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Project Insights Report

# Experiential Learning in Innovation, Technology, and Entrepreneurship (ELITE) Program for Black Youth



## **PARTNERS**

University of Alberta



## **LOCATIONS**

Alberta



## **INVESTMENT**

\$433,330



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## **Executive Summary**

The Experiential Learning in Innovation, Technology, and Entrepreneurship (ELITE) Program for Black youth responded to the higher unemployment rate among Black youth aged 15 to 24, which was worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. This initiative aimed to close workforce disparities by equipping Black youth with practical skills in high-demand areas like robotics, automation and advanced manufacturing. It integrated technical training with entrepreneurial and resilience skills to prepare participants for higher education and career opportunities.

Throughout the project, Black youth participated in training and paid internships that offered hands-on experience in technology-driven fields, which allowed them to build their professional networks and facilitated their transitions from high school to postsecondary education. The program's success was bolstered by community engagement and targeted recruitment efforts, particularly within the Black francophone community. The program developed and implemented training content on entrepreneurship and mental health and well-being based on feedback from participants, which improved its inclusivity and overall effectiveness, ensuring it effectively met the evolving needs of the youth involved.

The initiative demonstrated the value of tailored, work-integrated training programs and paid internships in promoting diversity, equity and inclusion. It also highlighted the necessity of adaptable and collaborative approaches in educational and professional settings, proving that such strategies directly contribute to closing skills gaps. Other postsecondary institutions aiming to increase diversity in STEM programs can adopt lessons from the implementation of this project.

The success of the project not only improved immediate educational and employment outcomes for participants but also offered valuable insights for future workforce development policies and practices. By emphasizing the importance of mentorship, community involvement and practical training, the initiative has laid a foundation for more effective and inclusive training programs that can significantly enhance the economic prospects of marginalized youth.

#### KEY INSIGHTS

- 1** While recruitment of high school students was challenging, increasing the number of lunch-and-learn sessions and doing more direct marketing and engagement at francophone high schools resulted in increased participation. Toward the end of the project timelines, 30% of participants identified as francophones.
- 2** Engagement among male participants in the Wellness and Coaching series improved when Black male presenters were added.
- 3** The adoption of the model by Carleton University illustrated its scalability and the effectiveness of cross-institutional collaboration.

## The Issue

The Experiential Learning in Innovation, Technology, and Entrepreneurship (ELITE) Program for Black Youth at the University of Alberta was launched in response to significant workforce disparities experienced by Black youth, which were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Black youth are under-represented in high-demand fields such as robotics, automation, tissue engineering and advanced manufacturing. This under-representation has resulted from barriers like anti-Black racism (faced by Black youth throughout their lives), limited access to high-tech industries and inadequate support structures to support their entry and success.



## What We Investigated

Designed for Black youth in Alberta aged 15 to 22, the initiative focuses on equipping participants with the skills necessary for success in advanced manufacturing and technology sectors, including robotics, automation and tissue engineering. It combines technical training, experiential learning opportunities and paid internships with the development of entrepreneurial skills and resilience, as well as opportunities for participants to engage directly with industry partners.

Objectives focused on facilitating pathways for academic progression and reducing labour market entry barriers through early-stage, hands-on training that also encouraged an entrepreneurial mindset. The methodology involved a multidisciplinary team of experts delivering work-integrated internships and technical training, using cutting-edge equipment, and fostering robust industry partnerships to ensure comprehensive skills acquisition.

## What We're Learning

Between 2021 and 2023, the ELITE program had 146 participants, as well as a diversity of partners from postsecondary institutions, government, industry and community organizations who provided program support, delivery and work-integrated learning opportunities.

### **Targeted outreach is needed to counteract recruitment challenges**

Recruitment challenges, especially among high school students in the Black francophone community, highlighted the need for proactive engagement strategies. By increasing outreach, organizing targeted information sessions and creating specialized roles within the project structure, the initiative successfully boosted student enrolment. This improvement underscored the effectiveness of tailored outreach and direct community engagement in overcoming recruitment barriers and enhancing inclusivity. The initiative also addressed the shortage of trained Black experts by intensifying school involvement and employing targeted marketing in collaboration with Black community organizations to ensure the delivery of relevant and effective programming.

### **Stakeholder feedback about representation improved the project**

The project employed active feedback mechanisms to enhance inclusivity and effectiveness. By soliciting input from interns and their parents during implementation, necessary adjustments were made, such as ensuring balanced gender representation in program activities, and having Black facilitators and program deliverers to properly reflect the identities of the participants. This iterative approach demonstrated the value of incorporating stakeholder perspectives to refine programs and improve participant engagement effectively.

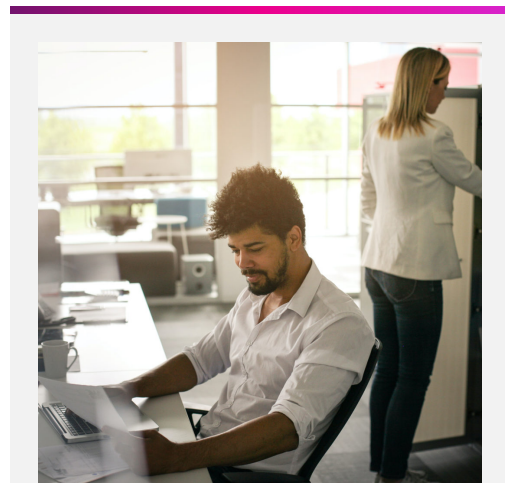
### **This model was scaled for impact**

The ELITE program was adopted and replicated by Carleton University in 2022, and has also informed the development of other programming at the University of Alberta targeting Black youth, including the [Black Youth for Social Innovation Program](#). Passionate program spokespeople, robust program documentation and compelling results were key to being able to share the model more broadly.

## **★ Why It Matters**

The Black population in Canada is diverse and growing, reporting more than 200 ethnic or cultural origins in 2016. By 2041, it is expected that the Black population in Canada will exceed three million. Black peoples in Canada continue to experience widespread, systemic anti-Black racism in our education systems and labour market, and more needs to be done to name and address anti-Black racism in the skills development ecosystem, including efforts to make educational institutions and workplaces more inclusive.

The insights from the ELITE program have implications for policy and practice that extend beyond the project's scope. These findings serve as a crucial call to action for policymakers, funders and other decision-makers concerned with workforce disparities and inclusivity.



**State of Skills:  
Better labour market transitions  
for mid-career workers**

The success of the project in engaging Black-focused and Black-led community organizations and Black professionals underscores the importance of community partnerships in delivering effective programming for under-represented youth. By leveraging community expertise and resources, organizations can enhance the impact of their initiatives, fostering meaningful connections that contribute to a more inclusive and supportive environment for youth empowerment.

The project also demonstrates the significance of tailored strategies to reach diverse youth populations, such as the Black francophone community, through proactive outreach and targeted engagement. The project's success in achieving nearly equal gender balance among interns highlights the effectiveness of intentional recruitment strategies and program design to ensure diversity and inclusivity.

The project's findings offer valuable insights for policy-makers, funders and organizations striving to enhance diversity, equity and inclusion in educational and community-based initiatives. By prioritizing community partnerships, proactive outreach and tailored support for marginalized youth, organizations can (1) create sustainable pathways for youth development, (2) drive positive change in communities, and (3) contribute to a more inclusive and prosperous society. The lessons learned from this project serve as a blueprint for designing effective youth training initiatives that prioritize inclusivity, collaboration and continuous improvement, ultimately benefiting individuals, organizations and society as a whole.

## ► What's Next

The University of Alberta continues to offer [ELITE to Black youth](#). The Future Skills Centre continues to support the program, most recently with support to implement an external evaluation to better understand the impact of the program on job-readiness for Black youth after program completion, and on the impact of the entrepreneurship training and wellness coaching elements on employment prospects. Improved program documentation will support further scaling of the ELITE program.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact [communications@fsc-ccf.ca](mailto:communications@fsc-ccf.ca).

### How to Cite This Report

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There is considerable promise in the role digital tools and virtual career services can play in improving access to training and career development, particularly for those with geographic barriers or constraints such as family care or other work responsibilities.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

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