



## PROJECT INSIGHTS REPORT

# Cook to Connect

### Inclusive Economy

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The program, Cook to Connect (C2C), provides the opportunity for newcomers living in Newfoundland and Labrador to gain culinary and industry-ready training, mentoring and practical work experience and skills development within the food services industry. It is intended to address the impact of pandemic-related restaurant closures on employment, underemployment due to language barriers, and lack of knowledge of Canadian workplace requirements, as well as competition for entry-level jobs with Canadian-born workers.

The program addresses challenges most newcomers to Canada face in the first five years after their arrival when searching for employment; a lack of Canadian experience and language barriers specific to a work context. To that end, the C2C program provides culinary instruction, English-language lessons and experience in a catering kitchen workplace. The program also included certification in two areas: safe food handling and workplace hazardous materials information systems.

As well as meeting the needs of newcomers in these ways, working with food has the potential to bring people together and facilitate the integration of newcomers into their new Canadian communities.

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#### PARTNERS

[Association for  
New Canadians](#)

#### LOCATIONS

Newfoundland and  
Labrador

#### INVESTMENT

\$1,119,330

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Report:**  
**Cook to Connect  
Project**

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**KEY INSIGHT #1**

**KEY INSIGHT #2**

**KEY INSIGHT #3**

Income support is important to support attendance in such programs.

Wrap-around services and referrals are highly valued by program participants.

The program needed to be adaptable and flexible to accommodate the diverse needs of participants, such as language barriers and varying levels of culinary experience.

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## The Issue

The province of Newfoundland and Labrador is welcoming increasing numbers of newcomers but as in the rest of Canada finding employment can be challenging. Newcomers often face challenges having their existing skills, education and experience recognized by Canadian employers, which leads many to being underemployed. Newcomers also face barriers gaining sector-specific language competencies needed to be successful, as many English-as-a-Second-Language programs provide more general language instruction.

The Association for New Canadians (ANC) developed the Cook to Connect program in response to seeing a growing number of newcomers to St. John's who had worked in the food industry as cooks in their countries of origin, but who were struggling to get a foothold in the Canadian industry. This was because their past cooking experiences were not being recognized and they required food and safety certification and industry-specific language instruction. They were also seeing a growing number of newcomers who wanted to start their own home-based catering businesses, but who didn't know how to get started. 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. While there are other culinary and cooking programs available in St. John's, they involve a cost and are much longer in duration. They also lack language instruction and are not designed for newcomers.



## What We're Investigating

The Cook to Connect project aimed to provide newcomers with recognized culinary instruction and job experience, as well as leverage newcomers' existing skills. The longer-term goal was to help newcomers secure meaningful employment, ultimately contributing to their successful participation, settlement and integration in their new Canadian community.

The Cook to Connect program consisted of free culinary training, English-language training and workplace training delivered over a one-year period. Delivered on the site of a local farmer's market, the first half of the year participants focused on culinary training led by a culinary instructor and certified chef. Industry-specific English-language training was also provided that included things like kitchen language, kitchen protocols, recipe reading and writing. The training was provided Monday to Thursday, six hours a day, with a three-hour stipend to cover the time spent in training. In the second half of the year program, participants had opportunities to work shifts either at ANC's social enterprises – the Global Eats food truck or their catering business. Participants were paid an hourly rate for their labour. Participants were also provided transportation supports, access to a computer, access to chef equipment and uniform and ingredients. Participants were also encouraged to take home the food they cooked each day.

The project was testing the effectiveness of the cook-to-connect model in providing newcomers with recognized culinary instruction and job experience to support their successful settlement and integration in Canada. It aimed to leverage newcomers' existing skills in cooking and provide them with the necessary skills, knowledge and support to secure meaningful employment in food services in Canada.

The project was also testing the use of positive network externalities to enhance project outcomes. Positive network externalities are the benefits that arise from a project due to the interaction of people within a network to which they are introduced. The partnerships with other organizations, such as the St. John's Farmer's Market, were also part of the project's testing. The ANC aimed to leverage shared community assets through innovative approaches that arose from the partnerships to make the project responsive to the needs of newcomers.

## What We're Learning

Cook to Connect graduated 32 participants over three cohorts, and all participants found the three components of the program to be helpful. The majority of participants interviewed for the evaluation (62 per cent) did not have any previous experience working in the food services industry. One-third of these explained that they enjoyed cooking, often cooked for their family and friends, and/or cooked as a hobby. The other 38 per cent reported working in food services, either in their home country and/or since arriving in Canada. All participants across the three cohorts passed the Safe Food Handling Certificate exam, with a minimum of 90 per cent.

**Incentives and wrap-around supports are integral to facilitate program completion of these kinds.** Cook to Connect participants benefited from incentives to participate and complete the program including transportation support and a stipend to cover in-class time. While not a component of the program logic model, ANC staff assisted participants with other needs such as challenges with residency status, renewing a driver's license, childcare and other day-to-day troubleshooting that allowed participants to stay in the program and complete it.


**Such programs must be flexible in responding to individual participant needs.** Cook to Connect staff credited some of the program success to their ongoing efforts to adapt the program for the individual participants in each cohort. These efforts included recording videos on specific culinary skills that could be practiced at home, scheduling food safety training during Ramadan to minimize preparing and tasting food for Muslim participants, and integrating dietary restrictions such as using halal chicken or beef and vegetarian options into recipes. ANC staff also modified the curriculum to integrate varied understanding of Canadian workplace culture norms, for example spending time exploring and educating participants regarding certain ingredients that are common in Canada, but less used in other cultures.

**High-value partnerships with like-minded programs and organizations are a must.** As well as connections with its own social enterprises, ANC established partnerships with a range of other social service organizations and social enterprises to expand the workplace training opportunities it was able to offer. Connections to other successful programs allowed for on-the-job learning that continued well past the end date of the program. By working with community partners, program managers were able to offer additional resources and experiential opportunities to participants and build stronger connections within the community.

**Opportunities to network supports the integration of newcomers.** An unexpected outcome of the program was the strong sense of community and support that developed among participants. While the focus of the program was on providing high-quality culinary and language training to prepare participants for employment, the connections made within the program were equally valuable. Participants formed a tight-knit 'family' within each cohort, made use of cohort-based What's App groups, and graduates from all three cohorts continued to work with ANC on catering events after the program ended. This unexpected development highlights the importance of fostering a supportive environment for newcomers to Canada, where they can feel a sense of belonging and connection to others in their community.



## Why It Matters



Many participants were motivated to join because they'd had experiences where their credentials, education and experience was unrecognized, or their language skills were not adequate. This echoes the experience of many newcomers to Canada, regardless of where they choose to settle, or the industries they are attempting to integrate into.

Projects like Cook to Connect provide a model for how to build an economy in which all Canadians can participate, and no talent, skills and knowledge are untapped. Increasing the employment rates of all segments of the labour market is important to address Canada's productivity challenge and achieving more equilibrium between the supply and demand of labour.

While small in scale, Cook to Connect's ability to combine regionally focused, technical skills development with industry-specific language training and workplace training opportunities offers a model for others to replicate in the food services industry and beyond.

## What's Next

ANC may plan to cultivate partnerships with other local social enterprises that make food to give participants more opportunities to do workplace training. ANC is also fielding requests from local restaurants looking to hire Cook to Connect participants to support special events. ANC is exploring partnerships with local post-secondary institutions to share learning and create a pathway from Cook to Connect for further education or training where there is interest from participants.

### HOW TO CITE THIS REPORT

Young, S. (2023) Project Insights Report: Cook to Connect. Toronto: Future Skills Centre. <https://fsc-ccf.ca/projects/cook-to-connect-2/>

The Future Skills Centre acknowledges that the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee share a special relationship to the 'Dish With One Spoon Territory,' where our office is located, bound to share and protect the land. As a pan-Canadian initiative, FSC operates on the traditional territory of many Indigenous nations across Turtle Island, the name given to the North American continent by some Indigenous peoples. We are grateful for the opportunity to work in this territory and commit ourselves to learning about our shared history and doing our part towards reconciliation.