



**Future
Skills
Centre**

Centre des
**Compétences
futures**

Project Insights Report

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



PARTNERS

University of Alberta



LOCATIONS

Alberta



INVESTMENT

\$433,330



PUBLISHED

October 2024



CONTRIBUTORS

Sonia Boskov,
*Strategic Insights
Associate*

Laura McDonough,
*Associate Director of
Knowledge Mobilization
& Insights*

☰ Executive Summary

Black youth in Canada continue to face systemic barriers to workforce participation, particularly in high-growth and high-wage STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics) fields such as artificial intelligence, renewable energy, and biotechnology. To address these inequities, [the Experiential Learning in Innovation, Technology, and Entrepreneurship \(ELITE\) Program](#), led by the University of Alberta, was launched in 2021 to equip Black youth (ages 15–22) with technical, entrepreneurial, and wellness skills through paid internships and wrap-around supports.

During **Phase 1 (2021–2023)**, the ELITE Program demonstrated success in creating pathways to STEM careers through its three-tiered model: paid work-integrated learning, entrepreneurship training, and wellness coaching. Targeted recruitment strategies and community engagement improved inclusivity, while internal evaluations informed program refinement. Over four years, 174 interns participated, including expansion to Carleton University in Ottawa.

Building on these results, **Phase 2 (2024)** involved an external evaluation by Malatest to assess outcomes and document best practices. Findings showed that 77% of participants felt more prepared for the workforce, with paid internships cited as the most valuable component. The program's Black-led delivery model enhanced mentorship and participant trust.

Overall, the ELITE Program represents a scalable model for inclusive experiential learning that addresses both technical skill gaps and systemic inequities. Insights from this project emphasize the need for continued investment in community partnerships, proactive outreach, and culturally responsive program design to advance equity, diversity, and inclusion in Canada's evolving skills ecosystem.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 The ELITE program is delivered by Black professionals, who act as advocates, mentors, and role models, and allow for safer discussions around mental health.
- 2 95% of ELITE respondents remained interested in STEM careers following their participation in the program.
- 3 Participants cited stress management and mental health supporting skills as the most lasting learning from the Wellness & Coaching Series.

▶ The Issue

Black youth continue to face unique challenges during their transition into the workforce. Black Canadians are underrepresented among innovators and professionals in high-wage, emerging technology-related areas of work (e.g., AI, manufacturing, quantum technologies, regenerative medicine, renewable energy systems) and are less likely to be entrepreneurial innovators. This underrepresentation is the result of barriers like anti-Black racism faced by Black youth throughout their lives, limited access to high-tech industries and inadequate support structures to support upward socio-economic mobility.

Barriers to participation in high-technology professions for Black people and in entrepreneurship are associated with increased likelihood of pursuing opportunities in less lucrative sectors.

Some educational institutions have started to develop science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) programs tailored to Black youth, however, most take the form of after-school programs for elementary and junior students.



What We Investigated

The Experiential Learning in Innovation, Technology, and Entrepreneurship (ELITE) Program aims to support Black youth by building the hands-on skills, knowledge, and resilience needed to chart pathways to careers in STEM. The long-term goal of ELITE is to increase the number of Black youth pursuing STEM education in university, leading to high-paying jobs after graduation.

Offered over the summer to high-school students (assistants) and undergraduate students (associates), the program includes:

- 8-16 week paid internships that facilitate work-integrated learning.
- Entrepreneurship Design Series, which involves training in entrepreneurship, financing, leadership, teamwork, and communication skills.
- Wellness and Coaching Series, which aims to facilitate personal growth by building wellness enhancing skills, resilience, hope and increasing mental health skills and knowledge.

Phase 1: 2021 to 2023

The Future Skills Centre first invested in the ELITE Program in 2021 to test and evaluate if the model was successful in facilitating pathways for academic progression and reducing labour market entry barriers through early-stage, hands-on training. The methodology involved a multidisciplinary team of experts delivering work-integrated internships and technical training, using cutting-edge equipment, and fostering robust industry partnerships to ensure comprehensive skills acquisition. During this first phase, the ELITE program team collected pre- and post-program data from participants on the entrepreneurship design series and wellness and coaching series.

Phase 2: 2024

Based on the success of the initial cohorts, the Future Skills Centre made an additional investment in 2024 and funded an evaluation of the ELITE Program in collaboration with the firm Malatest. Malatest conducted a retroactive outcome evaluation for ELITE participants over a 4-year period (2021-2024). The participants of the evaluation included ELITE Program alumni, collaborators, and staff members.

The Phase 2 project had three main objectives:

- To better understand the impact of the ELITE Program on job-readiness for Black youth after program completion.
- To develop a comprehensive description of the wrap-around components of the ELITE Program for use as a model for future programs.
- To provide data and analysis on the impact of targeted wrap-around activities in entrepreneurship training and wellness coaching on the employment prospects of Black youth, and solutions for the specific challenges they face in pursuing STEM careers.

What We're Learning

Between 2021-2024, the ELITE Program hosted 163 participants – 79 high-school students and 93 undergraduate students. Although the program takes place in Alberta, it expanded to involve students from Carleton University in Ottawa in 2022.

Phase 1 learnings:

Targeted outreach addressed recruitment challenges. Challenges recruiting high school students, especially in the Black francophone community, highlighted the need for more proactive recruitment strategies. To increase student enrollment, the ELITE program organized targeted information sessions at schools and created specialized recruitment roles within the project structure. The recruitment initiative's success underscored the effectiveness of tailored outreach and direct community engagement in overcoming recruitment barriers and boosting inclusivity.

The wrap-around components of the ELITE Program offer unique benefits and opportunities for students beyond technical knowledge and skills. The Wellness and Coaching Series helped participants build mental health knowledge and skills to enhance resiliency and build capacity for managing and thriving in the academic and work environment. In the external evaluation conducted for Phase 1, the data showed that participants largely agreed that the Wellness and Coaching Series helped them develop mental health skills and coping strategies and improved knowledge of how to access mental health supports. While the Program addresses technical skills through work-integrated training and entrepreneurial design, it also addresses specific challenges of advocating for oneself in the face of racism and maintaining wellness in a holistic way.

Regular internal evaluation can strengthen outcomes. The project included annual internal evaluations and feedback loops to improve the program design and enhance inclusivity and effectiveness. By gathering input from interns and their parents during the beginning and the end of delivery, necessary adjustments were made that led to better outcomes. For example, after feedback in the Year 2 evaluation that some male interns would have liked to have Black male role models in the Wellness and Coaching Series, the Program integrated Black male representation in this component. This iterative approach demonstrated the value of incorporating stakeholder perspectives to refine and revise program content and implementation for full effectiveness.

Scaling for impact. Following the success of ELITE in Alberta, the Program was implemented at Carleton University in Ottawa. By expanding outside of Alberta, the ELITE Program demonstrated its potential to scale and expand to other Canadian cities and institutions. In addition, the ELITE Program informed the development of other programming at the University of Alberta, including the [Black Youth for Social Innovation Program](#) and the Black Youth Pathways to Law Program, to develop work-integrated spaces and opportunities for Black youth who wish to pursue careers in social sciences and humanities, and law.

Phase 2 learnings:

Paid internships for Black youth contribute to positive economic and social outcomes. Participants generally agreed that the holistic approach of incorporating paid internships, the Entrepreneurship Design Series and the Wellness and Coaching Series enhanced their job readiness and growth as individuals. Mentorship programs are valuable, but alone are not sufficient for the upward social mobility of Black youth early in their academic careers. Malatest's findings on the internship experience showed that participants cited the internship as the most helpful component of the program. Participants confirmed that the hands-on experiential learning in the internship experience works as intended in preparing students for the workforce. In fact, 77% of the participants reported that the internship helped them feel more prepared to join the workforce.

As a black-led initiative, the ELITE program provides appropriate and informed training to its staff and interns. Programs are more effective when delivered by staff who reflect the identities of the intended target group. In the case of ELITE, Black staff and instructors act as role models, advocates, and mentors. As a Black-led initiative, the program staff's awareness of the ongoing issues and their contact with the Black community enabled appropriate program adjustment and solutions to the needs voiced by students through a feedback loop.

Why It Matters

The Black population in Canada is diverse and growing, reporting more than 200 ethnic or cultural origins in 2016. By 2041, it is expected that the Black population in Canada will exceed 3 million. Black people in Canada continue to experience widespread systemic anti-Black racism in our education systems and labour market, and more needs to be done to name and address anti-Black racism in the skills ecosystem, including efforts to make educational institutions and workplaces more inclusive.

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

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

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

► What's Next

ELITE continues to operate at the University of Alberta. Looking to the future, ELITE staff are excited to continue their partnership with the DiscoverE Program to provide Black elementary-aged youth with opportunities to explore the world of STEM. This early intervention is key to building a sustainable and comprehensive pipeline into STEM for Black youth. The project staff are also committed to continued investments in research. Insights from quantitative and qualitative research studies conducted on the Program and its impact in Black communities and broader society will have applications not only for the improvement of the ELITE Program but also for other similar initiatives, contributing to knowledge mobilization around training and development of Black youth across Canada.



State of Skills: Enhancing career prospects and well-being for Canadian youth

Across a range of FSC-funded projects, we explored how to improve the long-term career prospects of Canadian youth and their well-being, while stimulating economic growth and fostering social inclusion. Projects investigated what measures are needed to promote the full and effective participation of youth in training, education and employment.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

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

How to Cite This Report

Boskov, S. and McDonough, L. (2025). Project Insights Report: Experiential Learning in Innovation, Technology, and Entrepreneurship (ELITE) Program for Black Youth, University of Alberta. Toronto: Future Skills Centre. <https://fsc-ccf.ca/projects/elite-program/>

Funded by the
Government of Canada's
Future Skills Program



Experiential Learning in Innovation, Technology, and Entrepreneurship (ELITE) Program for Black Youth is funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program. The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

© Copyright 2026 – Future Skills Centre / Centre des Compétences futures