

Retail Entrepreneurship Acceleration Program + iLaunchHERproduct Program Evaluation Report



The Diversity Institute conducts and coordinates multi-disciplinary, multi-stakeholder research to address the needs of diverse Canadians, the changing nature of skills and competencies, and the policies, processes and tools that advance economic inclusion and success. Our action-oriented, evidence-based approach is advancing knowledge of the complex barriers faced by under-represented groups, leading practices to effect change, and producing concrete results. The Diversity Institute is a research lead for the Future Skills Centre.



The Future Skills Centre (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, and The Conference Board of Canada, and is funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.



Founded in 2018, de Sedulous Women Leaders is a social enterprise that supports women's equality in business and economic advancement for the immigrant, Black, and women of colour community in business. By helping business-challenged entrepreneurs, start-ups, and medium enterprises to grow and scalable their ventures, de Sedulous Women Leaders has developed retail-specific and business-growth-appropriate support programs to meet its target constituents' needs. All their programs flow through de Sedulous Women Retail Incubator and Entrepreneurship School (SERIES); the Retail entrepreneurship Acceleration Program (REAP) with iLaunchHERproduct is the first of its kind retail-focus acceleration, vendor-buyer connect in Canada. De Sedulous Women Leaders is a safe space where immigrant women (black women, women of colour, BIPOC) are empowered to embrace their

business journey. Focusing on their unique business model, they develop, explore and challenge their mindset for barrier-breaking success, and find meaningful business resources to help grow, scale and expand their business venture. The organization's mission in the entrepreneurial ecosystem is to amplify the voices of all women in business and tell their stories from a unique point of view – their products. Their goal is to ensure “#NoWomanShouldBeLeftBehind,” a slogan behind the Social Development Goal (SDG) #5, Gender Equality, that the organization strives to fulfill through this program.



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Executive Summary

Context

Women entrepreneurs are vital to Canada's economy, with women majority owners accounting for nearly 20% of private sector businesses. They also represent almost 40% of Canada's self-employed population, with self-employment often serving as a critical pathway to business ownership. Within this broader group, Black, racialized, and immigrant women are playing an important role in driving economic growth and innovation. However, diverse women entrepreneurs continue to face significant barriers in scaling their businesses and accessing retail markets. Systemic biases limit their ability to secure external funding, forcing many to rely on personal savings. Fragmented support systems, complex compliance requirements, and limited access to professional networks further hinder their ability to connect with buyers and navigate the retail landscape. Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions that provide access to retailers, mentorship, and specialized training in areas such as branding, pricing, and supply chain management. These supports are essential for helping diverse women entrepreneurs overcome systemic barriers, expand their market reach, and achieve long-term success.

This report presents an evaluation of the Retail Entrepreneurship Acceleration Program (REAP) + iLaunchHER product program, which is designed to equip Black, racialized, and immigrant women with the knowledge, tools, resources, and connections to strengthen their business competencies and gain access to large retail chains. Central to this evaluation is the Inclusive Entrepreneurship Competency Framework, an evidence-based tool, developed by the Diversity Institute (DI) that underpins the assessment of the program's effectiveness. The framework identifies and evaluates competencies critical for business development across various stages while integrating considerations for equity-deserving groups and diverse industry needs. By applying this framework, the evaluation explores how the program fostered the development of critical competencies among participants.

The evaluation is guided and informed by the following questions about program delivery and outcomes:

Program delivery

1. To what extent has the program effectively recruited and engaged Black, racialized, and immigrant women entrepreneurs?
2. To what extent has the program supported entrepreneurs with the implementation of the provided online training?
3. What challenges or barriers do Black, racialized, and immigrant entrepreneurs face in fully engaging with and applying the content from the online training?

Program outcomes

4. How did the program impact the competencies needed for entrepreneurial success?
5. To what extent were participants satisfied with the program, and how effectively did it contribute to tangible outcomes in retail readiness and business expansion?

Program Overview

Launched in 2021, the REAP+iLaunchHERproduct program was designed to fill the gap in supports for Black, racialized, and immigrant women entrepreneurs by equipping them with the skills, knowledge, and networks needed to scale their businesses and enter retail markets. Led by de Sedulous Women Leaders (dSWL), the program offered a structured pathway to 285 diverse women entrepreneurs to date. Participants were drawn from across Canada, with the largest shares based in Ontario (48.8%) and Alberta (28.1%).

The program is delivered in two phases. Phase 1, REAP, provides foundational training through masterclasses on product positioning, pricing, intellectual property, branding, logistics, and distribution. Participants then move to Phase 2, iLaunchHERproduct, where they refine their retail readiness and pitch their products to buyers through the Buyer + Vendor Connect event. With partnerships across business, retail, and finance sectors, the program aims to improve market access for diverse women entrepreneurs and foster a more inclusive Canadian retail ecosystem.

Evaluation Methods

This report uses both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to evaluate program delivery and outcomes across the three program cycles spanning 2021 to 2024, drawing on data from intake and post-program surveys, focus groups with participants, and interviews with program staff and employer partners. The evaluation is guided by the Inclusive Entrepreneurship Competency Framework, which is used to assess participants' development of critical competencies at various stages of their business journeys.

The following provides a breakdown of sample sizes by evaluation instrument:

- **Intake survey:** 308 diverse women entrepreneurs registered for the program and completed the intake survey.
- **Post-program survey:** 92 out of 285 participants who completed the program responded to the post-program survey (32% response rate).
- **Focus Groups:** Three focus group discussions were held, comprising 26 participants in total.
- **Staff interviews:** Two staff members from dSWL engaged in semi-structured interviews.
- **Partner interviews:** Seven employer partners participated in semi-structured interviews.

Findings

Recruitment and engagement

The REAP+iLaunchHERproduct program engaged Black, racialized, and immigrant women entrepreneurs, with higher representation from Ontario and Alberta. Representation from French-speaking regions was notably lower due to the program being delivered in English. A total of 308 participants registered, and 285 completed the program, resulting in a 92.5% completion rate. Outreach was conducted through partnerships with community organizations and social media campaigns. High engagement and retention rates indicate that the program was relevant to the experiences of diverse women entrepreneurs. Demographics and business characteristics of participants that completed the program are as follows:

- 92.6% of participants identified as Black women (compared to 93.2% of registrants), 84.9% as women of colour (compared to 85.4%), and 77.5% as immigrant women (compared to 76.3%).
- Nigeria was the most common country of birth (35.8%), followed by Canada (22.8%) and Jamaica (4.6%).
- The majority of participants were based in Ontario (48.8%) and Alberta (28.1%), followed by Nova Scotia (6.3%), Quebec (6.0%), British Columbia (5.6%), Saskatchewan, with New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Manitoba each comprising 1.1%.
- 54.7% of participants identified their businesses as incorporated.
- 58.9% of participants reported operating their businesses for 1 to 4 years, while 28.1% had been in business for less than one year.
- 61.8% of participants reported revenues of less than \$25,000.
- The most common product categories among participants were Beauty and Skincare (27.7%), Food and Beverages (27.4%), and Clothing, Fashion, and Accessories (16.1%).
- 68.5% reported manufacturing their products in Canada. Smaller proportions identified other bases, including China (10.7%) and Nigeria (7.8%).
- 26.7% of participants reported having their products stocked in retail stores across Canada, with a significant majority (73.3%) reporting not having this market presence.
- 13.7% of participants indicated that they sell their products to companies, resellers, or wholesalers within Canada, whose products are subsequently sold or used outside the country.

Program support

The online training modules received high ratings, with participants finding them relevant (4.78 mean score), compelling and useful (4.76), easy to understand (4.76), easy to access (4.71), and

easy to implement (4.74). The following list summarizes key themes from focus group discussions on how the program supported participants in engaging in the training.

- **Confidence and clarity on steps forward:** Participants shared that the program enhanced their confidence and sense of self-efficacy by providing the tools, knowledge, and support needed to navigate the entrepreneurial landscape. Many noted that, through their participation, they developed a clearer understanding of the tangible actions required to move forward, helping them feel less overwhelmed by the broader challenges of entrepreneurship.
- **Buyer access and support:** Participants identified access to big-box retailers as one of the most compelling aspects of the program. The Buyer + Vendor Connect event stood out as a key highlight, offering participants meaningful feedback and insights into the retail landscape.
- **Program staff support:** Participants reported that program staff provided tailored support, facilitated connections with buyers, and fostered peer relationships. Resources such as pre-session guides and one-on-one sessions were noted as helpful in addressing individual needs.
- **Peer support and sense of community:** Participants reported that the program fostered a supportive community of diverse women entrepreneurs. Some suggested that the program could be enhanced by creating more structured spaces for collaboration and resource sharing.
- **Increased understanding of Canadian business landscape:** Focus group discussions indicate that the program enhanced participant knowledge of key aspects of doing business in Canada, which was reported as valuable by immigrant entrepreneurs who were less familiar with local business requirements. Moreover, they appreciated the opportunity to engage directly with industry experts and partners, which provided them with practical insights into navigating the Canadian retail environment.

Challenges and barriers

Focus group discussions and interviews with both partners and staff highlighted challenges and barriers that could be addressed in future iterations:

- **Balancing engagement and accessibility:** Challenges related to scheduling were raised, particularly across time zones and in balancing other responsibilities. While the decision not to release session recordings was intended to encourage real-time engagement, some participants found this approach limiting.
- **Regional Disparities and Language Barriers:** The lack of French-language materials and personnel hindered broader engagement and posed challenges for French-speaking entrepreneurs. Participation was not evenly distributed, with a significant majority of participants being from Ontario and Alberta.

- **Need for more tailored support:** Participants and employer partners noted the importance of aligning program content with the diverse readiness levels of entrepreneurs. Some participants expressed that some sessions assumed greater financial capacity or business maturity. Employer partners highlighted the value of using pre-program assessments to better tailor content in future iterations. Suggestions also included improving coordination among partners to reduce redundancy and enhance the training experience.
- **Lack of diverse market representation:** Participants reported that the program's focus on big-box retailers did not always align with their business needs and expressed interest in engaging a broader range of buyers across industries.
- **Disconnect between entrepreneurs and buyers:** Difficulties in maintaining buyer engagement after initial introductions were noted, with some expressing a need for structured follow-up support. Employer partners also acknowledged the long timelines and complexity involved in securing large-scale retail contracts, highlighting the importance of setting realistic expectations.

Competencies for entrepreneurial success

The analysis centers on the launch, growth, and sustainability phases, as no respondents indicated involvement in the Ideation phase, and only a minimal number participated in the validation phase. In each phase participants were asked to rate each competency on a scale of one to five.

Launch

For entrepreneurs in the launch phase (12% of respondents), the results indicate that the program supported their ability to transform validated business ideas into operational businesses.

- **Legal literacy:** Participants reported increased knowledge and capacity in relevant competencies, including understanding regulations and taxation (4.36), intellectual property rules and capacity to apply them (4.80), as well as knowledge of the rules and regulations pertaining to incorporating a business (4.60).
- **Financial literacy:** Results indicate increased understanding of the documentation required to access credit from financial institutions or granting bodies (4.50), introductory budgeting principles (4.60), and the borrowing and repayment loan process (4.33). Familiarity with digital financial tools to support planning received a lower score (3.50), indicating a potential area for further skill development.
- **Leadership and management:** Though not directly targeted, the results indicate that participants increased their ability to coach and mentor others (4.80), plan and organize resources (4.70), cope with challenges (4.60), and promote organizational mission and goals (4.20).

- **Interaction with others:** While higher scores for team building and teamwork (4.40), valuing diversity (4.30), and influencing others (4.00) indicate that the program generally enhanced these competencies, lower mean scores were observed for customer relationship management (3.90), tact (3.80), and human resource management (3.30).

Growth

The results for those in the growth phase (72.8% of respondents) indicate that the program was effective in improving competencies related to expanding businesses, increasing market share, and securing retail opportunities.

- **Grow revenue:** Participants reported increased competencies in key sales and marketing activities, including scaling sales organization (4.43), managing customer success (4.40), brand-building (4.37), managing a sales lead pipeline (4.32), generating leads (4.30), though lower scores were observed for building a conversation website (3.92), generating online leads (3.87), suggesting that the program could be enhanced by integrating digital solutions in future iterations. Public procurement opportunities (3.42) was the lowest rated competency in this component.
- **Grow team:** The results indicate moderate development in cultivating team culture and norms (3.72) as well as managing partnerships with external stakeholders (3.75). Scores were lower in competencies related to talent, specifically in hiring (3.15) and managing (3.28), suggesting opportunities for enhanced support in human resources. Managing advisory boards (3.49) also received a lower mean score.
- **Raise funds:** Competencies related to raising funds received comparatively lower scores, including building a funding strategy (3.92) and securing grant financing (3.74). These results coincide with the findings from focus group discussions, where participants noted that fundraising was a common challenge and expressed a need for more targeted guidance and resources.
- **Technology implementation:** Participants reported moderate competency in understanding how digital technologies can support business processes and improve efficiency (3.82).

Sustainability

For the 14.1% of survey respondents in the sustainability phase, the evaluation focused on strategic management, innovation and innovative thinking, as well as corporate social responsibility.

- **Strategic management:** High scores were observed for all three competencies, namely, partnership-building (4.69) risk assessment (4.54), and strategic vision (4.54).
- **Innovation and innovative thinking:** Results indicate increased competencies for both research and development (4.31) and innovation (4.33), defined as generating, identifying, and implementing new ideas, processes, products, or services that create value for the business and its stakeholder.

- **Corporate social responsibility:** High scores were observed for applying sustainability practices (4.33) and ethical and sustainable business thinking (4.42), though Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) integration (4.08), while still receiving a high score, scored lower. Cybersecurity (3.92) received the lowest score in this area.

Industry and individual competencies

The program appears to have been effective in building industry-specific competencies, with participants reporting relatively high levels of knowledge in areas such as automation, merchandising and product selection, e-commerce, and data management and analytics. In contrast, lower scores for individual-level skills such as language and cross-cultural competence suggest that additional support may be needed in these areas, particularly given the high representation of immigrant entrepreneurs in the REAP+iLaunchHERproduct program.

Program satisfaction and short-term outcomes

Participants reported high satisfaction with the program, rating their overall satisfaction at 4.81 out of 5. The survey results suggest that the program was effective in helping participants secure a spot in a big-box store (4.28 mean score), supporting the growth of their business (4.21), and increasing their entrepreneurial knowledge (4.77). A majority of participants reported significant progress in retail access (60% reported being able to connect to big box buyers during or after the program where they reported not being able to do so before), with 56% securing access to big-box stores during or after the program.

Conclusion and recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are suggested for future iterations of the program, focusing on program design and delivery as well as competencies.

Program design and delivery

- Strengthening post-program support, such as structured check-ins with buyers and mentorship on sustaining relationships, could help entrepreneurs convert initial retail connections into long-term partnerships.
- Increasing partnerships with specialty stores, independent retailers, and niche market buyers would create more opportunities for diverse business types beyond big-box retailers.
- Implementing pre-program assessments to segment participants based on business stage (e.g., early-stage vs. retail-ready) could optimize learning. Similarly, providing industry-specific training and mentorship would ensure entrepreneurs receive guidance tailored to their sector.

- Expanding access to French-speaking entrepreneurs and participants from underrepresented regions through bilingual resources and regional cohorts would increase inclusivity.

Competencies to strengthen in future programming

- Training in managing and sustaining partnerships (e.g., contract negotiations, long-term buyer engagement, etc.) could help participants build enduring relationships with retailers.
- Offer dedicated resources and training focused on adopting versatile digital tools that are applicable across various industries. (e.g., hands-on workshops on accounting software, customer relationship management systems, supply chain tracking, etc.).
- Expanding training in investment pitching, grant writing, and alternative funding sources, coupled with personalized one-on-one financial coaching, would offer vital support to entrepreneurs, as access to capital continues to pose a significant challenge, especially for early-stage businesses.
- While not an immediate priority, as businesses grow, internal team building becomes crucial. An opt-in HR module focused on workforce development, leadership, and talent retention could help participants prepare for this transition.

Context

Women Entrepreneurship in Canada

Small and medium-sized enterprises are the foundation of the Canadian economy, accounting for nearly 90% of private sector employment.¹ Women are majority owners of nearly 20% of private sector businesses in Canada, contributing approximately \$90.6 billion in revenues and nearly one million jobs.^{2, 3, 4} Furthermore, women represent almost 40% of self-employed individuals in Canada, with self-employment serving as a strategic entry point for majority business ownership for women entrepreneurs.⁵

Immigrants play a vital role in the Canadian economy, often pursuing entrepreneurship due to both “push” and “pull” factors. “Push” factors include challenges such as exclusion from traditional job markets, which can compel immigrants toward self-employment. Conversely, “pull” factors involve recognizing new business opportunities and the desire for independence, motivating immigrants to establish their own enterprises.⁶ Immigrant women represent an important and growing segment of entrepreneurs in Canada, with some ethnic and racialized groups demonstrating a higher propensity for entrepreneurship than others. Among racialized groups, Black-owned SMEs have the highest proportion of majority women ownership, with 38.8% of Black entrepreneurs being women.⁷

Diverse women entrepreneurs are an important part of Canada’s economy and have made considerable strides over the past decades. Immigrant entrepreneurs more broadly have also contributed significantly to the Canadian entrepreneurial landscape. While just over one-fifth (21.0%) of the more than one million private-sector businesses are majority owned by immigrants to Canada,⁸ they own 32.0% of all employer businesses in Canada, creating jobs in all sectors of the economy.⁹ In the current environment, where Canadian businesses are actively seeking new international markets for both sourcing and sales, the international networks and market knowledge of Canada’s immigrant entrepreneurs is a strategic asset.¹⁰

Women entrepreneurs tend to be concentrated in service and retail sectors, which were disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and continue to face challenges amid trade tensions in terms of access to suppliers as well as markets.^{11, 12} At the same time, the “buy Canadian” movement has enormous potential, with 85% of Canadians seeking “made in Canada” solutions and corporations seeking local producers to fill their supply chains.¹³ In addition, recent events are likely to accelerate the efforts of both government and private sector corporate customers to invest in supplier diversity and, in particular, companies owned by diverse women.¹⁴ In recent years, women-owned businesses in Canada have increased their exports, nearly closing the gap with men-owned businesses.¹⁵ Women are slightly less likely than men to export to the US and more likely to export to other international markets,¹⁶ with

many businesses exploring alternative suppliers to diversify supply chains and reduce dependency on US imports.

Barriers faced by Diverse Women Entrepreneurs

Diverse women entrepreneurs face a wide array of barriers that hinder their ability to scale and successfully deliver products to retail markets. Systemic biases limit their access to capital, with many relying on personal savings due to challenges in securing external funding.¹⁷

Extensive research has documented how racial and cultural stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination, along with systemic biases in banking, funding and networking opportunities, significantly hinders the growth and viability of businesses owned by Black and racialized entrepreneurs.^{18, 19, 20, 21}

Stringent compliance requirements and fragmented support systems further complicate their scaling efforts.²² A lack of professional networks further impedes their ability to connect with buyers and navigate the retail landscape.²³ Black entrepreneurs encounter significant challenges in establishing and building networks, including difficulties in securing sponsors and mentors who can provide guidance on attracting customers, obtaining finance, and navigating entrepreneurial hurdles, as well as understand their unique experiences.²⁴ Immigrant women entrepreneurs face significant barriers given the lack of pre-established support networks, crucial for accessing information, resources, and opportunities for business success.^{25, 26, 27} Without them, immigrant women entrepreneurs may struggle to secure financing, navigate regulatory environments, and reach potential retailers.

Addressing these challenges requires targeted initiatives that expand access to funding, provide mentorship opportunities, and deliver tailored training in critical areas such as branding, pricing, and supply chain management. These supports are critical in helping diverse women entrepreneurs overcome systemic barriers, unlock growth opportunities, and achieve long-term success in competitive markets.

In 2021, de Sedulous Women Leaders (dSWL) launched the Retail Entrepreneurship Acceleration Program (REAP) + iLaunchHERproduct program to support the retail readiness of Black, racialized, and immigrant women entrepreneurs.

This report evaluates the program's three cycles from 2021 to 2024, highlighting its successes and areas for improvement. It offers actionable recommendations to strengthen delivery and expand inclusive opportunities within Canada's entrepreneurial ecosystem. The findings provide valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners, outlining effective strategies to address barriers and better support diverse women entrepreneurs in pursuing sustainable growth and long-term success.

The Retail Entrepreneurship Acceleration + iLaunchHER Program

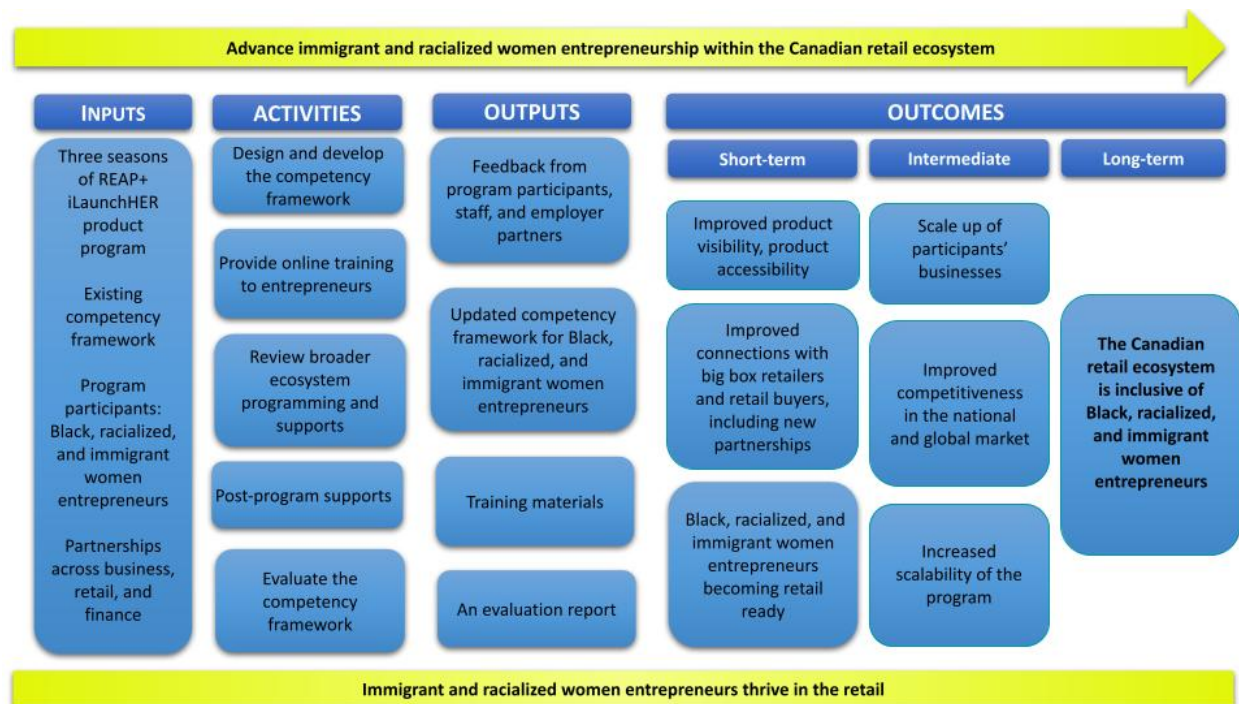
Overview

The REAP+iLaunchHERproduct program was developed to support Black, racialized, and immigrant women entrepreneurs in scaling their businesses and entering the competitive retail landscape. Delivered by dSWL, the program aims to provide a structured pathway to success and address the unique challenges faced by diverse women entrepreneurs, particularly in accessing retail opportunities.

The program includes two phases. Phase 1, REAP, focuses on equipping participants with essential skills and knowledge through a series of 13 masterclasses. These sessions cover a range of topics, including product positioning, pricing strategies, intellectual property protection, branding, logistics, and distribution. In Phase 2, iLaunchHERproduct, the program aims to transition participants from learning to execution. This phase is centred around the Buyer + Vendor Connect event, where participants are provided with the opportunity to pitch their products to buyers from major retail chains. To prepare for this opportunity, participants are supported with developing a Business Capability Statement (BCS) and Product Line Sheet (PLS) and engage in pitch preparation sessions to refine their presentations and strategies. Beyond these phases, the program is designed to provide regular check-ins to monitor participants' progress with retailers and assist with post-pitch requirements.

Figure 1 illustrates the program logic model. In the short term, REAP+iLaunchHERproduct aims to enhance product visibility and accessibility, strengthen connections with retailers, and support Black, racialized, and immigrant women entrepreneurs in becoming retail ready. Intermediate outcomes focus on scaling businesses and improving market competitiveness, with the overarching long-term goal of creating a more inclusive Canadian retail ecosystem.

Figure 1. REAP+iLaunchHERproduct logic model



Scaling Journey

One of the goals of the REAP+iLaunchHERproduct program was to diversify Canada's retail landscape by amplifying the presence of products from diverse women-owned businesses. The program's vision was to connect Black, racialized, immigrant, and newcomer women business owners with major retail chains. By facilitating access to high-traffic retail spaces, the program sought to increase product visibility and revenue for these entrepreneurs.

dSWL identified key players within the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Six partners were secured for Season 1: Business Development Canada (BDC), TD Bank, Export Development Canada (EDC), Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (WEKH), Trade Commissioner Service (TCS), and WEConnect International. Five of these partners (BDC, TD Bank, EDC, WEKH, and TCS) provided financial sponsorship, while WEConnect International was contracted to oversee program administration and coordination.

The inaugural 18-month season featured a single cohort, where participants underwent training sessions designed to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to pitch their products to major retailers. Following training, WEConnect International selected the top 25 entrepreneurs to pitch directly to big-box stores. Upon completing Season 1, feedback was gathered through focus group discussions with participants and an internal evaluation of the program's structure, administration, and outcomes. The findings highlighted the need for a strategic overhaul to better align the program with its goals.

To address these insights, several changes were implemented for Season 2:

- **Smaller cohorts:** The program was divided into three cohorts for improved management and personalized attention.
- **Direct retail partnerships:** Partnerships were established directly with big-box retailers, enabling them to facilitate masterclasses and engage directly with participants.
- **Curriculum development:** A structured program curriculum, masterclass guide, and detailed class processes were created.
- **Program administration transition:** dSWL assumed full responsibility for administration and coordination.
- **Retail Acceleration Model Canvas Model introduction:** A Retail Acceleration Model Canvas (RAM-C) was developed as the foundational framework for program delivery.
- **Pitch preparation:** A dedicated pitch preparation session was added to equip participants with essential skills for presenting to retailers.
- **Alumni network:** An alumni community platform was launched to foster ongoing communication, share industry best practices, and celebrate success stories.
- **Follow-up processes:** A systematic follow-up process between participants and retailers was introduced to enhance engagement.
- **Defined partner roles:** Partners were categorized into Business Knowledge Partners, Retail Knowledge Partners, and Finance Knowledge Partners for clarity and strategic alignment.

Building on the learnings from Season 2, Season 3 introduced additional partnerships and innovations. GS1 Canada joined as a partner, and the program secured financial support from the Future Skills Centre (FSC). Plans were also initiated to further enhance the program by developing an AI-enabled retail platform and organizing an in-person Buyer + Vendor Connect Conference.

Program partnerships

The REAP+iLaunchHERproduct program established three key types of partnerships: Business Knowledge Partners, Retail Knowledge Partners, and Finance Knowledge Partners, each offering specialized masterclasses tailored to the needs of participants.

- Business knowledge partners delivered masterclasses on critical topics such as trade regulations, business growth strategies, legal requirements in Canada, Commercial General Liability (CGL) insurance, and the use of barcodes for retail readiness.
- Retail knowledge partners focused their masterclasses on navigating retail entry requirements for big-box and off-price stores, developing and sustaining retail partnerships, and creating effective pricing strategies.
- Finance knowledge partners offered masterclasses on understanding the valuation process, securing funding, and managing financial planning.

Figure 2 provides a summary of the partners across the three seasons. Table 1 lists project sponsors across the three seasons.

Figure 2. Partners

Business Knowledge Partners

Export Development Canada (EDC): EDC is Canada's export credit agency that offers trade knowledge, financial solutions, equity, insurance, and connections to businesses across Canada. EDC offers tailored support for women entrepreneurs including financing, credit insurance, mentorship opportunities, and other resources.

WEConnect International: WEConnect International is a global network that connects women-owned businesses with buyers around the world. To achieve this, WEConnect International educates women business owners about how to access new markets and connect with buyers and delivers certifications for Women's Business Enterprises (WBEs).

Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (WEKH): WEKH is a national network and accessible digital platform for sharing research, resources, and strategies. The platform helps women entrepreneurs connect and collaborate with organizations that support them.

Trade Commissioner Service (TCS): The Trade Commissioner Service is a network of more than 1000 business experts across 160 cities in the world who help Canadian businesses trade, grow, and succeed. The TCS connects Canadian businesses with qualified contacts in this network, as well as support programs, funding, and access to international opportunities.

Thompson Woodruff: Thompson Woodruff is an Edmonton-based law firm that specializes in intellectual property law. The firm advises brands on how they can protect themselves such as IP, Trademark, Patent, Copyright, and Franchise.

SKUFood: SKUFood is a community of suppliers in the food industry.

Taiwo Olatunji. A self-employed insurance broker with Aaxel Insurance Brokers.

Future Skills Centre (FSC): FSC is a centre for innovation and applied research. Its research aims to understand future skills issues and research gaps to help Canadians gain the skills they need in a changing labour market.

GS1 Canada: GS1 is a non-profit organization that develops standards for barcodes on retail products.

Retail Knowledge Partners

Walmart: Walmart Canada is an omnichannel retailer with more than 4000 suppliers around the world.

Costco: Costco is a membership warehouse club that sells wholesale products and operates 890 warehouses worldwide.

Sobeys: Sobeys is a Canadian supermarket chain with more than 1600 stores across the country.

Sodexo: Sodexo is a sustainable food services and facilities management company.

Hudson's Bay: Hudson's Bay is a department store chain with 84 store locations across North America.

TJX Canada: TJX is an off-price department store corporation that owns chains such as Winners, Marshalls, and HomeSense.

Marriott: Marriott is a hotel brand that operates over 8500 properties around the world.

Sysco: Sysco is a broadline food distributor that provides services in over 90 countries.

Loblaw: Loblaw is one of the largest retailers in Canada. Its subsidiaries include Loblaws, Shoppers Drug Mart, Joe Fresh, and President's Choice.

Finance Knowledge Partners

Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC): BDC is a financial institution that specifically supports small and medium-sized businesses of all sectors and business stages. BDC provides financing, venture capital, and consulting services to entrepreneurs.

TD Bank: TD Bank is a financial services corporation. TD offers a range of small business bank accounts as well as loan and credit options.

Table 1. Program sponsors

Season 1	Season 2	Season 3
Export Development Canada (EDC)	Export Development Canada (EDC)	Export Development Canada (EDC)
WEConnect International	Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (WEKH)	Future Skills Centre (FSC)
Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (WEKH)	Sobeys	Sobeys

Season 1	Season 2	Season 3
Trade Commissioner Service Business Development Canada (BDC) TD Bank	TJX Canada Business Development Canada (BDC)	TJX Canada Business Development Canada (BDC)

Evaluation Methods

Inclusive Entrepreneurship Competency Framework (IECF)

Entrepreneurship training programs have proliferated in recent years but are often developed without clearly identified goals and objectives or evaluation frameworks to assess their impact. Without a robust framework, it is challenging to determine whether a program has met its intended outcomes or supported participants in achieving meaningful progress. Although there is extensive research on the characteristics of successful entrepreneurs (e.g., their personality traits, cognitive abilities, and knowledge)^{28, 29} as well as the processes they use to identify opportunities and secure resources,^{30, 31} this evidence is rarely applied to the design of entrepreneurial training programs, particularly in addressing the documented barriers they face and the systems required to support them.^{32, 33, 34}

Competencies encompass the integrated combination of knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, and personality traits required to perform tasks effectively and efficiently,^{35, 36, 37} but are seldom formally applied to entrepreneurship training programs. Moreover, the definition and assessment of individual competencies vary widely. Many programs reference broad topics, such as business planning, financial literacy, marketing, digital skills, and networking, without clearly identifying the specific competencies required for success.³⁸ While these areas receive considerable attention, they are often introduced without a clear articulation of the underlying skills and behaviours that should be developed. For example, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) may be included as a training topic, but the competency it requires, such as effectively managing and analyzing customer interactions to enhance satisfaction, foster loyalty, and drive business growth, may be overlooked or insufficiently addressed.

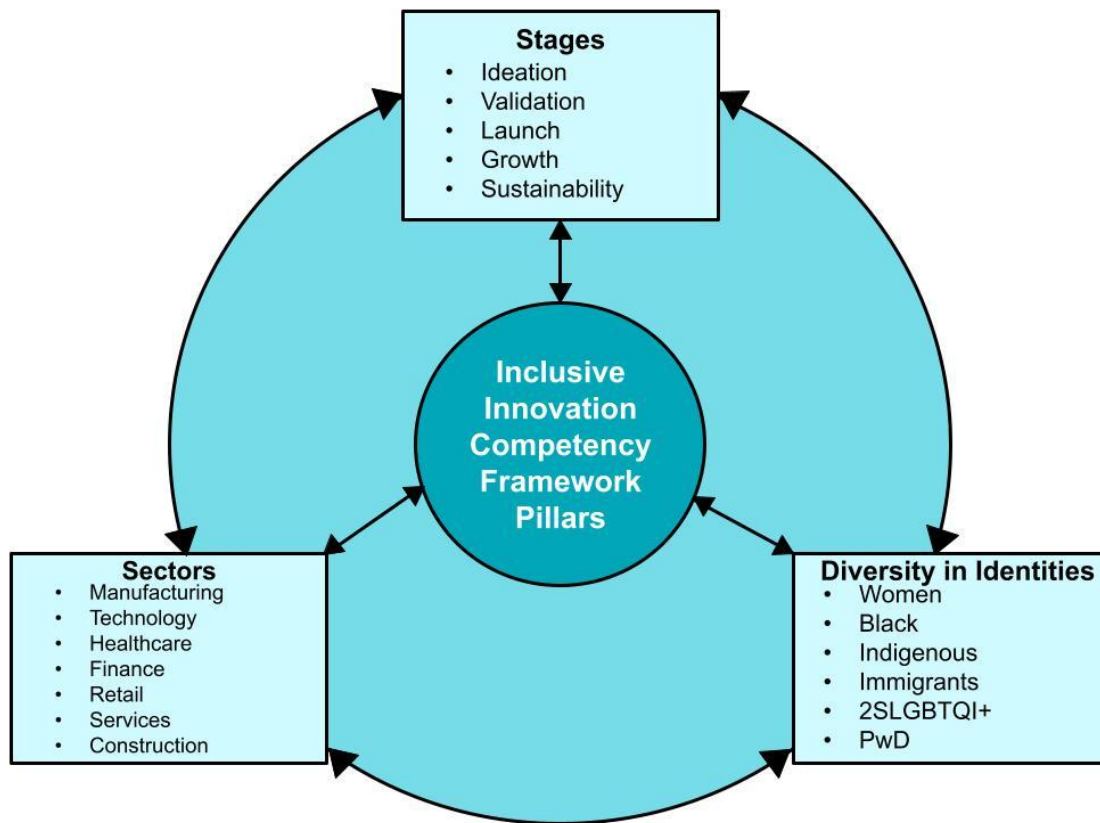
By defining and evaluating competencies, entrepreneurship programs can align their design with measurable outcomes, ensuring participants are equipped with the knowledge and capacities they need to succeed. Researchers and practitioners have developed a range of frameworks using different approaches. Some have adopted a progression approach, emphasizing competencies required at each stage of entrepreneurship^{39, 40, 41, 42} and others have focused on specific sectors (e.g., food industry,⁴³ sustainability entrepreneurship,⁴⁴ financial sector,⁴⁵ technology,⁴⁶ institutions,⁴⁷ etc.), or different demographics of entrepreneurs (e.g., women,^{48, 49} SME managers,⁵⁰ youth,⁵¹ etc.), each offering structured guidelines for developing the skills necessary for innovation, business creation, and adaptability across various industries. However, many of these models address entrepreneurial competencies from a singular perspective, often overlooking the intersecting challenges faced by diverse entrepreneurs in an increasingly globalized and complex environment. As such, there is a need for dynamic and multilayered competency frameworks that reflect the realities of diverse entrepreneurial experiences and support inclusive, context-specific approaches to training and development.

Additionally, previous research has shown that entrepreneurs are often directed to programs that do not align with their stage of business development, sector, or demographic-specific needs.⁵² For example, entrepreneurs in the ideation phase require different forms of support than those who are pre-revenue, investment-ready, or scaling ventures.⁵³ Similarly, while many incubators focus on tech startups, women are more likely to operate businesses in sectors such as retail, services, or hospitality.^{54, 55} Demographic factors also matter as, for example, women may have different preferences and support needs than men, and immigrant women may require tailored resources to address the unique challenges they face.^{56, 57} Past projects have shown that misalignment between program design and participant needs can have detrimental effects. For instance, placing women in programs intended for investment-ready ventures when they are still in the ideation or pre-revenue stage can not only fail to deliver intended outcomes but may also undermine confidence and hinder future success.⁵⁸

To address the need for clearly defined competencies tailored to the realities of diverse entrepreneurs, and to support more targeted and effective program evaluation, the Diversity Institute (DI) has developed the Inclusive Entrepreneurship Competency Framework (IECF). This framework draws on extensive research in entrepreneurship, including studies on entrepreneurial intent, cognition, skills, and supports.^{59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64} It also reflects the practical experience designing and evaluating training programs for diverse audiences, such as the Black African and Caribbean Entrepreneurship Leadership (BACEL) program,⁶⁵ the Capital Skills program,⁶⁶ and Lab2Market.⁶⁷

The IECF serves as a guide for designing, implementing, and evaluating entrepreneurship programs in a systematic and meaningful way. It is designed to support better alignment between the needs of aspiring and developing entrepreneurs and the services and supports provided. The framework outlines core competencies essential at five key stages of the entrepreneurial journey: Ideation, validation, launch, growth, and sustainability. It also accounts for sector-specific competencies in industries such as manufacturing, technology, healthcare, finance, retail, services, and construction. Importantly, it incorporates specialized competencies that reflect the distinct experiences and needs of equity-deserving groups, including women, Black and racialized individuals, Indigenous Peoples, immigrants, 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, and persons with disabilities. This evidence-based approach can be leveraged to enhance program design and delivery, contributing to more equitable, relevant, and targeted outcomes across the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Figure 3. Inclusive entrepreneurship competency framework (IECF)



Learning agenda

The project aims to answer the following evaluation and learning questions:

Program Delivery

1. To what extent has the program effectively recruited and engaged Black, racialized, and immigrant women entrepreneurs?
2. To what extent has the program supported entrepreneurs with the implementation of the provided online training?
3. What challenges or barriers do Black, racialized, and immigrant entrepreneurs face in fully engaging with and applying the content from the online training?

Program Outcomes

4. How did the program impact the competencies needed for entrepreneurial success?
5. To what extent were participants satisfied with the program, and how effectively did it contribute to tangible outcomes in retail readiness and business expansion?

Data sources and sample sizes

This section outlines the quantitative and qualitative methods employed in the evaluation to identify participant experiences, program impact, and areas for improvement. As detailed in Table 2, the quantitative approach included intake and post-program surveys that gathered measurable data on participants' demographics, business profiles, and the program's impact. Qualitative methods such as focus groups, partner interviews, and staff interviews offered deeper insights into participants' experiences and feedback from key stakeholders, as summarized in Table 3.

Table 2. Quantitative data sources and sample sizes

Data sources	Description	Sample sizes	Collection dates
Intake survey	Collected by dSWL during program registration, the data includes questions on demographics, business profiles, growth strategies, and challenges.	308	Sept. 2021 - Nov. 2023
Post-program survey	Administered by DI with outreach support from dSWL, the post-program survey was distributed to all participants who completed the program across the three seasons.	32% (92/285)	Aug. 2024 - Oct. 2024

Note. The number of respondents in the intake survey (n=308) reflects all program registrants, while the number who completed the program is lower (n=285).

Intake survey. The intake survey captured demographic information such as location and self-identification (e.g., woman of colour, Black woman, immigrant woman), as well as business-related questions covering brand, years in operation, revenue, ownership, certifications, product offerings, and market reach. The survey also explored sales channels, including retail and online platforms, and, for those not yet in retail, examined barriers to market entry. Additionally, it assessed participants' growth strategies, financing needs, readiness for retail expansion, and challenges related to competition, supply chain management, and compliance.

Post-program survey. Building on the IECF, the post-program survey used a skip logic design to assess the development of competencies based on participants' business phases (Ideation, Validation, Launch, Growth, or Sustainability). This design ensured a targeted evaluation of the specific competencies relevant to the selected phase, sector, and equity-deserving group, ensuring a focused assessment tailored to the developmental needs of the business. The survey also assessed participants' satisfaction with the program as well as the program's impact on business development, such as securing retail placements, growing online presence, etc.

Table 3. Qualitative data sources and sample sizes

Data sources	Description	Sample sizes	Collection dates
Focus groups	Facilitated by DI, three focus group sessions were conducted to gather participant insights on their experience with the program.	26 participants Focus Group 1: 9 Focus Group 2: 9 Focus Group 3: 8	Sept. 2024
Partner interviews	DI conducted semi-structured interviews with employer partners to gather insights on challenges faced and identify areas for improvement.	7 interviews BDC, GS1 Canada, Thompson Woodruff Intellectual Property Law, Sobeys, TJX Canada (n=2), and WEConnect International	Sept. 2024 - Nov. 2024
Staff interviews	DI conducted semi-structured interviews with dSWL staff to assess recruitment, outreach, activity alignment, challenges faced, participant experiences, and suggestions for improvement.	2 interviews	Sept. 2024

Focus group sessions. Three focus groups were held with 26 participants in total, distributed across seasons: 23.1% from Season 1, 34.6% from Season 2, and 42.3% from Season 3. The sessions, with nine participants in the first two groups and eight in the third, explored participants' experiences and satisfaction with the program. Discussions focused on program implementation, including the usability of online training, relevance of topics, gaps in content, and overall accessibility. The sessions also addressed satisfaction, exploring motivations for joining, how the program met their needs, barriers faced, and feedback on enhancing participant experiences.

Partner interviews. Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with six key partners involved in the program, including representatives from BDC, GS1 Canada, Thompson Woodruff

Intellectual Property Law, Sobeys, TJX Canada, and WEConnect International. These interviews explored partners' roles in the program, their motivations for involvement, and the challenges or benefits they experienced. Questions also sought insights into participant challenges and gathered recommendations for improving the program to better support both partners and participants.

Staff interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two program staff from dSWL to examine participant recruitment, marketing and outreach efforts, and the program's efforts in engaging targeted groups. The interviews sought to determine whether delivered activities aligned with planned activities and, if not, what factors led to deviations and how adjustments were managed. Questions also addressed challenges encountered during implementation, how they were resolved, participant experiences, and recommendations for improving the program to better meet participant needs.

Data limitations

The evaluation of the REAP+iLaunchHERproduct program employed multiple instruments, including surveys, focus groups, and interviews, to capture diverse perspectives on program implementation and outcomes. While this mixed-methods approach provided a detailed understanding of the program, certain limitations inherent to the instruments used should be acknowledged.

- **Self-selection bias:** Given that participation in surveys, interviews, and focus groups was voluntary, there is the potential for self-selection bias. Those who chose to participate may have been more motivated, engaged, or shared certain demographic characteristics compared to those who opted out. As a result, the sample may not fully represent the broader participant population.
- **Variations across program seasons:** The sample was drawn from participants across all three seasons of the program. While Seasons 2 and 3 shared a more similar structure, Season 1 featured significant differences in program design and delivery. This variation could affect the consistency of the data and potentially skew the analysis, particularly regarding how the program may have already addressed the issues raised. Although this is mitigated in the report by placing greater emphasis on the experiences of participants from the more recent seasons, the nature of the focus group discussions also means that these differences may still influence the insights and feedback provided.
- **Response bias:** The group setting in focus groups introduced potential biases, such as groupthink, where participants may have been influenced by dominant opinions, and social desirability bias, where responses were shaped by participants' perceptions of what was considered acceptable or appropriate within the group.
- **Recall bias:** Participants from all three program seasons contributed to the focus groups and surveys, with some reflecting on experiences up to two years after program completion. This time lag may have resulted in inaccurate or incomplete recollections.

Findings

This section presents the key findings derived from both the quantitative and qualitative data collected during the evaluation. The insights are organized according to the program’s learning agenda, focusing on five critical areas:

Program Delivery:

1. **Recruitment and engagement** examines the program’s effectiveness in attracting and engaging Black, racialized, and immigrant women entrepreneurs. It presents findings from the intake survey and highlights the strategies used to reach these groups, including staff interview insights.
2. **Program support** assesses whether the program was designed and delivered in a way that facilitated engagement with the content and training
3. **Challenges and barriers** identifies the obstacles that Black, racialized, and immigrant women entrepreneurs faced in fully engaging with the program and applying its contents. This section addresses both systemic and program challenges that may have hindered participation or implementation.

Program outcomes:

4. **Competencies for entrepreneurial success** explores the development of key entrepreneurial competencies at different stages of business development. It highlights the skills and knowledge participants gained, how these competencies supported their entrepreneurial journey, and identifies areas where improvements can be made or gaps remain.
5. **Program satisfaction and short-term outcomes** assesses participants’ overall satisfaction with the program and explores the tangible, short-term business benefits they experienced, such as enhanced market access, improved product packaging, among other key milestones.

Program Delivery

Recruitment and engagement

Of the 308 participants registered in the program, 93.2% identified as Black, 85.4% as “women of colour,” and 76.3% as immigrant women. Nigeria was the most common country of origin, with 34.4% of participants reporting it as their birthplace. Geographically, the businesses were concentrated in Ontario (51.3%) and Alberta (27.3%), with smaller numbers located in Quebec (6.2%), British Columbia (5.2%), Nova Scotia (5.2%), Saskatchewan (1.9%), and 1.0% each in Manitoba, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island.

Most businesses were either incorporated (53.9%) or sole proprietorships (41.2%), with fewer registered as partnerships (3.9%) or unregistered/trade name entities (1.0%). Around 60% of businesses had been operating for one to four years, while 26.9% were in their first year of operation. Financially, many were in the early stages, with 63.2% reporting annual revenues under \$25,000. Others were further along, with 19.5% earning \$25,000 to \$49,999, 8.5% generating \$50,000 to \$99,999, and 8.8% exceeding \$100,000 in revenue. The businesses span a variety of industries, with beauty and skincare, food and beverages, and clothing, fashion and accessories being the most common product types. Nearly one-third (26.6%) of businesses sold their products to companies, resellers, or wholesalers in Canada at the time of registration.

The recruitment numbers show that the program effectively attracted interest from the target population. Outreach efforts leveraged social media platforms to share program information and streamline access to the registration process. Collaborations with national and community-based organizations, such as the Black Chamber of Commerce, African Center, and Casa Foundation, played a role in extending the program's reach. Word of mouth referrals from past participants were noted as particularly effective by program staff. Staff interviews further highlighted the fact that partnerships with prominent organizations like WEConnect International, Sobeys, and TJX Canada enhanced outreach efforts and reinforced the program's credibility to entrepreneurs.

However, representation was largely concentrated in two provinces, comprising 78.6% of program registrants. As noted in the interviews, limited staffing and resources constrained the program's ability to expand, particularly in engaging French-speaking participants in Quebec. Focus groups also highlighted that the lack of a bilingual version of the program posed challenges for non-English speakers, restricting its inclusivity. Furthermore, the absence of mainstream marketing efforts, such as TV or media campaigns, was seen as a missed opportunity by staff to raise broader awareness and attract a wider audience.

Program uptake

A total of 285 participants completed the REAP+iLaunchHERproduct program, which was delivered over three seasons and across seven cohorts, achieving a 92.5% completion rate. The demographic breakdown of participants closely aligned with registration figures, indicating no significant barriers to completion for any particular group. Specifically, 92.6% of participants identified as Black women (compared to 93.2% of registrants), 84.9% as "women of colour" (compared to 85.4%), and 77.5% as immigrant women (compared to 76.3%). For Seasons 2 and 3, more detailed information was collected to gain insights into participants' immigration status. Approximately 20.3% of participants from these seasons identified as newcomers to Canada, having lived in the country for five years or less. Among all participants, Nigeria was the most common country of birth (35.8%), followed by Canada (22.8%) and Jamaica (4.6%).

Season 1 began with a single, large cohort. Insights from this experience informed the adoption of smaller, more focused cohorts in subsequent seasons to enhance participant engagement

and optimize learning outcomes. A detailed breakdown of participants per cohort is provided in Table 4.

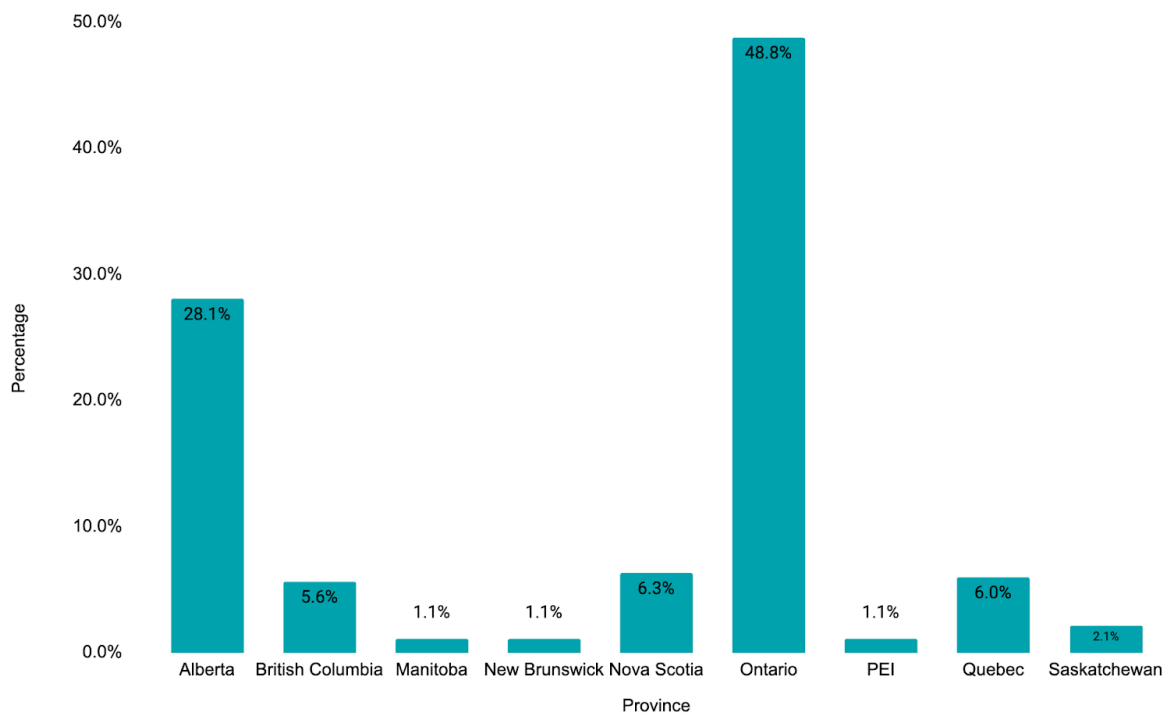
Table 4. Participant distribution across cohorts and seasons

Cohort 1	November 2021 - September 2022	157 participants
Cohort 1	November 2022 - April 2023	16 participants
Cohort 2	March 2023 - August 2023	35 participants
Cohort 3	July 2023 - November 2023	27 participants
Cohort 1	November 2023 - April 2024	20 participants
Cohort 2	March 2024 - August 2024	15 participants
Cohort 3	July 2024 - November 2024	15 participants

Note. The dates provided reflect the training sessions, with recruitment for each cohort commencing two months prior to the start date.

The geographic distribution across all three seasons, illustrated in Figure 4, shows the majority of participants based in Ontario (48.8%) and Alberta (28.1%).

Figure 4. Geographic breakdown of program participants



Among respondents, the majority (97.9%) reported owning a significant or full stake in their businesses, with ownership shares ranging from 51% to 100%. A small proportion (1.4%) reported owning exactly 50%, while only 0.7% held less than 50%. Regarding business structure, most participants (54.7%) identified their businesses as incorporated, followed by 40% operating as sole proprietors. Partnerships accounted for 2.8%, while 1.8% of businesses fell into other categories, and only 0.7% were not registered.

In terms of business longevity, the largest group of participants (58.9%) reported operating their businesses for 1 to 4 years, while 28.1% had been in business for less than one year. Smaller proportions had been operating for 5 to 9 years (9.1%), 10 to 15 years (3.2%), or more than 15 years (0.7%). The majority (61.8%) of participants reported revenues of less than \$25,000. An additional 20.4% reported revenues between \$25,000 and \$49,999, while 9.1% reported being in the \$50,000 to \$99,999 revenue bracket. Smaller proportions earned between \$100,000 and \$249,999 (4.2%), \$250,000 and \$499,999 (3.5%), or \$500,000 and above (0.8%).

The most common product categories among participants were Beauty and Skincare (27.7%), Food and Beverages (27.4%), and Clothing, Fashion, and Accessories (16.1%). The majority of participants (68.5%) reported manufacturing their products in Canada. Smaller proportions identified other bases, including China (10.7%) and Nigeria (7.8%). Additional countries mentioned were the United States (2.9%), Senegal (1.0%), and Ghana (1.0%), while 5.8% indicated “other” locations.

Regarding product distribution, only 26.7% of participants reported having their products stocked in retail stores across Canada, with a significant majority (73.3%) reporting not having this market presence. Among participants from Seasons 2 and 3, a majority (58.6%) reported utilizing eCommerce platforms to sell their products, while 41.4% had not yet adopted online sales channels. In terms of broader sales networks, 13.7% of participants indicated that they sell their products to companies, resellers, or wholesalers within Canada, whose products are subsequently sold or used outside the country. However, the majority (86.3%) do not engage in such sales. Additionally, 13.0% of participants reported having stockists outside Canada.

Challenges reported before the program

Before joining the REAP+iLaunchHERproduct program, participants faced significant barriers to growth, with 85.3% reporting obtaining financing as the most pressing challenge. Market expansion was another major concern, as 75.4% of participants reported difficulties in finding new customers and 75.8% reported difficulties securing partners, suppliers, or distributors. Time and resource constraints also posed a significant barrier to 70.5% of participants. A lack of guidance and mentorship was a significant challenge, with 75.1% of participants uncertain about where to turn to for advice.

Many also struggled with business strategy development (67.4%), emphasizing the need for structured guidance in refining their models and navigating competitive markets, the latter of which was a challenge reported by 57.5% of participants. Operational difficulties were another key concern, particularly in shipping logistics (58.9%) and supply chain management (51.6%). Knowledge gaps were also prevalent, with 59.6% of participants identifying challenges in understanding their industry market and 57.5% facing difficulties understanding their target customers.

Table 5. Challenges reported by program participants

Challenge	Percentage (%)
Competition in the market	57.5%
Creating a business strategy	67.4%
Obtaining financing	85.3%
Getting paid by customers	24.6%
Finding new customers	75.4%
Finding partners/suppliers/distributors	75.8%
Limited time and resources	70.5%

Challenge	Percentage (%)
Understanding/complying with government regulations	42.8
Managing debt level	36.1
Supply chain management	51.6
Shipping logistics	58.9
IP rights/Violation	26.0
Knowledge about brand industry market	59.6
Knowledge about brand target customers	57.5
Knowing where to turn for advice	75.1
Our company doesn't have any challenges	7.7

Program support

The post-program survey results on the online training sessions presented in Table 6 indicate positive experiences. Participants found the training to be relevant to their needs and goals, compelling and useful, easy to understand and access, and readily applicable.

Table 6. Experience with online training

Statement	Mean Score
The online training was relevant to my needs and goals.	4.78
The online training was compelling and useful.	4.76
The content of the online training courses was easy to understand.	4.76
The online training was easy to access.	4.71
The content from the online training sessions was easy to implement.	4.74

Note: Responses were graded on a scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.

Building upon these results, focus group discussions indicated the program's design and delivery supported participants in applying their training effectively. The discussions were divided into five overarching themes, which are discussed below.

Confidence and Clarity on Next Steps

A key theme from the focus group discussions was that the program helped motivate participants to succeed by building their confidence and providing knowledge and tools to support their entrepreneurial journey. As one participant highlighted:

de Sedulous Women Leaders has empowered me to believe in my brand and follow the "why" of my brand. I am more confident now to represent my brand anywhere and to pitch before investors and buyers anytime as a result of undergoing the rigorous 13 weeks program including the Buyer + Vendor Connect event. (Post-program survey)

Through the shared experiences of peers, encouragement of program staff, and support of employer partners, many participants reported being able to envision a clearer path to success. As one participant reflected, "I grew more confident in myself. Sometimes, especially we immigrants coming into a new environment in the Western world, some of us are, I'm not speaking for everybody, but for me, it was a struggle to settle in. It was a struggle to say, well, I have an idea, but will other communities accept it?" This participant explained that the program's support helped shift her perspective, adding, "It gives me that impression that okay, I have a value. No matter how little I think it is, I am solving a problem, and that gave me that zeal to strive on" (Focus Group 3).

Interviews with program staff emphasized the importance of focusing on practical outcomes so that participants could make tangible progress toward their entrepreneurial goals, which was also reflected in focus group discussions:

Even if I eventually don't get into a big box store, the program actually showed me that it's doable. During the program, the program pushed me to actually do a competitor analysis. I went into stores that sell [my product], and I look[ed] at what they were doing, and I actually saw things that I wasn't doing right. And since then I've actually improved on my products like I looked at the products I created before the program and after the program, it's been better. I've taken part of my social media more seriously, my websites more seriously. And even though I'm not yet in the big box store, I was able to pitch to a small store, and I was able to get my product into a small store. (Focus Group 2)

This sentiment was echoed in the post-program survey, where participants highlighted the program's lasting impact on their entrepreneurial journey, even if their ultimate goals had yet to be achieved. As one participant shared:

After participating in REAP, I have developed a strong confidence to pitching my products, opened my online store, and connected with Big Box stores that we are still in the process of negotiations. I have developed my products brands which is still

ongoing to meet packages specifications. All these developments are hard shells to cracks and REAP+iLaunchHERproduct have made it easier for me. (Post-program survey)

Buyer access and support

Participants highlighted that access to big-box retailers was one of the most valuable aspects of the program. Many shared that without the program's support, reaching such buyers on their own would have been nearly impossible due to the lack of connections. As one participant shared:

Some of us have amazing ideas, but we have no way [of] getting it out there...I've been to several stores. I call[ed] in big box stores. No one will listen to you unless you know someone. They will just not listen to you. And this is the first time I've gotten... an audience, and there's somebody actually communicating with you. (Focus Group 2)

Several participants underscored how the program's direct access to buyers set it apart from other initiatives. In the words of one participant, "I've done numerous programs before... [but] we didn't have that opportunity to pitch in front of retailers and buyers" (Focus Group 3). For many, the chance to pitch directly to buyers and ask questions that would typically be difficult to raise was invaluable. One participant explained that "the opportunity to speak to the buyer one-on-one, to ask them questions...was just golden" noting that the exchange facilitated her learning in "how far [she] could go, or what [her] limitations were, or what [she] could do with what [she] had" (Focus Group 3). Additionally, participants reported that the program's partnerships with major organizations like TJX, Sobeys, and BDC provided them with critical insights into the buying process, knowledge they felt would have been otherwise inaccessible.

The Buyer + Vendor Connect event received particularly strong praise from focus group participants, who valued the opportunity to engage directly with buyers and receive actionable feedback. As one participant shared:

The Buyer and Vendor connect event was the icing on the cake for me. I was able to prove to buyers that my products was worth being in the stores and I got lots of feedback that I am currently working on to perfect my product. The program is the best I have attended, and I would highly recommend to anyone hoping to understand the retail landscape. (Post-Program Survey)

Support from program staff

Participants expressed appreciation for the support provided by the program staff, particularly their attentiveness to individual needs and their role in connecting entrepreneurs with buyers. As captured by one participant, "To have someone literally in our corner to advocate for us and to do the follow-ups was very helpful" (Focus Group 1). Beyond facilitating connections with buyers, participants also acknowledged the program staff's role in fostering relationships among the entrepreneurs themselves. Focus group discussions also highlighted that program staff provided participants with valuable resources, such as pre-session packages with guides and one-on-one sessions, which offered opportunities to connect individually and address their specific needs. Participants further noted the commitment of program staff in supporting

entrepreneurs' success. As one participant shared, "It's something that you can't really put a value on" (Focus Group 1), adding that this commitment distinguished the program from others.

Interviews with program staff suggest that direct and ongoing contact with entrepreneurs allowed them to iterate and adjust the curriculum to better respond to participants' needs. Staff noted flexibility by adapting the program to changing requirements, adding new partners, and adjusting course content. For example, based on participant feedback, a course on business evaluation was added to help entrepreneurs prepare for securing loans and grants. Recognizing that many entrepreneurs were unaware of the importance of barcodes or where to source them correctly, the staff brought in GS1 Canada to address this gap.

Peer support and a sense of community

Participants emphasized the program's role in fostering a sense of community among women entrepreneurs, while also expressing interest in expanding these networks. Many highlighted the value of connecting with peers at similar or different stages of their entrepreneurial journeys. One participant shared:

Having the community of other women, some at the same stage as you, or some advanced or just starting...was really good...and that community has continued...[through a] WhatsApp group [where] people make announcements...It's always good and encouraging to see people's progress and see that things are going on (Focus Group 1).

Others proposed ideas to strengthen connections, such as creating more structured community groups to share resources and event information. Participants also highlighted the importance of building partnerships and fostering collaboration within these communities. They emphasized that creating connections and encouraging collaboration among entrepreneurs could contribute significantly to mutual growth and success.

Increased understanding of the Canadian business landscape

Participants reported that the program improved their knowledge of the Canadian business landscape, which was especially valuable for immigrant entrepreneurs. Direct engagement with industry experts specializing in areas like export development, business valuation, and retail standards provided insights that helped them to navigate the Canadian retail industry. As one participant shared, "Ultimately, it was an amazing program to get to hear from the industry experts, and those who actually run and make decisions of what to stock in their stores" (Focus Group 3).

Many participants also reflected on the relevance of learning key requirements, such as insurance and retail standards, which were previously unfamiliar to them. One participant explained, "It was very relevant for me to understand... the basics of many things... because, you know, if you are running a business, you need to have the general insurance...so this was information that was not [available] before [because] I had no idea from my home country" (Focus Group 2). Immigrant women entrepreneurs highlighted the program's role in helping

them become more familiar with the Canadian business environment. As one participant reflected, “The program opened my eyes to how business is being done properly in Canada” (Post-program Survey), while another shared, “I gained lots of knowledge about doing business in Canada and all the required documents to get in order to sell to big box stores” (Post-program Survey).

Challenges and barriers

This section examines key themes related to barriers and challenges, identifying areas for potential improvement while considering broader systemic factors that influence entrepreneurial success.

Balancing engagement and accessibility

Participants and program staff highlighted scheduling challenges, particularly due to participants’ geographic dispersion across multiple time zones. For example, one participant shared how the timing of the sessions clashed with other responsibilities: “Maybe there’s socials, you’ve got kids. It was tough to kind of fit in” (Focus Group 3). Program staff acknowledge these difficulties. As one staff member noted, “Life is happening. Some [participants] have kids, [and] their schedules just don’t align with the timeline for the program.”

To encourage active participation, program staff chose not to release session recordings, aiming to foster real-time engagement. As explained by a staff member, “Even though the master classes were recorded, they were not released to the student and this also made them to always attend class, because they know that there is no recording to fall back on. You just have to be in class to take your notes” (Staff Interview). However, this decision left some participants feeling unsupported. One participant shared, “There’s no fallback, or there was no backup... If you miss it, then you miss it. That’s it. That bit was a little bit tough to kind of maneuver around” (Focus Group 3).

These findings suggest that balancing engagement and accessibility is critical to meeting the diverse needs of participants. A potential workaround could involve shifting the focus from discouraging missed sessions to incentivizing attendance. For example, offering exclusive benefits for those who attend a specified number of live sessions could motivate participation without penalizing those who face unavoidable conflicts.

Regional disparities and language barriers

Program staff and participants identified regional disparities and language barriers as key challenges limiting the inclusivity and expansion of the program, particularly in underrepresented areas like Quebec and smaller provinces. Staff noted that a dedicated French-language version of the program could help engage more entrepreneurs. As one member shared, “There were times when I had to really struggle [to] communicate with people in Quebec and throughout the procurement process there were people I couldn’t get on board because of that language [barrier]” (Staff Interview). Participants from Quebec echoed these challenges noting limited opportunities available to them compared to other regions.

Need for more tailored support

Focus group discussions highlighted the need for more tailored support, particularly for small businesses. Participants reported that some of the content did not fully address their specific challenges, especially those related to financial constraints. As one participant explained:

A lot of the topics assumed that you had more working capital to do some of these things. And I would love to hear the perspective if you have limited dollars, how do you do some of the things like packaging? Or what are the requirements of packaging to be on a shelf? (Focus Group 1)

However, perspectives on program accessibility varied. Some participants commended the program's ability to meet them at different stages of business development. One entrepreneur emphasized how the program's approach allowed them to engage meaningfully, regardless of their starting point:

It was really good to have so many experts to come in and explain and meet us where we were at and one of the greatest things about that part was that I did not have to guess or try and fit myself in wherever we were, in different levels, in the program we were able to just fit right in into the education (Focus Group 3).

Employer partners also reflected on the challenges of delivering training content that aligned with participants' varying levels of readiness. As one employer partner explained, "For many of those business owners, they don't know. It's hard trying to explain it most times, and I understand it's because they've never done it before" (Employer Partner). At the same time, another employer partner recognized that while the program content was not immediately applicable to all businesses, it still provided long-term value, even for those not yet ready to fully implement their learning:

The timeframe is so different for each individual entrepreneur...there's so many variables, and I think for the ones that weren't quite ready for it, it was just helpful for them to know, like, okay, this is coming. This is gonna cost me money, I need to put it in my budget, and then I know where to go if I need help once I get there. (Employer Partner).

Some participants noted that certain sessions, namely "Export 101 – All you need to know to become an Exporter," were less relevant to their current stage of business growth. For early-stage entrepreneurs, the priority was establishing a retail presence rather than expanding into international markets. As one participant explained, "The export portion... might have been less relevant for us because most of us were at the beginning stages of our business, but it was still good information to have" (Focus Group 1). This reflection reinforces the challenge of balancing broad, future-oriented training with immediate needs while ensuring that all participants still gain valuable insights for long-term planning.

Findings from focus groups and employer partner interviews highlight opportunities to strengthen the program by better aligning content with participant readiness and improving coordination among partners. Given the diverse experience levels of participants, employer

partners suggested leveraging insights from the pre-program assessment to tailor content more effectively. This approach would ensure that early-stage entrepreneurs receive foundational support while more advanced participants gain more advanced insights into scaling their businesses.

Employer partners also emphasized the need for greater coordination among themselves to avoid redundancy and enhance the value of training sessions. For example, one partner suggested that if a retailer focuses on a particular topic, subsequent sessions should build on rather than repeat the same information. A more structured approach to content delivery, where experts provide distinct yet complementary insights, would strengthen program effectiveness.

Lack of diverse market representation

Participants emphasized the need to engage a wider range of buyers across industries, including expanding big-box retailer options and creating opportunities beyond large retail chains. Many noted that the program's focus on big-box retailers did not fully align with their business needs, with one participant explaining, "Sometimes [a] business is not a one size fits all" (Focus Group 2). This misalignment was particularly evident for entrepreneurs in non-food sectors. As one participant stated, "So for my products, it wasn't a food-based product...I would have preferred to see a different, a range of buyers, and not just in the food sector" (Focus Group 1). This challenge was also recognized by employer partners, who observed that the composition of program cohorts varied, sometimes resulting in a mismatch between business needs and available retail opportunities.

In addition to buyer diversity, participants highlighted the challenges small businesses face when meeting the pricing and distribution demands of big-box retailers. One participant explained, "We have small businesses, and when we have to work with certain store[s], then the pricing is not going to be friendly... I hope that we can get more stores that can actually work for a lot of us" (Focus Group 2). Others pointed to the financial strain imposed by the significant markdowns required by major retailers: "It's hard for us to take such a large cut to be in some of the big-box stores...hopefully, they could expand on the amount of stores or the different types of stores that can take niche products" (Focus Group 2).

To address these challenges, participants recommended broadening the program's scope to include a wider range of industry buyers. While there is value in participants gaining insights into multifaceted requirements for entering larger retailers, expanding engagement beyond big-box stores to include specialty retailers and independent shops would create more viable market entry points, particularly for entrepreneurs whose products are not suited to large-scale retail. Greater diversification would also help address concerns about pricing constraints, as smaller retailers may offer more flexible terms that better align with the financial realities of small businesses.

Disconnect between entrepreneurs and buyers

Many participants raised challenges in sustaining buyer relationships and securing follow-ups after initial interest. As one participant shared:

So the fact that they [the buyers] had interest, and now we are chasing them. We are not getting any response back. I feel like maybe there should be a follow-up system for those who they had interest from to follow it up. (Focus Group 1)

This feedback suggests that additional support in navigating post-introduction engagement could enhance the program's impact, ensuring participants feel equipped to sustain buyer relationships beyond the initial pitch.

Employer partners also recognized the long-term nature of securing large-scale retail contracts and the need to manage participant expectations. One employer partner noted, "I think a big challenge is sometimes people think that because we're part of this or because they're pitching with us, that means that we're gonna be writing orders right away, and that they have a shoo-in, or that it means it's a go" (Employer Partner). Another partner echoed this perspective, emphasizing the complexity of supply chain agreements and the time required to establish them:

The disappointment is even though we tried our best to manage the expectations of the participants, the reality of a small business getting a large contract from... a large supply chain, it's very difficult, and it's long term. So it wasn't realistic, even in the 18 months that we did the program, that we would start with a business that knew nothing about supply chain to signing a million dollar contract with a large supply chain. (Employer Partner)

These reflections highlight the importance of continued guidance and realistic goal setting for participants as they navigate the complexities of retail partnerships. While the program opened doors and provided exposure, reinforcing follow-up strategies and long-term planning support could help businesses translate initial interest into sustained opportunities.

Program Outcomes

Competencies for entrepreneurial success

The revenue data from program participants indicates that many are in the early stages of their entrepreneurial journey, with 61.8% reporting annual revenues under \$25,000. However, the post-program survey offers a more nuanced perspective by highlighting alternative metrics tailored to distinct entrepreneurial stages. For instance, the ideation phase emphasizes building self-awareness, exploring business ideas, and identifying networks and support systems. In the validation phase, entrepreneurs focus on assessing the feasibility and profitability of their ideas. The launch phase involves transitioning ideas into operational businesses, addressing critical areas such as business planning, regulatory compliance, product development, and customer engagement. During the growth phase, entrepreneurs concentrate on scaling strategies, including marketing, technology adoption, and securing funding. Finally, the sustainability phase prioritizes long-term stability, operational efficiency, and continuous innovation.

Focusing on stage-specific competencies can offer a more nuanced understanding of participants' development than revenue data alone, as it captures the evolving mindset of entrepreneurs. Accordingly, 72.8% of participants identified their business as being in the growth stage (n=67), highlighting their efforts to increase market share. Smaller proportions reported being in the sustainability phase (14.1%, n=13) or the launch phase (12%, n=11). Only 1.1% identified as being in the validation phase, and none reported being in the ideation phase. As such, the analysis of stage-specific competencies focuses on the launch, growth, and sustainability phases.

Launch phase competencies

A total of 11 participants identified as being in the launch phase and completed the relevant competency questions in the post-program survey. Seventeen competencies, each linked to a specific skill, were evaluated and organized into four overarching categories: Legal literacy, financial literacy, leadership and management, and interaction with others. The mean scores for each competency, as shown in Table 7, indicate the extent to which the program was effective in equipping participants with the foundational knowledge and skills required to transform validated business ideas into functional businesses. However, given the small sample size, these findings should be interpreted with careful consideration.

Legal literacy

The findings identify legal literacy to be one of the program's most impactful areas. A high mean score of 4.80 for knowledge and application of regulations pertaining to intellectual property suggests participants benefited from the program's focus on legal knowledge, particularly through the Protecting Your Brand masterclass. Facilitated by intellectual property experts, this session was designed to equip participants with practical tools for safeguarding their businesses through trademarks, patents, and copyrights. When asked about program contents, the focus group discussions underscored the importance of intellectual property and trademarking, with one participant noting it was "the most useful thing for me" (Focus Group 1).

Participants highlighted how the program provided clarity on the regulatory frameworks that govern businesses in Canada. For newcomers, this was particularly valuable. As one participant shared, "For a newcomer in Canada, it actually helps you clarify certain things on how to effectively operate a business in Canada" (Focus Group 2). Beyond theoretical knowledge, focus group discussions indicate that the sessions inspired participants to implement immediate, practical changes in their businesses. For example, one entrepreneur revised their approach to risk management by securing commercial insurance after learning about its importance. Similarly, another participant gained an understanding of liability insurance, highlighting that such coverage was not a requirement in their home country.

Insights from program partners emphasized the importance of tailoring support to meet the specific compliance needs of diverse industries. For instance, one partner identified gaps in participants' understanding of Canadian labelling standards, such as ingredient disclosure,

bilingual labelling requirements (e.g., Bill 96), and the steps to ensure compliance during the product design phase. These findings suggest that while the program has successfully built foundational legal knowledge, future iterations could enhance participant outcomes by incorporating more industry-specific guidance.

Financial literacy

The survey results on financial literacy show high scores for budgeting (4.6) and financial documentation (4.5), suggesting that masterclass sessions like the Business Valuation for Women Entrepreneurs were effective, which provided information on financial planning and maintaining accurate records. Participants reported satisfaction with the program's ability to connect theoretical knowledge with practical application. For instance, one participant shared how the program facilitated direct connections with a bank, making it possible to open a business account, describing the experience as "a small win" and further noting the immediate and tangible benefits it provided.

The program also facilitated a valuable feedback loop with employer partners, who reported participant insights to shape loan products that better met the needs of equity-deserving entrepreneurs. Partners further highlighted how the program enabled meaningful connections, such as providing guidance on securing loans and witnessing participants transform their ideas into businesses. One partner reflected on the tangible impact of these collaborations, recalling the rewarding experience of attending an event where a participant showcased a business that had originated as a concept during the program.

The low score for digital financial tools (3.5) highlights an opportunity to enhance training by incorporating accessible digital solutions for financial planning and budgeting. Hands-on sessions focused on user-friendly financial management tools could help bridge this gap and provide the needed training for entrepreneurs to manage their finances more effectively.

Leadership and management

While leadership and management competencies were not a primary focus of the program, survey results indicate that participants developed these skills as a result of the training provided. High scores in coaching and mentoring (4.8), planning and organizing (4.7), coping with challenges (4.6), and leadership (4.2) suggest that entrepreneurs strengthened their ability to guide teams, structure business strategies, and navigate uncertainty because of their participation.

Focus group participants reported that the program equipped them with practical tools to make informed decisions and develop leadership acumen. More specifically, the emphasis on pitching and direct engagement with retailers was noted as useful in helping participants shift their perspective from theoretical planning to execution. This experience helped them refine their approach, adapt to industry expectations, and navigate the complexities of securing retail partnerships. As one participant reflected, "Working on the pitch, presenting it to big box stores, we came to know the reality of doing business" (Focus Group 2).

Interaction with others

Much like leadership and management competencies, the survey results suggest that participants strengthened their ability to influence others (4.00), build teams (4.40), and value diversity (4.30). However, lower scores in human resource management (3.30) point to limited development in competencies related to overseeing staff, likely reflecting the program's emphasis on external business relationships rather than internal team management. Although HR management was beyond the program's scope, future iterations may benefit from integrating targeted resources or training in this area.

Table 7. Launch phase competencies and mean scores

Group	Skill	Competency	Mean Score
Legal literacy	Regulation and taxation	Knowledge of the rules that apply.	4.36
	Regulations and intellectual property	Knowledge of the rules and regulations about intellectual property and the capacity to apply them.	4.80
	Register or incorporate a business	Knowledge of the rules and regulations about business incorporation and capacity to apply them.	4.60
Financial literacy	Financial documentation	Knowledge of what documentation is needed to qualify for credit from a financial institution or a granting body.	4.50
	Budgeting	Knowledge of introductory principles of budgeting.	4.60
	Digital financial tools	Introduction to digital tools that aid financial planning.	3.50
	Borrowing	Knowledge of the process of borrowing and repaying a loan.	4.33
Leadership and	Coaching and mentoring	The ability to help the team grow and succeed through feedback, instruction, and encouragement.	4.80

Group	Skill	Competency	Mean Score
management	Leadership	Promoting organizational mission and goals, and showing the way to achieve them.	4.20
	Planning & organizing	The ability to coordinate ideas and resources to achieve goals.	4.70
	Coping with challenges	The ability to make decisions in uncertain situations, where outcomes are uncertain, information is incomplete or ambiguous, or there is a risk of unexpected business results.	4.60
Interaction with others	Influencing others	Influences others to be excited and committed to furthering the organization's objectives.	4.00
	Team building and teamwork	Promotes cooperation and commitment within a team to achieve goals and deliverables.	4.40
	Valuing diversity	Helps create a work environment that embraces and appreciates diversity.	4.30
	Customer relationship management	Managing and analyzing customer interactions to enhance customer satisfaction, foster loyalty, and drive customer growth.	3.90
	Tact	To be able to diplomatically handle challenging or tense interpersonal situations.	3.80
	Human resource management	The ability to manage staff in ways that improve their ability to succeed on the job.	3.30

Note: Responses were graded on a scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.

Growth phase competencies

A total of 67 participants (72.8% of respondents) identified as being in the growth stage and completed the corresponding competency questions in the post-program survey. The survey covered competencies essential for scaling a business, categorized into four key areas: Growing

revenue (8 competencies), growing a team (5), raising funds (2), and technology implementation (1). Each competency was linked to a specific skill critical for navigating the complexities of business expansion. The mean scores for these competencies, shown in Table 8, provide insight into the program's role in supporting entrepreneurs as they refine their sales strategies, strengthen organizational capacity, secure funding, and adopt digital tools for growth.

Grow revenue

The findings indicate progress in revenue-related competencies, including generating leads (4.30), managing a sales pipeline (4.32), customer success (4.40), scaling a sales organization (4.43), and building a brand (4.37). These results reflect the program's emphasis on equipping entrepreneurs with the knowledge and tools to access retail markets, improve sale strategies, and expand business operations.

The results suggest that the program's structured curriculum, which featured masterclasses on retail market entry, product positioning, distribution strategies, and logistics, was both relevant and impactful. These sessions were designed to prepare participants to engage with major buyers and navigate the complex requirements. One of the most valued components of the program highlighted in focus groups was its focus on business capability statements, which is a document that provides a brief overview of the company to communicate strengths to potential buyers and secure retail opportunities. One participant described it as "one of the most useful pieces of documents that I was able to walk away with," noting that they continue to leverage it today and had never developed such a resource before the program (Focus Group 1).

Many participants emphasized how the program helped them overcome barriers to retail entry, refine their sales pitches, and better position their products. For instance, one participant noted, "I pitch to retailers, [there is] potential [of] getting leads and everything. However, it was always 'oh, we're not ready, or you have a good product, but.' There's always a but, right?.... So this program really paved the way for me and opened some doors" (Focus Group 3).

Participants noted that the program also strengthened their confidence in pitching to retailers, which they observed required a different skill set than securing investors or grants. The opportunity for peer-to-peer learning was also seen as valuable, allowing entrepreneurs to exchange insights and build networks that extend beyond the program. As one participant shared:

I've been able to connect with retailers that I haven't [before]...I feel more confident, going to pitch to retailers as well. It's always, it's different, we pitch to investors, or just maybe for a grant competition, but going to retailers is totally different. So at least that has helped. And it's created new relationships as well a lot of changes has occurred. And again, being able to connect with other businesses and business owners as well and just creating that network of opportunities. (Focus Group 3)

Employer partners who facilitated masterclasses also emphasized the value of peer learning, noting that interactive sessions allowed participants to engage more deeply with complex

topics. As one employer partner explained, discussions often evolved organically as participants built on each other's questions, making the learning process more dynamic and relevant:

The best part of what we do is the interactivity... okay, we present content, it can be quite heavy, it's quite complex, standards are complex, and having the voice of the participants and helping them each sort of teach each other almost because somebody will ask a question you don't know to ask, and that sort of got the ball rolling often in the Q&A sessions we were doing. (Employer Partner)

In open-ended survey responses, participants highlighted how the program helped them successfully secure deals with major retailers. One respondent stated, "The program helped me learn all I need to get my products out there and in the right way and I [am] now approved to be in [a major retailer] right now" (Post-program survey). Another respondent noted, "Being able to speak to real buyers and learning how they made buying decisions and how I could tailor my pitch to them was needed and super helpful" (Post-program survey).

While the program facilitated introductions to major retailers, some participants faced challenges in maintaining buyer engagement. As noted in the challenges and barriers section, navigating post-introduction relationships required additional support. Additionally, some participants expressed the need for a broader range of buyer partnerships, as certain businesses found that their products did not align with the retailers engaged through the program. Employer partners acknowledged this challenge, noting that some cohorts included businesses whose offerings did not always match buyer needs, which may have limited partnership opportunities.

To further enhance the program's impact, future iterations may benefit from strengthening post-program follow-up mechanisms, deeper engagement with buyers, and additional training on long-term customer relationship management. Expanding partnerships with a broader range of retailers could also help ensure that participants have more tailored opportunities to scale their businesses.

Grow team

The lower scores observed for competencies related to growing a team may point to the program's emphasis on initiating external relationships over building internal teams and managing relations with external stakeholders over time. Focus group discussions indicate that some struggled to maintain and deepen the relationships they made as a result of the program. Partnership management, though the highest-rated competency in this area, still lags behind competencies related to sales, suggesting that while participants improved competencies in securing initial deals, they need more guidance on sustaining long-term relationships and navigating ongoing negotiations. Strengthening these abilities is crucial to ensure that early retail successes lead to lasting growth.

Hiring and talent management remain the lowest-rated competencies, reflecting the program's focus on market access rather than organizational development. Participants in the REAP+iLaunchHERproduct program have limited budgets, which often translates to prioritizing

immediate revenue over structured team building. While this approach aligns with the program's emphasis on retail readiness, strategic workforce planning becomes essential as businesses expand. Collecting information on participants' interest in team growth through the intake survey could help tailor future support. The program could also offer foundational hiring resources or best practices up front, allowing entrepreneurs to revisit these materials when they are ready to scale. This would ensure participants remain focused on their current market objectives while still having a roadmap for sustainable team development.

Raise funds

As the program evolved, a business evaluation course was introduced to cover bookkeeping fundamentals and funding preparation. While participants found this addition useful, the results indicate that more direct support, such as mentorship or hands-on grant-writing workshops, would further enhance their ability to secure capital.

With an average rating of 3.92, participants felt moderately confident in developing a funding strategy. Many appreciated the program's introduction to funding opportunities, particularly those unfamiliar with Canada's financial landscape, with some noting that before the program, they had no knowledge of how to access funding or business support. However, participants looking to scale expressed that additional guidance would have been beneficial. While they were connected to organizations offering lines of credit, they lacked a structured process for securing financing at different growth stages.

Confidence in securing grants was lower, with an average rating of 3.74, reflecting a stronger need for practical, hands-on support. Many participants found grant applications challenging and suggested expert-led workshops to simplify the process. Structured guidance on writing applications was seen as particularly valuable for first-time entrepreneurs unfamiliar with funding systems. Beyond technical skills, systemic barriers, such as credit score limitations and risk aversion toward loans, were key concerns highlighted in the focus groups. Participants emphasized that more accessible financing options, including grants or flexible repayment structures, could significantly improve the viability of their businesses.

Technology implementation

Participants rated their understanding of how digital technologies can enhance business processes and efficiency at 3.82, indicating a moderate level of confidence and room for further development. Given the growing reliance on digital tools for business operations, marketing, and customer engagement, integrating more structured support in this area could add value to future iterations of the program. This can involve incorporating optional sessions, toolkits, or expert-led workshops on digital transformation. Even introductory guidance on leveraging technology for CRM, financial management, or supply chain efficiency, could help participants build more resilient and scalable businesses in an increasingly digital economy.

Table 8. Growth phase competencies and mean scores

Group	Skill	Competency	Mean Score
Grow revenue	Sales: Generate leads	Identifying and attracting potential customers or clients and initiating the sales process.	4.30
	Sales: Manage a sales lead pipeline	Overseeing and optimizing the process of moving prospects through various stages of the sales cycle.	4.32
	Sales: Manage customer success	Engaging with customers to understand their needs and aligning product or service offerings to meet those needs.	4.40
	Sales: Scale the sales organization	Expanding and growing the sales organization to achieve business growth objectives.	4.43
	Marketing: Build your brand	Creating a unique identity, reputation, and perception of your business in the marketplace.	4.37
	Marketing: Build a conversion website	Designing and developing a website to convert visitors into leads or customers.	3.92
	Marketing: Generate online leads	Attracting and capturing potential customers or clients through digital channels and platforms.	3.87
	Public procurement opportunities	The ability to identify and take advantage of public procurement opportunities.	3.42
Grow team	Develop team culture and norms	Establishing shared values and behaviours that guide interactions and decision making within the team.	3.72
	Hire talent	Identifying, attracting, and selecting individuals with the skills and experience to contribute to the success of the organization.	3.15

Group	Skill	Competency	Mean Score
	Manage talent	Overseeing the recruitment, development, and retention of skills individuals within the organization.	3.28
	Manage partnerships	Nurturing and maintaining collaborative relationships with external stakeholders.	3.75
	Manage an advisory board	Selecting, organizing, and leveraging a group of external stakeholders who provide strategic guidance and expertise.	3.49
Raise funds	Building a funding strategy	Developing a comprehensive plan to secure financial resources needed to start, grow, or sustain a business.	3.92
	Secure grant financing	Identifying and obtaining funding from government agencies and other organizations through competitive grant applications.	3.74
Technology implementation	Digital transformation for business growth	Understanding the potential of digital technologies to enhance business processes and boost efficiency.	3.82

Note: Responses were graded on a scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.

Sustainability phase competencies

A total of 13 participants (14.1% of respondents) identified as being in the Sustainability stage and completed the corresponding competency questions in the post-program survey. The survey addressed three areas essential for long-term business resilience: Strategic management (3 competencies), innovation and innovative thinking (2), corporate social responsibility (4). Similar to the results in the Launch stage, the low number of respondents limits the generalizability of these findings, and they should be interpreted with caution.

Strategic management

Results indicate confidence in strategic management, with partnership building receiving the highest score (4.69), followed by risk assessment and management and strategic vision (both 4.54), suggesting the program's effectiveness in preparing entrepreneurs for business growth and retail expansion through sessions like Business Valuation for Women Entrepreneurs and How to Develop a Business Capability Statement and Product Line Sheet. Participants

consistently reported that the pitching preparation and Buyer + Vendor Connect event refined their confidence, business positioning, and ability to communicate their value proposition to retailers. Many found that even when their pitches were not immediately successful, the training helped them sharpen their business strategies and secure future opportunities. As one participant reflected, “By the time we did the main pitch, I was over the roof. I even applauded myself, because in three minutes I got a new definition about my business” (Focus Group 3). Another participant remarked:

Practicing our pitch and being able to pitch and pitch is something that everybody struggles with. But you know we had such very good classes and teachings on how to pitch and everything. And when I pitched, actually, all the stores picked my products, although I’m still working with them, I am still getting ready to onboard [with them], but I think the pitch was one of the greatest things I really learned. (Focus Group 2)

The discussions suggest that the pitching process enabled participants to strengthen their strategic vision and distill complex business models into compelling, concise narratives that resonate with buyers. The iterative nature of pitch preparation required them to assess and manage risks, anticipate retailer concerns, and adapt their value propositions accordingly. Moreover, the negotiations involved in pitching provided hands-on experience in partnership building, as entrepreneurs engaged directly with buyers and industry stakeholders.

Innovation and innovative thinking

Participants reported confidence in their ability to conduct research and development (4.31) and drive innovation within their businesses (4.33). These competencies are critical for entrepreneurs navigating a competitive retail environment, where adapting to consumer trends and refining product offerings can determine success. The program’s focus on these areas, through courses like Product Positioning and Pricing and Finding the Perfect Retail Distributor, may have contributed to these high ratings. These sessions encouraged participants to assess market gaps and communicate the value of their product.

In the focus groups, participants highlighted how throughout the program they were encouraged to apply innovative thinking to strengthen their business models, refine product packaging, and strategically position themselves for retail success. For many, the knowledge gained was instrumental in transforming ideas into actionable business strategies. One entrepreneur shared how the program provided them with the tools to elevate their brand and meet industry standards:

The program gave me a good knowledge of improving my product packaging to the standards of the big bulk stores, [taught] me to write and present a detailed pitch with confidence. Gave me more understanding on different relevant aspects of pricing, and how to develop My Product Line Sheet and Business Capability Statement. (Post-program survey)

Others underscored how the program encouraged them to re-evaluate their business strategies and make data-driven decisions. One participant shared that the program’s training led them to rebrand one of their flagship products, resulting in a measurable impact on sales:

The mentorship and workshops helped me refine my business strategies, improve product development, and enhance my marketing efforts. One particular success story stands out: During the program, I was able to rebrand one of our flagship products based on insights gained from market research and consumer feedback facilitated through the program. This rebranding effort not only increased our product visibility but also led to a 25% increase in sales within the first three months of the relaunch.
(Post-program survey)

Corporate social responsibility

Both ethical and sustainable business thinking received high ratings (4.42), as did applying sustainability practices (4.33), whereas a lower score was observed for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) (4.08), indicating an opportunity for deeper engagement on how to integrate EDI principles into supply chains, partnerships, and branding strategies. Cybersecurity (3.92) received the lowest rating suggesting that businesses may require additional guidance on digital security best practices, particularly as businesses expand their online presence.

Table 9. Sustainability phase competencies and mean scores

Group	Skill	Competency	Mean Score
Strategic management	Risk assessment and management	The ability to identify and manage potential risks to the success of their business.	4.54
	Partnership building	The ability to build relationships with potential partners and key stakeholders.	4.69
	Strategic vision	Ability to see the big, long-range picture.	4.54
Innovation and innovative thinking	Research and development	Conducting research for business enhancement.	4.31
	Innovation	To generate, identify, and implement new ideas, processes, products, or services that create value for the	4.33

Group	Skill	Competency	Mean Score
		business and its stakeholders.	
Corporate social responsibility	Applying sustainability practices	Cultivating a corporate culture that emphasizes social responsibility in business practices.	4.33
	Ethical and sustainable thinking	Reflect on how sustainable long-term social, cultural and economic goals are, and the course of action chosen.	4.42
	EDI practices	Integrating humane principles and values into business activities across diverse contexts and communities in a reflective and critical manner.	4.08
	Cybersecurity	Keeping an organization's digital assets safe from theft, leakage or destruction.	3.92

Note: Responses were graded on a scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.

Industry and individual competencies

Table 10 displays the mean scores for industry-specific competencies by sector, as well as individual competencies by equity-deserving group. Results should be interpreted with caution, as the Likert scale used a 1–4 range with the following response options due to a manual error: 1 = disagree, 2 = neither agree nor disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree. In a 4-point Likert scale, 1 typically represents 'strongly disagree; and 2 represents 'disagree,' with no neutral midpoint, and may have therefore caused confusion for respondents and introduced ambiguity.

Industry-specific competencies received relatively high scores, suggesting the program was effective in equipping participants with knowledge in areas such as automation (3.17), merchandising and product selection (3.69), e-commerce (3.49), and data management and analytics (3.19). In contrast, lower scores for individual-level skills indicate that participants may have required more support in developing language skills (2.35) and cross-cultural competence (2.52), especially given the high representation of immigrant entrepreneurs in the program.

Table 10 | Industry and individual phase competencies and mean scores

Industry Competencies	Industry	Mean Score	Number of Respondents
Automation	Manufacturing, Technology, Healthcare, Retail, Finance	3.17	53
Merchandising and product selection	Retail	3.69	49
E-commerce	Retail, Services, Finance, Technology	3.49	61
Data management and analytics	Finance, Retail, Technology, Service, Healthcare	3.19	62
Language skills	Immigrants and newcomers	2.35	48
Cross-cultural competence	Immigrants, Black and racialized	2.52	54

Note: Responses were graded on a scale where 1=disagree, 2=neither agree nor disagree, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree.

Program satisfaction and short-term outcomes

Changes observed before and after program participation

The survey results suggested that the REAP+iLaunchHERproduct program supported participants' business development, particularly in areas related to market access, digital presence, and product packaging. Among all analyzed respondents (excluding those who selected "not sure or prefer not to answer"), 56% reported having access to big-box stores during or after the program, whereas they did not before. The qualitative findings provide deeper insight into this impact, with many participants sharing success stories. Several credited the program with helping them onboard with major retailers, such as Winners, TJX, and Sobeys.

89% of participants who reported not having an online presence before the program reported growing their online presence at the time of the survey. Improvements in intellectual property protection were also evident, with 79% of all respondents indicating they had secured a trademark when they previously had not. Additionally, 78% of respondents updated their packaging to comply with retail requirements. Regarding changes in manufacturing, 30% of respondents who initially self-manufactured transitioned to external production sites. A majority of respondents (60%) reported being able to connect and pitch to big-box buyers at the time of the survey.

One area for further consideration in future programming is barcode adoption. Despite being a key focus of the curriculum, more than half of respondents (52%) had yet to obtain a barcode by the end of the program, and only 28% moved from not having one to acquiring one. Employer partners noted that while product identification is crucial for retail readiness, it is often overlooked in early-stage business planning. Focus group discussions highlighted the role of barcoding in protecting brand integrity and ensuring smooth retail onboarding. However, given the variability in business readiness, it might have been the case that some entrepreneurs were not yet at a stage where immediate barcode acquisition was necessary. To bridge this gap, employer partners suggested incorporating a pre-session assessment to better tailor content, providing structured follow-up materials to support later decision-making, and offering additional mentorship to facilitate implementation when participants are ready.

While these results suggest business development, some unexpected patterns emerged in how participants reported changes over time. For example, 17% of respondents who initially indicated that their business was incorporated later reported that it was not. A similar trend appeared in barcode registration, where 17% of respondents who had previously obtained a GS1 Canada barcode later reported that they did not have one. These shifts could be attributed to a possible misinterpretation of the question, particularly if participants believed they had to achieve a milestone specifically during or after the program to select “yes.”

Table 11. Changes in key business indicators before and after the program

Statement	No → Yes	No → No	Yes → No	Yes → Yes
My product was in big-box stores	56%	44%	0%	0%
My business/product had an online presence	89%	11%	0%	0%
My business was incorporated	11%	8%	17%	64%
My brand name was trademarked	79%	21%	0%	0%

Statement	No → Yes	No → No	Yes → No	Yes → Yes
I obtained a barcode from GS 1 Canada for my business	28%	52%	17%	3%
My product packaging met retail standard	78%	6%	6%	11%
My manufacturing takes place in a factory, commercial kitchen, brewery, or other production site.	30%	0%	2%	68%
I could connect with and pitch to big box store buyers myself	60%	33%	5%	2%

Note. The survey included questions asking participants to assess the status of their business before the program and during/after the program. The phrasing may have led participants to believe that a change had to occur specifically during or after the program to select “yes,” which is why some participants who had already achieved certain milestones before the program may have responded “no” afterward.

Participants strongly agreed that the program contributed to their entrepreneurial knowledge (4.77) and provided them with practical tools that they have since implemented (4.68). Additionally, many participants attributed their recent business growth to the program (4.21) and reported that it directly helped them secure a spot in a big-box store (4.28). The positive impact of the program was also reflected in open-ended survey question responses “The education and knowledge I acquired from the program helped me to get my products into independent retail stores. I was able to complete my website, get barcode for my products, protect my brand with appropriate legal documentation, and also manufacture in mass” (Post-program survey).

Table 12. Impact of the program on business growth and entrepreneurial development

Statement	Mean Score
Participating in the deSedulous program helped me secure a spot in a big-box store.	4.28
I attribute any recent growth my business had experienced to the deSedulous program.	4.21
Since participating in the REAP+iLaunchHERproduct program, I	4.68

Statement	Mean Score
have implemented at least one of the tools provided by the program.	
The REAP+iLaunchHERproduct program helped me increase my entrepreneurial knowledge.	4.77

Note: Responses were graded on a scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.

Program satisfaction

Overall satisfaction with the REAP+iLaunchHERproduct program was high (4.81), with participants rating their experience positively across multiple dimensions. The statement pertaining to the uniqueness of the program in the survey received a high rating (4.67), suggesting that participants saw it as an opportunity they would not have been able to access elsewhere. Moreover, the score on the program's responsiveness to specific barriers participants have faced (4.54) indicates that it effectively addressed the real-world challenges. The results further show that participants are likely to recommend the program to others (4.81).

Table 13. Overall program satisfaction

Statement	Mean Score
I am satisfied with the program overall.	4.81
The program offerings are unique and cannot be found elsewhere.	4.67
The program was responsive to specific barriers I have experienced.	4.54
I would recommend this program to a friend or colleague.	4.81

Note: Responses were graded on a scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The qualitative and quantitative data from the evaluation suggest that the REAP+iLaunchHERproduct program has had a positive impact on Black, racialized, and immigrant women entrepreneurs, equipping them with the skills, confidence, and direct market access needed to scale their businesses. Based on the findings, the program's structured approach, which integrates masterclasses, industry expertise, retail engagement, and mentorship, was effective in providing diverse women business owners with essential knowledge and resources to strengthen their market presence.

The competencies developed through the program were wide-ranging, enhancing participants' ability to navigate regulations, safeguard intellectual property, and integrate essential financial and legal structures into their business strategies. Many also strengthened critical skills in partnership building, sales and marketing, and strategic vision. The Buyer + Vendor Connect event was reported to be particularly valuable, providing participants with direct access to big-box retailers. Beyond retail connections, the results indicate that the program fostered a sense of community, confidence, and entrepreneurial resilience. Participants also expressed satisfaction with the opportunity to hear from experts in the field, which helped them gain critical knowledge and practical strategies to strengthen their businesses.

The findings also point to opportunities for enhancements. The following recommendations focus on improving program design and delivery as well as suggestions for competencies to target in future iterations.

Program Design and Delivery

- **Enhance follow-up mechanisms and buyer engagement:** While the Buyer + Vendor Connect event provided critical access, many participants struggled with post-event follow-ups. Strengthening structured follow-up mechanisms, such as check-ins with buyers, mentorship on sustained engagement, or guided networking opportunities, could improve long-term retail success.
- **Expand retail and buyer representation:** Many participants emphasized the need for a broader range of buyers beyond traditional big-box retailers. Expanding partnerships to include specialty stores, independent retailers, and alternative sales channels would create more diverse and viable market pathways. Additionally, where there is sufficient overlap in the types of products businesses offer, engaging regional and niche market buyers could help address the pricing and volume constraints that small businesses often face in big-box settings.

- **Tailor support to business readiness levels:** While the cohort model has been effective, further segmenting participants based on readiness (e.g., separate tracks for early-stage vs. retail-ready businesses) could better align content delivery with participant needs. Implementing pre-program assessments to tailor content to business stages could help maximize program impact. This approach could involve a combination of core classes covering foundational topics and specialized classes tailored to the unique challenges and opportunities of different business stages.
- **Tailor support to business industry:** Providing industry-specific support would enhance participants' ability to navigate the unique challenges and opportunities within their sectors. A structured approach that combines core business training with specialized industry-focused sessions on compliance, buyer expectations, and market dynamics would better equip entrepreneurs for success. Expanding access to industry experts and sector-specific mentorship could further strengthen participants' ability to scale effectively within their respective markets.
- **Address regional and language barriers:** Expanding access to French-speaking entrepreneurs in Quebec and other underrepresented regions remains a key opportunity for growth. Providing bilingual materials, live translation, or regional program cohorts could ensure greater inclusivity and amplify the program's reach.

Competencies to strengthen in future programming

- **Sustaining partnerships:** While the program successfully facilitated introductions to major retailers, many entrepreneurs found it difficult to maintain these connections over time, with some reporting that they struggled to translate initial connections into long-term business relationships. Strengthening support in this area could include advanced training on contract negotiations, strategic partnership management, and long-term buyer engagement strategies.
- **Technology implementation:** Lower mean scores across digital competencies suggest that many participants faced challenges in adopting and integrating technology into their business operations. Given the diverse range of businesses in the program, technology needs vary widely, ranging from inventory management and digital payment systems to e-commerce platforms and data analytics tools. To address this gap, the program could introduce hands-on workshops focused on widely applicable digital solutions, such as accounting software, CRM systems, supply chain tracking, or digital marketing automation.
- **Securing funding:** Fundraising was a significant challenge for participants, particularly those in the early stages of business growth. Many entrepreneurs struggled to secure grants, limiting their ability to expand production, meet retail demand, or invest in marketing. To address this, the program could enhance its support by expanding training on financial planning, investment pitching, and alternative funding sources. Additionally, offering one-on-one financial coaching with experts could provide participants with personalized guidance, helping them navigate the fundraising process with greater confidence and clarity.

- **Internal team building:** While beyond the scope of the current program and not an immediate priority for participants, many entrepreneurs encounter challenges in hiring, training, and retaining staff as their businesses grow, particularly when transitioning from a sole proprietorship to managing a team. Establishing clear workplace structures and understanding human resource management are essential for long-term business sustainability. To help participants prepare for this stage, the program could offer an opt-in training module focused on key HR competencies, providing guidance on effective hiring, team leadership, and workforce management.

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