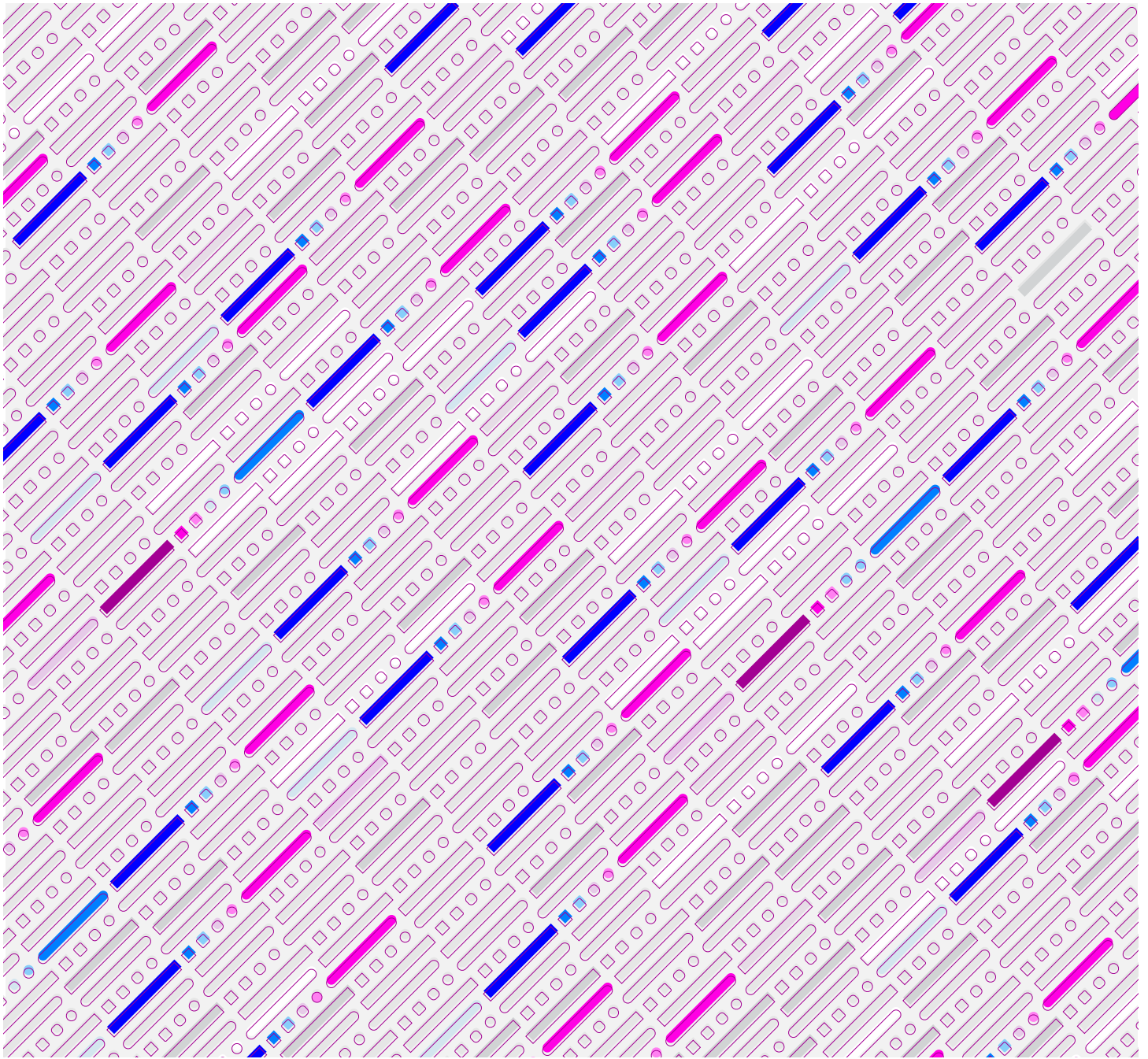




AspireAtlantic

Final Report

January 2025

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.



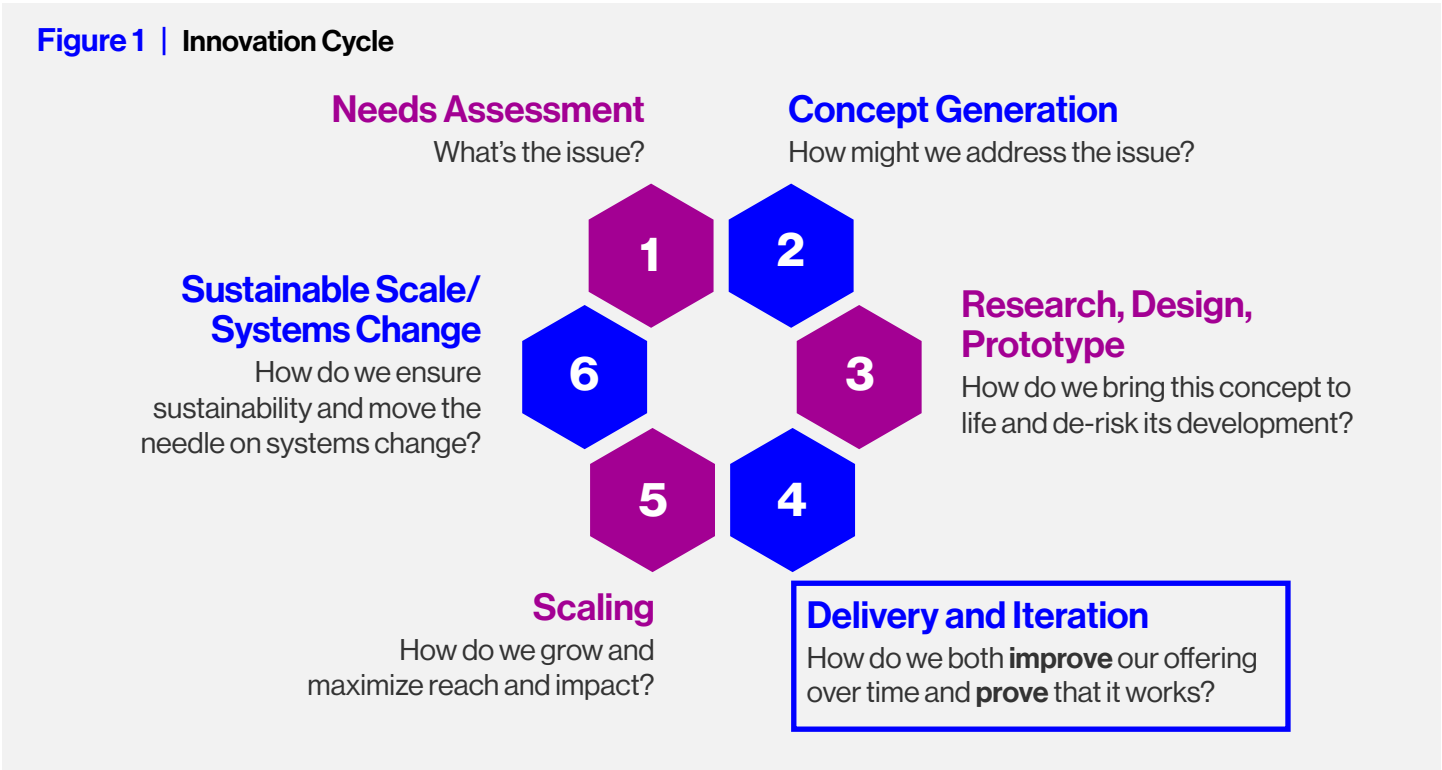
Preface

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 launched the [Scaling Up Skills Development Portfolio](#).

In this initiative, FSC is partnering with 10 organizations with promising skills development interventions that began 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 journeys. For more information about Blueprint’s approach to scaling, see our [Scaling Social Innovation](#) webpage.

Blueprint’s evidence generation approach is aligned with the six-stage innovation cycle (see **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**).



About this report

This report shares findings from **Blueprint**'s evaluation¹ of **AspireAtlantic**, a sector-based training program led by **Pier Labs** that responded to the needs of local workers for access to higher-quality jobs and the needs of employers for workers in growth sectors in Nova Scotia. Specifically, AspireAtlantic helped unemployed workers, those with low wages, and groups such as women, newcomers, and racialized individuals transition into and advance within homebuilding; industrial, commercial, and institutional (ICI) construction; and manufacturing.

Blueprint's [Interim Report](#) (November 2023) analyzed data gathered from February to December 2022. This *Final Report* builds upon and expands findings presented in our initial evaluation with new data collected from January to September 2023, providing an analysis of program uptake, participant experiences, and employment outcomes over the 19-month duration of the project (from February 2022 to September 2023). Findings are based on administrative, survey, and cost-related data and on staff and partner interviews.

Our report is organized into five sections:

- **Section 1: Introduction (pp. 10-11)** provides background on AspireAtlantic and the labour market needs to which it responded.
- **Section 2: About the AspireAtlantic Intervention (pp. 12-19)** offers an overview of the model, how AspireAtlantic was adapted from the US-based WorkAdvance model, and other elements of design and delivery, including training streams, the participant journey, and program partners.
- **Section 3: Methodology (pp. 20-23)** shares Blueprint's evidence generation approach, learning agenda, data sources, sample sizes, and limitations.
- **Section 4: Findings (pp. 24-44)** presents findings on program uptake, participant completion and satisfaction rates, employment outcomes, and program costs, as well as reflections from partners on implementation and delivery.
- **Section 5: Discussion and conclusions (pp. 45-48)** offer a summary of our findings and reflections for similar sector-based interventions.

¹ This report is part of FSC and **Blueprint's Scaling Up Skills Development Portfolio** and complements Pier Labs' reports on AspireAtlantic, which were finalized in March 2024 (see **Section 1: Introduction** for more information).

Executive Summary

This report shares findings from our evaluation of **AspireAtlantic**, a workforce development program designed by **Pier Labs** to address acute skills shortages in Nova Scotia. Adapted from **WorkAdvance**,² an evidence-informed, sector-based model originally designed and implemented by **MDRC**, AspireAtlantic aimed to bridge the gap between unemployed or underemployed workers and employers struggling to fill positions in high-growth industries in the province. These included home building; industrial, commercial, and institutional (ICI) construction; and manufacturing. The program focused on recruiting individuals from groups that are underrepresented in those industries, such as women, newcomers, and racialized individuals.

Leveraging the original WorkAdvance model, AspireAtlantic included five main components: recruitment and screening; career-readiness training; occupational skills training; wraparound supports; and post-employment services. Pier Labs partnered with three Service Provider Organizations (SPOs) and three sector associations in Nova Scotia to deliver the program, which was implemented in two cohorts, with adaptations made between them to improve delivery and outcomes.

This report is part of Blueprint's [Scaling Up Skills Development Portfolio](#), which involves collecting data on AspireAtlantic and capturing implementation stories and participant outcomes along its scaling journey. Our [Interim Report](#) (November 2023) analyzed data gathered from February to December 2022; this *Final Report* builds upon and expands those findings with new data collected from January to September 2023, providing an analysis of program uptake, participant experiences, and employment outcomes collected from February 2022 to September 2023. Findings are based on administrative, survey, and cost-related data and on staff and partner interviews.

Participant uptake

- AspireAtlantic reached its target population: **67%** of participants were unemployed at intake. **Twenty-four percent** identified as women, **61%** as racialized, and **52%** as newcomers. Among employed participants, average annual earnings (**\$23,395.96**) were below the poverty line.
- The program achieved **65%** of its recruitment target. This recruitment gap was likely related to delays in curriculum delivery and tight recruitment timelines for SPOs; a surge of funding for workforce development programs in response to COVID-19-related labour disruptions, creating multiple program options for participants; and reduced demand for employment training programs (likely due to falling NS unemployment rates).

2 Schaberg, K., & Greenberg, D. H. (2020). *Long-term effects of a sectoral advancement strategy: Costs, benefits, and impacts from the WorkAdvance demonstration*. MDRC. <https://www.mdrc.org/work/publications/long-term-effects-sectoral-advancement-strategy>

Participant experiences and outcomes

- Nearly all participants (**91%**) completed the program; **96%** were satisfied with AspireAtlantic overall, with **94%** believing it was useful in helping them prepare for employment and **98%** likely to recommend it to others. Respondents also reported high levels of satisfaction with the career-readiness training (**93%**), advancement coaches (**94%**), and occupational skills training (**96%**).
- Employment rates more than doubled from **33%** at intake to **68%** nine months later. The proportion of respondents who reported working in manufacturing and construction increased from **9%** to **62%** in the same period (**+53 percentage points**).
- For those who reported being employed in some capacity at the end of the program, the proportion of those who held casual jobs decreased from **67%** to **24%**, seasonal jobs from **38%** to **12%**, and temporary jobs from **29%** to **8%**.
- The proportion of respondents whose jobs provided benefits (i.e., pensions, health insurance, and paid time-off) increased between program intake and nine months post-training, with percentage point increases ranging from **30** to **43 points**.
- Job satisfaction increased from **38%** to **80%**, and satisfaction with career advancement increased from **38%** to **60%**.
- Respondents reported an increase in average weekly work hours from **26** to **38** hours, in average hourly wages from **\$15.23** to **\$24.05**, and in average annual employment earnings, which nearly doubled from **\$23,395.96** to **\$46,743.60**.

Program implementation

- Most components of AspireAtlantic were implemented successfully, with Pier Labs building strong relationships and coordinating a complex, sector-based model effectively. Post-program supports were reduced in length from some cohorts, however.
- Several key adaptations were made between Cohorts 1 and 2, described below:
 - Collaborative networks were strengthened by more frequent and improved collaboration with partners.
 - Cohort 2 saw improved alignment between participant needs and employer expectations; delivery partners focused on end-users when making programming adjustments and adaptations.
 - Cohort 2's curricula, contracts, and referral pipelines were in place by the program start date, meaning participants graduated in time for seasonal hiring.
 - Each case manager worked with only one advancement coach to deliver training in one matching sector, matching the local supply and demand for labour.
 - Case managers and advancement coaches co-delivered training to facilitate sectoral perspectives, create targeted workshops, and help participants forge stronger connections with employers.

- Career-readiness training was split into early and later stages, giving participants the opportunity to refresh their skills and update their application materials with newly gained experiences and specific employers in mind.
- Advancement coaches were involved directly in the recruitment process, supporting case managers in screening applicants and making acceptances; as a result, Cohort 2 recruitment was more effective in terms of participant suitability.
- Additional training was offered—including certified one-day safety training and fall protection and scaffolding training—along with more on-site visits to employers in home construction and tailored content and accommodation for newcomers.
- In interviews, staff identified three opportunities for improvement: a) incorporating a longer, dedicated period for post-employment supports to operate as originally intended for the model; b) providing a larger financial allowance to participants to help them focus on the training; and c) offering greater employer engagement and touchpoints (such as through 'hiring days').

Cost analysis

- The program cost a total of **\$2,790,058 CAD**, which was divided between costs for delivery (**\$1,912,356**), startup (**\$385,620**), and continuous improvement (**\$492,082**). On a per-participant basis, the program cost **\$28,763** (with **\$3,975** for startup costs, **\$19,715** for training delivery, and **\$5,073** for continuous improvement activities). On a per-seat basis (what it would have cost per individual if 130 participants were recruited instead of 97), costs were **24%** lower than per participant at **\$22,000** (with startup costs at **\$2,966**, delivery at **\$15,218**, and continuous improvement at **\$3,816**).
- A per-participant cost of **\$28,763** (and per-seat cost of **\$22,000**) indicates a promising return on investment considering that the average annual employment earnings of employed participants increased by **\$23,347.64**.
- When converted to 2024 dollars, WorkAdvance costs equate to between **\$11,170** and **\$14,486** CAD per participant. While our comparison indicates that AspireAtlantic cost more to deliver than WorkAdvance, direct delivery costs were relatively close, indicating that cost levels could be more equal in future iterations with a focus on scaling the model for effective integration within the employment ecosystem.

Key insights from the program

- **Rapid learning and adaptability.** AspireAtlantic showcased the critical importance of quick learning and flexibility for sector-based models (SBMs). Pier Labs effectively demonstrated this by collaboratively refining their approach with delivery partners, successfully delivering the program across different cohorts despite challenges in recruitment and timing.
- **Responsiveness to economic shifts.** The program underscored the necessity for SBMs to be agile in response to broader economic changes. Initially designed for an economy with specific unemployment and skills gaps, the program had to adapt to post-pandemic economic transformations. Pier Labs responded by implementing more flexible delivery methods that prioritized participant needs and circumstances over rigid curriculum sequencing. This included virtual delivery adjustments (using online platforms), providing a living allowance to address financial barriers, and use of sector-relevant digital and interpersonal skills training. Through ongoing dialogue with interest groups and continuous feedback integration, organizers maintained the program's core objectives while adjusting service delivery to changing conditions.
- **Rigorous participant screening.** The success of an SBM hinges on comprehensive screening processes that align with both participant and employer requirements. AspireAtlantic highlighted the need for service providers to receive thorough training to conduct effective recruitment screening. This approach ensured that the program reached and supported the most appropriate participants while maintaining its intended scope.
- **Scaling and inclusivity.** As part of the **Scaling Up Skills Development Portfolio**, AspireAtlantic is positioned to contribute valuable insights into developing scalable and inclusive workforce development strategies. The program can help design approaches that effectively address employment barriers across Canada.

1. Introduction

While skills shortages—especially in the skilled trades, such as manufacturing and construction—are felt across Canada,³ the issue is particularly acute in Nova Scotia. Driven by an aging population and a declining local workforce,⁴ analysts project that the province will need 11,000 additional tradespeople by 2030 to meet growing demand.⁵ Meanwhile, high unemployment rates persist in Nova Scotia and across Atlantic Canada. In December 2019, the NS unemployment rate was 8.1%: 2.5 percentage points above the national average.⁶ At the same time, employers are struggling to find workers and reporting labour shortages—a situation that Rick Miner referred to (over a decade ago) as “people without jobs, jobs without people.”⁷ It is estimated that Nova Scotia experienced a loss of approximately \$1 billion worth of potential sales and contracts in 2022.⁸

[Pier Labs](#), a non-profit social innovation lab, recognized that these issues required new and innovative approaches to workforce development. With funding from the [Future Skills Centre \(FSC\)](#) in 2020, Pier Labs conducted comprehensive labour market research that included reviewing provincial reports, interviewing job seekers, and consulting with multiple interest groups. These included government departments, training providers, and industry experts across 11 sectors in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. Their aim was to identify growth sectors that were offering quality jobs with opportunities for career progression but facing significant hiring challenges. The research identified a lack of workforce development programs in Nova Scotia that focused on advancement and post-employment services, which are crucial in the Atlantic context where many small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) lack HR capacity. Research also indicated that any program designed to engage these issues must be responsive to local contexts and ecosystems.

Drawing on a review of the evidence base, Pier Labs hypothesized that sector-based training programs (sector-based models, or SBMs) could be an effective approach to address labour shortages and meet jobseeker needs. Evidence shows that SBMs can be powerful tools to create ‘on ramps’ for workers to

3 McDowell, A. (2024, August 7). The skilled trades shortage is now a threat to Canada’s economy – and we’re not doing enough to fill the gap. *The Hub*. <https://thehub.ca/2024/08/07/adam-mcdowell-the-skilled-trades-shortage-is-now-a-threat-to-canadas-economy-and-were-not-doing-enough-to-plug-the-gap/>

4 Public Policy Forum. (2020). *Solving for shortages in Nova Scotia: Employer experiences and the labour market across Atlantic provinces*. <https://ppforum.ca/publications/solving-for-shortages-in-nova-scotia-employer-experiences-and-the-labour-market-across-atlantic-provinces/>

5 Henderson, J. (2023, October 20). Nova Scotia to spend \$100 million on recruitment, retention for skilled trades. *Halifax Examiner*. <https://www.halifaxexaminer.ca/economy/labour/nova-scotia-to-spend-100-million-on-recruitment-retention-for-skilled-trades/>

6 Statistics Canada. (2023). *Labour force characteristics by province, monthly, seasonally adjusted*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410028703>

7 “Although the debate over the existence or non-existence of skills mismatches rages on,” Miner writes, “many are considering only the supply-demand mismatches. We actually have multiple skills mismatches. These are: supply-demand mismatches; geographical mismatches; under-employment (over-skilled) mismatches; [and] under-skilled/over-employment mismatches.” See: Miner, R. (2014). *The great Canadian skills mismatch: People without jobs, jobs without people and MORE*. Miner Management Consultants. [http://www.minerandminer.ca/data/Miner_March_2014_final\(2\).pdf](http://www.minerandminer.ca/data/Miner_March_2014_final(2).pdf)

8 Gorman, M. (2023, November 28). Labour shortages cost N.S. businesses \$1B in missed opportunities in 2022, report says. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/labour-shortages-business-workers-jobs-1.7042721>

transition into new careers because they are based on a deep understanding of a sector's needs.⁹ SBMs are also designed to support the requirements of both employers and employees, providing a comprehensive approach to addressing workforce needs (see section 2.1. Sector-based models for a more detailed discussion of SBMs).

In early 2021, AspireAtlantic was selected as one of the [10 interventions](#) to be part of Blueprint's [Scaling Up Skills Development Portfolio](#). This allowed Pier Labs to deliver a pilot version of AspireAtlantic in three specific high-growth sectors: home building; industrial, commercial, and institutional (ICI) construction; and manufacturing. During this pilot, Pier Labs and its partners focused on continuous improvement to refine the model and troubleshoot problems in real-time. Pier Labs also aimed to diversify recruitment pipelines—and address systemic discrimination and financial barriers for job seekers¹⁰—by focusing on groups underrepresented in the target industries: namely, women, newcomers, and racialized individuals.

In December 2022, AspireAtlantic delivered the program to its first cohort of participants. In November 2023, Blueprint released an [Interim Report](#) covering early findings on program uptake, completion, satisfaction, implementation, and other learnings based on its first 55 participants.

This *Final Report* follows our *Interim Report* and presents final findings for AspireAtlantic for Cohort 1 (February to December 2022) and Cohort 2 (February to June 2023) related to participant uptake, experiences, and employment outcomes. We also explore reflections from staff and delivery partners on program implementation and report on program costs based on evidence from both cohorts.

Note. Pier Labs published a [technical report](#) and an [implementation toolkit](#) on AspireAtlantic, both finalized in March 2024.¹¹ These reports provide a high-level outline of program development and implementation, along with lessons learned from the project, and complement our work here.

9 Pier Labs. (2024). *AspireAtlantic technical report: Evaluation findings*.

<https://www.davispier.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/AspireAtlantic-Technical-Report-F.pdf>

10 Abdul Latif, J. (2022). Reducing search barriers for job seekers. *J-PAL Policy Insights*. <https://doi.org/10.31485/pi.2234.2022>

11 Pier Labs. (2024, March). *AspireAtlantic technical report: Evaluation findings*.

<https://www.davispier.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/AspireAtlantic-Technical-Report-F.pdf>

2. About the AspireAtlantic Intervention

2.1 Sector-based models

SBMs focus on specific industry sectors, operating as a dual-client models to address the needs of both employers and jobseekers. There is strong international evidence showing that well-designed SBMs are effective at delivering training that prepares jobseekers for in-demand occupations and helps employers meet labour demands. SBMs offer workers entry points to quality jobs in growth industries that offer competitive wages and career advancement. SBMs typically include participant pre-enrolment screening to assess motivation, suitability, and readiness; sector-specific pre-employment and career-readiness services; occupational skills training to match with employer needs; job development and placement services for graduates; and retention and advancement services to help participants make career progress.^{12, 13}

While well-designed SBMs are effective, they can also be challenging to deliver. They require a broad range of expertise, such as serving jobseekers with labour market barriers, engaging employers, developing deep industry knowledge, designing and delivering high-quality training programs, and communicating and coordinating between multiple organizations. As a result, SBMs stretch the capacity of even highly experienced service providers.¹⁴ SBMs are also vulnerable to labour market fluctuations, from global shocks like the pandemic to more minor sectoral downturns or upticks.

2.2. Adapting the WorkAdvance model

The [WorkAdvance](#) project was a large, high-profile demonstration project running from 2011 to 2015, featuring six target sectors and four service providers. Studies showed WorkAdvance increased earnings, led to career advancement for participants over time, and produced a positive return on investment for government and society.¹⁵ The project also generated several evidence-based practices. Better participant outcomes came from service providers with: a) good industry relationships, often built from decades of working with employers and associations in its target sector; and b) the ability to deliver training in-house, allowing staff to familiarize themselves with participants, identify the most suitable job placements, and avoid some logistical complexities.¹⁶

12 Myers, K., Harding, S., & Pasolli, K. (2021). *Skills training that works: Lessons from demand-driven approaches*. IRPP. <https://irpp.org/research-studies/skills-training-that-works-lessons-from-demand-driven-approaches/>

13 Katz, R., Roth, J., Hendra, R., & Schaberg, K. (2022, April). Why do sectoral employment programs work? Lessons from WorkAdvance. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 40(S1), 249–291. <https://doi.org/10.1086/717932>

14 West, K., & Molina, F. (2024, February). *Sector-based training programs: An approach to achieving equitable labor-market outcomes and upward mobility*. MDRC. https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/EML_Brief_%202024_final_rv.pdf

15 Kanengiser, H., & Schaberg, K. (2022). *Employment and earnings effects of the WorkAdvance demonstration after seven years*. MRDC. <https://www.mdrc.org/work/publications/employment-and-earnings-effects-workadvance-demonstration-after-seven-years>

16 Hendra, R., Greenberg, D. H., Hamilton, G., Oppenheim, A., Pennington, A., Schaberg, K., Tessler, B. L. (2016). *Encouraging evidence on a sector-focused advancement strategy: Two-year impacts from the WorkAdvance demonstration*. MRDC. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2854309

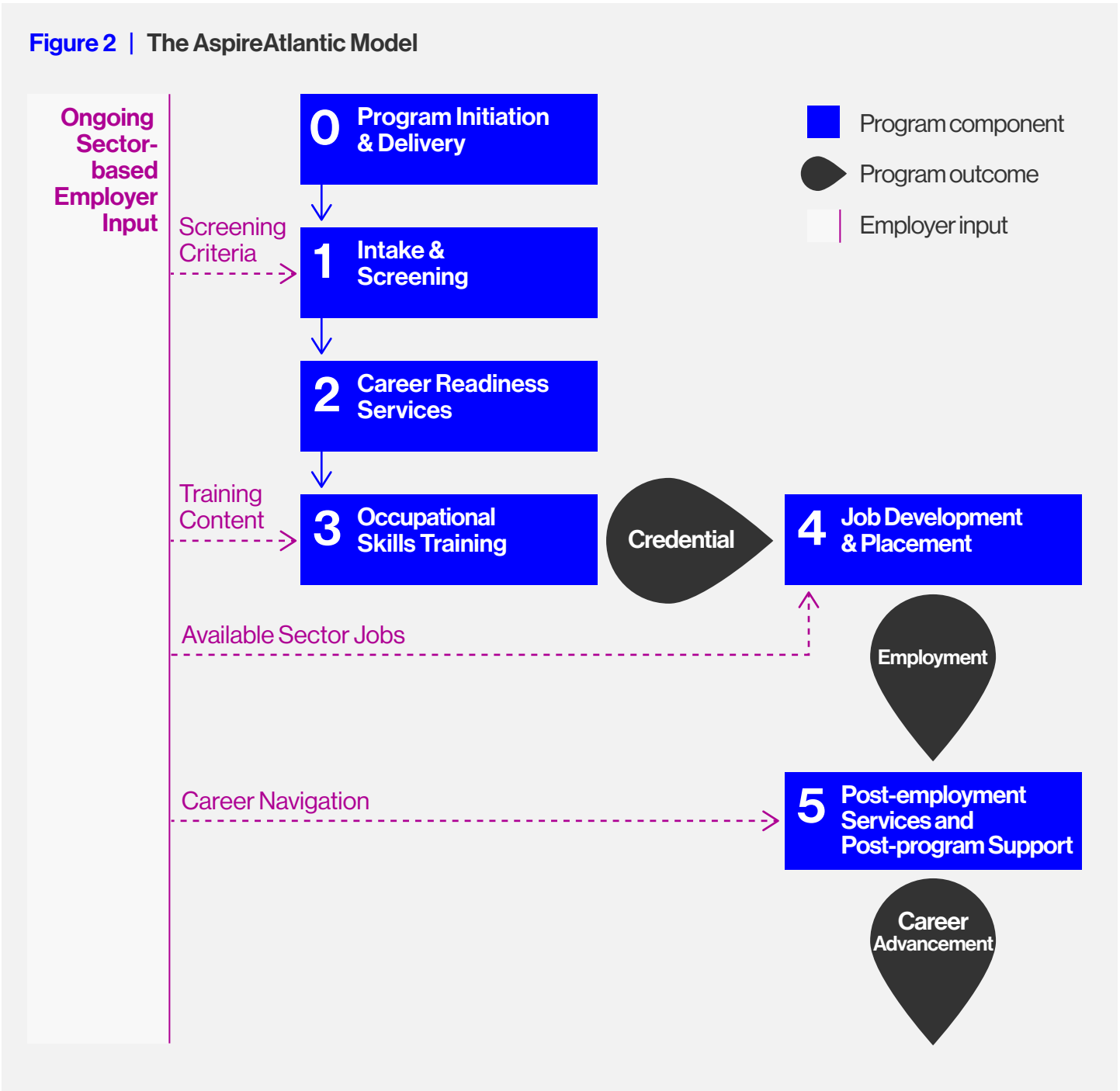
Pier Labs leveraged WorkAdvance as its starting point and adapted it to fit the Nova Scotia context. AspireAtlantic was designed to address gaps between existing programs and local employer and jobseeker needs. Specifically, the program aimed to help individuals move from unemployment or low-wage jobs into those with advancement opportunities in manufacturing and construction. It featured many of the same components as WorkAdvance but was adapted to align with Nova Scotia's specific economic and labour market contexts. It was also adjusted to align with the three key target sectors of home building; manufacturing; and industrial, commercial, and institutional (ICI) construction.¹⁷ To design and deliver the program, Pier Labs partnered with six Nova Scotia-based organizations: three Service Provider Organizations (SPOs) and three Sector Associations. For a summary of each partner organization, see **Box 1** on **pg. 18**. Specifically, the program was delivered through the following roles:

- **Case Managers from SPOs** coordinated the participant experience. They led the recruitment, intake, and screening of participants. They also designed and delivered career-readiness training and helped jobseekers overcome challenges and barriers. Once the training component was complete, case managers also helped match jobseekers to employers.
- **Advancement Coaches from sector associations** connected with employers to design curricula for the occupational skills training component. They helped promote the program, provide employer outreach and post-employment supports, and coordinate with SPO case managers to provide job search support.

¹⁷ Myers, K., Harding, S., & Passoli, K. (2021). *Skills training that works: Lessons from demand-driven approaches*, Institute for Research on Public Policy. <https://irpp.org/research-studies/skills-training-that-works-lessons-from-demand-driven-approaches/>

2.2.1. Participant journey and regional adaptations

Below, we detail five components of the AspireAtlantic participant journey, including timelines and delivery staff responsible. We explain how Pier Labs adapted elements of the WorkAdvance model to ensure AspireAtlantic was appropriate for the Nova Scotia labour market.



1. Recruitment and suitability screening of unemployed or low-wage individuals. SPOs recruited participants through their client bases, community partners, and other employment-related stakeholders, such as Nova Scotia Works and the NS Department of Community Services. Outreach strategies included online job boards, in-person events, social and print media, and more informal networks.

Those individuals referred to the program completed an online registration form, were pre-screened via telephone, then more formally interviewed and assessed by an SPO Case Manager. The assessment used a scoring rubric that looked at a person's a) motivation for working in the target sector; b) suitability and employability (e.g., their language and physical abilities, availability for a full-time work, eligibility to work in Canada, and ability to learn online); and c) coachability (i.e., their willingness to learn).

Adaptations from WorkAdvance

While WorkAdvance focused on individuals with low income, AspireAtlantic also focused on low-income individuals from groups underrepresented in the target sectors in Nova Scotia: women, newcomers, and racialized individuals.

2. Career-readiness training. Over four weeks, participants received career-readiness training from SPO case managers, designed in consultation with sector partners, case managers, advancement coaches, and Pier Labs. Career-readiness training covered industry-specific skills requirements, workplace expectations, and guidance on job applications and interviews; a common curriculum was further customized where necessary across cohorts. Training materials were approved by an AspireAtlantic Steering Committee, including an adult education specialist.

Adaptations from WorkAdvance

WorkAdvance career-readiness training was generally delivered early in the program. AspireAtlantic tailored career-readiness training to local sectors, emphasizing both soft skills and sector-specific knowledge. To address participant needs, it included practical skills (like job applications and interviews), mental wellness and resiliency training, and flexible delivery (in-person and virtual). Living allowances were provided to reduce barriers. These adaptations ensured inclusivity and alignment with regional workforce demands. In AspireAtlantic's second cohort, this component was split into two parts, with the first at the beginning and the second at the end of the training (for more details, see **Section 4.4. Program implementation**).

3. Occupational skills training. With the support of advancement coaches, participants then received occupational skills training from industry experts. Occupational skills training covered industry-specific occupational skills; introductions to employers and industry experts; and an industry-recognized credential (simply called 'AspireAtlantic') upon completion. Both the training and credential were designed by sector associations in consultation with employers. Training lasted from four to 10 weeks, depending on the sectoral stream. As above, training materials were approved by an AspireAtlantic Steering Committee, including an adult education specialist.

Adaptations from WorkAdvance

WorkAdvance occupational skills training was provided by Service Provider Organizations (SPOs), not sector associations. The shift was made because Pier Labs believed that sector associations have a clear understanding of employers' skill needs and in-demand, recognized credentials in their respective sectors. AspireAtlantic took a co-designed approach that involved leads from the partner organizations and Pier Labs, which served to promote trust both in process and outcomes.

4 & 5. Post-training support. Participants received individualized support in finding jobs and post-employment mentorship on job retention and career advancement. Case managers and advancement coaches worked together to deliver this support.

Adaptations from WorkAdvance

WorkAdvance's post-employment services involved retention and advancement coaching to participants, recommended to be offered over the course of 18–24 months. In AspireAtlantic, because the NS economy is characterized by SMEs, which often lack HR capacity, the model was originally expanded from retention and advancement coaching to also provide sector-based, customized support to employers who hired program participants.

In practice, however, AspireAtlantic post-employment services were delivered for fewer than 18 months for most participants due to a delay to curriculum delivery during Cohort 1. Since the program ended in September 2023, only the first stream (beginning in February 2022) received the full 18 months of post-training support; later streams in Cohort 1 received between nine and 12 months of support, and graduates of the second cohort received three to four months of support. For more details, see **Section 4.4. Program implementation.**

During training and while participants searched for jobs, SPO case managers also provided wraparound supports, such as a living allowance of \$700 per month (up to a total of \$2,000), gas cards, bus passes, laptops, professional uniforms for interviews, and referrals to mental health resources. Each SPOs provided community-specific wraparound supports (for example, ISANS helped newcomers and connected them with other supports).

2.3. AspireAtlantic timeline, partners, and training streams

Cohort 1 (February to December 2022) involved 55 participants. During this cohort, each Service Providing Organization (SPO)—ISANS, DALA, and MetroWorks—delivered training across all three sector streams (manufacturing, ICI construction, and home construction) and collaborated with all three sector associations (EMC, NSCSC, and AHBRSC).

Cohort 2 (February to June 2023) included 42 participants and featured a different training delivery approach. In this cohort, each SPO was assigned to work with only one sector association and deliver training in a single sector stream:

- ISANS partnered with NSCSC to deliver ICI construction training.
- DALA partnered with AHBRSC to deliver home construction training.
- MetroWorks partnered with EMC to deliver manufacturing training

This organizational shift is discussed in more detail in section **4.4. Program implementation**. **Box 1** describes and summarizes the roles of each of the organizations.

Box 1 | AspireAtlantic partner organizations

Program Lead

Pier Labs: Pier Labs is a non-profit social innovation lab that works with governments, community organizations, post-secondary institutions, charities, and private-sector companies to conduct research and innovation to address complex social issues. **Pier Labs led the design of the AspireAtlantic model, as well as the implementation, developmental evaluation, and research of the pilot project.**

Service Provider Organizations (SPOs)

ISANS (Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia): ISANS is an immigration and settlement service agency based in Halifax, NS, delivering services both online and in-person, and at scale, including business development and employment services.

DALA (Digby Area Learning Association): DALA is a non-profit service provider focused on education, training, career counseling, and career progression in Digby, NS.

MetroWorks: MetroWorks is a Halifax, NS-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

AHBRSC (the Atlantic Home Building & Renovation Sector Council): The AHBRSC is a Halifax-based organization that focuses on human resource planning, recruitment, retention, training, and development for the home construction sector across Atlantic Canada. **The AHBRSC delivered occupational skills training for the home construction streams.**

NSCSC (the Nova Scotia Construction Sector Council): 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. **The NSCSC delivered occupational skills training for the ICI construction streams.**

EMC (the Excellence in Manufacturing Consortium): 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.). **The EMC delivered occupational skills training for the manufacturing streams.**

Table 1 summarizes the entry requirements, training components, and target occupations for each sector pathway. As shown, there are differences across sector pathways in entry requirements (in terms of educational credentials and professional experience), delivery mode (in-person vs. online), and training duration.

Table 1 | AspireAtlantic training streams

	Home construction	ICI construction	Manufacturing
Program entry requirement	High school diploma	High school diploma, AND some past professional experience related to construction, AND/OR some post-secondary education.	High school diploma, BUT those with previous professional experience or post-secondary studies were considered on a case-by-case basis.
Delivery mode¹⁸	In-person and online	In-person and online	Online
Duration	8 weeks	10 weeks	4 weeks
Sample curriculum of Occupational Skills Training	• Occupational Health and Safety Training • Building Science: A House as a System • Carpentry/ Construction Labourer hands-on topics (e.g., Nova Scotia Building codes)	• Introduction to the Nova Scotia ICI Construction Industry • Construction Project Management and Estimating • Communication and Negotiation • Introduction to Ethics and Law • Workplace Safety and Awareness	• Production Worker Skills • Occupational Health and Safety • Quality Management Systems • Productivity Skills
Target occupations	• General contractor • Interior/Exterior Finishing carpentry • Framing • Repair/ maintenance • Drywall • Flooring	• Project Coordinator • Estimator • Project Administrator or Project Lead • Proposal Developer	• Manufacturing Assistant • General Labourer/Operator • Assembly Technician • Production Associate • Manufacturing Assembler • Production Coordinator/Manager

¹⁸ Career-readiness training was delivered virtually for home construction and ICI construction due to COVID-19, but in-person occupational skills training sessions were allowed with COVID precautions. Training was delivered virtually for manufacturing due to COVID-19 restrictions.

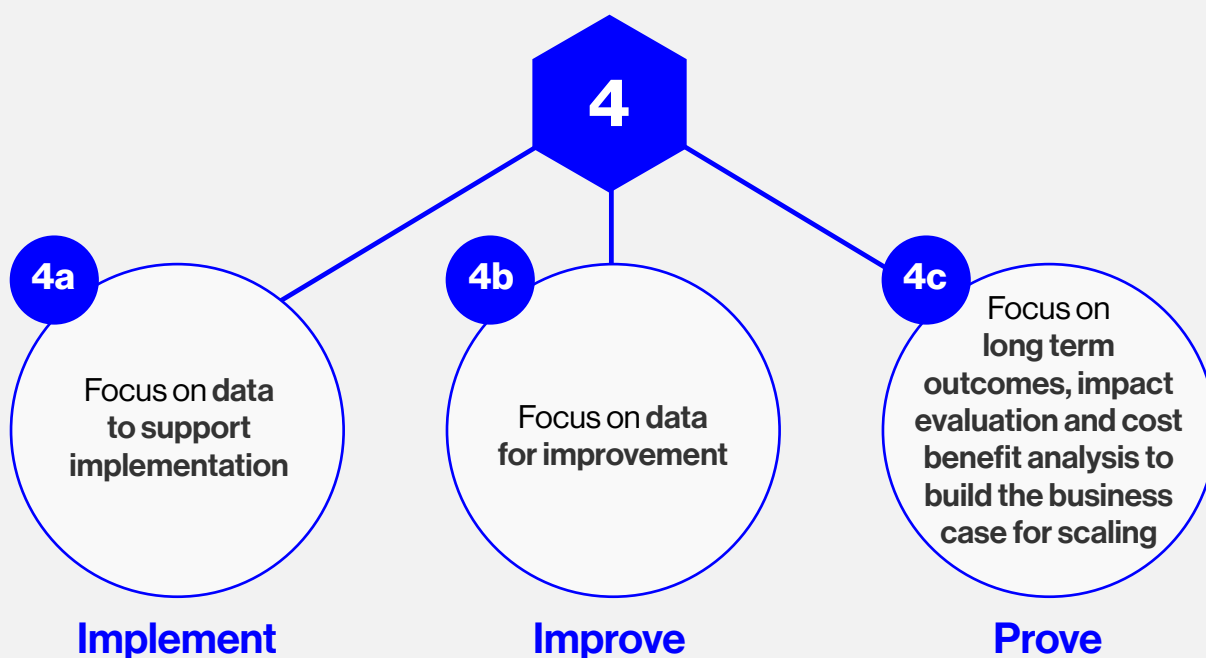
3. Methodology

3.1. Blueprint's evidence generation approach

Blueprint has developed a novel approach to evidence generation that fits within the six stages of the innovation cycle to support the scaling-up of promising interventions. By understanding an intervention's stage of development, we can determine the most appropriate tools to advance it to the next stage. **Box 5** of the [Scaling Design Report](#) provides more details on our evidence generation approach.

Among the [Scaling Up Skills Development Portfolio](#) interventions, AspireAtlantic is in **Stage 4** of the innovation cycle, **Delivery and Iteration**. Stage 4 is further broken down into three levels of delivery maturity: *Implement*, *Improve* and *Prove* (see **Figure 3**). Because AspireAtlantic was being implemented for the first time, we categorized it at **Stage 4a** of the innovation cycle, Implement, where we focus on evidence generation to support implementation.

Figure 3 | Phases of delivery maturity



3.2. Blueprint's common outcomes framework

Our measurement approach includes both indicators that are specific to the AspireAtlantic model and common indicators drawn from our common outcomes framework (see **Box 2**).

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**.

3.3. Learning agenda

Our *Final Report* covers the entire AspireAtlantic program period—from February 2022 to June 2023—and reports on five areas:

- 1. Program uptake.** Did AspireAtlantic reach its recruitment targets and target demographic?
- 2. Participant experiences.** Did participants complete the program? Were participants satisfied with the program?
- 3. Participant outcomes.** What were the employment outcomes for participants? How many became employed after the program, and how many were employed in the target sectors? What were their earnings and perceptions of job quality and satisfaction?
- 4. Program implementation.** What have we learned about program delivery? What did staff and partners identify as areas for improvement?
- 5. Program cost.** What was the total and per-participant cost to deliver the program? How did it compare to WorkAdvance delivery costs?

3.4. Data collection strategy, data sources, and sample sizes

To understand changes in participant outcomes we collected data at baseline, post-training, and at three- and nine-month follow-up points. Because of the relatively low sample size (n=97), we used a repeated-measures cross-sectional design rather than a longitudinal design. By focusing on the total population and comparing responses across cohorts, we were able to make more confident statements about the data. In the future, we hope to analyze long-term outcomes using Statistics Canada data linkage.

The sources and sample sizes for each research component are presented in **Table 2**.

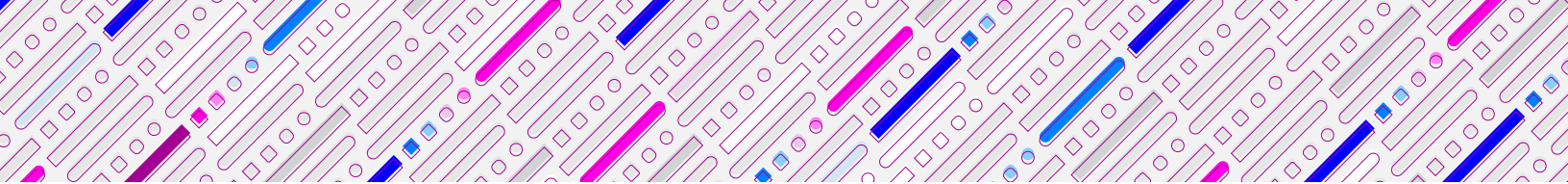
Table 2 | Data sources, sample sizes and notes

Data source	Collection dates	Number/percentage of participants	Description
Administrative data	Feb. 2022 – June 2023	Enrolment: 97 Completion: 91% (88/97, with nine dropouts)	Pier Labs collected and shared participant data with Blueprint on program enrolment, dropouts, and completion rates.
Baseline survey	Feb. 2022 – Feb. 2023	76% (74/97)	Administered in training week one; collected socio-demographic characteristics, employment, and education rates.
Training exit survey	Apr. 2022 – June 2023	81% (60/74)	Administered in the final week of training; collected satisfaction rate and employment and education outcome data.
Three-month follow-up survey	July 2022 – Sept. 2023	66% (49/74)	Administered three months post-training; collected satisfaction rate and employment and education outcome data.
Nine-month follow-up survey	Jan. 2023 – March 2024	50% (37/74)	Administered nine months post-training; collected satisfaction rates and employment and education outcomes data.
Staff/partner interviews	Dec. 2022 and Aug. 2023	n=17	Blueprint conducted two rounds of semi-structured interviews (eight in Dec. 2022 and nine in July and Aug. 2023) with Pier Labs and six partner organizations on program delivery.
Delivery and administrative costs	Apr. 2021 – Mar. 2024	N/A	Each month, Pier Labs collected and shared staff hours on program delivery activities saved in Harvest, their internal time tracking system. Pier Labs shared cost breakdown data upon the conclusion of the project.

Note. In the cell describing 'Number/percentage of participants' for the baseline survey, the denominator (97) indicates the entire number of participants enrolled; the numerator (74) indicates those who consented to research and completed the survey. In the cells describing 'Number/percentage of participants' at the post-training, three-month, and nine-month marks, the denominators indicate the number of participants who consented to research and received the surveys; the numerators indicate the proportion of participants who completed the surveys.

3.5. Data limitations

The program enrolled **97 participants**, with **76%** consenting to research. Attrition reduced the sample to **37 (50%)**, limiting meaningful comparisons across groups or sectors.



4. Findings

4.1 Program uptake

Did AspireAtlantic reach its target demographic?

AspireAtlantic reached its target population of unemployed or low-wage individuals, many of whom were women, racialized, and/or newcomers. As noted in **Table 3** (below), **67%** of survey respondents were unemployed at intake. Average annual earnings among the employed was **\$23,396**, which is below the poverty line in Nova Scotia.¹⁹

The program attracted a cohort that was more diverse than that currently found in Nova Scotia's construction and manufacturing sectors. Among Aspire Atlantic participants: **24%** identified as women, **61%** identified as racialized (i.e., non-white, including Indigenous), and **52%** identified as newcomers (having arrived in Canada in the past five years). To provide context, in 2022, Nova Scotia's construction workforce was composed of only **5.3%** Indigenous people, **9.6%** immigrants, and **3.5%** women.²⁰ Across Atlantic Canada, women accounted for only **11.4%** of the industry in 2023.²¹

Fifty-two percent of respondents held a bachelor's degree or higher, which is also higher than the average educational level of manufacturing or construction workers. **Sixty percent** of survey respondents were immigrants (and **52%** were newcomers) who completed their education before arriving and were likely skilled professionals in their home countries.

Table 3 provides a breakdown of key socio-demographic characteristics of participants.

19 The MBM in Nova Scotia in 2023 was generally around \$50,000 for a family of four. Using the standard square root equivalence scaling formula, it was about \$25,000 for a single individual without dependents. For more, please see: Statistics Canada. (2024, September 4). *Market Basket Measure (MBM) thresholds for the reference family by Market Basket Measure region, component and base year*. Table 11-10-0066-01. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1110006601>

20 Buildforce Canada. (2023, May 4). *Construction and maintenance looking forward: Nova Scotia*. https://www.Constructionforecasts.ca/sites/default/files/highlights/2023/2023_ns_constr_maint_looking_forward_-_may_4.Pdf

21 Government of Canada Job Bank. (2024, September 11). *Construction: Atlantic Canada*. <https://www.jobbank.gc.ca/trend-analysis/job-market-reports/atlantic-region/sectoral-profile-construction>

Table 3 | Participant socio-demographics

Participant socio-demographics		Response rate / Number of respondents
Number of respondents to the baseline survey		74
Gender	Woman/Female	24% (16/68)
	Man/Male	74% (50/68)
	Other	3% (2/68)
Age	Under 30	26% (18/68)
	30–45	51% (35/68)
	45+	22% (15/68)
	Average age	37
Highest level of education	Less than high school	6% (4/67)
	High school	28% (19/67)
	Some post-secondary education	13% (9/67)
	Bachelor's degree and above	52% (35/67)
Race*	White (European descent)	39% (26/67)
	Black (African, Afro-Caribbean, African-Canadian descent)	24% (16/67)
	Middle Eastern (Arab, Persian, West Asian descent, e.g., Afghan, Egyptian, Iranian, Lebanese, Turkish, Kurdish, etc.)	21% (14/67)
	Latino (Latin American, Hispanic descent)	10% (7/67)
	Other	10% (7/67)
Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, Inuit descent)		7% (5/67)
Immigrant		60% (40/67)
Newcomer (arrived in Canada five years ago or fewer)		52% (34/66)
Unemployed at intake		67% (45/67)
(if employed) Average annual employment earning (n=18)		\$23,395.96

Source. Baseline survey.

*Note. Respondents could select multiple choices that applied to them; as a result, the total percentage across categories is greater than 100%.

Did AspireAtlantic reach its recruitment target?

The program achieved two-thirds (65%) of its recruitment target. This lower number of participants was likely related to the following factors, which are further discussed in **Section 4.4. Program implementation:**

- Delays in curriculum delivery from sector organizations created tight recruitment timelines for SPOs, leaving little time for marketing, outreach, and word-of-mouth referrals. This limited the program's visibility to potential participants.
- Additionally, the surge in funding for workforce development programs during the pandemic led to an increase in competing program options,²² making it harder to attract candidates.²³
- Meanwhile, falling provincial unemployment rates reduced the overall demand for employment training programs. Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are especially sensitive to changes in the job market. Pier Labs conducted its needs assessment in 2019-2020, during which Nova Scotia's unemployment rate rose from 7.4% in 2019 to 9.9% in 2020. By mid-2021, the rate returned to pre-pandemic levels and kept declining as the economy recovered. When AspireAtlantic launched Cohort 1 mid-2022, the unemployment rate was 6.5%, dropping further to 5.7% in March 2023. While still higher than the national average, it was much lower than Nova Scotia's typical levels,²⁴ which have averaged over 10% since the mid-70s.²⁵

Pier Labs²⁶ suggested two additional reasons why recruitment targets may not have been met:

- The \$700/month living allowance was not enough to cover expenses, making it difficult for participants to commit to full-time training.
- Recruiters could not provide clear program details to applicants because of delays in finalizing the curriculum and hiring advancement coaches, which left start times uncertain.

22 Department of Finance. (2020). *Overview of Canada's COVID-19 economic response plan*. Government of Canada. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-finance/services/publications/economic-fiscal-snapshot/overview-economic-response-plan.html>

23 Gjipali, A., Karapici, V., & Baci, N. (2023). How do the labour force characteristics encounter COVID-19 economic consequences—A Canadian experience. *Administrative Sciences*, 13(9), 209. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci13090209>

24 Government of Nova Scotia. (n.d.). *Labour market information: Unemployment*. <https://lmi.novascotia.ca/unemployment#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20it%20declined%20to,Scotia's%20unemployment%20rate%20was%207.4%25>

25 Department of Labour, Skills and Information. (2023, April). *Labour market information news*. Government of Nova Scotia. <https://lmi.novascotia.ca/sites/default/files/2023-08/20230424%20LFS%20April%202023%20Insights%20FINAL.pdf>

26 Pier Labs. (2024, March). *AspireAtlantic technical report: Evaluation findings*. <https://www.davispier.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/AspireAtlantic-Technical-Report-F.pdf>

4.2. Participant experiences

Did participants complete the program?

Nearly all participants completed the program, with 91% (88/97) of participants receiving a certificate of completion. Among the nine individuals who did not complete, reasons given for not completing were finding employment, personal reasons, and lack of interest in the target sectors.

Were participants satisfied with the program?

Participants were highly satisfied with the program. As shown in Table 4, 96% (57/59) of respondents reported that they were satisfied with AspireAtlantic overall.

Table 4 | Overall program satisfaction rates

Overall, I am satisfied with AspireAtlantic	Response rate	
Strongly disagree	2% (1/59)	
Disagree	0% (0/59)	
Neither agree nor disagree	2% (1/59)	
Agree	25% (15/59)	96% (57/59)
Strongly agree	71% (42/59)	

Source. Post-training survey.

Table 5 shows that **98%** (58/59) of respondents were either 'likely' or 'very likely' to recommend AspireAtlantic or had already recommended it to others.

Table 5 | Likelihood of recommending the program

How likely are you to recommend AspireAtlantic to others?	Response rate	
Very unlikely to recommend	2% (1/59)	
Unlikely to recommend	0% (0/59)	
Neither likely nor unlikely to recommend	0% (0/59)	
Likely to recommend	14% (8/59)	98% (58/59)
Very likely to recommend	42% (25/59)	
I've already recommended AspireAtlantic to someone	42% (25/59)	

Source. Post-training survey.

Respondents reported high levels of satisfaction with specific program components. We asked about specific aspects of the program to assess strengths and areas of improvement, including with the career-readiness training, the occupational skills training, the job search and placement support, the sector of training, case managers, and advancement coaches. Satisfaction rates ranged from **79%** (47/59) to as high as **96%** (57/59), as shown in **Table 6**.

Table 6 | Levels of satisfaction with program components

Prompt	Percentage endorsement				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
The sector I chose to receive training in is a good match with my educational background and work experience.	0% (0/59)	3% (2/59)	17% (10/59)	32% (19/59)	47% (28/59)
				79% (47/59)	
I am satisfied with the occupational skills training.	2% (1/59)	0% (0/59)	2% (1/59)	32% (19/59)	64% (38/59)
				96% (57/59)	
I am satisfied with the career-readiness training.	3% (2/59)	2% (1/59)	2% (1/59)	27% (16/59)	66% (39/59)
				93% (55/59)	
I am satisfied with the case manager I was assigned.	2% (1/59)	0% (0/59)	7% (4/59)	34% (20/59)	58% (34/59)
				91% (54/59)	
I am satisfied with the advancement coach I was assigned.	2% (1/59)	0% (0/59)	3% (2/59)	25% (15/59)	69% (41/59)
				94% (56/59)	
I am satisfied with the job search and placement support.	2% (1/59)	2% (1/59)	10% (6/59)	36% (21/59)	51% (30/59)
				86% (51/59)	

As shown in **Table 7**, **94%** (56/59) of respondents 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the program was useful in helping to prepare them for future employment.

Table 7 | Overall usefulness of the program

AspireAtlantic is useful in helping me prepare for future employment	Response rate	
Strongly disagree	2% (1/59)	
Disagree	0% (0/59)	
Neither agree nor disagree	3% (2/59)	
Agree	25% (15/59)	94% (56/59)
Strongly agree	69% (41/59)	

Source: Post-training survey.

Blueprint gathered data on participant satisfaction rates three- and nine-months after the training to gauge how participants' experiences in the labour market (post-program) shaped their perceptions of AspireAtlantic. **Table 8** illustrates participant satisfaction over time. Program satisfaction remained high three months after the training and dropped marginally at nine months. Notably, perceived program utility for those finding jobs increased dramatically. While **59%** (17/29) of employed respondents thought the program was useful three months after training, **79%** (19/24) thought so nine months later: an increase of **20 percentage points**.

Table 8 | Rates of program satisfaction and utility over time

Prompts around program satisfaction over time	Three-month follow-up survey	Nine-month follow-up survey
	Responses: agree/strongly agree or somewhat/very useful	
I am satisfied with the job search and placement support.	90% (36/40)	91% (21/23)
I am satisfied with the post-employment services, including career advancement support.	95% (36/38)	85% (22/26)
I am satisfied with the case manager I was assigned.	98% (39/40)	96% (22/23)
I am satisfied with the advancement coach I was assigned.	95% (36/38)	85% (22/26)
If employed: How useful was AspireAtlantic in helping you find/get your current job?	59% (17/29)	79% (19/24)

Sources: Three-month and nine-month follow-up surveys.

4.3. Participant outcomes

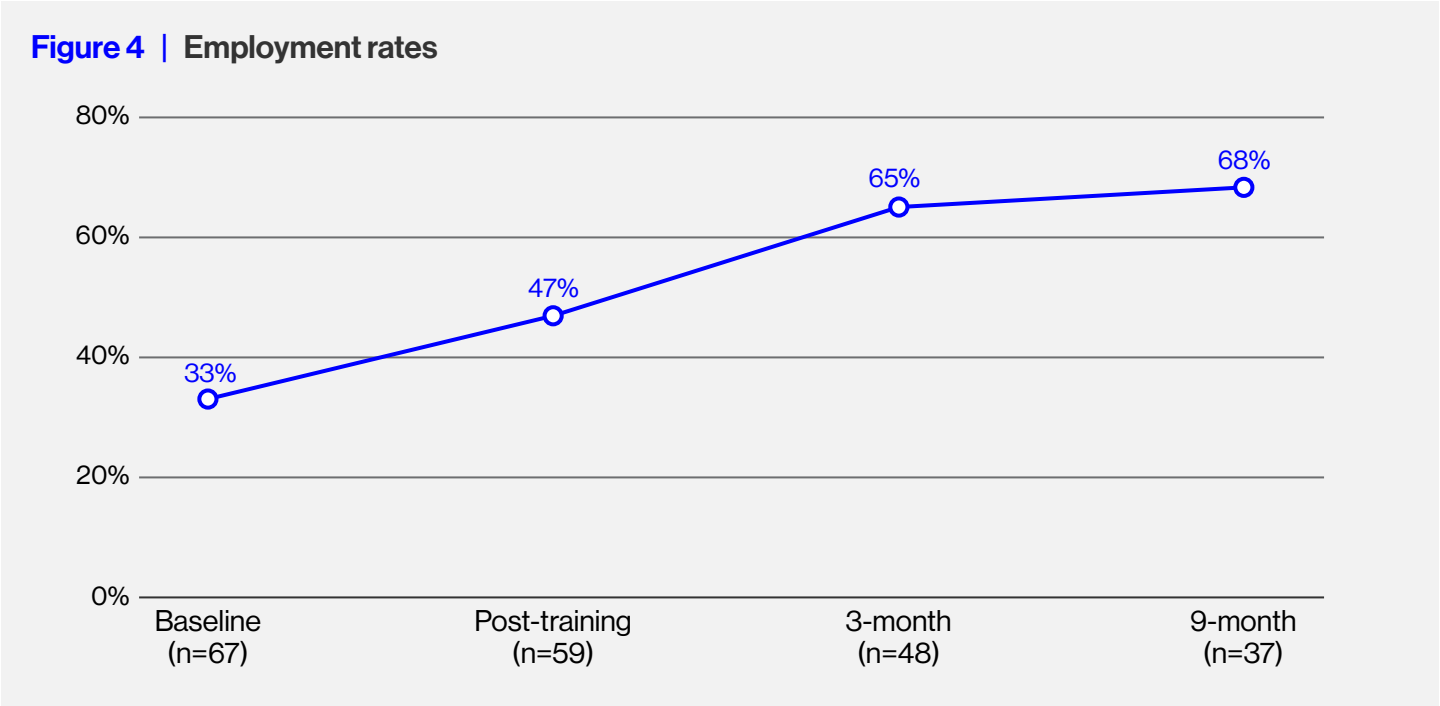
Our cross-sectional study identifies statistical relationships in the data, taking a snapshot of data at one point in time. Cross-sectional studies are good for identifying patterns but limited for proving causation; in other words, we cannot conclusively determine whether AspireAtlantic directly caused the observed participant employment outcomes, as other factors could have influenced these results. For example, increases in hours and earnings could result from changes in jobs or careers that may have occurred regardless of participation in AspireAtlantic.

To definitively prove causation, different research designs, such as longitudinal studies or randomized controlled trials, are required with a larger sample size.

What were the employment outcomes for participants?

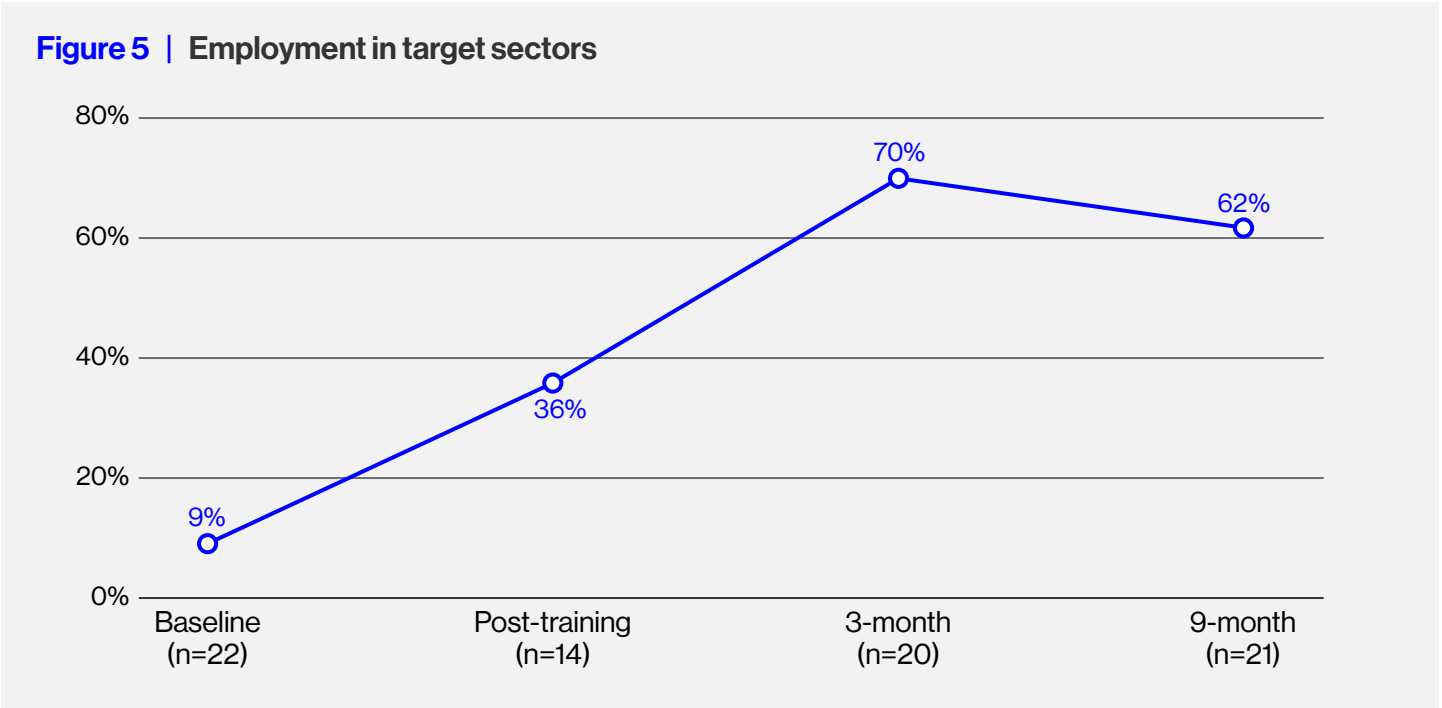
Participant employment rates more than doubled over time—from 33% at program intake to 68% nine months later. Figure 4 shows respondents’ employment rates increased from 33% (22/67) at program intake to 47% (28/59) immediately after the training (an increase of 14 percentage points), then to 65% (31/48) three months post-training and 68% (25/37) nine months later (an increase of 35 percentage points from program intake).

Despite the caveats mentioned above, these results are encouraging—especially considering that 79% (19/24) of participants thought the program was useful for finding work nine months after the training: an increase of 20 percentage points from the three-month mark.



Source. Baseline, post-training, and three-month and nine-month follow-up surveys.

Figure 5 shows that the proportion of survey respondents who reported working in the target sectors²⁷ (manufacturing and construction) increased from **9%** (2/22) to **62%** (13/21) between program intake and nine months later (an increase of **53 percentage points**).

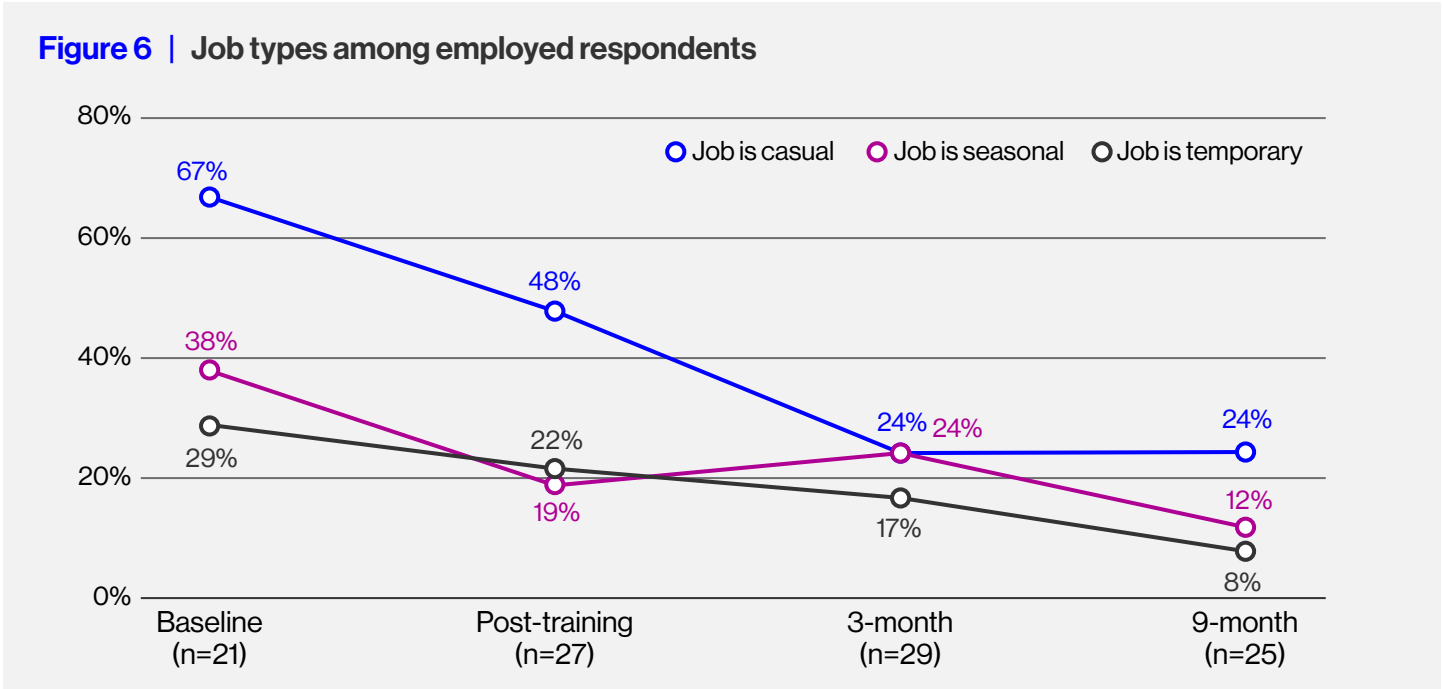


Source. Baseline, post-training, and three-month and nine-month follow-up surveys.

For those employed, job quality, job satisfaction, and employment earnings improved over time. One of the ways we assessed **job quality** was by asking participants whether their jobs were casual, seasonal, or temporary and what kind of benefits they provided. The rationale was that the nature and structure of a job can influence social, financial, and personal benefits.

27 Based on manual coding of job industries reported in surveys.

Between program intake and nine months post-training, the proportion of those who held a **casual job** decreased from **67%** (14/21) to **24%** (6/25); the proportion of those who held a **seasonal job** decreased from **38%** (8/21) to **12%** (3/25); and the proportion of those who held a **temporary job** decreased from **29%** (6/21) to **8%** (2/25), with the steepest drop occurring for casual jobs (as shown in **Figure 6**).



Source. Baseline, post-training, and three-month and nine-month follow-up surveys.

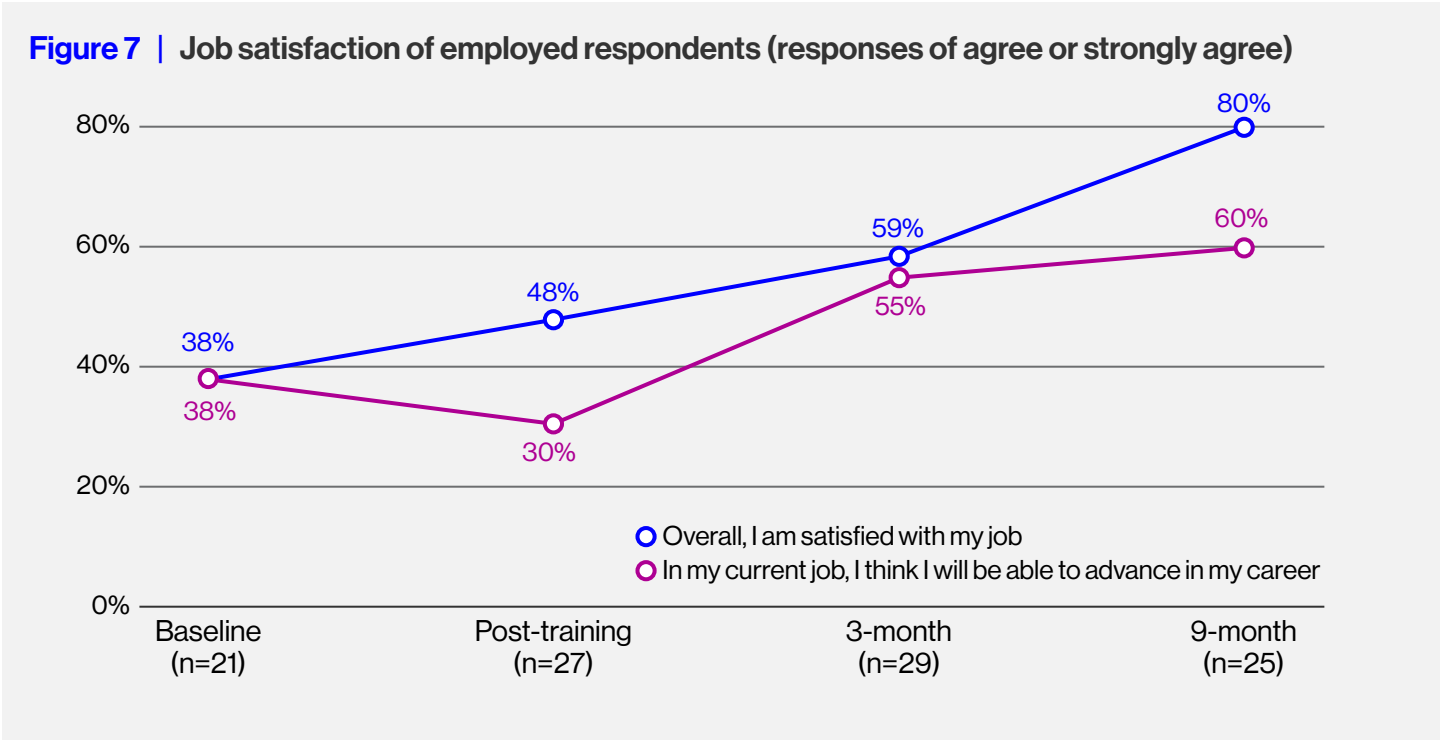
Another way we measured **job quality** was by asking participants in all surveys to select the types of benefits they received from their jobs. As noted in **Table 9**, the proportion of respondents whose jobs provided benefits (such as pensions, supplementary health insurance, and paid time-off) increased between program intake and nine months post-training, with **percentage point increases ranging from 30 to 43**.

Table 9 | Job benefits of employed respondents

Job benefit type	Baseline survey	Post-training survey	Three-month follow-up survey	Nine-month follow-up survey	Increases in percentage points
At least two weeks of paid time off/paid vacation days²⁸	32% (7/22)	29% (8/28)	48% (15/31)	72% (18/25)	+40
Dental plan or dental coverage with health plan	18% (4/22)	32% (9/28)	52% (16/31)	56% (14/25)	+38
Life and/or disability insurance plan	5% (1/22)	21% (6/28)	32% (10/31)	48% (12/25)	+43
Medical insurance or health plan in addition to public health insurance coverage	23% (5/22)	39% (11/28)	58% (18/31)	64% (16/25)	+41
Private pension plan	14% (3/22)	14% (4/28)	32% (10/31)	44% (11/25)	+30

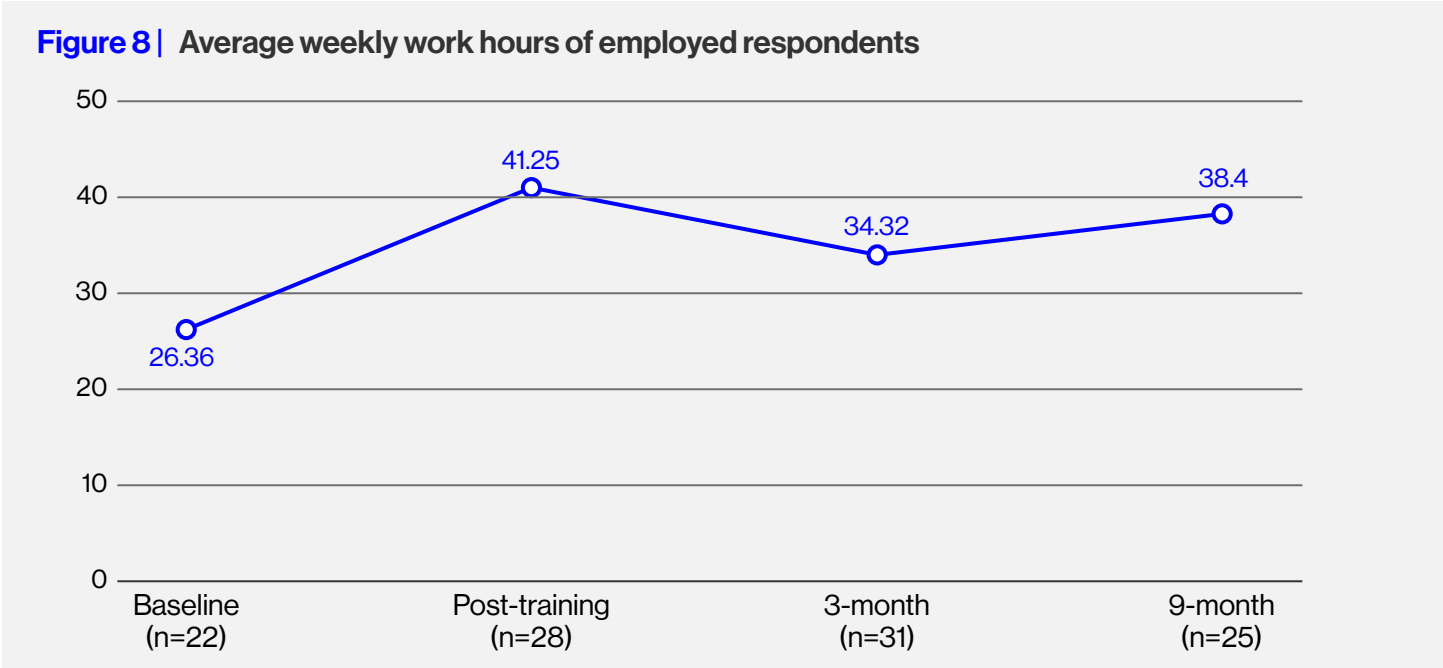
28 Under Nova Scotia law, employees are entitled to two weeks of vacation after each 12-month period of employment. After completing eight years of service, this entitlement increases to three weeks. See: Government of Nova Scotia. (n.d.). *Vacation time and vacation pay*. <https://novascotia.ca/lae/employmentrights/vacationleavepay.asp>

We measured **job satisfaction** by asking participants if they were satisfied with their current job and if they thought they could advance within it. **Figure 7** shows survey responses of ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ to these questions over time. Between program intake and nine months post-training, overall job satisfaction increased from **38%** (8/21) to **80%** (20/25) and satisfaction with career advancement increased from **38%** (8/21) to **60%** (15/25).



Source. Baseline, post-training, and three-month and nine-month follow-up surveys.

As shown in the following figures (8, 9, and 10), between program intake and nine months post-training, respondents reported an increase in average weekly work hours from **26 hours** to **38 hours** (moving from part-time to full-time),²⁹ in average hourly wage from **\$15.23** to **\$24.05**, and in average annual employment earnings,³⁰ which nearly doubled from **\$23,395.96** to **\$46,743.60**.

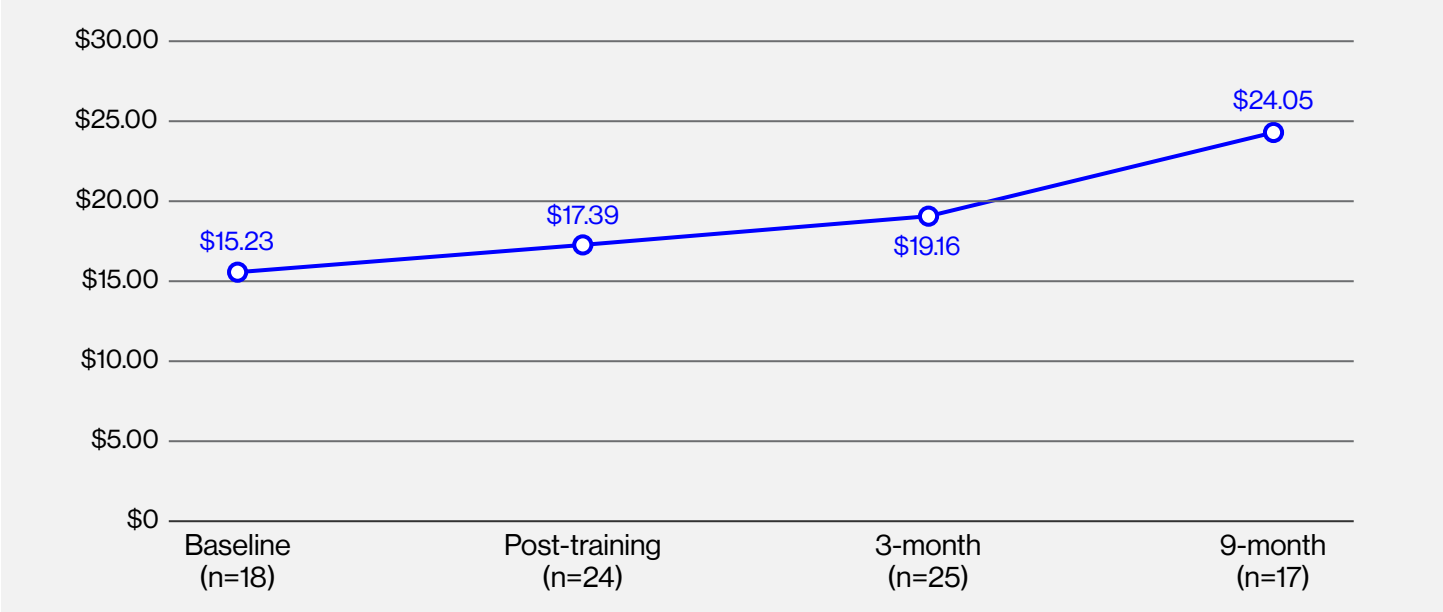


Source. Baseline, post-training, and three-month and nine-month follow-up surveys.

29 As per [Statistics Canada classifications](#), part-time work is considered fewer than 30 hours per week and full-time work is considered 30 hours or more.

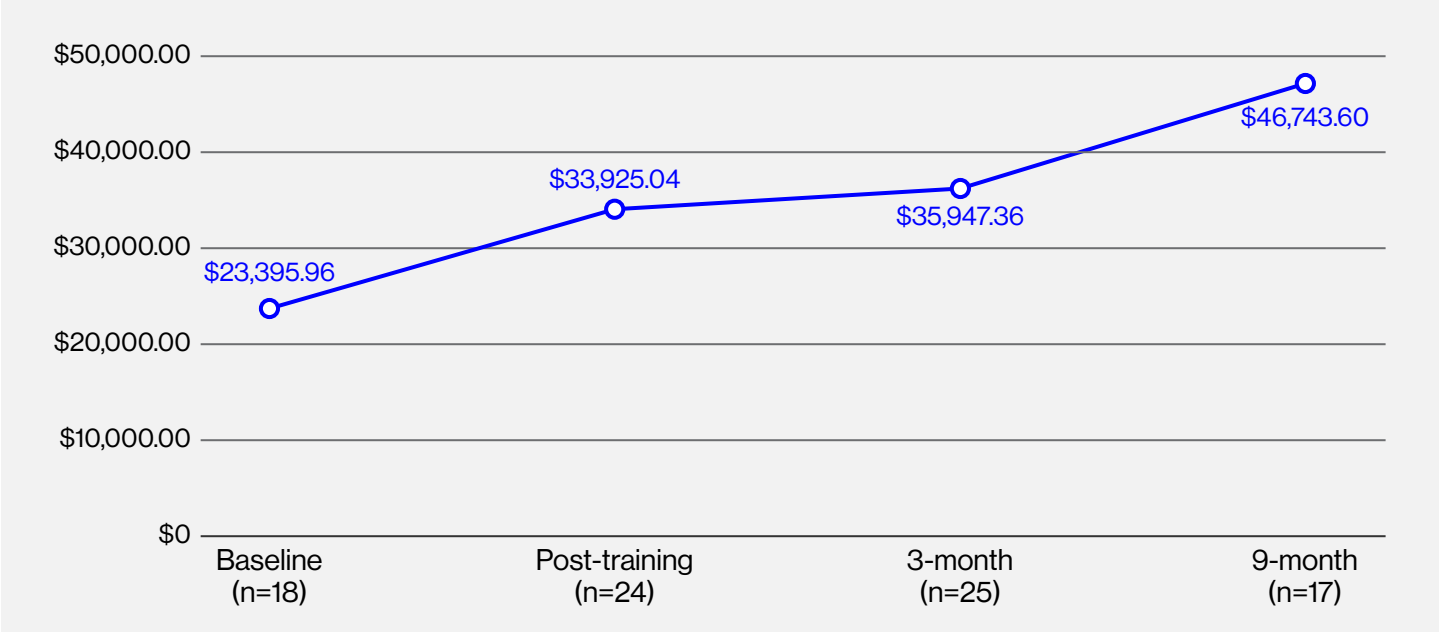
30 Average annual employment earnings were calculated as annualized earnings. Participants’ reported earnings (weekly, biweekly, semimonthly, or annual) are extrapolated to estimate full-year earnings for consistent comparison.

Figure 9 | Average hourly wage of employed respondents



Source. Baseline, post-training, and three-month and nine-month follow-up surveys.

Figure 10 | Average annual employment earnings of employed respondents



Source. Baseline, post-training, and three-month and nine-month follow-up surveys.

4.4. Program implementation

What have we learned about successes in program delivery?

Findings in this section are based on feedback collected through two rounds of interviews with project staff from Pier Labs (n=17) and with delivery staff from six delivery partners.

Overall, AspireAtlantic was implemented successfully. Pier Labs invested considerable time and energy in building new relationships, creating trust, and coordinating a new coalition to deliver a complex, multi-stream model. Interviewees noted the continuous improvement efforts and strong collaborative processes shared by all staff and partners—and stressed that this was an even more significant achievement in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, which had created difficult conditions for skills training interventions. As one interviewee from a partner organization remarked:

*“I hope that [AspireAtlantic] does come back to this area. It was extremely successful, [and] I know it was for a lot of other people. It’s been amazing to watch how it’s ... **literally changed people’s lives.** Obviously, that’s an amazing feeling—when they come in, they’re like, ‘I can’t believe that this has actually happened. I took this 12-week program and I have a career.’ Like, they’re just in complete awe. Like, ‘this has literally changed my life.’” – Partner interview*

Delays with curriculum delivery meant challenges with recruitment and limited post-employment services. As discussed in our *Interim Report*, sector associations were scheduled to finalize training curriculums in late 2021 for an early 2022 launch. However, Pier Labs received the manufacturing curriculum in early 2022 and curriculums for the other two streams in July 2022. Preparatory activities were intended to start in 2021 but faced delays into early 2022, delaying the program’s implementation. Without finalized training content, SPOs could not begin recruitment, create advertising and promotional materials, provide accurate start-time information to participants, or identify suitable candidates. These hiring challenges, recruitment issues, and timing conflicts led to delays of several months, depending on the setting.

After training content was finalized, SPOs were asked to recruit on reduced timelines. Staff reported that two to four months would be a realistic window to recruit enough participants for a stream, but due to these delays, they were expected to do so in two to four weeks. As discussed in section 4.1. **Program uptake**, this delay likely impacted recruitment targets. It was also a contributing factor to why only Cohort 1 received a full 18 months of post-employment services, as discussed in section 2.2.1. **Participant journey and regional adaptations.**

Pier Labs staff and delivery partners reported improved program delivery in Cohort 2. Program staff adopted a learning and innovation approach to translate lessons from the first cohort into design and delivery changes for the second. Below, we list these adaptations as well as the issues they were intended to solve. As discussed above, a lack of comparable sizes of different cohorts means we cannot estimate differences between them or individual-level changes with statistical confidence. Instead, we focus on providing evidence to inform the program’s development and explore how the entire population fared as a group.

1. Stronger networks and communications.

During Cohort 2, Pier Labs staff were able to draw on their experience and familiarity with their roles. Delivery staff were more knowledgeable about the model, requiring less support from Pier Labs. The program had built a positive reputation and strong relationships; networks were more established, and operational communications about the program coordination had improved. In the words of an interviewee from a partner organization:

*“Having the same group of people working on it more than once ... made it a little bit more successful the second time ... I guess ‘growing pains’ is an easy way to say it: **you learn a lot from a pilot. We believed in the program and the opportunity.** The way that it was all set up this time? We knew it would be really good for people.” – Partner interview*

2. Delivery of core components better timed with seasonal hiring.

In Cohort 1, Pier Labs and SPOs planned to launch the ICI construction cohort in February 2022 to align with summer hiring patterns in the industry. However, as described, training curriculums were not delivered by the sector associations until July 2022, which meant the cohort did not begin until August 2022. Participants completed the program as the industry wound down for the winter, impacting work placements and available job opportunities. For Cohort 2, however, the curricula, contracts, and referral pipelines were all in place at the appropriate time, meaning that participants graduated in time for seasonal hiring.

3. Matching local labour supply and demand.

In Cohort 1, each SPO case manager worked with an advancement coach from each of the three sector associations to deliver training in all three target sectors (see **Section 2.3. AspireAtlantic timeline, partners, and training streams**). This approach was designed to: a) give participants the flexibility to choose their sector of enrolment; and b) build a community of practice, where delivery staff could share lessons learned from the experience of delivering training in all three sectors.

However, this design entailed a heavy workload for staff, especially when sectoral training streams overlapped and staff had to provide post-training support for participants in one sectoral stream while simultaneously recruiting for participants for another. It also created misalignments between client needs and the skills required for jobs in the target sectors.

For example, ISANS (the Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia) had difficulties recruiting participants suitable for front-line jobs in manufacturing. Qualified immigrants and refugees often found manufacturing roles misaligned with their skills and career aspirations. Language barriers, cultural differences, and concerns about inclusivity in male-dominated workplaces made integration challenging.

Many felt overqualified or undervalued and prioritized immediate income through other jobs, further distancing them from opportunities in manufacturing. DALA, which served participants in remote areas of Nova Scotia, found it difficult to help them find employment in ICI construction due to fewer local job vacancies and regional transportation constraints.

To address these challenges in Cohort 2, each case manager worked with only one advancement coach to deliver training in one sector: ISANS was matched with NSCSC and the ICI construction stream; DALA was matched with AHBRSC and home construction; and MetroWorks was matched with EMC and manufacturing. As a result, partners reported that delivery staff had much greater capacity, saw better alignments between the needs of participants and employers, and enjoyed smoother communications.

4. Introducing a co-delivery mode.

In each training stream during Cohort 1, career-readiness training and occupational skills training were delivered sequentially by case managers and advancement coaches, respectively. Staff and partners noted this could lead to staff working in silos, preventing collaboration and interaction. In Cohort 2, case managers and advancement coaches co-delivered both career-readiness and occupational skills training, with the following division of tasks:

- Advancement coaches attended career-readiness training sessions led by case managers to bring sectoral perspectives to the classroom and develop rapport with participants.
- Case managers attended occupational skills training sessions led by advancement coaches to support facilitation, identify ‘teachable moments,’ and create targeted workshops to reinforce the soft skills covered in later career-readiness training sessions (such as teamwork and conflict resolution). Case managers also joined employer site visits as part of occupational skills training to help participants make connections with employers.

Partners reported improved collaboration between these two roles, especially with the aligned training streams and resulting lighter workloads. As one respondent from a partner organization commented:

*“I definitely have a **stronger relationship** with this group than the last group, for sure, because **I was there more often, and I was involved in their process a lot more this time.**” – Partner interview*

5. Splitting CRT into early and later-stage phases.

In Cohort 1, training to improve job search skills occurred during the first weeks of the program as part of career-readiness training. In Cohort 2, career-readiness training was split into two phases, with one at the start of the training and the next at the end. This gave participants the opportunity to refresh their skills and update their application materials with newly gained experiences and with specific employers in mind. Staff and partners noted that participants found the targeted resume and interview support immediately before their job search very helpful.

6. Involving advancement coaches in recruitment.

In Cohort 1, only case managers were responsible for participant recruitment. According to staff and partners, case managers had limited knowledge of sector-specific employer needs and faced pressure to fill seats in AspireAtlantic. Some staff inadvertently referred individuals who were not well-suited for the program.

In Cohort 2, staff better understood the intensive screening required and the need to adhere to the eligibility requirements. Moreover, advancement coaches actively participated in the recruitment and screening of applicants and helped make selection decisions based on their sectoral expertise. As a result, both staff and partners reported that Cohort 2 recruitment was more effective in terms of participant suitability. According to one interviewee from Pier Labs:

*"[Recruitment] happened **more seamlessly** ... because there was **more awareness in the ecosystem**. And employers, jobseekers, even our partners ... **knew how to talk about the program**. They knew who the folks were." – Staff interview*

7. Additional training content.

Staff highlighted three modifications that were made to the Cohort 2 training content to improve employment outcomes:

- **Certified one-day safety training**, including fall protection and scaffolding training. This training is mandatory for jobs in ICI home construction but was unavailable during Cohort 1 due to logistical delays.
- **More on-site visits to employers** as part of the occupational skills training in home construction to provide participants with additional opportunities to gain industry contacts.
- **Tailored content and accommodation for newcomers**, including closed captioning available to those with limited English skills and adaptation supports during the career-readiness training to help them acclimatize to the Canadian workplace.

What did staff and partners identify as areas for improvement?

When looking toward the future, interviewees identified the following opportunities for improvement of program delivery:

- **Improved participant affordability**. Participants received \$700 per month (up to \$2,000, total) to cover basic living and transportation expenses during AspireAtlantic, but this living allowance did not match the costs of living Nova Scotia (designated between \$22.85 and \$26.50/hour in 2023 or \$3,710 to \$3,710/month).³¹ According to staff and partners, providing a larger allowance³² would help participants focus on

31 Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. (2023). *Living wages in Nova Scotia 2023 update*. <https://policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/living-wages-nova-scotia-2023-update>

32 Staff and partners did not recommend a specific value but did discuss the importance of a living wage (i.e., a range from \$24 to \$28.30 in Nova Scotia as of 2024). Values would be impacted based on area, family dynamic, ability to work part time, in evenings, ability to accept other social assistance (e.g., EI).

the training. It would motivate unemployed and under-employed participants to quit their ‘survival jobs’ and focus solely on the program.

- **Greater employer engagement.** As AspireAtlantic’s reputation improved, employers—especially SMEs with limited HR resources—started reaching out to the program to find job candidates and fill positions. Stakeholders believed getting employers more involved could lead to better results. For example, they suggested adding a ‘hiring day’ to the program, where employers could meet directly with participants.
 - **Longer post-employment support.** The WorkAdvance model placed a strong emphasis on participants’ long-term outcomes—including around job retention and career advancement—which were to be achieved through post-employment supports over an ideal period of 18 to 24 months. However, as mentioned above, several factors, including delays to the program launch, meant that many participants were offered service for a shorter period than the recommended 18 months. We take this up in section 5.
- Discussion and conclusions.**

4.5. Program costs

What was the total and per participant costs to deliver the program?

Cost analysis rationale

Understanding the total cost of delivering AspireAtlantic—and how that cost was divided between various activities—is an important input to understanding cost effectiveness and to support future cost-benefit analysis. Our framework captures the costs of managing and delivering the program and includes three main features:

- **Aligned.** We use the same data Pier Labs used for their own costing estimates, ensuring a common frame of reference.
- **Prospective.** We include projections for the cost of future delivery under the assumption that cohorts are fully enrolled.
- **Categorized.** We break costs into different activity types to provide granular insight into which activities drove program costs.

Cost analysis framework

To create our cost estimates, we:

1. **Received budget data from Pier Labs**, including different line items and their categorization of costs, to establish a common frame of reference for total project costs.
2. **Consulted with Pier Labs regarding the nature of activities** funded by each line item to establish a practical categorization system.

3. Consulted with Pier Labs to identify the fixed and variable components of each cost category. This allowed us to estimate the total cost per client in the actual delivery and the cost per client in a potential delivery, in which all delivery resources were fully utilized (since delivery resources in this pilot may not have been fully utilized due to recruitment challenges).

We separated costs into the following categories.

- **Start-up:** activities required to deliver the program for the first time at a new site. These activities, and their associated costs, reflect the effort required to adapt the program to a new context and bring frontline staff up to speed.
- **Delivery:** activities that enable the core function of the program, including coaching, training delivery, case management, and related administration. Within delivery, we further differentiate between staff costs, which are the salaries of delivery staff directly hired through the project, and direct costs, which represent direct expenditures, such as training subcontracting and the participant living allowance.
- **Continuous Improvement:** activities related to ongoing program evaluation and improvement. Pier Labs staff who consulted on this categorization scheme emphasized that taking a “developmental evaluation approach was critical,” and that “ongoing assessment [will be needed] to ensure the efficacy of the model.”

This categorization helps provide a better estimate of what it may cost to replicate the model in a new context. As an innovation project, AspireAtlantic accrued costs related to design that would not be relevant in a future replication given that the initial model design has already been established.

Cost analysis results

Table 10 shows the total costs of the program, the costs per participant (dividing by the 97 participants reached), and the costs per seat (estimated costs if the program had reached its full target of 130 participants).

Table 10 | Total costs, costs per participant, and costs per seat

Cost category	Total	Startup	Delivery			Continuous improvement
			Total	Staff	Direct	
Grand total	\$2,790,058	\$385,620	\$1,912,356	\$1,007,767	\$904,589	\$492,082
Per participant (actual)	\$28,763	\$3,975	\$19,715	\$10,389	\$9,326	\$5,073
Per seat (capacity)	\$22,000	\$2,966	\$15,218	\$7,752	\$7,466	\$3,816

The program cost a total of **\$2,790,058**, with approximately two-thirds representing delivery costs (**\$1,912,356**) and the remainder split between startup (**\$385,620**) and continuous improvement (**\$492,082**) costs.

This indicates that the program cost **\$28,763** on a **per-participant** basis. Of this cost, **\$3,975** was associated with startup, **\$19,715** was required for delivery of training, and **\$5,073** was associated with research and continuous improvement activities.

These costs reflect the actual cost per participant. However, while AspireAtlantic faced recruitment challenges that led to lower enrolment than planned, it still required investment in some fixed costs (such as staff) for a higher number of participants. To inform future iterations of the model, we also consider the cost **per seat** of the model, or what it would have cost per individual if the target 130 participants had been recruited instead of the 97 engaged.

On a per-seat basis, program costs were **24%** lower than per participant, or **\$22,000**. This reduction holds across cost categories: on a per-seat basis, startup costs were **\$2,966**, delivery costs were **\$15,218**, and continuous improvement costs were **\$3,816**. The ratio of per-seat delivery costs to per-participant delivery costs was slightly higher than other categories, since delivery costs include the participant living allowance, which is a variable cost and therefore scales directly with the number of participants.

As a point of comparison, WorkAdvance cost between **\$6,400** and **\$8,300** USD per participant in 2018 dollars. For three of the four providers, the range was quite narrow: **\$6,400** to **\$6,800**.³³ When converted to 2024 dollars, these costs equate to between **\$8,023** and **\$10,405** USD per participant, or **\$11,170** and **\$14,486** CAD.

This comparison indicates that AspireAtlantic cost more to deliver than WorkAdvance. However, the direct delivery costs were relatively close, indicating that cost levels could be more equal in future iterations with a focus on scaling the model for effective integration within the employment ecosystem. Generally, these figures illustrate the comparability between AspireAtlantic and WorkAdvance, which represents a significant achievement considering AspireAtlantic was delivered for the first time and during a period of economic turbulence (including the pandemic).

33 Schaberg, K., & Greenberg, D. (2020). *Long-term effects of a sectoral advancement strategy: Costs, benefits, and impacts from the WorkAdvance demonstration*. MDRC. https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/WorkAdvance_5-Year_Report-Final.pdf

5. Discussion and conclusions

5.1. Summary of findings

From February 2022 to June 2023, AspireAtlantic was piloted to two cohorts and reached **97 total participants**. The pilot achieved **67%** of its target—a lower-than-expected outcome that may be due to several factors:

- a) Delays in curriculum delivery by sector organizations, combined with tight recruitment timelines for service provider organizations (SPOs), left less time for marketing, outreach, and word-of-mouth referrals.
- b) Increased funding for workforce development programs in response to pandemic-related labour market disruptions gave participants more program options.
- c) Declining provincial unemployment rates led to lower demand for employment training programs.
- d) Time requirements and general complexities of managing a new program that asked ecosystem partners to co-ideate from day one (discussed further in section **5.2. Wider learnings**).

As discussed in our data limitations section, the small sample size resulting from recruitment challenges and survey attrition did not allow for longitudinal, cohort-, or sector-based comparisons. However, we can report on several notable results, summarized below:

- AspireAtlantic reached a target population of **unemployed** and/or **low-wage workers, women, newcomers, and racialized individuals**, surpassing their current representation in the Nova Scotia construction and manufacturing sectors.
- Nearly all participants completed the program (**91%**), with **96%** of respondents satisfied overall and **98%** likely to recommend it. Satisfaction with specific components ranged from **79%** to **96%**. Ninety-four percent thought it was useful overall.
 - The number of employed respondents who thought the program was useful three months after training increased by **20 percentage points**. It is uncommon within the **Scaling Up Skills Development Portfolio** to see such large post-program increases in satisfaction. Typically, we have seen participant satisfaction rates in our scaling projects stay relatively consistent (see our [Final Report for Lift/Futur en tête](#)) or decrease over time (see our [Final Report for EDGE UP 2.0](#)).
- Employment rates increased from **33%** at program intake to **68%** nine months post-training. The number of respondents working in the target sectors rose from **9%** to **62%**, with significant boosts reported in satisfaction and job quality (including paid time off, pensions, and benefits). The average number of work hours per week and annual employment earnings also increased from program intake to the follow-up period, from **26 to 38 hours** and from **\$23,000 to \$47,000**.³⁴

34 AspireAtlantic initially aimed to assess participant advancement outcomes (i.e., job attainment, enhanced confidence in pursuing opportunities, career advancement via staff support, ability to navigate challenges and stay focused, increased satisfaction and decreased job security concerns, moving from job seeking to prioritizing advancement and professional development, and better job fit) as a part of the post-employment component. Due to timeline constraints, Pier Labs was unable to collect sufficient data to conclude that AspireAtlantic improved advancement outcomes.

- Staff and partners reported successful implementation of most program components through strong inter-organizational collaborations and efforts at continuous improvement. This was especially the case for Cohort 2, as the AspireAtlantic model had matured, and several adaptations were made to address challenges encountered in Cohort 1—including **reducing the number of training streams, introducing a co-delivery mode, splitting CRT into early and later-stage phases, involving advancement coaches in recruitment, and providing additional training content.**
- Staff and partners also identified additional areas for improvement to inform future program deliveries, suggesting **greater monetary incentives for participants, greater engagement with employers,** and time built in for **longer post-employment supports.**
- The program cost a total of **\$2,790,058 CAD**. On a per-participant basis, the program cost **\$28,763**, and on a per-seat basis, costs were **24%** lower than per participant at **\$22,000**. While our comparison indicates that AspireAtlantic cost more to deliver than WorkAdvance, direct delivery costs were relatively close, indicating that cost levels could be more equal in future iterations with a focus on scaling the model for effective integration within the employment ecosystem.
 - A per-participant cost of **\$28,763** (and per-seat cost of **\$22,000**) indicates a promising return on investment considering that the average annual employment earnings of employed participants increased by **\$23,347.64**.

5.2. Wider learnings

Overall, AspireAtlantic provided three key lessons for the design and delivery of SBMs aiming to meet the needs of both job seekers and employers:

1. Continuous learning and timely adaptations can enhance the development of an SBM.

Pier Labs is a social innovation lab that provides research and consulting services. With AspireAtlantic, Pier Labs assumed the role of workforce intermediary for the first time, assembling a set of organizations to design and deliver a sector-based training program. In doing so, Pier Labs adapted AspireAtlantic from WorkAdvance from the ground up, establishing and strengthening relationships with employers, service providers, and sector associations along the way. Implementation responsibilities were divided between SPOs and sector associations, adding another layer of complexity and novelty to the program.

Research indicates that implementing SBMs can be so complex that even experienced, high-capacity service providers with strong industry relationships take time to bring their programs to full delivery maturity.³⁵ Given the required expertise, it can take years for an SBM to run smoothly. Nevertheless, Pier Labs and partners successfully delivered two cohorts over two years, learning throughout to make improvements from one to the next. Their success stemmed from rapid learning and adaptation—their ability to continuously refine the model and implement new processes collaboratively.

35 Hendra, R., Greenberg, D. H., Hamilton, G., Oppenheim, A., Pennington, A., Schaberg, K., Tessler, B. L. (2016). *Encouraging evidence on a sector-focused advancement strategy: Two-year impacts from the WorkAdvance demonstration*. MRDC. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2854309

The program's strength lay in its ability to adapt to changing circumstances, though this did impact certain outcomes. For instance, the short FSC funding window, the COVID-19 pandemic, and delays in developing and delivering the curriculum led to limitations in post-program coaching services available. While these adjustments were necessary given the context, they may have reduced the program's impact—post-program support was truncated or eliminated for some cohorts. Re-introducing this component would be advised, as evidence from other SBM studies highlights the value of post-program supports in improving career transition outcomes.³⁶

2. Strategies are needed to address SBM sensitivity to shifting economic conditions.

An SBM is inherently organized to serve a specific sector. When that sector is significantly disrupted, it affects the overall model. COVID-19 presented an additional challenge in that it affected the entire economic and social systems in which these sectors operated. AspireAtlantic was primarily designed for a provincial economy with relatively high unemployment rates—and a relatively large number of people who were both capable and interested in pursuing careers in construction and manufacturing—along with acute skills shortages in these sectors. COVID-19 disrupted the supply, demand, and means of connecting the two forces for a prolonged period of time.

Rather than stop, however, AspireAtlantic shifted its model to respond to the conditions and identify unmet needs wherein its network of partners could operate. This was possible because AspireAtlantic had a clear value proposition focused on participant needs (rather than on delivery of a curriculum) supported by data. This evidence-based model built in rapid feedback gathering and was further supported by a collaborative structure that allowed for learning to be quickly translated. Having a curriculum and model that was inherently set up to be flexible in its content and delivery at the outset was key. As Pier Labs noted in their Technical Report, “The success of AspireAtlantic relied on providing supports and resources in ways that were flexible and responsive to participant and employer needs.”³⁷

Together, these allowed Pier Labs and its partners to make rapid shifts to the curriculum and delivery approach to respond to circumstances and client needs together. Maintaining active, engaged partnerships and a curriculum that is sensitive and open to changes in delivery, content structure, and focus is critical to building resiliency to disruptions. This includes maintaining an ongoing monitoring and evaluation strategy that provides the necessary evidence to support the making of these decisions.

3. To ensure applicants are screened for suitability, service providers require comprehensive training and technical support.

As a dual-client model, AspireAtlantic was designed to meet the needs of participants and employers in parallel. Pier Labs had to ensure that program participants could complete the program and were

36 Cattell, L., Stein, J., & Rotz, D. (2021). *Evidence snapshot: Employment coaching*. OPRE Report #2021-190. Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/evidence-snapshot-employment-coaching>

37 Pier Labs. (2024, March). *AspireAtlantic technical report: Evaluation findings*. <https://www.davispier.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/AspireAtlantic-Technical-Report-F.pdf>

motivated to work in the target sectors, which required intensive screening. As noted in the Implementing the WorkAdvance Model policy brief, “sectoral programs implement rigorous, transparent screening procedures and set their admission standards higher than traditional workforce programs do. Rigorous screening also contributes to high training course completion rates.”³⁸ Abiding by best practices, AspireAtlantic SPOs were tasked with screening based on objective criteria, like literacy test scores, and more subjective ones, like assessments of participant attitudes and interests.

However, in the first cohort, some service providers faced challenges in meeting recruitment targets while implementing eligibility criteria due to time-based limitations around training and technical support for delivery staff. Other providers found it difficult to reject applicants out of a desire to help clients in difficult situations. As a result, some participants were accepted who were not a good fit for the program. For example, despite screening questions designed to assess their interest in working in the target sector, some participants enrolled for other reasons—such as to gain soft skills training, receive the stipend or living allowance, or because they misunderstood the program’s purpose. In Cohort 2, service providers had a far better understanding of the need for rigorous screening. This resulted in closer alignment between participants’ needs, goals, and motivations and the job openings available from local employers in the target industries. Ultimately, service providers need sufficient training and technical assistance to buy into evidence-based sectoral programs and deliver them with a high level of fidelity.

Pier Labs’ implementation of an SBM in Nova Scotia demonstrates an innovative approach to addressing persistent challenges of high unemployment rates and skills gaps in the province. As demonstrated throughout AspireAtlantic’s two years of delivery, SBMs often serve job seekers with diverse backgrounds and significant barriers to employment. These challenges range from legal issues to mental health concerns, transportation constraints to housing instability to language and cultural needs, especially for newcomers.

The inclusion of AspireAtlantic in the [Scaling Up Skills Development Portfolio](#) had given us an opportunity to learn from its successes and challenges. These lessons will be crucial in de-risking future interventions, allowing for the revision and replication of effective strategies in new contexts. By providing evidence on how to implement and adapt SBMs effectively, AspireAtlantic offers insights that will be instrumental in shaping more effective, inclusive, and scalable workforce development initiatives across Canada.

38 Kazis, R., & Molina, F. (2016). *Implementing the WorkAdvance model: Lessons for practitioners*. MDRC. https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/WorkAdvance_2016_PolicyBrief.pdf

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

