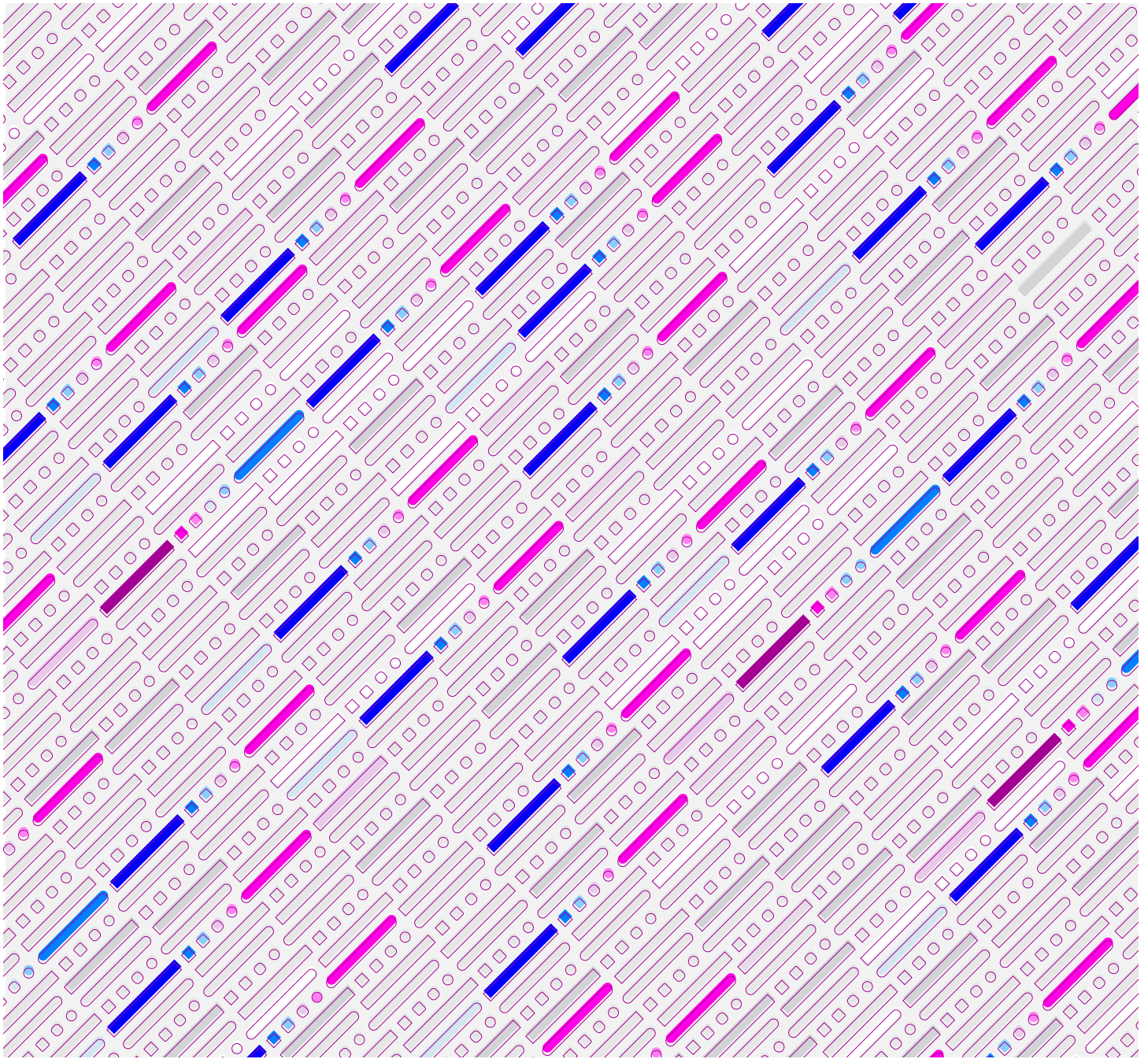




AspireAtlantic

Interim Evidence Report

November 2023

Blueprint

This report was produced as part of a project funded by the Future Skills Centre (FSC), with financial support from the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.

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

The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Future Skills Centre or the Government of Canada.



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Acknowledgements

About the Future Skills Centre

The [Future Skills Centre](#) (FSC) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to driving innovation in skills development so that everyone in Canada can be prepared for the future of work. We partner with policymakers, researchers, practitioners, employers and labour, and post-secondary institutions to solve pressing labour market challenges and ensure that everyone can benefit from relevant lifelong learning opportunities. We are founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint, and The Conference Board of Canada, and are funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.

Le Centre des Compétences futures (CCF) est un centre de recherche et de collaboration avant-gardiste qui se consacre à l'innovation dans le domaine du développement des compétences afin que toutes les personnes au Canada soient prêtes pour l'avenir du travail. Nous travaillons en partenariat avec des personnes chargées de l'élaboration des politiques, des personnes chargées de la recherche, des spécialistes, des employeurs et des travailleuses et travailleurs, ainsi qu'avec des établissements d'enseignement postsecondaire, afin de résoudre les problèmes urgents du marché du travail et de veiller à ce que chacun puisse bénéficier de possibilités pertinentes d'apprentissage tout au long de la vie. Nous sommes fondés par un consortium dont les membres sont l'Université métropolitaine de Toronto, Blueprint et le Conference Board of Canada, et nous sommes financés par le Programme du Centre des compétences du gouvernement du Canada.

About Blueprint

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

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

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



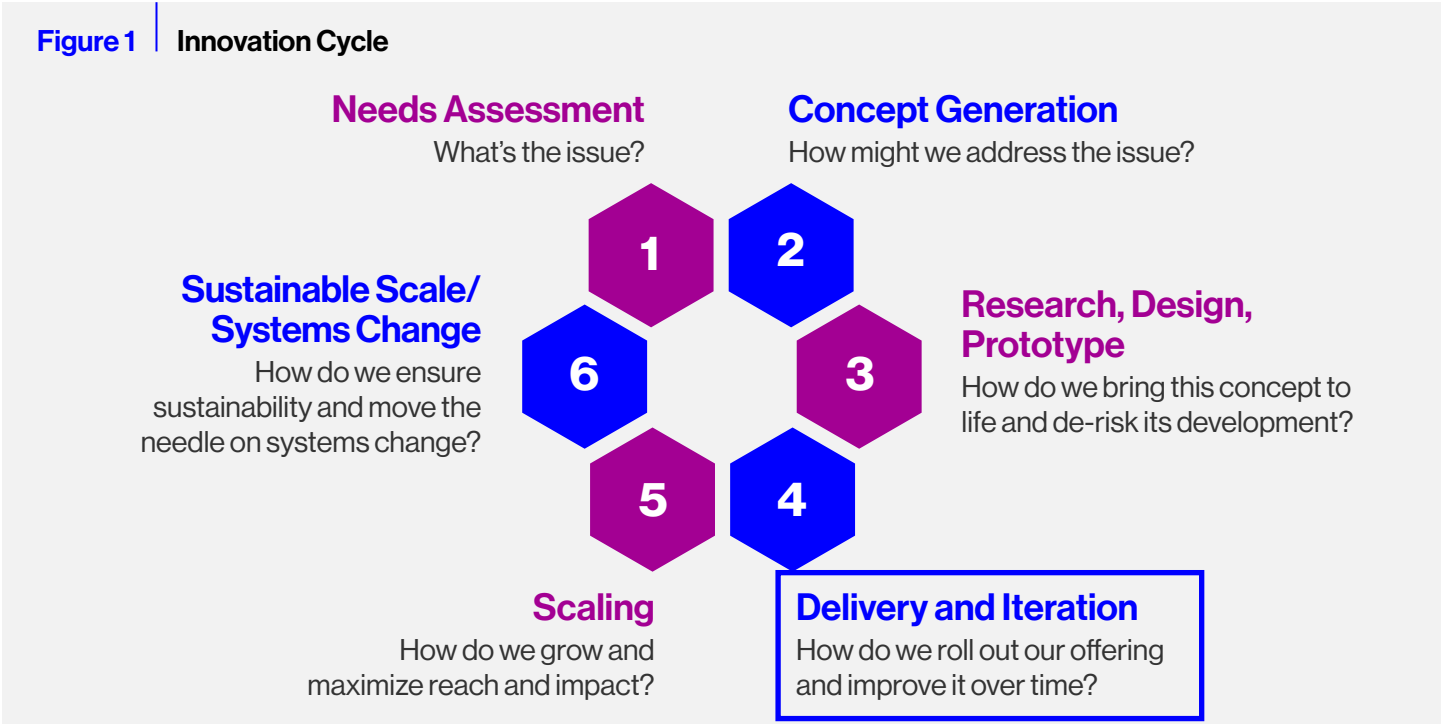
Preface

Canada’s labour market is rapidly changing. To keep pace with these changes, Canadians need skills development opportunities that respond to demands and apply evidence-informed practices. Many skills development innovations have emerged to meet these needs, but they often face barriers to scaling their interventions beyond a pilot stage.

To address this challenge, the Future Skills Centre (FSC) and Blueprint have launched the **Scaling Up Skills Development Portfolio**.

In the [Scaling Up Skills Development Portfolio](#), FSC is partnering with ten organizations with promising skills development interventions that have moved toward scaling up their impact. As part of the FSC consortium, Blueprint is working closely with each grantee organization to generate evidence to support their scaling journey. This is an opportunity to disrupt the current “one study at a time” approach to evidence building in favour of continuous evidence generation and program improvement. The hope is that this approach will better produce the quality and quantity of evidence needed to help promising interventions progress in their scaling journey. For more information about Blueprint’s approach to scaling, see our [Scaling Social Innovation](#) webpage.

Blueprint’s evidence generation approach is aligned with the innovation cycle (**Figure 1**). Our focus for the Scaling Portfolio is to work alongside partner organizations to generate evidence that helps move their interventions through **Stage 4** to **Stage 5** with the ultimate goal of supporting sustainable scale and systems change (**Stage 6**) in our sights.



About this report

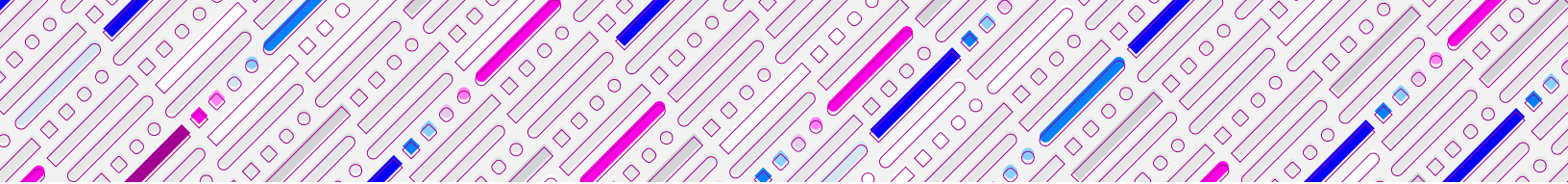
Blueprint is working together with each partner organization in the [Scaling Up Skills Development Portfolio](#) to continuously collect and monitor data about their intervention, capturing implementation and participant outcomes along the scaling journey.

This report shares interim findings on AspireAtlantic, a sector-based training model that helps unemployed workers and workers with low wages to transition into and advance in three high-growth sectors (home-building; industrial, commercial and institutional construction; and manufacturing) in Nova Scotia.

While the purpose of this interim report is to share early insights, it is important to note that the impacts of skills development interventions take time to realize, and interim findings may not yet reflect the intervention's full potential.

This report is organized into seven sections:

- **Section 1: Introduction** (pp. 8-9) provides background on AspireAtlantic.
- **Section 2: About AspireAtlantic** (pp. 10-16) presents an introduction to sector-based models and an overview of the program model.
- **Section 3: Changing economic conditions** (pp. 17-18) provides an account of the context in which the model has been implemented, which has changed significantly since the initial needs assessment in 2019-2020.
- **Section 4: Methodology** (pp. 19-21) shares Blueprint's evidence generation approach and the learning agenda and data sources used in this report.
- **Section 5: Early insights on participant experience** (pp. 22-23) presents interim findings on program uptake and participant satisfaction.
- **Section 6: Early insights on program implementation** (pp. 24-28) discusses learnings from program delivery.
- **Section 7: Concluding thoughts** (pp. 29-30) offers some reflections about the model and future directions.



Executive Summary

In 2020, non-profit social innovation lab Pier Labs saw that Nova Scotia had both a population of local workers who needed access to higher quality jobs and employers in growth sectors who needed workers. In response, Pier Labs designed and implemented a new sector-based model, AspireAtlantic, to bridge the gap between the needs of employers and workers seeking to move from unemployment or low-wage jobs into jobs with advancement opportunities in manufacturing and construction.

AspireAtlantic provides career readiness and occupational skills training in one of three sectors: 1) home-building; 2) industrial, commercial and institutional construction; and 3) manufacturing. Following training, participants are provided with job placement and post-employment supports.

In 2019-2020, Pier Labs received funding from the [Future Skills Centre \(FSC\)](#) to carry out an initial research and design phase which scoped out the need for a sector-based model in Nova Scotia. In early 2021, AspireAtlantic was selected as one of [ten interventions](#) to form FSC and Blueprint's [Scaling Up Skills Development Portfolio](#), and provided further funding to bring the program from an initial model design to delivery in three locations. Blueprint worked collaboratively with Pier Labs and its delivery partners to generate evidence on program implementation, in support of continuous learning and growing insights on sector-based models.

Pier Labs' undertaking was ambitious. Through their focus on specific industry sectors, sector-based models act as on-ramps to good jobs in growth sectors and create hiring pipelines to help employers meet their skills needs. But sector-based models are highly challenging and time-intensive to deliver and can be vulnerable to changes in the labour market.

AspireAtlantic also saw Pier Labs taking on a new role, acting as a workforce intermediary for the first time. What's more, Pier Labs had to navigate one of the most profound disruptions to the labour market since World War II. Covid-19 created deep and far-reaching economic impacts and post-pandemic recovery has tightened the labour market. In contrast, AspireAtlantic was originally designed for a provincial economy with a skills shortage and relatively high unemployment.

While this had significant implications for recruitment, it also means that the model is well placed to generate insights into how to implement and continuously improve a model in a significantly different context than the one envisioned. This report shares interim insights from cohort 1 of AspireAtlantic, which had 54 participants and ran from February to December 2022.

Key findings

Pier Labs successfully assembled and coordinated a coalition of organizations to design and deliver the AspireAtlantic model.

Pier Labs invested considerable time and energy in building new relationships, creating trust and coordinating this new coalition to deliver a complex, multi-streamed model. Assembling, organizing and leading this coalition is a significant achievement, particularly given that the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath have created difficult conditions for skills training interventions. Building trust takes time, often longer than the span of a training cohort or two.

AspireAtlantic is showing very promising results in terms of participant satisfaction.

Participants report high rates of satisfaction with their experiences in the program and with the role of AspireAtlantic in providing employment support. Satisfaction rates are over 90% for both the career readiness and occupational skills training components. A similar proportion of participants reported finding the program useful in helping them prepare for future employment. All participants would recommend the program to someone else, a strong indication of positive perceptions of AspireAtlantic.

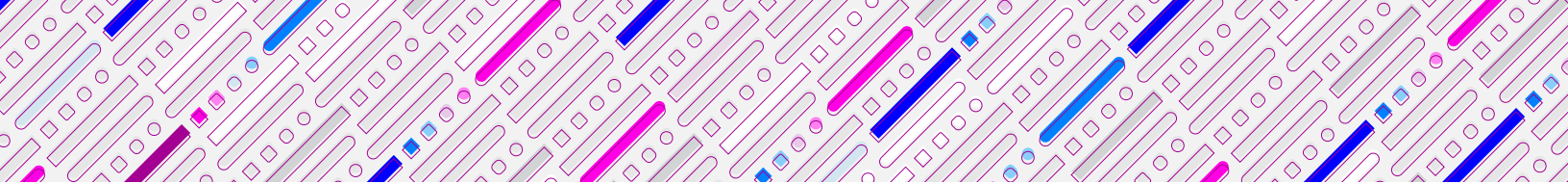
Participant recruitment has been impacted by economic conditions, gaps between model needs and client profiles, and curriculum development timelines.

Due to a combination of economic and implementation factors, AspireAtlantic is unlikely to reach as many participants as planned. A tightening labour market means that an increasing number of work-ready jobseekers have been able to find work without support from employment service organizations. The remaining clients are more likely to be facing barriers to work and have more complex needs. Since service providers have limited ability to reach beyond their existing client pools, this led to misalignment between the model's target population and the population actually reached. Timelines also played a role in recruitment mismatches, where training curriculums were finalized later than expected, leaving less time for recruitment and, in the case of one sector, missing the seasonal hiring window.

All of these findings should be understood in the context of AspireAtlantic's ambitious and thoughtful approach, the inherent challenges in delivering sector-based initiatives and the unprecedented market and workforce impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. The purpose of the Scaling Up Skills Development Portfolio is to learn about how interventions fare in their scaling journeys, not to implement without incident. Challenges and adaptations are expected, and helpful in learning about how to scale promising interventions.

Next steps

A final report in 2024 will contain analyses of program outcomes by sector, data on program costs and resourcing, as well as updates on participant uptake and satisfaction. It will include data from cohort 2, which ran from March 2023 to May 2023. We will report on employment outcomes in the final report, when we have longer-term data and anticipate larger sample sizes.



1. Introduction

In a thriving labour market, all workers would have the means to transition into good quality jobs. People who face barriers to labour market participation would be supported through targeted training interventions that provided seamless on-ramps to good jobs in growth sectors. Those same on-ramps would create hiring pipelines to help employers meet their skills needs.

In Nova Scotia in 2020, recognizing both a population of local workers who needed access to higher quality jobs and employers in growth sectors who needed workers, Pier Labs was funded to test a sector-based intervention called AspireAtlantic, which was adapted from the WorkAdvance model designed by MDRC.¹ AspireAtlantic supports people who are unemployed or under-employed to enter growth industries, and helps employers hire workers with relevant skills.

Pier Labs is a non-profit social innovation lab that works with governments, community organizations, post-secondary, charities and private-sector companies to conduct research and innovation to address complex social issues. Designing and delivering a sector-based model was a bold and ambitious move for the organization. While Pier Labs’ staff have considerable experience working on social issues through their work as a strategic partner to Davis Pier, this is the first time they have designed a skills development intervention. This is also the first time they are acting as a workforce intermediary.

Sector-based models are highly challenging to deliver and can be vulnerable to changes in the labour market. They stretch the capacity of even very experienced service providers as they require a broad range of expertise to get right, including serving participants facing barriers to training and work, engaging directly with employers, complex program design, and inter-organizational coordination and communication.

Pier Labs designed AspireAtlantic to be a sector-based training model that helps unemployed workers and workers with low wages to transition into – and make career progress in – three high-growth sectors:

AspireAtlantic supports people who are unemployed or under-employed to enter growth industries, and helps employers hire workers with relevant skills

1 Home-building	2 Industrial, commercial and institutional (ICI) construction	3 Manufacturing
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1 More details about WorkAdvance can be found in Section 2.

AspireAtlantic also seeks to diversify recruitment pipelines by focusing on groups underrepresented in these industries, namely women, newcomers and BIPOC individuals.

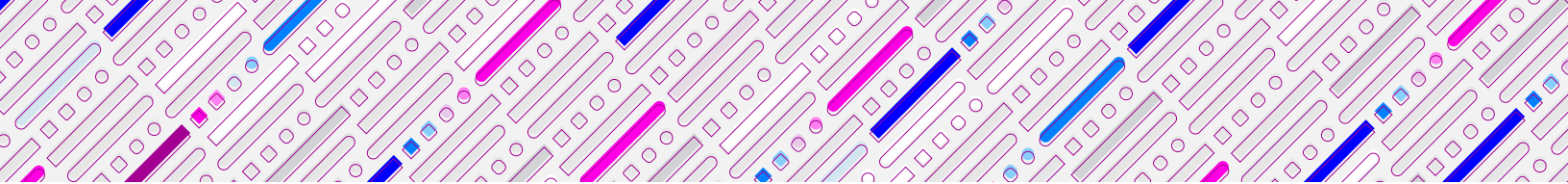
There is evidence to show that this kind of sector-based model can be effective. WorkAdvance, a large-scale sector-based US study (2011-2015) demonstrated that sector programs can increase earnings in the longer term and can lead to career advancement gains over time.^{2 3} AspireAtlantic features many of the same components as WorkAdvance, but also includes modifications to align with the economic and labour market context of Atlantic Canada.

In 2019-2020, Pier Labs received funding from the [Future Skills Centre \(FSC\)](#) to carry out an initial research and design phase which scoped the need for a WorkAdvance inspired model in Nova Scotia. This work also identified the types of organizations Pier Labs needed to partner with to develop and deliver the various components of the AspireAtlantic model.

In early 2021, AspireAtlantic was selected as one of [ten interventions](#) to form FSC and Blueprint's [Scaling Up Skills Development Portfolio](#) because it has the potential to meet Canada's pressing skills needs and is feasible to scale. As part of the Portfolio, Pier Labs received further FSC funding to bring the program from an adapted model design to delivery in three locations at launch. As part of this initial launch, Pier Labs and its partners are focusing on learning and continuous improvement to quickly refine the model and troubleshoot problems in real time.

2 Greenberg, David H., and Kelsey Schaberg. "Long-term effects of a sectorial advancement strategy: Costs, benefits, and impacts from the WorkAdvance demonstration." MDRC, 2020.

3 Kanengiser, Henry, and Kelsey Schaberg. "Employment and Earnings Effects of the WorkAdvance Demonstration After Seven Years." MRDC, 2022.



2. About AspireAtlantic

2.1 Sector-based models

AspireAtlantic is a sector-based model, meaning it is focused on specific industry sectors. Sector-based models tend to be dual client models as they address the needs of both employers and workers. For employers, the aim is to align training with in-demand occupations in the local economy by working with stakeholders in specific industries to identify their skills needs and then to design training that builds these skills. For workers, the aim is to provide an entry point into ‘good quality’ jobs in growth industries, which offer better wages and opportunities for career progression.

Sector-based models typically have the following features:

- Intensive screening of participants pre-enrollment to assess motivation, suitability and readiness
- Sector-specific pre-employment and career readiness services to ensure participants are job-ready
- Sector-specific occupational skills training to equip participants with skills employers need
- Job development and placement services to help program graduates find jobs in the target sector

Some sector-based models also offer retention and advancement services to help participants keep their jobs and make career progress.

Sector-based models typically provide an ‘on-ramp’ to entry-level roles in a specific sector. The target audience is usually workers who are unemployed or under-employed, and who do not have a relevant post-secondary credential.

There is strong evidence to show that well-designed sector-based models are effective at delivering outcomes for both workers and employers.⁴ However, there is also evidence that shows sector-based models are highly challenging to deliver. They require a broad range of expertise, including how to serve participants with complex needs, how to work with employers, deep industry knowledge, training design and delivery, and cross-organizational collaboration and coordination skills. Implementation of sector-based models can be so complex that even experienced, high-capacity service providers with strong industry relationships take time to reach full delivery maturity.⁵

4 Myers, Karen, Simon Harding, and Kelly Pasolli. “Skills Training That Works: Lessons from Demand-Driven Approaches.” IRPP, 2021.

5 Hendra, Richard, et al. “Encouraging evidence on a sector-focused advancement strategy: Two-year impacts from the WorkAdvance demonstration.” New York: MDRC, 2016.

Pier Labs' decision to adapt and deliver a sector-based model was an ambitious one, but also one that was carefully considered. High unemployment rates are a persistent issue in Nova Scotia. Addressing them requires new and innovative approaches. The research phase confirmed the value of a sector-based model, identified key growth sectors offering good quality jobs and determined the kinds of organizations Pier Labs would need to engage and partner with to design and deliver the model.

Given the expertise required to successfully implement sector-based models, it can take years before they run smoothly. Adding to the challenge, they are vulnerable to labour market fluctuations which may undermine some of the assumptions on which the model is based. These fluctuations could be major external shocks like the pandemic, or more minor sectoral downturns or upticks. In its first few years, AspireAtlantic – like all the interventions in the Scaling Portfolio – has experienced unprecedented turbulence (see **Section 3**). As a result, Pier Labs and its partners have been forced to think tactically about how to adapt the model. Thus, the AspireAtlantic demonstration project is providing evidence on how to maintain a sector-based model in a volatile economy: how to adapt and pivot. These will be important insights for de-risking future sector-based models.

The AspireAtlantic demonstration project is providing evidence on how to maintain a sector-based model in a volatile economy

2.2 Building on the WorkAdvance model

AspireAtlantic is based on the WorkAdvance demonstrations, a landmark sector-based demonstration project that ran in the US from 2011-2015. WorkAdvance featured six target sectors (e.g., IT, manufacturing) delivered by four different service providers in three US cities (New York, Tulsa and Cleveland). The WorkAdvance model had five key components: intensive participant screening, sector-specific pre-employment and career readiness services, sector-specific occupational skills training, job development and placement services, and retention and advancement services.

AspireAtlantic has adapted and built upon these five core components (see **Table 1**, below).

Table 1 | WorkAdvance Components and AspireAtlantic Model

WorkAdvance core component	AspireAtlantic model	
	Application of WorkAdvance model	Changes from WorkAdvance model
1. Intensive screening of participants pre-enrollment	Participants are screened through a pre-screen phone call, assessment using a scoring rubric, and a formal interview to assess motivation and ‘fit’ with the target sector.	WorkAdvance did not require participants to have a qualification or work experience in any of its streams. However, Pier Labs identified that: (1) many jobseekers with credentials or work experience struggle to find employment in their sectors, and (2) employers would be primarily seeking qualified workers for mid-level positions. In response, AspireAtlantic is open to participants with sector-specific credentials, and one of its workstreams (ICI construction) requires participants to have a credential or relevant work experience upon entry to particular roles.
2. Sector-specific pre-employment and career readiness services	Following program entry, participants take a four-week Career Readiness Training Course, which teaches them industry-specific skills requirements and workplace expectations and provides them with advice and guidance on job applications and interviews.	N/A

WorkAdvance core component	AspireAtlantic model	
	Application of WorkAdvance model	Changes from WorkAdvance model
3. Sector-specific occupational skills training	After completing the career readiness component, participants get four-to-eight weeks of industry-specific Occupational Skills Training, which leads to an industry-recognised credential.	Some WorkAdvance service providers delivered the training in-house. However, in AspireAtlantic, sector associations deliver or procure the training. This is because in the Nova Scotia context, these organizations have the best understanding of employers' skills needs and valued credentials that employers value in their respective sectors. One sector association (Excellence in Manufacturing Consortium) also had previous experience in delivering training based on employer needs.
4. Job development and placement services	Participants can access individualised job search supports for up to 18 months after graduation. They also get introductions to employers and industry experts.	N/A
5. Retention and advancement services	Job advancement mentorships are available for up to 18 months after program graduation to support career progression.	AspireAtlantic can also augment human resource (HR) practices for employers hiring program graduates. Program partners work closely with employers to identify candidates who are a good fit and areas for candidates' further skills development. Program advancement coaches also provide personal and professional services to new hires. This support is needed as many employers in these industries in Nova Scotia are small-to-medium enterprises with limited HR capacity.

It took up to 18 months for the large, high-capacity providers to fully implement the WorkAdvance model as planned, highlighting the time investment need for sector-based models to reach stable implementation.

WorkAdvance demonstrations generated best practices for sector-based models.⁶ Researchers found that the WorkAdvance partner organization responsible for the best participant outcomes had good industry relationships built up over decades of working with employers and industry associations in its target sector. This organization was also able to deliver training in-house. This allowed staff to get to know participants better, which helped them to identify the most suitable job placements and avoid some logistical complexities. On the other hand, the partner sites in WorkAdvance with the lowest impact on participant employment attributed this to having a more limited network of employers (and therefore more challenges with job placements) and a months-long wait for municipal certification required by the target sector, which many participants could not afford to wait for without seeking employment in another sector.

Pier Labs is building AspireAtlantic from the ground up. This means relationships with employers and sector partners must be introduced, established and strengthened along the way, in contrast to the ideal conditions identified in WorkAdvance. Further, implementation responsibilities are divided between service providers (who conduct recruitment, intake, and career readiness services and training) and sector associations (who deliver occupational skills training and post-employment support), which adds an additional layer of coordination and communication requirements.

2.3 AspireAtlantic model

Pier Labs is working with six partner organizations to design and deliver AspireAtlantic. There are three service provider partners (agencies who deliver services) and three sector associations (organizations that represent the interests of a given industry) (**Box 1**). Service provider partners are responsible for recruitment, intake, career readiness training and post-employment services. Sector associations are responsible for developing and delivering occupational skills training and coordinating job placements.

Figure 2, below, provides an overview of the participant pathway through the model, including its components, the organizations responsible for each component, timelines and target outcomes.

⁶ Hendra et al., 2016

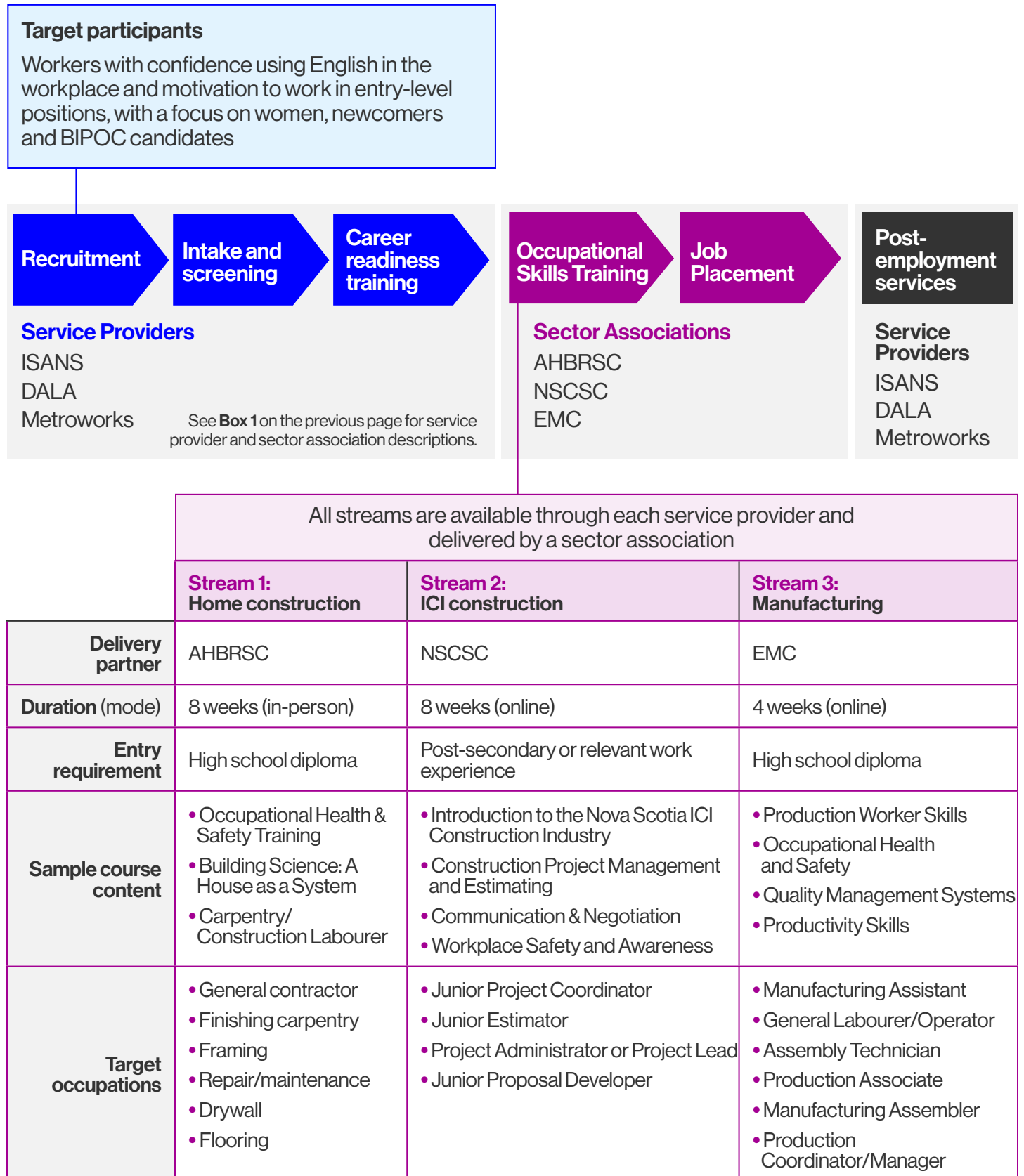
| **Box 1** | AspireAtlantic partner organizations

Service provider partners

- [Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia \(ISANS\)](#): ISANS is an immigration and settlement service agency based in Halifax, delivering services both online and in-person, and at scale, including business development and employment services.
- [Digby Area Learning Association \(DALA\)](#): DALA is a non-profit service provider focused on education, training, career counseling and career progression in Digby, Nova Scotia.
- [Metroworks](#): Metroworks is a Halifax-based non-profit employment services organization, with service offerings including adult education, sector-based training and programs targeting women, youth, immigrant women and people facing barriers to the labour market.

Sector associations

- [Atlantic Home Building & Renovation Sector Council \(AHBRSC\)](#): The AHBRSC is a Halifax-based organization that focuses on human resource planning, recruitment and retention, and training and development for the home construction sector across Atlantic Canada.
- [Nova Scotia Construction Sector Council \(NSCSC\)](#): The NSCSC works on human resourcing issues facing the industrial, commercial and institutional construction industry in the province. It works on helping workers embark on career pathways into construction jobs, including delivering training across a range of trades.
- [Excellence in Manufacturing Consortium \(EMC\)](#): The EMC is a national manufacturing consortium. It focuses on helping Canadian manufacturers grow and become more competitive in domestic and international markets by providing a range of programs for its consortium members (e.g., HR assistance, recruitment help, energy use advice etc.)

Figure 2 | AspireAtlantic Participant Journey

3. Changing economic conditions

In 2019-2020, Pier Labs conducted research to assess the need for the model and determine the alignment of the WorkAdvance model with the Atlantic Canada context.

Based on consultations with experts from 11 industries,⁷ Pier Labs identified a number of key growth sectors in which employers were struggling to fill positions, despite offering good quality jobs with the prospect of career progression. While employers struggled to hire, unemployment in Nova Scotia remained high (8.8% in the year the research was conducted, which was 3 percentage points above the national average⁸).

The research also found that a relevant credential could help workers to enter these growth sectors, and that there was a lack of easily accessible training options that used the core components of sector-based models. This pointed to the need for a sector-based model to support workers to move into these roles, and in turn, help employers meet their skills needs.

Since this research was conducted, the global labour market has experienced one of the most profound disruptions since World War II. The Covid-19 pandemic created deep and far-reaching economic impacts, which saw some sectors boom while others fell into a rapid decline. Large numbers of workers saw their work reduced and restricted or were taken out of the labour market entirely. The pandemic was a major external shock that no stakeholder in the skills development sector could be expected to predict or prepare for, and it impacted projects across the Scaling Up Skills Development Portfolio and the sector more broadly.

The unemployment rate in Nova Scotia leapt to around 14% in mid-2020 (at the height of pandemic restrictions) before returning to pre-pandemic levels by mid-2021.⁹ However, since 2021 the provincial unemployment rate continued to fall as the economy rebounds. By mid-2022, during which cohort 1 of AspireAtlantic was being implemented, the rate stood at 6.4% which is still above the Canadian average but much lower than Nova Scotia's unemployment historically (which ranged from 8-10% from 2000 to 2019).

The AspireAtlantic model was designed for a provincial economy with a skills shortage and relatively high unemployment. However, the post-pandemic recovery has tightened the labour market. This means that some of the assumptions upon which the model was based are less applicable three years on.

7 Consultations were conducted in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island.

8 Statistics Canada. October 2023 labour force characteristics by province, monthly, seasonally adjusted, 2023. Available at: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410028703>

9 Statistics Canada. July 2021 labour force characteristics by province, monthly, seasonally adjusted, 2023. Available at: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410028703&pickMembers%5B0%5D=3.1&pickMembers%5B1%5D=4.1&cubeTimeFrame.startMonth=06&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=2021&referencePeriods=20210601%2C20210601>

While the changing economic context and its implications for recruitment pose challenges, the reality is that labour markets are not static, and sector-based models need to be responsive to changing conditions. While all sector-based models must be responsive to be effective, it is an understatement to say that in AspireAtlantic, the scale of disruption has been unprecedented. On the positive side, this means that the model is well placed to generate useful insights into how to implement and continuously improve a model in a significantly different context than the one envisioned. The following section contains some early insights into program uptake and participants' experience of the program.

While the changing economic context and its implications for recruitment pose challenges, the reality is that labour markets are not static, and sector-based models need to be responsive to changing conditions

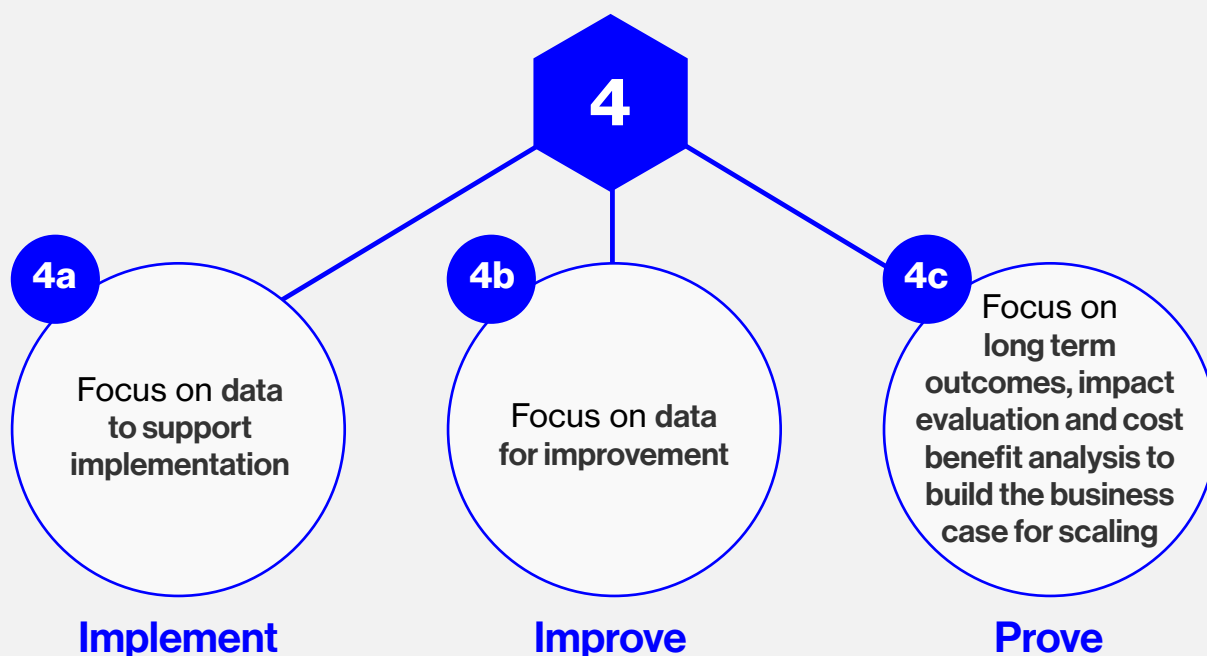
4. Methodology

4.1 Blueprint's evidence generation approach

To support the scaling up of promising interventions, Blueprint developed a novel approach to evidence generation that fits within the stages of the innovation cycle (see pg. 4). By understanding an intervention's stage of development, we can determine the most appropriate tools to advance it to the next stage. More details on our evidence generation approach can be found in **Box 2** and the [Scaling Design Report](#).

Like all other interventions in the Portfolio, AspireAtlantic is in Stage 4 of the innovation cycle, Delivery and Iteration. **Stage 4** is further broken down into 3 levels of delivery maturity: Implement, Improve and Prove (**Figure 3**). Because AspireAtlantic is being implemented for the first time, we categorized it at Stage 4a of the innovation cycle – **Implement** – where evidence generation is focused on data to support implementation. Other sector-based models in the Portfolio are at different stages of maturity and will provide complementary evidence on program improvements and longer-term impact.

| **Figure 3** | Phases of delivery Maturity



| Box 2 | Common Outcomes Framework

Our measurement approach includes indicators that are specific to an intervention as well as a set of common indicators that are measured for every intervention in the Portfolio.

These common indicators are drawn from Blueprint's Common Outcomes Framework, which was developed in consultation with our partners and was informed by review of employment-related outcomes frameworks and measurement approaches both within Canada and internationally. They include:

- **Intermediate outcomes** that reflect 'in-program' participant experiences and gains (e.g., program satisfaction and skills development)
- **Long-term outcomes** such as employment and educational attainment

Using a consistent approach to measuring outcomes is part of our commitment to understanding how each intervention in the Portfolio is reaching people across Canada and allows us to measure long term outcomes using Statistics Canada's Social Data Linking Environment. For more information on Blueprint's Common Outcomes Framework, see **Appendix A**.

4.2 Learning agenda

In this interim report, we share early findings from cohort 1 of AspireAtlantic, which had 54 participants and ran from February to December 2022.

We report on two areas:

- 1. Participant experience:** Does the program reach its target population? Do participants complete the program? Are participants satisfied with the program?
- 2. Program implementation:** What are we learning about successes, challenges and opportunities in program delivery?

The final report in 2024 will contain analyses of program outcomes by sector, data on program costs and resourcing, as well as updates on uptake and satisfaction. It will include data from cohort 2, which ran from March 2023 to May 2023. We will report on employment outcomes in the final report, rather than at the interim stage, because we will have longer-term data and anticipate larger sample sizes.

4.3 Data sources

Table 2, below, shows the data sources from which these early findings are derived. It is important to note that the current sample size is small as not all participants enrolled in the research. Furthermore, not all enrollees answered all of the survey questions, which means the sample size may vary from finding to finding. Also, comparison between training in different sectors or delivered by different organizations is not available. This means that the conclusions that can be drawn from these early findings are limited, but they do provide an early indication of uptake and participants' experiences in the program.

| Table 2 | Data Sources

Data source	Dates	Participants enrolled (Response rate)	Description
Administrative Data	Feb 2022 – Dec 2022	54*	Pier Labs collects and shares with Blueprint participant administrative data on program enrollment, dropout and completion.
Baseline Survey	Feb 2022 – Oct 2022	76% (41/54)	Survey administered by Blueprint during the first week of the Career-Readiness Training to capture participant socio-demographic characteristics.
Post-Training Survey	Apr 2022 – Dec 2022	76% (31/41)	Survey administered by Blueprint during the last week of the Occupational Skills Training to capture participant program satisfaction and outcomes.

*Administrative data reflects all participants enrolled in cohort 1 of AspireAtlantic.

5. Early insights on participant experience

5.1 Program uptake and completion

Fifty-four participants enrolled in the first cohort of AspireAtlantic. Over the full program (cohorts 1 and 2), AspireAtlantic aimed to recruit a total of 150 participants. By the end of the data collection period for this report, AspireAtlantic has achieved 36% of its total recruitment target. Recruitment challenges are discussed in the next section on implementation learnings.

Overall, the program appears to be reaching its target population: unemployed workers and workers on low wages with a particular focus on women, newcomers and BIPOC candidates. **Table 3**, below, shows some of the characteristics of the participants.

| Table 3 | Participant Socio-demographics

Employment status at intake	
Unemployed	68% (23/34 participants)
Average period of unemployment	20 months
Average wage for employed participants	\$16/hr (NS median = \$22/hr)
Socio-demographics	
Women	36% (13/36)
Newcomers	90% (19/21)
BIPOC	65% (22/34)
Highest level of education	
No high school diploma	6% (2/34)
High school diploma	26% (9/34)
Between high school and bachelor's degree	21% (7/34)
Bachelor's degree or higher	47% (16/34)

Nearly half of participants held a bachelor's degree or above. Project partners had expected some participants in the ICI construction training to have post-secondary education (PSE), but this number was higher than expected, and people in the other streams had PSE qualifications as well. This was likely due to service provider organizations (SPOs) shifting from the profile of who should be enrolled in the program, and enrolling people who were more qualified than planned, including a high proportion of newcomers. This may have been a response to the recruitment challenges outlined below in the section on implementation.

Program completion rates were high: 93% (50/54) of participants finished the training and received a certificate of completion.

5.2 Program satisfaction

AspireAtlantic is showing very promising results in terms of participant satisfaction. Participants report high rates of satisfaction with their experiences in the program, across the training modules and its usefulness for employment preparation (see **Table 4**). Satisfaction rates are over 90% for both the Career Readiness Training and Occupational Skills Training. A similar proportion of participants reported finding the program useful in helping them prepare for future employment. All participants would recommend the program to someone else, a strong indication of positive perceptions of AspireAtlantic.

Participants report high rates of satisfaction with their experiences in the program, across the training modules and its usefulness for employment preparation

However, the satisfaction rate for the job search and placement support component is lower at 76%. While this still a high satisfaction rate, it is a marked drop from the other areas. Possible explanations for this are discussed in the next section on implementation learnings.

Table 3 | Program Satisfaction

Program Satisfaction – Post-Training Survey	% satisfied (Sample)
Would recommend program	100% (29/29)
Overall satisfaction	93% (27/29)
Satisfaction with Occupational Skills Training	93% (27/29)
Satisfaction with Career-Readiness Training	90% (26/29)
Program usefulness in helping prepare for future employment	90% (26/29)
Satisfaction with job search and placement support	76% (22/29)

Overall, the early findings suggest that the program is broadly reaching its target group and that participants are very satisfied with their experience. Updated findings about satisfaction will be shared in the final report. The following section discusses how the AspireAtlantic model has been implemented and what we are learning so far about implementation.

6. Early insights on program implementation

Implementation is an important aspect of the AspireAtlantic project because this is the first time the model is being delivered in Nova Scotia and, as discussed above, sector-based models take considerable time, resources and iterations to reach maturity. Insights into how AspireAtlantic has been developed from an initial idea into a working model can drive continuous improvement and add to the sparse but growing body of Canadian research on sector-based approaches.¹⁰

This section is based on interviews carried out by Blueprint with nine staff members from seven organizations participating in AspireAtlantic conducted in December 2022 (the three service partner organizations, three sector associations and Pier Labs). In the interviews, we collected insights into the design and implementation of the program to inform continuous improvement.

The staff members interviewed identified five areas of implementation that posed successes, challenges and opportunities for model delivery and continuous improvement:

1	2	3	4	5
Learning new roles	Recruiting participants	Responding to economic geography	Aligning with seasonal hiring	Meeting complex needs

6.1 Learning new roles



The AspireAtlantic project has seen Pier Labs take on a new role. It has been assembling, coordinating and contracting a coalition of organizations to design and deliver a skills development intervention. Pier Labs is primarily a social innovation lab providing research and consulting services, and this role as a workforce intermediary is new for the organization. In this role, Pier Labs has had major success in forming a coalition of six different organizations to deliver the AspireAtlantic model. They have invested considerable time and energy in building new relationships, creating trust and coordinating this new coalition to deliver a complex, multi-streamed model. Assembling, organizing and leading this coalition is a significant achievement, particularly given that the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath have created difficult conditions for skills training interventions. Building trust takes time, often longer than the span of a training cohort or two. This task is shared by Pier Labs and numerous other grantees across the Portfolio. Learning what is required in this new role and acquiring the corresponding skills is a key part of continuous learning in practice. Challenges identified along the way are expected given the newness of the role to Pier Labs, the complexity of the intervention and what it takes to deliver a sector-based model.

¹⁰ The Scaling Up Skills Development portfolio contains a number of other sector-based models. We hope to draw together insights from these sector-focused projects in a future portfolio-level report.

Based on their experiences implementing the model, the interviewed staff reported that Pier Labs could strengthen its skills as a workforce intermediary by developing structures to support cross-agency communication on day-to-day project activities and operations. Staff reported that there could have been more communication around program delays and revised timelines, to help maintain sufficient timelines for recruitment. They also noted that eligibility criteria and program components could have been communicated more clearly, to ensure staff could provide accurate information to potential recruits and identify suitable participants. These types of communication challenges were common across many interventions in the Portfolio, given the complexity of coordinating multi-organization program delivery.

Recognising these challenges, Pier Labs has proactively taken steps to improve communication going forward. To strengthen communications between project partners, Pier Labs will include more program staff in project meetings related to program delivery and will share regular emails with them regarding program updates.

6.2 Recruiting participants

AspireAtlantic is broadly reaching its target group of participants, though at present, it is unlikely that the program will achieve its target of 150 participants. Despite the recruitment challenges described below, SPOs remained motivated to fill program cohorts and worked creatively to recruit participants on tight timelines and among challenging economic conditions.

Several contextual factors contribute to the recruitment shortfall:

- **Wider economic context:** There was consensus among staff on two factors about the economic climate that affected recruitment: a tightening labour market and fewer work-ready clients. First, the tightening labour market means that an increasing number of work-ready jobseekers have been able to find work without support from employment service organizations. This is because employers may be more willing to hire workers without more relevant skills, qualifications or experience, which can reduce training uptake among job seekers. Second, SPOs have fewer work-ready clients in their caseloads, which may limit the pool of candidates available to AspireAtlantic. Those that remain may face more barriers to work or may lack the connections and knowledge of Canadian workplace norms needed to find local employment (e.g., newcomers). Other grantees in the Portfolio have similarly reported that their interventions are seeing fewer job-ready clients.
- **Gaps between SPO characteristics and model needs:** Pier Labs received limited interest from SPOs looking to participate in the project, possibly due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which increased the workload of service providers, leaving little capacity for new projects (e.g., shift to online delivery and rising unemployment). The providers who did express interest did not

have full capacity to implement the model. There were two main gaps between the model's needs and provider characteristics:

- **Newcomer focus:** Newcomers make up a significant proportion of the client base of participating organizations. ISANS in particular, the largest of the three service provider partners, only serves newcomers. Many of these newcomer clients would not necessarily be interested in AspireAtlantic because they already had professional training, and their career interests were in industries outside of the target sectors. Moreover, even for those newcomers who might be interested, the model did not initially have components built in to address the specific needs of newcomers (e.g., Canadian workplace culture and occupation-specific language training). SPOs adapted to provide these and other foundational supports as needed.
- **Recruitment capacity:** SPOs had limited capacity to recruit beyond their existing client pools. It takes time, effort and often outside assistance for an organization to build its recruitment capacity and to move beyond time-consuming, labour-intensive methods like flyers and phone calls.
- **Tight recruitment timelines:** The sector associations were meant to finalize training curriculums in late 2021 to be ready for an early 2022 launch. Pier Labs received the manufacturing curriculum in early 2022, slightly later than expected, but did not receive curriculums for the other two streams until July 2022 (six months late). Without finalized training content, SPOs could not begin recruitment for these streams as they could not create advertising and promotional materials, provide accurate information to potential participants or identify suitable candidates. SPOs were then asked to recruit on tight timelines following the eventual finalization of the training content. Staff reported that two–four months would be a realistic timeline to recruit enough participants for a training stream, but due to delays in finalizing the curriculums, they were often expected to do so in two–four weeks in order to launch the cohort as soon as possible.

As a result of these factors, SPOs worked to fill streams very rapidly in unfavourable economic conditions. Without sophisticated recruitment techniques to quickly bring in suitable candidates from outside their client pools, and little time to learn them, recruitment proved difficult, and some cohorts were rescheduled due to insufficient participant numbers.

Working to recruit participants for multiple training streams on tight timelines proved highly challenging for SPO staff. The SPOs often only had a single employee in charge of recruitment, which meant this staff member was working under considerable pressure, and often working long hours.

In response to recruitment challenges, SPOs often acted pragmatically and encouraged individuals from their existing client pools to fill seats. This did not always align with the needs of

workers or employers. While Pier Labs initially anticipated that employers were seeking qualified workers for mid-level jobs, many employers turned out to be seeking workers with good English language skills and a high school diploma (but no more) who are motivated to do entry-level jobs. But cohorts contain many participants who may lack confidence in English, have post-secondary credentials (often bachelor's degrees or more), and often, staff report, show little enthusiasm for entry-level jobs in the target sectors. Instead, they may be motivated by the prospect of quickly gaining some “Canadian experience” in the program to enhance their employment prospects in other sectors.

In response to these recruitment challenges, Pier Labs is considering giving SPOs the option to focus on a single training stream, rather than recruiting for all three simultaneously. This would allow partners to concentrate resources in a specific area and develop sectoral specialisation by more deeply engaging with industry stakeholders, including local employers. It may also allow service providers to select streams best suited to the characteristics of their client pools.



6.3 Responding to economic geography

The location of one of the SPOs, DALA, presented some challenges for implementing the model. DALA is located in Digby, a town with around 2,000 inhabitants in southwestern Nova Scotia (around 200km from Halifax). Its size and location posed two challenges:

- **Transport barriers:** Due to the town's size, many participants were recruited from other locations, which meant they had to travel to the town to access some program services. This created a barrier for those without their own transportation.
- **Few local vacancies in some sectors:** The local economy offers ample job opportunities in home construction but few in manufacturing or ICI construction. This meant that participants graduating from the ICI construction and manufacturing streams in Digby struggled to find local employment. Program graduates from the home construction stream also faced some challenges: home construction jobs in the area were often located some distance from the town itself, which again required graduates to have their own transportation.

Allowing SPOs to specialise in a specific sector may address the lack of local vacancies in some sectors. It would allow DALA to focus on home building, a sector in which jobs are available locally.

6.4 Aligning with seasonal hiring



Pier Labs and the SPOs had planned to launch the ICI construction cohort in February 2022 to align with seasonal hiring patterns in the industry. With this timing, participants would be able to complete the training and begin an employment placement before employers completed their hiring for the summer construction season in May.

However, the cohort did not begin until August as the training curriculums were not delivered by the sector associations until July 2022. This meant that participants completed the program as the industry began to wind down for the winter. This had implications for work placements and reduced the number of job opportunities available to graduates upon exit.

With the training curriculum finalised, future iterations of the ICI construction training can now be timed to align with the industry's hiring patterns to maximise job placement and employment opportunities for participants.

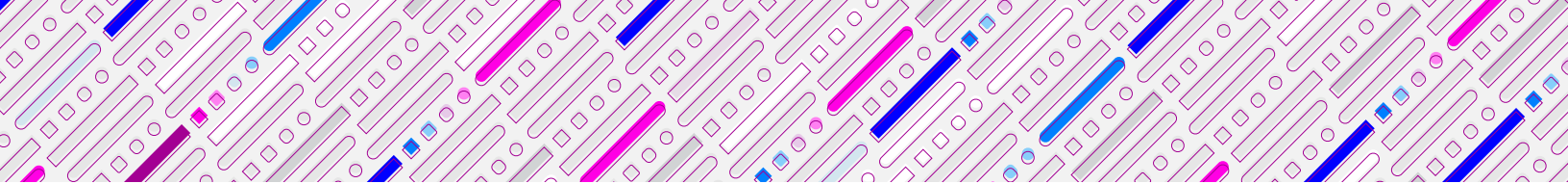
6.5 Meeting complex needs



Staff reported that many participants faced challenges in their lives, which affected their ability to find and retain a job after the program. These challenges included transportation constraints, mental health issues and a lack of affordable childcare. The wider economic context could be contributing to more clients with barriers to work, as more work-ready clients find jobs without support. This finding aligns with what Blueprint has heard from other service providers working to deliver skills interventions across multiple provinces as part of the Scaling Up Skills Development Portfolio.¹¹

Providing wraparound supports are a key approach to ensuring working-age adults dealing with challenging personal circumstances can access training and move into jobs. Challenges like food insecurity, poor access to healthcare or unstable housing simply make training interventions less effective. Service providers from across the Portfolio have spoken about an increasing recognition of the importance and interconnectedness of these needs, observations echoed by AspireAtlantic's SPOs.

¹¹See Scaling Learning Event report.



7. Concluding thoughts

AspireAtlantic is being delivered for the first time. Findings from the first cohort show that all components of the model are being implemented, it is reaching its target population, participants are completing the training and early indications show they are broadly satisfied with it.

Sector-based models are challenging to deliver and often take time to fully implement. Delivering all components of the model to the first cohort, as Pier Labs and partners have achieved with AspireAtlantic, is a major accomplishment. Full delivery from the start of the first cohort means that implementation learnings about all parts of the model have been accruing from launch onwards, providing valuable insights to help refine and improve the model. Like the other grantees in the Portfolio, Pier Labs is not only delivering a model but are also working to continuously refine and improve the model based on ongoing collaboration with Blueprint.

Participant feedback is generally positive. Participants are satisfied with the training, both overall and with specific components. They also believe it will be useful in helping them to prepare for employment. This is a promising early indication that the model is meeting expectations and needs. Data on employment outcomes will show the extent to which positive experiences of training translate into jobs.

However, AspireAtlantic faces two ongoing challenges: it must address implementation issues that limit the success of the model and it must consider how it could adapt to weather the current economic climate, which is contributing to low demand for the model.

To address ongoing implementation challenges, Pier Labs and its partners can continue to pursue continuous improvement: to identify problems and come up with modifications to either the model, or ways of working together, that tackle delivery issues as they arise. Ongoing revisions to recruitment and program management shows this is happening.

Responding to the wider economic environment requires strategic thinking. It touches on the wider question about how sector-based models should pivot when their fundamental assumptions about the labour market are disrupted by large-scale, external forces. The current “boom” is not permanent; it is a recovery from the negative economic impacts of the pandemic. Nevertheless, Pier Labs and partners will need to consider strategies that could help increase the demand for the model while current economic conditions persist.

Areas for Pier Labs to explore include whether AspireAtlantic could be pitched to employers to better convince them of its value-add. Rapid hiring in the post-pandemic recovery may result in higher-than-normal rates of turnover, which could reinvigorate the demand for the model among employers seeking skilled, motivated candidates who are a good fit for their vacancies. The model could be promoted as a useful step in readying jobseekers for work in the sector, increasing skills and reducing turnover.

Moving into the longer-term, there is also the potential to pivot AspireAtlantic towards a focus on retention and advancement. Employers could participate in specific parts of the AspireAtlantic model (e.g., human resources supports and sending employees to Occupational Skills Training) to ensure that their existing workforce has the right skills and is motivated to make career progress within the sector.

Addressing the implementation challenges faced by AspireAtlantic is inextricably linked with addressing challenges in the broader skills development landscape. Looking at the barriers faced by clients – not just in AspireAtlantic but across the interventions in the Portfolio – it is clear that the human needs participants face are complex, diverse and often deep. Service providers cannot meet them using an ad hoc, piecemeal approach. A systematic approach is needed. As Canada moves towards an economy in which re-training will happen multiple times in the working life, it will need to establish more efficient support systems to ensure people can access learning and translate skills training into sustainable employment.

This report has presented early findings and discussed implementation challenges and opportunities for AspireAtlantic. The final report, due in 2024, will offer more substantive insights into longer-term outcomes for participants and overall program effectiveness. It will include findings on the relationship between program design, delivery, satisfaction and outcomes and, in doing so, make a contribution to the Canadian evidence on sector-based skills development models.

Appendix A

Common Outcomes Framework

	Outcome	Indicators
Socio-demographics	Sex & Gender	Sex at birth
		Self-identified gender
	Age	Age
	Location	Province
		Region & Municipality
	Marital status	Marital status
	Children & Dependents	Children Dependents Household size
	Household Income	Household income
	Education	Highest credential obtained
		Location of highest credential attainment
	Indigenous Identity	Self-identified Indigenous identity
	Francophone status & languages spoken	First language spoken
		Official languages
		Language spoken at home
		Other languages spoken (At home)
	Citizenship Status	Place of birth
		Year of arrival
		Citizenship status
	Racial identity	Self-identification as member of racialized group
	Disability	Self-identified disability

	Outcome	Indicators
Employment status and history	Employment	Employment status
		Nature of employment (permanent, temporary, full/part-time)
	Earnings	Hours worked / week
		Wages
		Annual earnings
	Industry and occupation of employment	NAICS code of job
		NOC code of job
	Work history	Time since last employed
		NOC code of job
		NAICS code of job
	Income source	Income sources
Intermediate outcomes	Program completion	Successful completion of planned activities
	Participant satisfaction	Satisfaction with program
		Perceived Utility of Program
		Likelihood to recommend
Customized intermediate outcomes	Skills gains	Measured gains in specific skills
	Program-specific credential attainment	Attainment of program-specific credentials

