in supports, leading to the formation of a regional partnership to share ideas and solutions to the barriers facing Autistic individuals looking for work in Atlantic Canada.

The employment support landscape varies considerably across the Atlantic region, with Nova Scotia having the most robust support network for Autistic adults. For example, Autism Nova Scotia (Autism NS) has 15 years of experience in pre-employment skills training, employment supports, and advocacy for the disability community. With chapters across the province, its structure is unique to NS amongst the other Atlantic provinces. This allows greater reach in supporting Autistic adults across the province.

Outside of Nova Scotia, employment supports for adults on the autism spectrum are very limited. Employment agencies often do not have the skills to provide supports for Autistic adults, and there are little to no available on-the-job supports, job-based skills or supports during interviews (which can be a very difficult aspect of job hunting for adults on the autism spectrum). Additionally, the minimal supports that do exist often do not collaborate, and work in silos and are only mainly accessible in the larger cities, leaving many individuals with no support or support that is extremely difficult to access. As one AASEN facilitator points out:

“Each organization acts as a little independent resource where a participant will have to find a way into and way out. The organizations are not ready to work as a cohesive whole or an eco-system for adults on spectrum as each organization works differently and has an end objective to meet. The services could be funding dependent and might vary too so there is uncertainty involved. AASEN facilitator”.

1.2 Purpose of the AASEN Program

The Atlantic Autism Supports and Employment Network (AASEN) Program is an employment and skills support network comprising organizations from Nova Scotia (NS), New Brunswick (NB), Prince Edward Island (PEI) and Newfoundland (NL) to support Autistic adults in accessing employment opportunities. In the context of COVID-19, the AASEN program is designed to create a continuous collaboration of network partners to ensure resilient support structures are in place for Autistic adults in the Atlantic region to meet their employment needs, particularly in underserved areas.

Project Description

This project is designed to create new partnerships and strengthen existing ones by improving coordination between provinces and addressing employment service and support gaps within the Atlantic region.

Autism Nova Scotia (Autism NS) has been the AASEN program’s lead from the start and has worked alongside the network of regional partners to build community capacity for a new type of employment support for Autistic adults. Regional partner organizations in the network are:

- Autism Connections (Fredericton, NB)
- Stars for Life (Charlottetown, PEI)
- Autism Nova Scotia – Cape Breton Chapter (Sydney, NS)
- Autism Society of Newfoundland (St. John’s, NL)

The network provides an online supported job searching group, Career Quest (CQ) and the COVID-19 Employment Support Group (ESG), an online forum for Autistic employees/job seekers to discuss the changing nature of work and develop skills to adapt to it.

Project Objectives

The primary objectives of the network are to:

- Build a network of Atlantic partners to enhance capacity for employment supports across neighbouring regions for Autistic adults.
- Recruit participants, build relationships with communities that will refer the participants.
- Train facilitators and Autistic leaders to deliver CQ and ESG as designed (i.e., fidelity).
- Provide education and training opportunities to employment service providers and employers.
- Work in collaboration with Ready, Willing, and Able (RWA) and associated programs to ensure effective use of resources and minimize duplication.
- Create a knowledge exchange system that supports the development of an employment community of practice within the Atlantic region.
- Recognize and enhance the inclusion of first voice leaders in the delivery of the program (and thereby enhance the employability of Autistic adults).

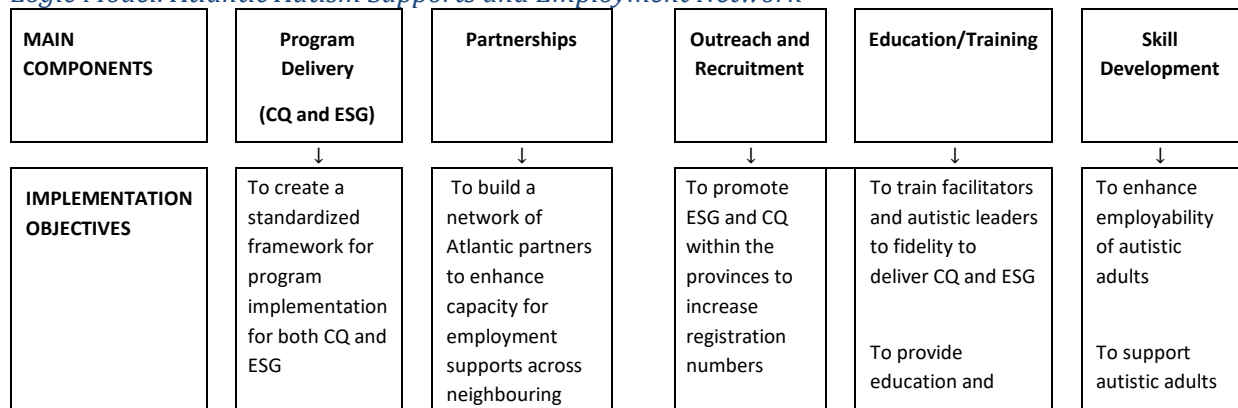
1.3 Theory of Change

The mission of AASEN is to provide a network of support for Autistic adults to gain skills and enhanced resiliency to reach their employment goals, despite COVID-19 and other social and economic challenges.

Through program delivery, partnerships, outreach and recruitment, education and training and skills development, the primary objective of the AASEN program is to create a standardized framework for implementation of key programs including Career Quest (CQ) and the Employment Support Group (ESG). If further seeks to build a network of partners to enhance capacity for employment supports across neighbouring regions for Autistic adults and seeks to promote programming, train facilitators and enhance employability of autistic adults.

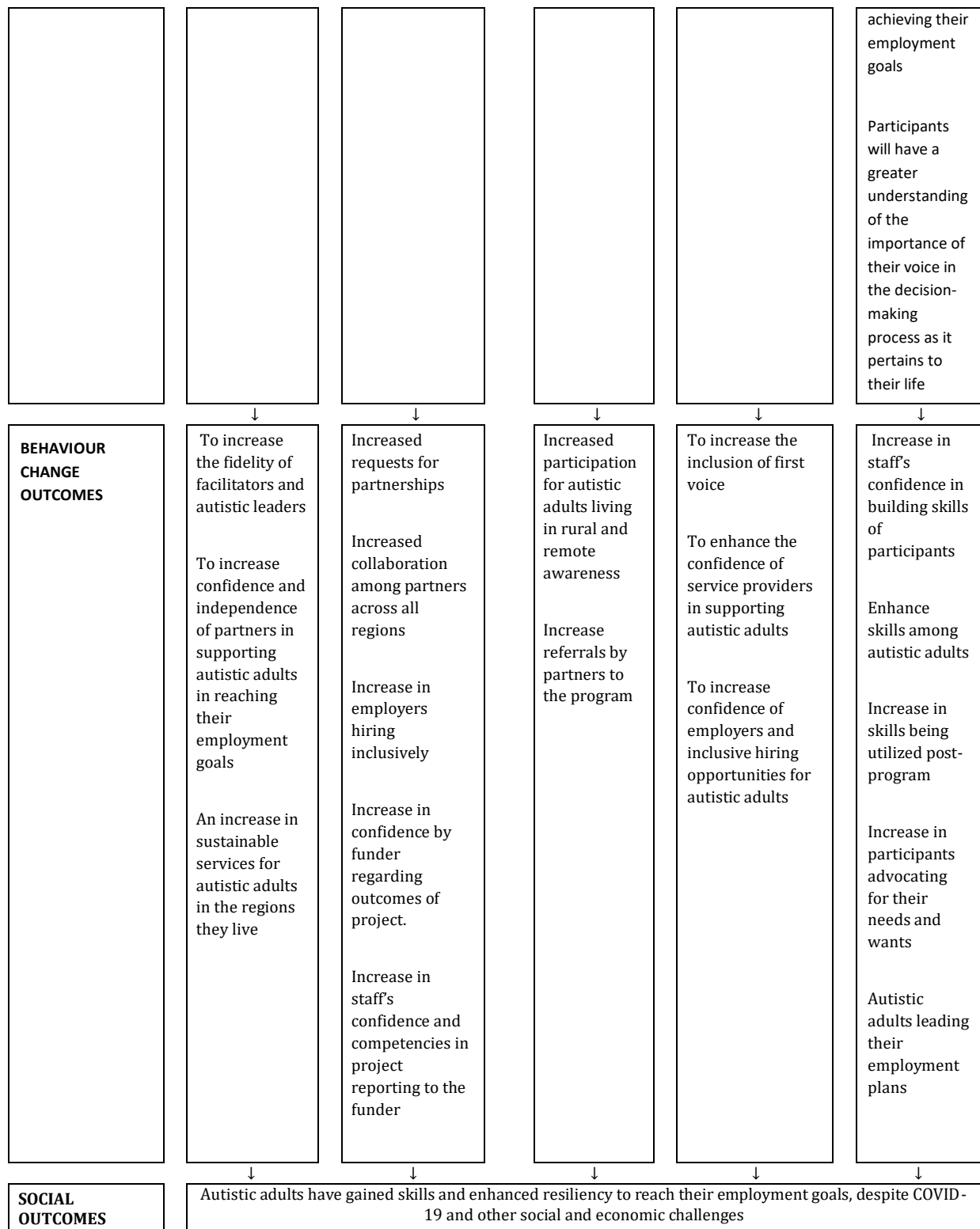
The following logic model illustrates the theory of change for the AASEN.

Logic Model: Atlantic Autism Supports and Employment Network



	<p>To work in collaboration with program partners to build sustainable services through an integrated service delivery system in each region</p> <p>To support facilitators in reaching fidelity of program model for successful implementation</p>	<p>regions for autistic adults</p> <p>To outreach and promote stronger partnerships within each province to better understand the service landscape and opportunities to collaborate</p> <p>To enhance inclusive hiring in all regions</p> <p>To enhance best practices in program delivery through partnerships</p> <p>To fulfill funding commitments and responsibilities to Future Skills</p>	<p>To ensure autistic adults in rural and remote regions have access to ESG and CQ</p> <p>To build strong and trusting relationships in communities that will refer participants to the program</p>	<p>training opportunities to employment service providers and employers.</p> <p>To work in collaboration with RWA to ensure effective use of resources and minimize duplication</p> <p>To create a knowledge exchange system that supports the development of an employment community of practice within the Atlantic region.</p> <p>To recognize and enhance the inclusion of first voice in the delivery of the program</p>	<p>in building critical vocational skills to independently find employment and navigate the support landscape</p> <p>To increase the generalization of skills learned in the program across multiple environments</p> <p>To enhance the knowledge and self-advocacy skills of autistic adults</p>
	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
OUTPUTS	<p># modules and activities</p> <p>Frameworks themselves</p> <p># partners</p> <p>Types of partners</p> <p># facilitators reaching fidelity</p> <p>%fidelity</p> <p># referrals post-program</p> <p>Types of referrals post-program</p>	<p># partners</p> <p>Kinds of partners</p> <p># promotions and outreach activities</p> <p>Types of promotions</p> <p>Types of outreach (employers)</p> <p># outcomes for funder</p> <p>Types of outcomes for funder</p> <p># meetings</p> <p>Types of meetings</p> <p># program or procedure</p>	<p># participants</p> <p>Geographical region</p> <p># relationships</p> <p># referrals</p> <p>Types of referrals</p> <p>Referral origin</p> <p>Promotion materials</p> <p>Frequency of promotion</p> <p>Types of promotion</p> <p>Referral forms</p> <p>Retention rate</p>	<p># training session delivered</p> <p>Types of training</p> <p># employers trained</p> <p># service providers trained</p> <p># resources shared between RWA and AASEN</p> <p># resources shared in the community of practice (COP)</p> <p># first voice leaders</p> <p>Surveys</p> <p>Types of surveys (pre and post)</p> <p># training session requests</p> <p>Types of requests</p>	<p># skills gained</p> <p>Types of skills</p> <p>Surveys</p> <p># of participants that self-report generalization of skills</p> <p># of participants that report enhance use of self-advocacy skills</p> <p># of job secured</p> <p>Types of jobs secured</p> <p>Origin of job opportunity (RWA, job</p>

		<p>changes among partners</p> <p>Types of program or procedure changes among partners</p> <p>Surveys (points in time surveys)</p> <p>Types of surveys</p>			<p>agency, online, etc.)</p>
	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
KNOWLEDGE / CAPACITY OUTCOMES	<p>To increase understanding and knowledge of a best practice employment support program among partners</p> <p>To increase knowledge of staff regarding the importance and role of fidelity in the program delivery</p>	<p>To increase partners awareness and understanding on the importance of collaboration</p> <p>To increase knowledge of best practices and inclusive hiring</p> <p>To increase awareness of opportunities of collaboration in the community</p> <p>To increase a better understanding and knowledge of the service landscape among partners in each region</p> <p>An increase in staff's understanding of funder expectations</p>	<p>Increased awareness and understanding by communities about the project</p> <p>Increased awareness and understanding of the program for autistic adults in rural and remote regions of the Atlantic</p>	<p>To increase facilitators and leader's knowledge of fidelity and how to achieve it</p> <p>To increase understanding and awareness of autism for employers, service providers and partners</p> <p>To increase understanding of the RWA team about AASEN and opportunities to collaborate</p> <p>To increase the knowledge and understanding of our partners regarding the importance of first voice representation in program delivery</p> <p>To increase the awareness of the opportunity for autistic adults to be a first voice leader in the ESG program delivery</p>	<p>To increase staff's understanding and knowledge of the importance of fostering and building self-advocacy skills among autistic adults</p> <p>To increase staff's knowledge about teaching the skills that will assist adults in building resiliency and reaching their employment goals</p> <p>To increase knowledge and understanding of how to support generalization of skills across a variety of environment</p> <p>Participants will have greater awareness and knowledge of their role in</p>



1.4 Evaluation Objectives, Scope and Questions

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the reach, design and delivery, and effectiveness of the AASEN program in meeting its project objectives. The scope of the evaluation includes the period from the launch of the project on March 5, 2021 until its project completion on March 31, 2023. The evaluation questions are presented in the Evaluation Matrix in Appendix A along with indicators and the associated data sources and methods.

2.0 Methodology

The following section highlights our methodological approach to the AASEN program evaluation. This evaluation applies a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach and Gender-based Analysis (GBA) Plus lens to the analysis.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) model

This evaluation applied a Participatory Action Research (PAR) model whereby researchers and evaluators worked closely with program staff and their stakeholders to ensure research informs action. GGI worked collaboratively and iteratively with the AASEN program coordinator and stakeholders to develop fit-for-purpose learning and evaluation supports. As will be highlighted in the methods section, GGI held working group sessions to obtain feedback at every phase, including in developing the evaluation plan, and the analysis phase and reporting phase.

Gender Based Analysis (GBA) Plus

Our analyses incorporated a Gender-based analysis (GBA) Plus perspective. GBA Plus is an analytical process used to assess how diverse groups may experience policies, programs and initiatives differently based upon identity factors. The “plus” in GBA Plus acknowledges that intersecting identity factors such as for example, race, ethnicity, religion, age, sexual orientation, physical ability, and mental ability equally define one’s identity.¹ A GBA Plus lens is designed to bring into light whether different root causes, needs, consequences, probabilities, access, or vulnerabilities may be at play depending on the identity or intersecting identities of participants, including Autistic adults and other intersecting identities.

GGI applied a GBA plus lens to analysis of the findings to provide an intersectional perspective on the diverse needs of Autistic adults which took into account diverse demographic groups and geographic areas in the Atlantic Region.

2.1 Data Collection Methods

GGI implemented the evaluation in three phases: i. Evaluation planning; ii. Data collection and analysis; and, iii. Reviewing the findings and reporting.

Data collection methods for this evaluation included: a document review; key informant interviews; and, an online survey of the AASEN program’s participants. These methodologies are further described below.

¹ The Government of Canada’s Gender Results Framework can be found online at this website: <https://cfc-swc.gc.ca/grf-crrg/index-en.html>

Document Review

The document review provided background information on the origin and initial design of the program. The review of implementation documents provided key information to understand how the program was intended to operate, and how it was actually implemented. This line of evidence also answered evaluation questions on relevance, performance, and program delivery.

In addition to key documents including the AASEN program's proposal, quarterly and annual reports, as well as internal design documents, the following documents were reviewed:

- Canadian Academy of Health Sciences (2022). *Autism in Canada: Considerations for future public policy development*, May;
- Autism Nova Scotia Project Description;
- The AASEN Program's Logic Model;
- Identifying Gaps Outside of the AASEN Program;
- The AASEN Program's Identifying Gaps Sheets;
- The AASEN Program's Evaluation Reflective Questions;
- The AASEN program's First Voice Accelerator Report; and,
- First Voice Focus Group Results, 1 & 2.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) (n=8)

In addition to the document review, GGI also conducted semi-structured Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with different stakeholders involved in the project. These KIIs captured perceptions, opinions, experiences, examples, and factual information with respect to most evaluation issues and questions. In total, GGI conducted 5 interviews (one in each of the four regions, plus one with the project coordinator) with a total of 8 different stakeholders (two participants in 3 of 4 regional sites) as highlighted below.

The evaluation team conducted 8 interviews for the AASEN program evaluation, including the following:

- a) The AASEN program coordinator (n=1);
- b) The AASEN program facilitators in each region and site manager (n=7); and,
- c) The AASEN program first voice leaders where applicable (n=0)²

The list of key informants was developed in collaboration with the AASEN program coordinator. In mid-January, 2023, the AASEN program coordinator forwarded an introductory email to potential interviewees. GGI then contacted interviewees to schedule meeting times and shared a

² Note three first voice leaders were contacted for interviews, but none responded to this request.

copy of the interview guide. For each stakeholder group, GGI developed tailored interview guides and shared a copy in advance of each meeting (see Appendix B).

GGI conducted the interviews virtually using MS Teams and interviews lasted approximately one hour. First voice leaders were offered the opportunity for an online interview (via MS Teams) or to provide a written response by email. All three opted to receive the interview guide by email and were offered two weeks to respond. Two reminders were sent out and no responses were received by email by the date outlined.

Online Survey of Project Participants (n=10)

An online survey of the AASEN program participants was undertaken. The survey consisted of a series of questions about the extent to which the CQ and ESG program helped participants gain skills and capacities, followed by a series of profile and demographic questions (i.e., location, program, cohort, self-identity). The survey was written in plain language and consisted of yes/no answers and was estimated to take 5-10 minutes to complete. The survey was administered by GGI staff, and 10 participants responded to the survey. The results of the analysis are presented in the findings section of this evaluation report.

2.2 Analysis of the Data

GGI analyzed all data from the three different lines of evidence. The analysis consisted of a vertical and a horizontal analysis of the findings. In the first step (the vertical analysis), GGI focused on the three individual lines of evidence individually, that is, a) the document review; and b) the KIIs with different stakeholder groups and c) the participant survey. For each of these lines of evidence, key findings were identified. In the second step (the horizontal analysis), GGI then compared the findings of the three lines of evidence and made linkages between them. This allowed GGI to identify essential insights for evaluating the project in its entirety.

2.3 Strengths and Limitations

Overall, this evaluation presents a strong methodology. The use of multiple lines of evidence enhances confidence in the findings. In addition, by consulting with several stakeholder groups involved in the program (i.e., project coordinator, facilitators and site managers in all four regions, and participants themselves), the evaluation provides a “voice” to these stakeholders as well as an opportunity to obtain objective information and perspective on topics directly from them. While first voice leaders were not interviewed for this evaluation, the document review filled this gap and findings from focus groups held by the AASEN program with first voice leaders are included.

Considering that this was a small-scale evaluation, only a relatively small number of KIIs were conducted. This places certain limitations on representativeness of the evaluation findings. Overall, GGI is confident that the evaluation findings adequately respond to each of the evaluation questions under consideration.

3.0 Findings

3.1 Reach – Autistic Adults in Atlantic Region

Evaluation Question 1 - To what extent has the AASEN program expanded its reach to: Autistic adults; project partners and communities; rural and remote communities; and participants from diverse communities?

Key Findings:

The AASEN program has expanded its reach to Autistic adults with varying success across the Atlantic region. In 2022 the network fell just short of its projected target of 66 participants, with NS and PEI exceeding expectations: NL falling slightly short, and NB struggling with recruitment.

Ongoing difficulties with recruitment were reported by facilitators and site managers, particularly in rural and less sparsely populated areas. Quarterly reports show AASEN facilitators meet regularly during rounds to address recruitment challenges and brainstorm new outreach strategies. These activities included not only to (1) introduce the AASEN program to their province, but also to (2) build rapport and trust with existing service providers in their landscape.

Outreach to diverse communities is fairly strong, with representation from Autistic adults, persons with disabilities and deaf and hard of hearing, youth (aged 15-29), women, LGBTQ2S+ persons, and older adults (65 years and older).

Given CQ and ESG were offered online, the program was accessible for participants in rural, remote, and northern communities. Participant retention was strong and very few participants surveyed identified any barriers to accessing and participating in the project. Only one of ten participants identified difficulty in accessing the program due to internet (i.e., WIFI) issues.

Strategies to Reach Target Population

The main strategies for reaching the intended target population were building relationships with local employment and community service centres in each of the regions according to the AASEN program facilitators and site managers (KIIs with AASEN facilitators and site managers). Participants surveyed online, also reported referrals by employment counsellors (case managers)

and word of mouth, were the primary way they found out about, and become engaged in the program.

Intended Number of Participants

The projected number of participants for CQ and ESG for 2022 was 66. This included an anticipated 18 participants each of the following three provinces: PEI, NB and NL, and an additional 12 participants expected in NS (Annual report).

Actual Number of Participants in CQ and ESG

The actual number of participants for CQ and ESG in the last annual report (March 2022) was 58. This included 19 participants in PEI: 10 participants in NB, 15 participants in NL, and 14 participants in NS (Annual report).

The following table illustrates the projected and actual number of participants last year by region:

Table 1: Actual & Projected # of Participants by Region, March 2022

Location	Actual	Projected
Prince Edward Island	19	18
New Brunswick	10	18
Newfoundland and Labrador	15	18
Nova Scotia	14	12
Total	58	66

In 2022 the network fell just short of its projected target of 66 participants, with 19 participants in PEI: 10 participants in NB, 15 participants in NL, and 14 participants in NS, for a total of 58.

Recruitment Challenges

Ongoing difficulties with recruitment were reported by all AASEN program facilitators and site managers interviewed, and this was particularly challenging in rural and less sparsely populated areas. Facilitators indicated the employment support landscape for Autistic adults is very siloed in the Atlantic Region, with some sites reporting issues over “turf” and a reticence to share clients and resources. As one AASEN facilitator stated:

Outreach has been too exhausting, reaching out to organizations who are happy to make those connections but wouldn't share a whole lot in terms of opportunity for our participants or even willing to share clients. AASEN facilitator

Though variations were seen across provinces, all AASEN facilitators shared a common concern about finding ways to work more effectively across the employment landscape (rather than competing against one another) to better support and engage participants. For example, in highly regionalized provinces like New Brunswick, the key challenge is breaking into ossified and regionalized support systems for individuals with disabilities. Often times, there are no autism-

specific supports in those areas, and the need is there, but it takes some time to massage professional relationships and gain trust to have folks referred to new programs. In the words of one AASEN facilitator this can impact both recruitment and retention:

Having agencies open their organization to include autism specific support for employment takes time to build relationships and overcome the perceptions that they are not adequately supporting people with ASD. [This can lead to] participants joining the program and then not attending. AASEN facilitator

A related challenge is that the AASEN program is, in some senses, competing with other programs which offer more immediate results using subsidized work placements. The AASEN program facilitators have seen individuals with disabilities run through these programs and come out the other side with some more experience, but a skills gap in terms of what to do with that and how to carry that momentum forwards – usually ending up back in mainstream employment supports that don't often have an understanding of how best to support Autistic adults. This is something that the networks have recognized is a part of the support's ecosystem, and they are making an effort to connect with these subsidy-driven programs to better learn how we can work together to support jobseekers with disabilities (AASEN program documents and gap analysis).

Despite these challenges, a review of documents (e.g., quarterly and annual reports) show the AASEN program's activities (outreach, employer education, facilitation, agency referrals) have been enhanced by partnerships and partnership activities. Quarterly reports show the AASEN program facilitators meet regularly to address challenges and brainstorm new outreach strategies. The team has adapted their outreach approaches in several ways, including connecting with partners outside of employment supports and exploring new areas within their regions. These activities were included not only to (1) introduce the AASEN programs to their province, but also to (2) build rapport and trust with existing service providers in their landscape (Annual report).

The AASEN program's facilitators suggest outreach is more meaningful and sustainable when they engage with service providers to learn about their supports and services, rather than simply introducing new programming. Placing the community at the focal point of the conversation allows the network to build rapport with service providers by situating the AASEN program as a transitional support that can work alongside and support them, rather than be in competition with them. In the words of one regional facilitator:

By engaging with service providers in a variety of sectors, including mental health, housing, transportation, medical, and youth services, we have not only reached new participants and communities, but have increased the variety or referral pathways our existing participants can more easily access. AASEN facilitator

Project Partners and Communities (including Rural and Remote)

Over the past two years the AASEN program’s facilitators have expanded their outreach approaches in several ways, including connecting with partners outside of employment supports and exploring new areas within their regions. A review of quarterly and annual reports show facilitators developed and maintained strong partnerships with a variety of service providers across their landscape. The AASEN program facilitators hosted monthly roundtable meetings, with general project updates and discussions on support strategies and provincial outreach, to ensure the sustainability of the network.

The following is a list of community partners engaged by the AASEN program in the past year:

Table 2: The AASEN Program Partners, March 2022

Nova Scotia	Prince Edward Island	New Brunswick	Newfoundland
Ready, Willing, and Able Breton Ability Centre North Side Employment YMCA Employment Inclusion East YMCA Cape Breton Employment Services Autism NS	Holland Collage - Employment and Career Advisor Career Development Services Tremploy Reach Foundation Peers Alliance Inclusion East Ready Willing and Able Council of Disabilities and Employment Journey City of Charlottetown Mi'kmaq Council of PEI Native Council of PEI Immigrant and Refugee Services PEI Libraries	Ready, Willing and Able Employment related organizations Social Development Autism Resource Center Premier's Council on Disabilities NBACL (Inclusion NB) Under One Sky Friendship NBACL Oromocto & Moncton Open Sky Co-op	Provincial Wellness Coalitions Murphy Center Empower Thrive Stella's Circle Community Employment Collaboration Autism Spectrum Support Team (ASST) Community Sector Council Eastern Health

These relationships have given the partners an opportunity to establish more diverse person-directed referral pathways and options for participants with intersectional needs and wants. Participants face barriers to employment in all areas of their life, including transportation, family support, housing, and mental health. The AASEN partners have therefore focused on building a network of services that can provide wraparound supports to participants as they work toward gaining meaningful employment (Annual Report).

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)

Outreach to diverse communities is fairly strong, with representation from persons with disabilities and deaf and hard of hearing, youth (aged 15-29), LGBTQ2S+ persons, people from rural, remote and northern communities and older adults (65 years and older). The following table illustrates equity-seeking groups participating in the AASEN last year:

Table 3: Participants from Equity-seeking Groups, March 2022

Equity-seeking groups	# of participants
Persons with disabilities and deaf and hard of hearing	58
Youth (aged 15-29)	21
Women	14
LGBTQ2S+ persons	4
Older adults (65 years and older)	3
People from rural, remote, and northern communities	14
Total	114

It is interesting to note that women are underrepresented in this sample (roughly 10%), and no participants identify as Indigenous, racialized, or as a newcomer or immigrant.

The profile of online survey participants provides a snapshot of participants in the AASEN program. Participants from all four provinces participated in the online survey, including NS, NB, PEI and NL. While no older adults are represented, there is a wide range of ages from 16-59, with most respondents under the age of 30, several youth age 16+, one in their 50s and several ranging in age from 30-40. Slightly under half of the respondents surveyed (4 of 10) identified as female and 2 in 10 identified as LGBTQ+. This is more balanced in terms of gender representation. All respondents were Canadian-born, and none disclosed their immigrant status, ethnicity or race. Their educational background ranged from high school to post-secondary graduate (including master's degree). Most (8 of 10) reported being on the autism spectrum, with some identifying other barriers such as ADD / ADHD (2); Intellectual Disability (1); Learning Disability (4); Mental health (3); and OCD (1). Of these, 6 in 10 self-identify as having a disability, with 2 N/As and 1 preferring not to say.

Given CQ and ESG were offered online, the program was accessible for participants in rural, remote, and northern communities. Participant retention was strong and very few participants surveyed identified any barriers to accessing and participating in the project. Only one of ten participants identified difficulty in accessing the program due to internet (i.e., WIFI) issues.

3.2 Design & Delivery

Evaluation Question 2 - To what extent has the program's design (e.g., project approach, partnerships, and pathways of support) facilitated the effective programming for participants?

Key Findings:

Overall, the AASEN program's design, namely its approach, partnerships and pathways of support, facilitated very effective programming for participants. Specifically, all lines of evidence indicate that the AASEN program did deliver content that supported confidence-building and self-advocacy for Autistic adults across the Atlantic Region.

Most lines of evidence suggest the AASEN programs did fill gaps in the employment landscape, particularly in providing pathways of support. The AASEN program's gap analysis showed local employment agencies did not always have the skills to support Autistic individuals in their job search, and CQ was designed to fill this gap by providing a self-directed approach for Autistic job seekers and providing customized support. The ESG also filled gaps in the employment support landscape by providing peer support, co-facilitated by first voice leaders.

Facilitators and site managers were generally positive about the role that the AASEN program had in their employment supports landscape. Most felt AASEN provided them with the resources, skills, and partnerships they needed to support participants. All but NS identified barriers to providing ongoing pathways to support, with the key gap being a lack of customized employment supports for Autistic adults in the employment landscape outside of the AASEN program. This is further discussed in the [Effectiveness Section](#) - Evidence of Enhancing Skills among Autistic Adults Utilized Post-program.

Evidence the Project Developed and Delivered Innovative Confidence-building Content that Supports Self-advocacy

Overall, the AASEN program's design, namely its approach, partnerships and pathways of support, facilitated very effective programming for participants. All lines of evidence indicate that the AASEN program did deliver content that supported confidence building and self-advocacy for Autistic adults across the Atlantic Region. A gap analysis by facilitators and site managers indicated that local employment agencies often did not have the skills to effectively support³, advocate for and provide accommodations to adults on the autism spectrum and that the program was designed to fill this gap. Most facilitators and site managers interviewed pointed to gaps in

³ Note: employment agencies do not always have the skills, as some case managers may be informed, and others are not. There is no standard baseline of information across all case managers.

supports for Autistic individuals in their region and found the program did fill gaps in supports for Autistic adults. For example, most noted that employment centres often lacked training on how to best support adults on the autism spectrum and pointed out CQ and ESG are designed to fill these gaps by providing a self-directed approach for Autistic job seekers. One facilitator describes this customized approach as:

...trying to create that referral pathway by encouraging participants to make those contacts for themselves using the resources available. Helping them develop those skills for life are important piece that we have done through our Career Quest program.

Most facilitators and site managers interviewed believe that Career Quest is successful in helping participants build confidence in developing job search strategies and feeling prepared to self-advocate and job search independently. The AASEN program was described by one facilitator as a safe and supportive environment where participants can develop employment skills at their own pace and build capacity to implement these skills in small one-on-one learning formats.

The online survey results seem to be consistent with these findings and shows that participants are more confident and feel better prepared to advocate on their own behalf as a result of participating in CQ. For example, the survey shows participants are more confident in self-disclosing their disability status with employers as a result of CQ and half (5 of 10) said they would be willing to ask for a workplace accommodation if needed. All online survey respondents reported participation in CQ helped them to advocate for their needs and wants and most respondents reported feeling at least somewhat more confident job searching independently.

The ESG also fills gaps in the employment landscape by providing peer support, co-facilitated by first voice leaders. All AASEN facilitators and site managers saw the ESG as a key site for building confidence and self-advocacy among Autistic adults. They all viewed this group as an important source of support where peers with lived experience can come together to talk about their lives and struggles and share strategies for navigating the employment landscape. AASEN program facilitators and site managers felt this was an important venue to bring people together to talk about how they have navigated the employment landscape, including barriers they have come up against, and to share resources and bring community together. One first voice leader identified the importance of peer led spaces in the following way:

I really liked last time when people shared their experiences and struggles. As a person with a disability, I felt the same way as them and have dealt with the same struggles personally so it's nice to know that were not alone with dealing with this kind of thing

The first voice leader plays a central role in creating a peer-driven space where it is safe to discuss issues of concern to the community, including issues of self-disclosure, feelings of isolation and navigating challenges that arise. In one AASEN program facilitator's words, the ESG is important because participants:

can feel very isolated, to have a group to share experiences and not alone, so vital, to every community. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

Evidence of Creating a Knowledge Exchange System that Supports Effective Programming for Autistic Adults within the Atlantic Region

The primary site for knowledge exchange on effective programming is the regular AASEN facilitator rounds which take place biweekly with the AASEN program coordinator. These regular meetings have been highlighted by facilitators as an excellent way to share resources and best practices across the network. Facilitators and site managers were generally positive about the role that AASEN programming has had in their employment supports landscape. Most felt AASEN provided them with the resources, skills, and partnerships they needed to support participants.

All but NS identified barriers to providing pathways to support, with the key gap being a lack of customized employment supports for Autistic adults in the employment landscape outside of the AASEN program. In the words of one first voice leader:

The infrastructure is not designed to onboard, you know, when someone is diagnosed or self identifies as autistic to say: 'okay, let's get you the support, and let's be your ally, and get you with everything that you need to succeed to be to reach your full potential'

Outside of Nova Scotia where the Autism NS has chapters across the province, AASEN program facilitators and site managers find that employment agencies for people facing employment barriers generally do not have the skills or training to effectively support autistic individuals. In one AASEN program facilitator's words:

I do believe that the program design is successful in teaching the skills to job search independently. However, when considering the second phase of the program in which the program facilitator guides the participant to another appropriate agency or site for job search support, this was less successful due to the lack of supports for adults with ASD.

Because of limitations within the employment supports landscape, there are a lack of consistent pathways for Autistic adults to advance beyond the CQ and ESG programs. Some participants have shared with AASEN program facilitators they may feel hesitation to return to employment agencies because of negative past experiences, which then led to discouragement, frustration, and lost momentum. Facilitators and site managers indicated that while some employment groups are open to working with Autistic adults, many simply do not have the skills and training to effectively respond to their particular needs, and this is especially true in smaller communities where services available for Autistic adults are even more limited than in larger communities. For further discussion see the Effectiveness Section - Evidence of enhancing skills among Autistic adults utilized post-program.

Evaluation Question 3 – Were modifications made by different sites to ensure a stronger level of support for participants?

Key Findings:

For the most part, the CQ and ESG programs were delivered as intended. CQ provides a person-directed approach to job searching and is customized by facilitators to respond to the distinct needs of participants. All program sites also made adaptations to the original program design for CQ to respond to employment contexts in each province.

Adaptations were also made to the ESG in each region to respond to the distinct needs of each group, as well as the style and approach of the first voice leader. Themes and topics were defined by the group and changed over time to accommodate their needs and interests.

AASEN facilitators and site managers indicated participants were pleased with the adaptations made to the program and overall feedback was positive for both CQ and ESG.

Evidence that the Design and/or Delivery of the Program Changed Over Time

For the most part, the CQ and ESG programs were delivered as intended. CQ provides a person-directed approach to job searching and is customized by facilitators to respond to the distinct needs of participants.

As a self-directed program, CQ did not have structured facilitated lessons or goals, and the curriculum involved searching and applying for two jobs each week, with support from the facilitator. Through this process the participant would learn how to search for a job, read and interpret the posting, create a resume and cover letter, and apply for positions. The AASEN program facilitators discovered this was not realistic and decided to adapt expectations for each person based on their own goals. Focused on the personalized needs of each participant, the facilitators at each site modified materials to meet the needs of participants (i.e., personalized learning, breakout groups, responsive curriculum based on feedback and needs). For example, the facilitators and site managers indicated in the interviews that not all participants were interested in linear progression seen in mainstream employment approaches. In some cases, they may not want to jeopardize their income supports by working beyond the identified number of hours each week. For these participants, success may be defined in more process-oriented goals such as gaining confidence and self-advocating on their skill-building journey, as opposed to a particular end goal, such as paid employment.

All program sites also made adaptations to the original CQ program design in order to respond to employment contexts in each province. Each region made slightly different modifications to CQ based on the local employment landscape. For example, NS made changes to the CQ curriculum materials in order to make it more relevant to the rural context of Cape Breton. Employment

issues in rural areas or in a small town can differ considerably from urban areas, and therefore the facilitator felt it was important to reflect this in the CQ presentations. There may also be barriers which are specific to a region that need to be explored, for example, job postings in rural communities need to factor in access to transportation which may not be an issue in a bigger town or city. Another example is language requirements in NB which may not be as much of a factor in other areas, etc.

The key informant interviews indicate that adaptations to the ESG were also made or adjusted to participants' needs. For example, one facilitator looked into adapting the ESG program by providing access to a "group chat" for participants to discuss employment between the official session times. This adaptation was being considered due to some participants not feeling comfortable speaking over a video call with the group, and an anonymous suggestion from a participant to have a space to become comfortable with the other participants prior to discussing "heavier topics" within the sessions. These types of adaptations were considered in order to enhance safety among participants.

The AASEN program facilitators and site managers indicated participants were pleased with the adaptations made to the program, and overall feedback was positive for both CQ and ESG.

Evaluation Question 4 – How was equity, diversity and inclusion (and integration of first voice) considered in the program’s design and delivery?

Key Findings:

The AASEN has sought to advance Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) through greater representation of neuro-diverse individuals in workplaces, and by providing individualized supports that reflect the diverse axes of identity within the autism community.

While focused on autism-specific supports and advocacy, the network strives to provide the foundation for a broader intersectional approach to program delivery. As a guiding principle and best practice, the AASEN program integrates a person-directed learning approach (e.g., CQ) to ensure that supports are individualized and engage first-person autistic voices into program development (e.g., ESG).

By engaging first voice leaders (Autistic adults with lived experience) and providing adults on the autism spectrum with customized supports in the CQ and ESG programs, it ultimately contributes to more equity by encouraging self-and group advocacy of participants.

While the benefits of engaging first voice leaders in the ECG program are unquestionable, some AASEN facilitators and site managers identified few leadership opportunities for Autistic leaders beyond the program, which created limited capacity for promotion and advancement once the project contract ended.

Evidence of/Views on the Inclusion of EDI in the Project

The AASEN has sought to advance Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) through greater representation of neuro-diverse individuals in workplaces, and by providing individualized supports that reflect the diverse axes of identity within the autism community.

While focused on autism-specific supports and advocacy, the network strives to provide the foundation for a broader intersectional approach to program delivery. As highlighted by the small survey sample, a diversity of Autistic adults participated in the AASEN program. The survey shows all provinces in the Atlantic region were represented, and there is a diversity of ages ranging from 16-60. Slightly under half of respondents are female and 2 in 10 identified as LGBTQ+. All respondents were Canadian born and none opted to disclose their ethnicity or race. Their educational background ranged from high school to post-secondary (including master’s degree). Most identified as Autistic, with some identifying as having multiple diagnoses (i.e., ADD / ADHD; Intellectual Disability; Learning Disability; mental health; and OCD).

The AASEN program engages first-person autistic voices into program development (e.g., ESG).

The first-voice leader is an individual with ASD running discussion and lessons through an autistic lens for the Employment Support Group with the support of the program facilitator. By engaging first voice leaders (Autistic adults with lived experience) in providing peer support, it ultimately contributes to more equity by encouraging self-and group advocacy of participants.

Most AASEN facilitators and site managers indicated they see first voice leaders as a highlight of the ESG group and a best practice for peer support. One interviewee pointed out this peer-led approach models' leadership with participants, who identify with their barriers, as someone with shared experience. As one interviewee suggested, it elevates autistic voices, and gives participants knowledge of understanding of unique challenges on issues like autistic burnout, mental health and self-disclosure etc.

This peer-led strategy not only benefits participants, but also provides a pathway to leadership in Autistic adults for expanding skills and giving back to the community. According to interviewees, first voice leaders facilitate group discussion, host the peer space, contribute to content, and bring their own facilitation style, and in the process grow their skills. This provides a unique employment and learning opportunity, one which they may not otherwise have without this program. In the words of one AASEN facilitator:

I found this to be an interesting and important aspect of the Employment Support Group as it allows the first-voice leader to gain leadership skills and for the participants to feel understood in the barriers they face by being led by someone with similar experiences.

AASEN facilitators and site managers indicate that the engagement of first voice leaders in the program were effective in building confidence, peer support and self-advocacy.

While the benefits of engaging first voice leaders in the ECG program are unquestionable, some AASEN facilitators and site managers identified there were few leadership opportunities for Autistic adults beyond the program, which created barriers to promotion and advancement. Further, one AASEN facilitator indicated that these are contract positions, which are inherently short-term, and therefore do not allow for further leadership growth and development.

Evaluation Question 5 – What, if any, barriers were identified by program participants at various partner sites?

Key Findings:

The main barriers to participants finding and keeping employment, related to lack of supports in four key areas: 1. Lack of employment supports 2. income support, 3. Long wait times for mental health services, and 4. Lack of access to transportation, particularly in rural areas (gap analysis and the AASEN facilitators and site manager interviews). Consistent with these findings, online survey participants identified the barriers they faced in finding and sustaining employment were related to lack of access to reliable transportation, being terminated, and not knowing where to find supports for maintaining employment.

Discussion of Key Barriers

In reflecting on program gaps, facilitators and site managers identified support gaps and additional barriers outside of AASEN activities that participants in their region were encountering which prevented them from finding and maintaining employment.

Key challenges reported by facilitators and site managers were lack of employment supports, mental health services, income support, and transportation. NS reportedly had the strongest and most robust services and supports due to the presence of Autism NS chapters across the province. All facilitators and case managers outside of NS reported they saw very few employment supports (i.e., pre-employment or on-the-job coaching or support options) for Autistic adults.

One gap I have been running into is the participants maintaining employment. After we help them build those job searching skills and they gain employment is where the barrier begins. If they have no on-the-job coach/support than it can cause them stress and anxiety, which leads to some of them quitting their job. After this they do not come back to our programs because we do not help with that “maintaining employment” piece
AASEN facilitator

These barriers can cause scarring (i.e., hinder future success) because of negative experiences in the workplace and ongoing issues that are not effectively addressed due to lack of support. The risk of trauma and burnout was also highlighted by several AASEN facilitator and site manager interviewees, when referring to negative experiences in the employment landscape due to lack of supports. In one AASEN facilitator’s words:

A lot of our participants have complex needs and are facing multiple barriers to employment that require additional considerations for navigation.
AASEN facilitator

In most Atlantic provinces, timely access mental health supports are lacking, and this has been identified as a gap for Autistic adults in order to be successful in employment. This includes long

wait times in order to receive a diagnosis (which then can triage potential access to services and supports), as well as availability of ongoing mental health supports to address multiple challenges and stressors as they arise.

Further, income support has been identified as a major inhibitor to obtaining employment because it prevents participants from being able to accept any job that offers them more than the provinces' allowable hours per week for risk of losing benefits.

Access to transportation was also identified as a key issue, particularly for participants in rural and sparsely populated areas. For example, rural participants with no access to a vehicle or public transport are limited to applying for jobs within walking distance. Cases have been identified by AASEN program facilitators where participants have lost opportunities because of no or unreliable access to transportation. For example, taxi fare is beyond the means of low paid employees and public transportation can be infrequent or unavailable in sparsely populated areas making it difficult to make it to work on schedule.

These findings are consistent with what online survey participants identified as the key barriers they faced in finding and sustaining employment, namely lack of access to reliable transportation, being terminated (in some cases for no known reason or explicitly identified reason), and not knowing where to find supports for maintaining employment.

3.3 Effectiveness – Intended Outcomes

Evaluation Question 6 – To What Extent Did/Does the Project Meet Its Intended Outcomes?

Key Findings

Findings from all lines of evidence demonstrate that the AASEN program has been successful in building a knowledge exchange system for Autistic individuals in the Atlantic region. It is the network's intention that the connections, infrastructure, and resources developed during the program remain active after the AASEN program's Future Skills funding is complete.

While the CQ, as well as the ECG, are seen as an important step to helping adults on the autism spectrum build confidence in their employability skills, there remain barriers in obtaining ongoing supports to ensure continued success in the employment landscape which can enable securing and retaining employment.

AASEN facilitators and site managers pointed to the lack of ongoing support in the employment landscape as a major barrier to long-term sustainability for the success of CQ as participants can become discouraged after learning skills and building confidence only to encounter barriers in gaining and sustaining actual employment.

Evidence of Creating a Knowledge Exchange System that Supports the Development of an Employment Community of Practice within the Atlantic Region

Findings from all lines of evidence demonstrate that the project has been successful in building a knowledge exchange system for Autistic individuals in the Atlantic region.

Quarterly reports show the AASEN program's monthly roundtable discussions in the Community of Practice have supported partners by providing a space for collaboration and problem-solving. From these discussions, partners noted that they gained new perspectives into their outreach strategies and implementation. In several cases, this prompted partners to redevelop their outreach materials to increase accessibility, identify gaps in their outreach plans, and connect with a diverse range of outreach sources they had not otherwise considered. Partners also noted that these discussions influenced their program delivery and support strategies. The collaborative nature of these discussions prompted partners to reflect on how they can actively adapt and strengthen their skills as program facilitators. For example, after connecting with other facilitators, the Newfoundland site partner began building a library of virtual spaces and resources that can be implemented depending on participant's goals (Quarterly and Annual Reports).

It is the network's intention that the connections, infrastructure, and resources developed during the project will remain active after the AASEN program's Future Skills funding is complete.

Evidence of Enhancing Skills among Autistic Adults Utilized Post-program

The ESG has been identified as highly successful in building confidence and peer support (i.e., breaking down isolation), however over time, some frustrations can arise as lack of supports are available post-program to continue to support them on their journey.

The lack of provincial employment-based supports for [Autistic adults] ...makes navigating obtaining and maintaining a job an extremely stressful and confusing process.... When the AASEN programs are complete, there is very little to guide the participants to for further support which means they're left to figure out the rest on their own, just as they were before joining the program.

AASEN facilitator

Few pathways to sustainable employment are available for Autistic adults in the Atlantic region. This results in some churning where participants may be frustrated and feel they are not getting anywhere due to lack of accommodation and support, lack of success retaining employment etc. In one AASEN facilitator's words:

Participants have experienced much anguish in a program designed to give individuals with autism the opportunity to share their feelings/experiences, but with the absence of an action plan.

Some facilitators and site managers pointed to the frustration and discouragement participants face as they try to advance beyond the program. For example, participants may find a job and because of lack of supports, the job does not work out, and so they decide to return to the program. Interviewees suggest this is the most common reason to return. The online survey supports this finding and shows some CQ participants participated in the program more than once. Online survey participants indicated that despite their increase in confidence with their job search, CQ did not help them find or keep a job. As one participant commented on the online survey:

Planning something and doing something are two different things...

Most interestingly, half of online survey participants reported they attended more than one ESG which seems to further point to the need for ongoing supports beyond the end of the initial program or cohort.

While the ESG plays an important role in the employment support landscape, in the absence of employment networks and pathways to employment, participants can begin to feel they are in an echo chamber, identifying challenges without seeing sustainable solutions. For example, members of the employment support group may lack access to employment networks, and therefore they

may not be in a position to help one another break into positions as part of a social network. In the words of one first voice leader:

And people who are [neurodivergent] ... we are at a distinct disadvantage, you know. And, you know, people on the spectrum, we're less likely to have friends... And so, we're much less likely to have these friends who can help us get a job, you know?"

Evidence of Building a Network of Atlantic Partners to Enhance Capacity for Employment Supports across Neighbouring Regions for Autistic Adults

Supported employment is designed to boost confidence during transition into the workforce, and most interviewees reported these much-needed supports are very limited outside of NS. Pre-employment and on-the-job supports are rarely available outside of NS. AASEN facilitators and site managers pointed to the lack of support in the employment landscape as a major barrier to long term sustainability and for the success of CQ. What AASEN facilitators and site managers have seen is that participants over time can become discouraged in learning skills and building confidence only to encounter barriers in gaining and sustaining employment. Some participants were left feeling like they were spinning their wheels without getting anywhere. A few facilitators and site managers felt the employment landscape made CQ unsustainable as a stand-alone program, while some argued that more resources should be provided to fill gaps and build engagement in order to make the program work more effectively.

Evidence of Employee Awareness of Accommodations Required for Adults Across the Autism Spectrum

Facilitators and site managers identified a lack of knowledge and awareness among employers about the diverse needs of Autistic adults and the need for accommodations (i.e., what inclusive employment looks like). AASEN program facilitators and site managers suggest the need for educating employers on what accommodations can entail. Often the perception is that the accommodations required are much larger than what might be needed, noting each person will have different access needs, and increasing awareness can help break down potential resistance to hiring Autistic individuals on the part of employers. For example, an accommodation might mean creating a sensory friendly work environment, and employers may not know how to create this and could use some guidance. Participants know what their needs are, and can also self-advocate, but it can help open the pathway if there is more training and awareness on the employer side.

3.4 Reflections

The following section provides reflections on what worked well – both including from the grantee’s reflections, as well as from an evaluation standpoint.

Overall AASEN was successful in its mission to provide a network of support for Autistic adults to gain skills and enhanced resiliency, despite COVID-19 and other social and economic challenges.

Through program delivery, partnerships, outreach and recruitment, education and training and skills development, the AASEN did meet its objective to create a standardized framework for implementation of key programs, namely CQ and the ESG.

Through building a network of partners to enhance capacity for employment supports across neighbouring regions for Autistic adults, the AASEN was able to provide effective programming across all four regions with relative fidelity to the original program design. While some local adaptations were made to tailor the program to local contexts and participant needs, the delivery was fairly uniform across all sites. While variations were seen across regions in terms of reach (with more rural and remote areas experiencing more difficulty with recruitment), the overall it was fairly effective at promoting programming, training and retaining skilled facilitators and enhancing employability skills of autistic adults across all sites. Participant engagement was high, and the program was able to recruit and train diverse populations of autistic adults across various identity factors including age, sexual orientation, and abilities.

In the context of COVID-19, the AASEN did create a continuous collaboration of network partners to ensure resilient support structures were in place for Autistic adults in the Atlantic region to meet their employment needs, particularly in underserved areas. Local partnership development was key to improving coordination between provinces, addressing the challenges of skill development and employment at each of the community-based autism partners.

The COVID-19 Employment Support Group (ESG) was very successful as an online forum for autistic employees/job seekers to discuss the changing nature of work and develop skills to adapt to it. In this sense the AASEN was very successful at building on existing networks with each region to create a knowledge exchange system that supports the development of an employment community of practice within the Atlantic region. The ESG formed the nucleus of this support system. A key highlight was the engagement of facilitators with lived experience, namely First Voice leaders, in providing peer support in the ESG.

As discussed, for various structural reasons (including systemic barriers to employment to Autistic adults) the network was less successful in providing meaningful employment outcomes through its online supported job searching group (CQ), leading to some churning in the program and frustrations on the part of participants who experience multiple barriers in advancing their employment goals. The concluding section that follows provides more detail on project successes and outcomes, challenges as well as recommendations for the future.

4.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusions

Reach

The AASEN program has expanded its reach to Autistic adults with varying success across the Atlantic region. In 2022 the network fell just short of its projected target of 66 participants, with NS and PEI exceeding expectations: NL falling slightly short, and NB struggling with recruitment.

Ongoing difficulties with recruitment were reported by facilitators and site managers, particularly in rural and less sparsely populated areas. Quarterly reports show AASEN facilitators meet regularly during rounds to address recruitment challenges and brainstorm new outreach strategies. These activities included not only to (1) introduce the AASEN program to their province, but also to (2) build rapport and trust with existing service providers in their landscape.

Outreach to diverse communities is fairly strong, with representation from Autistic adults, persons with disabilities and deaf and hard of hearing, youth (aged 15-29), women, LGBTQ2S+ persons, and older adults (65 years and older).

Given CQ and ESG were offered online, the program was accessible for participants in rural, remote, and northern communities. Participant retention was strong and very few participants surveyed identified any barriers to accessing and participating in the project. Only one of ten participants identified difficulty in accessing the program due to internet (i.e., WIFI) issues.

Design and Delivery

Overall, the AASEN program's design, namely its approach, partnerships and pathways of support, facilitated very effective programming for participants. Specifically, all lines of evidence indicate that the AASEN program did deliver content that supported confidence- building and self-advocacy for Autistic adults across the Atlantic Region.

Most lines of evidence suggest the AASEN programs did fill gaps in the employment landscape, particularly in providing pathways of support. The AASEN program's gap analysis showed local employment agencies did not always have the skills to support Autistic individuals in their job search, and CQ was designed to fill this gap by providing a self-directed approach and customized support for Autistic jobseekers. The ESG also filled gaps in the employment support landscape by providing peer support, co-facilitated by first voice leaders.

Facilitators and site managers were generally positive about the role that the AASEN program had in their employment supports landscape. Most felt AASEN provided them with the resources, skills, and partnerships they needed to support participants. All but NS identified barriers to

providing ongoing pathways to support, with the key gap being a lack of customized employment supports for Autistic adults in the employment landscape outside of the AASEN program. This is further discussed in the [Effectiveness Section](#) - Evidence of Enhancing Skills among Autistic Adults Utilized Post-program.

Effectiveness

Findings from all lines of evidence demonstrate that the AASEN program has been successful in building a knowledge exchange system for Autistic individuals in the Atlantic region. It is the network's intention that the connections, infrastructure, and resources developed during the program will remain active after the AASEN program's Future Skills funding is complete.

While the CQ, as well as the ECG, are seen as an important step to help adults on the autism spectrum build confidence in their employability skills, there remain barriers in obtaining ongoing supports to ensure continued success in the employment landscape which can enable securing and retaining employment.

AASEN facilitators and site managers pointed to the lack of ongoing support in the employment landscape as a major barrier to long-term sustainability for the success of CQ as participants discouraged in learning skills and building confidence only to encounter barriers in gaining and sustaining employment.

4.2 Recommendations

Recommendation for the AASEN program's Consideration

- Situate the AASEN program as a transitional support or option that can be accessed after this program's end.
 - Share and compile resources on supports available in the Atlantic Region in centralized location for easy access.
 - Enhance use of online tools to further build network and peer supports, particularly for rural areas.
 - Continue building connections beyond the employment support landscape to respond to the diverse needs of Autistic Adults and ensure continued diversity.
- Increase advocacy activities with employers and employment agencies to enhance workplace referrals and accommodations.
 - Provide education and training opportunities to employment service providers and employers.

Recommendations for FSC's Consideration

- Support further adaptation of CQ to fill gaps in the employment supports landscape and meet the needs of Autistic adults in the Atlantic region.
 - Suggest CQ programming blended with more opportunities for collaborative, intentional advocacy in order to expand potential pathways to employment.
- Encourage ongoing funding for ESG and engagement of first voice leaders (online for continued ease of access to people in rural areas).

Appendix A – AASEN Evaluation Matrix

Evaluation Issues/Questions	Indicators	Document Review	Facilitator and Partner Interviews	Participant Survey
Program Reach: Outreach & Recruitment				
1.1 To what extent has AASEN expanded its reach to:	1.1.1 Increased referrals of Autistic adults to the program	X		
a) autistic adults	1.1.2 Increased awareness and understanding of the ESG and CQ program through project partners and communities	X		X
b) programs and communities for the purpose of <i>referring</i> participants	1.1.3 Increased participation by Autistic adults living in rural and remote regions	X		X
c) programs and communities for the purpose of <i>recruiting</i> participants	1.1.4 Increased participation by Autistic adults from diverse communities (i.e., newcomers, immigrants, indigenous, LGBTQ+)	X		X
d) rural and remote communities				
e) participants from diverse communities (EDI)				
Program Design and Delivery				
2.1 To what extent has the program's design (e.g., project approach, partnerships, and pathways of support) facilitated effective programming for participants?	2.1.1 Enhance CQ program participants' capacity to develop regular job searching habits and tactics.		X	
	2.1.2 Enhance CQ program participants' capacity to develop skills, so they feel prepared and confident to job search independently.		X	
2.2 Were modifications made by different sites to ensure a stronger level of support?	2.2.1 Views regarding the effectiveness of CQ and ESG programming including potential improvements		X	X

Evaluation Issues/Questions	Indicators	Document Review	Facilitator and Partner Interviews	Participant Survey
	2.2.2 Extent to which partners made adaptations to the program to provide person-directed support that meets the unique individual needs of each participant.	X	X	
2.3 How was equity, diversity and inclusion (and integration of first voice) considered in the program's design and delivery?	2.3.1 Extent to which Employment Support Group facilitators engaged their first voice leaders to grow as leaders in and through the program (e.g., extent to which they were able to grow skills- as a facilitator; apply their lived experience to content and work towards goals)?	X	X	
me2.4 What, if any, barriers were identified by program participants at various partner sites (e.g., geography, local employment support agency capacity, etc.)?	2.4.1 Description of similarities and differences in barriers for participants based on location	X	X	X
	2.4.2 Views and perspectives on variations in access to programming and support across different geographies (rural, urban-ex-urban)?	X	X	
Effectiveness				
3.1 How effective has the AASEN been in creating a knowledge exchange system that supports the development of an employment community of practice within the Atlantic region.	3.1.1 Increased confidence and independence of partners supporting autistic adults in reaching their employment goals	X	X	
How effective has the AASEN been in enhancing skills among Autistic adults' post-program?	<p>Increased participant awareness and knowledge of their role in achieving their employment goals</p> <p>Increased participant understanding of the importance of their voice in the decision-making process as it pertains to their life</p> <p>Enhanced skills among Autistic adults</p>	X	X	X

Evaluation Issues/Questions	Indicators	Document Review	Facilitator and Partner Interviews	Participant Survey
	<p>Increase in skills being utilized post-program</p> <p>Increase in participants advocating for their needs and wants</p> <p>Increased capacity of adults in leading their employment plans</p> <p>Career Quest:</p> <p># of participants who learned how to: Job search; Understand how to read a job posting; Complete applications; Create and customize a resume</p> <p>Employment Support Group:</p> <p>% participants who learn new skills and strategies from group discussions and peer support (workplace communication, stress management, disclosure, giving feedback, workplace rights, professionalism)</p> <p>% participants given an opportunity to reflect on how these skills apply to their job searching journey</p> <p>% participants who have completed the program able to independently⁴ exercise these skills</p> <p>% of participants who learn how to apply general employment skills – like job searching or networking – to the employment landscape in their region</p>			

⁴ Just as a note, for AASEN programs, it will be key to measure independence in a person-directed way. Each individual's definition of independence will depend on their access needs and support preferences / requirements. (AV)

Evaluation Issues/Questions	Indicators	Document Review	Facilitator and Partner Interviews	Participant Survey
	<p>% of participants who gained employment after participating in AASEN programs</p> <p>% of participants who feel that the skills and experiences gained during AASEN programming supported them in obtaining employment</p>			
3.2 How effective has the AASEN been in building a network of Atlantic partners to enhance capacity for employment supports across neighbouring regions for autistic adults	3.2.1 Evidence of stronger partnerships within each province to better understand the service landscape and opportunities to collaborate		X	

Appendix B – Interview Guide

Evaluation of the Atlantic Autism Supports and Employment Network (AASEN) Program

Interview Guide - Partners/Facilitators

Introduction

The Future Skills Centre (FSC) has contracted Goss Gilroy Inc (GGI), an independent consulting firm, to support their strategic evaluation and learning support initiatives by assisting AASEN with its evaluation activities. GGI specializes in conducting program evaluations of skills training programs.

The interview will take about 60 minutes. Your participation in the case study is voluntary. Also, please be assured that any information you provide will remain confidential and will be managed and protected in accordance with the *Privacy Act* to prevent its loss or unauthorized disclosure. The information we gather through this interview will be summarized in aggregate form.

Since this interview covers a diverse range of activities, you will only be asked to speak to those areas where you are most involved or knowledgeable. Feel free to let us know if any questions do not apply to you, or if you do not feel comfortable answering them.

General

1. Please briefly describe your current roles What is your role with AASEN? Can you tell us a bit about the kinds of employment supports that you have or are helping participants connect with in their communities?

Project Design and Delivery

2. Career Quest is designed to help program participants develop regular job searching habits and tactics and to support program participants in developing skills, so they feel prepared and confident to job search independently. Do you believe that the program design is successful in these respects? [probe for why/why not]
3. Have you made any adaptations to the original program design for Career Quest of the Employment Support Group? [probe for why/why not] If so, during which group and cohort did you make that adaptation?
 - a. What prompted you to make this adaptation?
 - b. Have you received any feedback from participants on these adaptations? (why/why not?)

4. How would you describe the role of your first-voice autistic leader during Employment Support Group? Do you think it is important that the support group is co-facilitated by an autistic individual? [probe for why/why not]
5. How would you describe the challenges that AASEN program participants face in trying to get and keep employment? Where do the challenges come from?
6. How would you describe the role that AASEN programming has had in your employment supports landscape? How would you describe the challenges you face as an AASEN program facilitator? Does the AASEN provide you with the resources, skills and partnerships you need to support participants?

Effectiveness

7. Career Quest facilitators are meant to connect participants to a local employment agency once they have developed the ability to search for jobs more independently. Would you say the program design allowed you to do this with the participants you worked with? [Probe for why/why not; if not, how do people move from CQ to community-based supports?]
 - a. If someone gets a job interview or gains employment while in the first phase of Career Quest, what do you do? [Probe for role of community agencies for any supports or case management, role of their organization, types of supports provided if any]
 - b. Do you discuss support options with participants as they look for work? Can you tell me a little bit about that?
8. Participants in the Employment Support Group include people looking for work for the first time, some people who had been laid off, terminated, or furloughed from their jobs because of the pandemic, and those who were looking for new opportunities for work. What would you say were the major themes and concerns that came up in the conversations with the support group across experiences?
9. Do you think AASEN is working in a way that your organization would continue after the funding period has ended? If so, how do you think that could happen?
 - a. Have you or anyone in your organization discussed the continuation of the programs with any other potential funder? If so, can you tell me a little bit about that?
 - b. What would it mean for participants if the program were to end?
10. Do you have any other comments?

Thank you very much for your participation in this interview!

Appendix C – Participant Survey

Atlantic Autism Supports and Employment Network (AASEN) Participant Survey

Introduction

Thank you for participating in the Atlantic Autism Supports and Employment Network (AASEN) Participant Survey.

The Future Skills Centre (FSC) has contracted Goss Gilroy Inc (GGI), to help AASEN evaluate the Career Quest (CQ) and COVID-19 Employment Support Group (ESG) programs.

By participating in the survey, you are using your voice to provide opinions that will help Autism Nova Scotia and Future Skills develop programs in the future.

The survey is voluntary, and it will take approximately 5 to 10 minutes to complete.

Your privacy is protected

The information collected from this questionnaire will be kept strictly confidential. Your responses will be administered by a third party, GGI, and stored outside of the AASEN. Your responses will be handled in accordance with privacy legislation. Your name will not be asked and personal identifiers (for example site location, age, gender) will not be used in any reports. All of the findings will be reported at the aggregate level and will be used only for the purposes described above.

If you need help filling in the survey, please contact Michelle Pajot, Principal at GGI mpajot@ggi.ca

If you have questions about the Evaluation process, please contact Adri Vanos, AASEN Coordinator at avanos@autismns.ca.

Please complete this survey by March 10, 2023.

Section 1: AASEN PROGRAM EVALUATION QUESTIONS

The research team will not know your name, the information you share is confidential (and will not be shared) so please share what you are comfortable with. All responses will be kept confidential.

1. In what province do you live? (required)

- [1] Nova Scotia (NS)
- [2] Newfoundland and Labrador (NL)
- [3] New Brunswick (NB)
- [4] Prince Edward Island (PEI)

2. Did you participate in the Career Quest program?

- [1] Yes (Go to Q2.1)
- [2] No (Skip to Q3)

2.1 Did you participate in the Career Quest program more than once?

- [1] Yes
- [2] No

2.2 Please check when you participated in the Career Quest program. (Select all that apply)

- [1] May 2021 – October 2021
- [2] November 2021 – April 2022
- [3] May 2022 – September 2023
- [4] October 2022 – March 2023
- [6] Don't know

2.3 The following statements are about your time in Career Quest.

Career Quest helped me learn how to:				
	YES	SOMEWHAT	NO	Don't Know
Job search				
Comments				
Understand how to read a job posting				
Comments				
Complete applications				
Comments				
Create and customize a resume				
Comments				
Feel <u>prepared</u> to job search independently				
Comments				
Feel <u>confident</u> to job search independently				

Comments				
My participation in the Career Quest program has also helped me to:				
	YES	SOMEWHAT	NO	Don't know
Reach my employment goals				
Comments				
Gain an understanding of the importance of self-advocacy in making life decisions				
Comments				
Improve my skills which I use post-program				
Comments				
Advocate for my needs and wants				
Comments				
Develop employment plans				
Comments				
Get a job				
Comments				

3. Did you participate in the COVID-19 Employment Support Group program?

[1] Yes (Go to Q3.1)

[2] No (Skip to Q4)

3.1 Did you participate in the Employment Support Group program more than once?

[1] Yes

[2] No

[3] Not sure

3.2 Please check when you participated in the Employment Support Group. (Select all that apply)

[1] May 2021 – October 2021

[2] November 2021 – April 2022

[3] May 2022 – September 2022

[4] October 2022 – March 2023

[6] Don't know

3.3 The following statements are about your time in the Employment Support Group program.

The Employment Support Group (ESG) helped me to:				
	YES	SOMEWHAT	NO	Don't Know

Learn new skills and strategies from group discussions and peer support (workplace communication, stress management, disclosure, giving feedback, workplace rights, professionalism)				
Comments				
Reflect on how these skills apply to my employment journey				
Comments				
Apply these skills on my own after the program is completed				
Comments				
Use job searching or networking skills to find a job in my region				
Comments				

My participation in the Employment Support Group program has also helped me to:				
	YES	SOMEWHAT	NO	Don't know
Reach my employment goals				
Comments				
Gain an understanding of the importance of self-advocacy in making life decisions				
Comments				
Improve my skills which I use post-program				
Comments				
Advocate for my needs and wants				
Comments				
Develop employment plans				
Comments				
Get a job				
Comments				

4. **Did you participate in both programs?**

[1] Yes

[2] No

5. **Has it been hard accessing services you need in your area?**

[1] Yes

[2] No

Did you have any barriers to accessing virtual programs (e.g., WIFI connection, no personal computer, knowledge of zoom)?

[1] Yes

[2] No

[3] Don't know/Not applicable

If yes, please specify what barrier(s)?

6. How did you find out about the Career Quest (CQ) or the COVID-19 Employment Support Group (ESG) program? [Check all that apply]

[1] Friends

[2] Family

[3] A career counsellor or support person

[4] A posting/advertisement

[5] Website

[6] Social media

[7] Word of mouth

[8] Community organization (such as a local Autism Centre) - Please specify _____

[9] Government agency - Please specify _____

[10] Other - Please specify _____

Section 2: Employment

7. What is your employment status?

[1] Never worked [Go to Q7.1]

[2] Unemployed [Go to Q7.1]

[3] Working part-time [Skip to Q7.2]

[4] Working full-time [Skip to Q7.2]

[5] Working seasonally [Skip to Q7.2]

[6] Worked in past year [Skip to Q7.2]

[7] Worked in past 2- 5 years [Go to Q7.1]

[8] Retired [Skip to Q8]

[9] Other please specify _____ [Skip to Q8]

[10] Prefer not to answer [Skip to Q8]

7.1 Why are you not working right now? [Check all that apply] [Skip to Q8 after response]

[1] Lack of on-the-job support

[2] No accommodations

[3] Termination

[4] Lack of transportation support

[5] Lack of mental health support

- [6] Workplace was not inclusive of persons with disabilities
- [7] Not knowing where to find supports for maintaining employment
- [8] Other

7.2 Did job searching in Career Quest help you get a job?

- [1] Yes [Skip to Q7.4]
- [2] No [Skip to Q7.3]

7.3 How did you find your job? [Skip to Q8 after response]

7.4 Are you still in that job?

- [1] Yes [Skip to Q8]
- [2] No [Go to Q7.5]

7.5 Why are you no longer in that job? [Check all that apply]

- [1] Lack of on-the-job support
- [2] No accommodations
- [3] Termination
- [4] Lack of transportation support
- [5] Lack of mental health support
- [6] Un-inclusive work environment
- [7] Not knowing where to find supports for maintaining employment
- [8] Other

8. When working, have you had a workplace accommodation for a disability?

- [1] Yes
- [2] No
- [3] Prefer not to answer

9. Would you ask for workplace accommodations, if needed?

- [1] Yes (Skip to Q10)
- [2] No (Go to Q9.1)
- [3] Prefer not to answer (Skip to Q10)

9.1 Why wouldn't you ask for workplace accommodations?

- [1] Please specify

- [2] Prefer not to answer

Section 3: Demographics

10. Place of Origin

Were you born in Canada?

- [1] Yes (Skip to Q11)
- [2] No (Go to Q10.1)

[3] Prefer not to answer (Skip to Q11)

10.1 If not, where were you born?

[2] Prefer not to answer

11. What is your age range?

[1] 16-29

[2] 30-39

[4] 40-49

[5] 50-59

[6] 60-65

[7] Over 65

[8] Prefer not to answer

12. Which of the following best describes your daily living?

Select all that apply:

[1] Live alone

[2] Recent significant loss, divorce, death

[3] Feel isolated

[4] Feel geographically isolated

[5] Lack a support system

[6] Language/culture a barrier

[7] Other (please specify)

[8] N/A

13. What is the highest level of education you completed?

[1] Elementary School

[2] Some High School

[3] High School Diploma or equivalent (GED)

[4] Some college completed

[5] Some university completed

[5] College diploma/degree

[5] University Bachelor's Degree

[6] University Master's Degree

[7] Earned doctorate (Ph.D., D.Sc., D.Ed)

[8] Prefer not to answer

14. Would you be comfortable sharing what type of disability/ies you have?

[1] Yes (Go to Q14.1)

[2] No (Skip to Q15)

14.1 Please check all that apply:

[1] ADD / ADHD

[2] Autism

[3] Hearing impairment/loss

[4] Episodic Disability

[5] Intellectual Disability

- [6] Learning Disability
- [7] Vision loss / blindness
- [8] Mental health
- [9] Physical Disability/Mobility impairment
- [10] Workplace injury
- [11] Deaf
- [12] Multiple disabilities
- [13] Other (Please specify): _____

15. Would you like to identify your gender as...

- [1] Male
- [2] Female
- [3] Non-Binary
- [4] _____ (Self-identify if you wish)
- [5] Prefer not to say

16. Would you also like to self-identify as: (check all that apply)

- [1] A person with a disability
- [2] An Indigenous person
- [3] A racialized person/person of colour
- [4] An immigrant, refugee and/or newcomer to Canada
- [5] LGBTQ2S+
- [6] Prefer not to say
- [7] N/A

17. Do you have any other comments?

Thank you for taking the time to complete the AASEN Participant Survey!