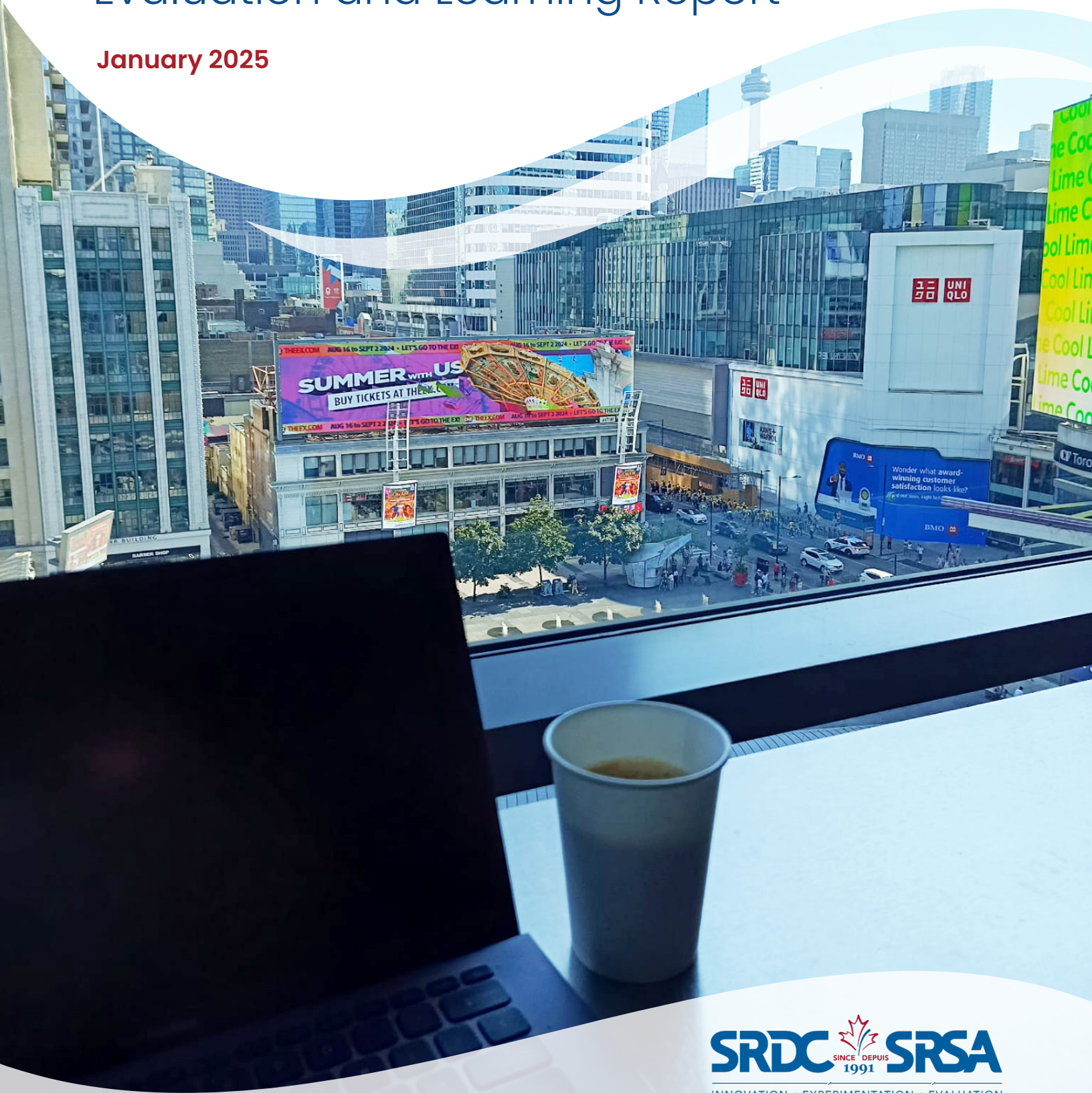


# DMZ Newcomer Entrepreneurship Program: Evaluation and Learning Report

January 2025



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

FSC is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure, and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead. The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint ADE, and Signal49 Research.

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



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# Executive Summary

## Project Objectives, Activities, and Anticipated Outcomes

Many newcomers in Canada seek entrepreneurship as an alternative career path due to systemic barriers to traditional employment such as bias and discrimination. Yet, several key challenges remain, including lack of access to mentors, resources, and relevant cultural experience. The Newcomer Entrepreneurship Program (NEP) at DMZ is a specialized training program that creates opportunities for newcomers to launch their startup business ideas.

Grounded in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, the NEP supports newcomers' individual goals for entrepreneurship by inviting them to select the unique combination of program activities most relevant to them, resulting in an experience fully customized to their specific needs. Program activities included access to mentors and Experts-in-Residence, social and networking events, online and in-person workshops, conferences, and co-working spaces.

From June to September 2024, 43 participants enrolled in Phase 2 of the NEP. By the end of the program, DMZ anticipated that participants would be satisfied with the NEP and related career advancement opportunities, experience meaningful connections in the program, and develop their soft skills. The anticipated longer-term outcomes include an increased rate of start-ups being launched.

## Methodology

The Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) conducted the NEP mixed-methods evaluation. This consisted of administrative data and document analysis, a retrospective participant survey, Photovoice (a qualitative participatory data collection method), and an in-depth interview with NEP program mentors. All evaluation activities were voluntary; between 2-24 individuals contributed to each data collection activity (excluding document review).

## Outcomes and Findings

Data from all activities were triangulated and analyzed, with the primary findings organized around five core themes:

### **1. Tailored Supports Positively Impact Newcomers**

NEP's 'a la carte' approach enabled participants to select the options that were most relevant to them, a process that was facilitated by mentorship. Rather than emphasizing specific skill gains, the self-directed and experiential nature of the NEP allowed participants to apply the skills they already had and build valuable local connections.

### **2. Mentorship Helps Catalyze Newcomer Skills Development**

In addition to helping participants navigate the NEP, mentors helped newcomers progress towards their goals, supported their skill development, and provided them with useful professional connections. Program mentors described the personal connection and similar lived experiences as essential elements of customized supports for newcomers, noting that the typical 'one-size-fits-all' approach to skills development programs overlooks the ongoing and systemic challenges that newcomers face.

### **3. Comprehensive Training Supports Newcomer Integration**

Targeted feedback and support based on participants' specific needs helped them launch their startups and integrate into the Canadian labour market. NEP participants described enrolling in the program to learn more about the local entrepreneurial ecosystem and make industry connections. They appreciated how the depth and breadth of NEP offerings allowed them to quickly gain exposure to many different aspects of Canadian business culture.

#### **4. Safer Spaces and Relevant Connections Can Turn Skills into Experience and Opportunity**

While the NEP contributed to communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills, participants and mentors agreed that what newcomers typically lack is relevant experience, opportunity, and connections. By providing experiential, hands-on opportunities to practice their abilities in a supportive environment, the NEP supported newcomers' personal and professional development. Participants reported that having space to invest in themselves and their ideas was one of the big impacts of the program.

#### **5. Inclusive Entrepreneurship Programs Recognize Structural Barriers**

The NEP helped newcomers navigate systemic barriers by offering free or low-cost services and access to resources such as conferences. Most survey respondents agreed that the NEP felt inclusive, and the mentors identified some strategies to improve inclusive program design, such as financial incentives and peer-to-peer sessions.

## **Recommendations, Implications, Next Steps**

Multiple data sources converged on the finding that tailored, individualized programs like the NEP support newcomers in their entrepreneurial journey. Such programs invite participants to progress through the program in their own way, promoting an active, experiential process that also supports newcomer integration and skills development. Mentorship emerged as an essential element of the NEP, partly because of its role in creating a tailored training experience.

Thus, service providers and funders are encouraged to actively involve newcomers in program design and incorporate flexible, strengths-based measures of success rather than pre-defined individual outcomes. Low- or no-cost programs that account for personal, environmental, and social context promote inclusion. By addressing the basic needs of newcomers, tailored programs are accessible to a broader range of audiences at various points in their integration into the Canadian labour market.

# Introduction

## Background

Addressing the complexities of immigrant employment and integration involves a vast range of approaches, which governments, employers, and policy-makers across Canada have been refining over many years. These approaches include various initiatives such as language training, bridging programs for foreign credentials, and career services to help immigrants successfully enter the labour market.

Despite these efforts, many challenges remain for newcomers seeking employment, including bureaucratic hurdles, discrimination and bias, and difficulties with social and professional integration in Canada. This is one explanation for why many newcomers turn to entrepreneurship as an alternative to continuously striving (and often failing) to overcome barriers to traditional career paths in Canada.

Yet within Canada's entrepreneurship ecosystem, newcomers lack several key resources to turn their business ideas into reality, despite typically being highly skilled academically and technically. These include:

- Lack of access to mentors, who can support newcomers in developing key entrepreneurship skills and building startup careers in Canada.
- Lack of access to assets to turn their entrepreneurial dreams into reality.
- Lack of understanding of how to effectively navigate the local competitive entrepreneurship ecosystem / labour market.

In a recent study, 78% of immigrant entrepreneurs reported needing help to start their business, yet less than 10% of them had accessed formal support (Diversity Institute, 2017)<sup>1</sup>. This shows that targeted and accessible programs for skills development and networking are important for newcomers to Canada. They can help newcomers bridge the perceived "experience gap", a barrier to accessing opportunities, resources, and funding for aspiring entrepreneurs with no prior Canadian experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Diversity Institute. (2017). Immigrant Entrepreneurship: Barriers and Facilitators to Growth. Retrieved from [https://www.torontomu.ca/diversity/reports/immigrant\\_entrepreneurship/](https://www.torontomu.ca/diversity/reports/immigrant_entrepreneurship/)

## Program Description

To address these gaps, DMZ developed programs to increase opportunities for newcomer entrepreneurs under five years in Canada looking to develop a tech-based company. DMZ offers specialized entrepreneurship training programs, provides access to mentorship, creates opportunities for participants to connect with potential investors, and supplies resources to help newcomers launch their startup companies. Each program participant chooses the combination of activities to participate in based on the stage they have reached in their entrepreneurship journey.

Building on Phase 1 of the Newcomer Entrepreneurship Program (NEP), created to build effective new training programs for newcomers with entrepreneurial aspirations, Phase 2 aimed to maximize knowledge mobilization opportunities. In this phase, DMZ prioritized the generation of strategic insights and collection of feedback from industry experts and NEP participants, to expand the impact and scope of the program.

## Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Reconciliation (EDI&R)

To address the issues newcomers face in finding employment in Canada, NEP has set three key EDI&R priorities to support their entrepreneurial ambitions:

1. Support newcomers' individual goals for entrepreneurship as an alternative to traditional career paths, which often have invisible barriers to entry;
2. Encourage and prioritize input from newcomers of diverse backgrounds to customize NEP programming to ensure inclusive and relevant programming; and
3. Within NEP cohorts, prioritize representation of newcomers from underrepresented groups (i.e., women & racialized individuals).

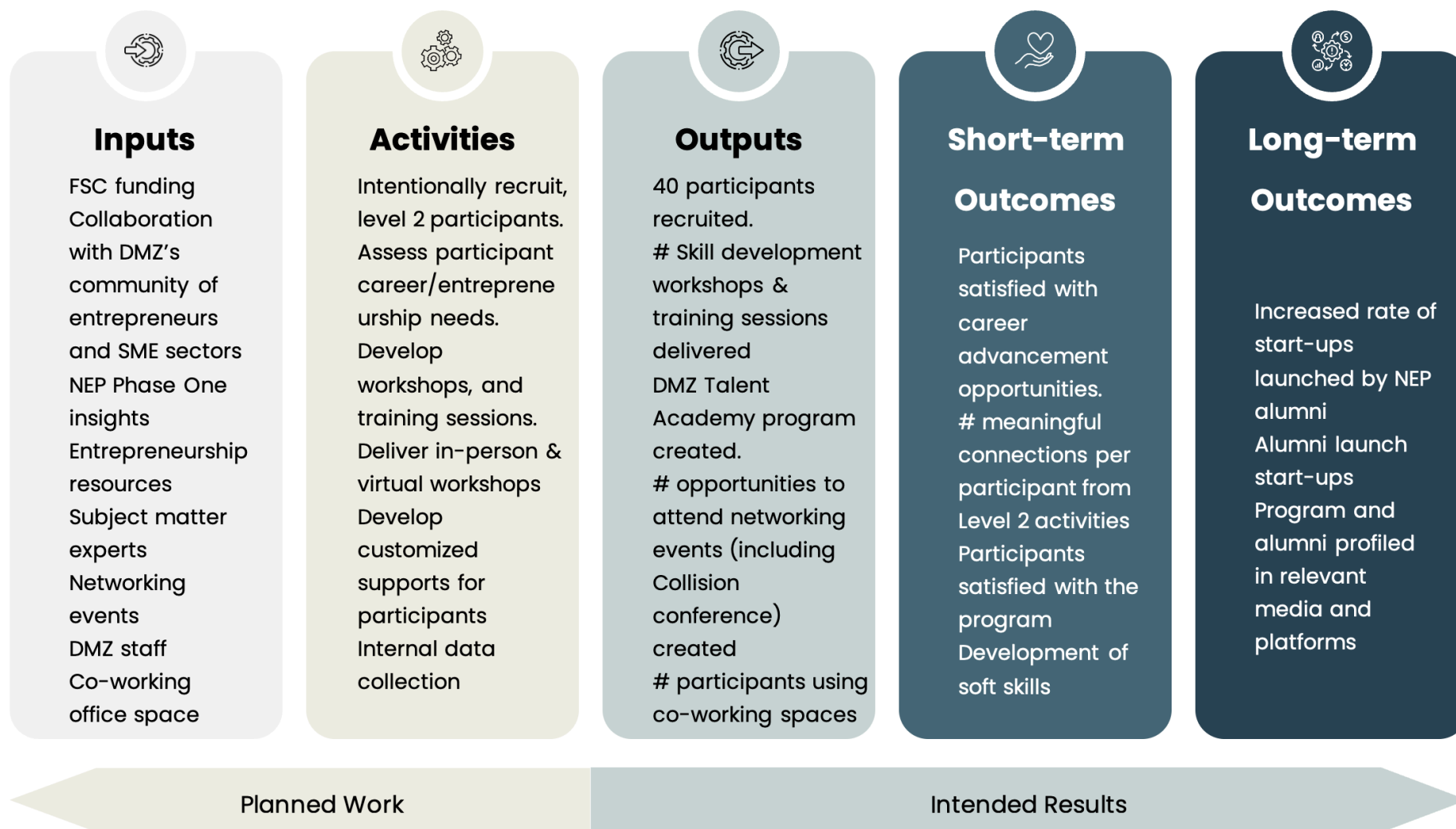
Ensuring the necessary resources for EDI&R commitments is an ongoing process. One of the ways the NEP commits to creating a more equitable and diverse program for future cohorts is by incorporating insights from complementary EDI&R initiatives at DMZ (e.g., specific incubation programs for women, Black-identified founders, and Indigenous Peoples).

## Logic Model

Interventions are designed to bring about changes in the world around us. These change pathways are often represented visually in a “Theory of Change” or “Logic Model” to describe the relationships between inputs, activities, and results (outputs, outcomes, and impacts). They present the changes the project is trying to bring about and describe the pathways by which the project interventions are assumed to bring about this change. They also consider and explain the assumptions or necessary conditions that are integral to understanding how the anticipated change should occur.

The logic model for Phase 2 of the NEP, or Level Up, appears in Figure 1. Planned Work represents the inputs and activities identified at the beginning of the project, in April 2024. The main program activities included DMZ workshops focusing on key skills; DMZ Talent Academy intensive programming designed to provide a deeper understanding of business and entrepreneurship; exclusive access to premier tech events; personalized mentorship; and a co-working space. Anticipated main outputs included successful implementation of the program with approximately 40 newcomer entrepreneurs, each of whom may take a slightly different path through the program based on their unique situation. Intended outcomes were divided into those intended to be achieved by the end of the evaluation period (short-term outcomes) and longer-term outcomes beyond the six-month funding period. By the end of the program, DMZ anticipated that participants would be satisfied with the NEP and related career advancement opportunities, experience meaningful connections in the program, and develop their soft skills. Longer-term outcomes included an increased rate of start-ups launched.

Figure 1 Level Up Logic Model



# Evaluation Scope and Methodology

SRDC was contracted as a third-party evaluation and learning partner to manage the evaluation of Phase 2. SRDC and DMZ collaborated to create learning goals and data collection tools, as well as discuss ongoing evaluation activities. In early May 2024, they developed an evaluation plan to answer five evaluation and learning questions.

## Evaluation and Learning Questions

Project Evaluation & Learning Questions:

1. How can targeted programs positively impact entrepreneurship opportunities for newcomers, while also providing relevant additional training in applicable skills for the Canadian labour market? (e.g., sector-specific skills and soft skills)
2. In what ways can mentorship and peer support within the entrepreneurship community catalyze the professional development of newcomers?
3. Can we enhance and/or accelerate the integration of newcomers in Canada through entrepreneurship training & the launch of startup companies?
4. What practices are needed to serve the skills development needs of diverse and vulnerable populations, including newcomers and other underrepresented groups?
5. How can we develop more inclusive entrepreneurship programs that recognize and address the impact of bias, discrimination, and systemic barriers?

FSC Strategic Thematic Question (Inclusive Economy):

1. Canadian Work Experience / Soft Skills: How can we more quickly enable newcomers to acquire or translate the transferable skill sets (e.g., soft skills) associated with successful integration and advancement in the Canadian workplace context?

## Evaluation Design

### Methodology and Data Sources

The overall evaluation design included:

- Administrative data (relevant program data, routinely collected for operational purposes – e.g. number of program participants, number of networking events, etc.).
- Document review (documents from NEP phase 1, relevant to answering the learning questions).
- Retrospective end of program participant survey (quantitative), including measures of soft skills, mentorship, peer support, participant satisfaction and perceived value.
- Photovoice, a qualitative, participatory data collection and analysis method, capturing the outcomes of participants in their own voices, through use of photos and short narratives.
- In-depth key informant interview (KII) with program mentors to provide a well-rounded perspective on the impact of the program on newcomer entrepreneurship and integration.

This mixed methods design was based on participants reflecting retrospectively on how participation in Level Up had prepared them for their entrepreneurship journey, as well as DMZ staff reflections from NEP phases 1 & 2.

## Overview of the Photovoice Process

This project's use of Photovoice consisted of three general phases: orientation, photography, and discussion.

**Orientation:** In July 2024, participants in the Newcomer Entrepreneurship Program were invited to a Photovoice orientation session, hosted online by SRDC. During the 60-minute session, the Photovoice method and basic photography techniques were reviewed, the framing questions for the project (see appendix A) were introduced, and the ethics of taking photos were discussed.

**Photography:** Over the following four weeks, participants took photographs in response to the framing questions and developed titles and short narratives to accompany them, which were submitted to SRDC online.

**Discussion:** In September 2024, participants in the program joined a discussion group facilitated by SRDC to discuss their photos, narratives and associated NEP learnings.

The evaluation used different data sources to answer each of the learning questions, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Evaluation Matrix

Learning Questions	Data Sources				
	Document Review	Admin Data (n=24)	Post-Survey (n=21)	Photovoice (n=2)	Kills (n=2)
1. How can targeted programs positively impact entrepreneurship opportunities for newcomers, while also providing relevant additional training in applicable skills for the Canadian labour market?	✓		✓	✓	✓
2. In what ways can mentorship and peer support within the entrepreneurship community catalyze the professional development of newcomers?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3. Can we enhance and/or accelerate the integration of newcomers in Canada through entrepreneurship training & the launch of startup companies?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4. What practices are needed to serve the skills development needs of diverse and vulnerable populations, including newcomers and other underrepresented groups?	✓		✓	✓	✓
5. How can we develop more inclusive entrepreneurship programs that recognize and address the impact of bias, discrimination, and systemic barriers?	✓		✓		✓
<b>Canadian Work Experience / Soft Skills:</b>  How can we more quickly enable newcomers to acquire or translate the transferable skill sets (e.g., soft skills) associated with successful integration and advancement in the Canadian workplace context?			✓	✓	✓

This mixed methods impact evaluation largely employs a retrospective design to reduce burden on participants. Additionally, SRDC incorporated an EDI&R lens to inform the evaluation and learning design, tool development and data analysis. By design, this project already has an equity and inclusion focus by addressing the needs of newcomers to Canada, an equity deserving group, which also naturally includes other equity deserving groups such as (but not limited to) women, ethnic, religious, and language minorities. While the evaluation was designed to capture diverse perspectives, disaggregated analyses were not feasible due to the limited number of participants in the evaluation.

## **Limitations and Assumptions**

Potential limitations of this design include the non-experimental design, potential for low survey response rates, need to have access to technology to participate in the evaluation (internet accessibility and hardware, phone with a camera, etc.), recall bias and selection bias.

Mitigation strategies included administering the survey just once, keeping the survey short (less than 10 minutes), offering an incentive to participate in the evaluation, and the relatively short timeframe in between completing the program and participating in the evaluation.

Additionally, highly customized programs such as the NEP can present a challenge for evaluators because each participant has a different experience. While this is typically highly beneficial in terms of individual experiences, it presents a methodological challenge to connect specific outcomes to specific program activities. Additionally, what constitutes a positive outcome is likely to differ from person to person, which may make overall outcomes more difficult to detect. It also may be harder to generalize findings to inform optimal design for future programming.

## Findings

From June to September 2024, 43 newcomers participated in the NEP. Each participant selected program activities that addressed their specific needs. Based on application form data from 24 of the participants, n=13 had an existing business upon entering the NEP, while n=10 had a business idea. By the end of the program, there was a similar ratio with n=9 having an existing business and an additional n=9 having a business idea. The status of the remaining 19 participants who did not complete surveys were not recorded.

Meeting with mentors was a common program activity, with n=49 meetings (across the 43 newcomer participants) occurring throughout the NEP. Ten Experts-in-Residence sessions took place throughout the program, and n=23 participants used the co-working spaces at least once.

Participation in online workshops ranged from 26 to 40 per cent of participants depending on the type of workshop. In-person events were well-attended, with between 25 to 37 NEP participants joining key events such as the high-profile Collision Conference, which welcomed over 35,000 attendees.

Based on observations DMZ made after Phase 1 of NEP, they expected newcomers' needs to be determined by their previous experience and other responsibilities in addition to their business. As several participants had already attended the program in Phase 1, they were expected to be at a later stage in developing their companies than new participants. Another learning from past programs was that additional responsibilities could severely impact participants' capacity to attend courses and meetings with mentors. To address these issues in Phase 2, DMZ developed more program features that supported both the business and personal development of the participants to provide a smoother transition into Canada and the business culture. One key feature in this phase was providing each participant with a mentor, whom they met with regularly to help participants focus their time and energy on courses and activities that were the most relevant for helping them achieve their current goals. Another feature was the 'à la carte' approach to the NEP, which allowed participants to select the options most relevant to them and invest their time as they saw fit, rather than requiring them to adhere rigidly to a pre-determined program schedule.

Below, we review the answers to the key evaluation questions, bringing together data from the post-program survey, mentor interviews, administrative data, and Photovoice.

## Tailored Supports Positively Impact Newcomers

The first evaluation question explored the mechanisms by which targeted programs impact entrepreneurship and skills training opportunities for newcomers. The main activities available through NEP were workshops, social events, networking events, mentorship, experts-in-residence, and the co-working space. Most survey respondents reported participation in 'some' of each type of program activity. At least one participant rated each of the six activities as contributing 'very much' to building their communication, problem solving, and teamwork skills, suggesting that all activities were relevant to at least some participants.

Given the a la carte approach, our analysis does not attempt to identify specific practices that lead to positive outcomes; instead, participants were asked to assess the program as a whole, and to comment on the extent to which the program helped them progress towards their own goals. Overall, 20/20 survey respondents said that the NEP helped them progress in their professional development (n=12 'somewhat' and n=8 'very much'). When asked about their biggest accomplishments, respondents mentioned networking (n=6), their business or business idea (n=5), gaining confidence (n=4) and effective communication (n=3), again suggesting that measuring success in only one of these areas would not be relevant for the majority of participants. Progress of the other 23 participants not completing the survey is not known.

One mechanism for providing targeted supports for newcomers was through mentorship, the benefits of which are explored further in the next evaluation question. NEP participants were assigned one of two program mentors and encouraged to meet with them throughout the program to seek individualized advice about the program and their business idea. Participants noted that customized support that was relevant to their unique situation allowed them to move beyond understanding 'what' to do into understanding how to move forward. The mentors were instrumental in helping participants identify which specific courses, topics and activities would be the most useful in addressing the goals and needs they had. In addition, mentors helped direct participants to additional resources beyond the courses to address specific questions, such as legal advice, registering a business and filing taxes.

For one Photovoice participant, this was exemplified through the following photo:



*“This image represents more than just participation in a conference; it symbolizes the journey of turning big dreams into reality. Holding the unicorn, often associated with highly successful startups valued at over a billion dollars, reflects my aspirations and the endless possibilities that the Newcomer Entrepreneurship Program has opened up for me. It’s a reminder that with the right support and environment, newcomers like myself can also aspire to make a significant impact in the tech world.”*

— Photovoice participant

**Photo 1:** Stepping into the Future:  
From Zero to Unicorn!

The participant providing the above photo described attending the Collision conference as a highlight of NEP. At Collision and through the program, the participant received individual support, information, encouragement, and mentorship. They described the NEP as a ‘game changer’ in terms of establishing their startup for the Canadian market. Rather than focusing on them gaining specific skills, the experiential and hands-on nature of the NEP allowed them to apply the skills they already had and build valuable local connections.

## Mentorship Helps Catalyze Newcomer Development

The second evaluation question asked how mentorship and peer support impacted the professional development of newcomers. While the NEP was less focused on peer support, mentorship emerged as a strong facilitator of newcomer development.

The post-program survey suggested that in-person and interpersonal program activities were quite popular, with 20 of 21 respondents engaging in networking events, 18/21 engaging in 1:1 mentorship support and 17/21 engaging in social events. Only 12 reported making use of the co-working space. One survey respondent suggested that more socialization would be valuable:

*“If it’s possible to do so in the future, there should be a heavier focus on in-person events and meetups because a lot of the value for newcomers and immigrants is to socialize, make new connections and generally learn from each other. The first newcomers program I went through did that component really well. This one was much more informational more than anything.”*

– Survey respondent

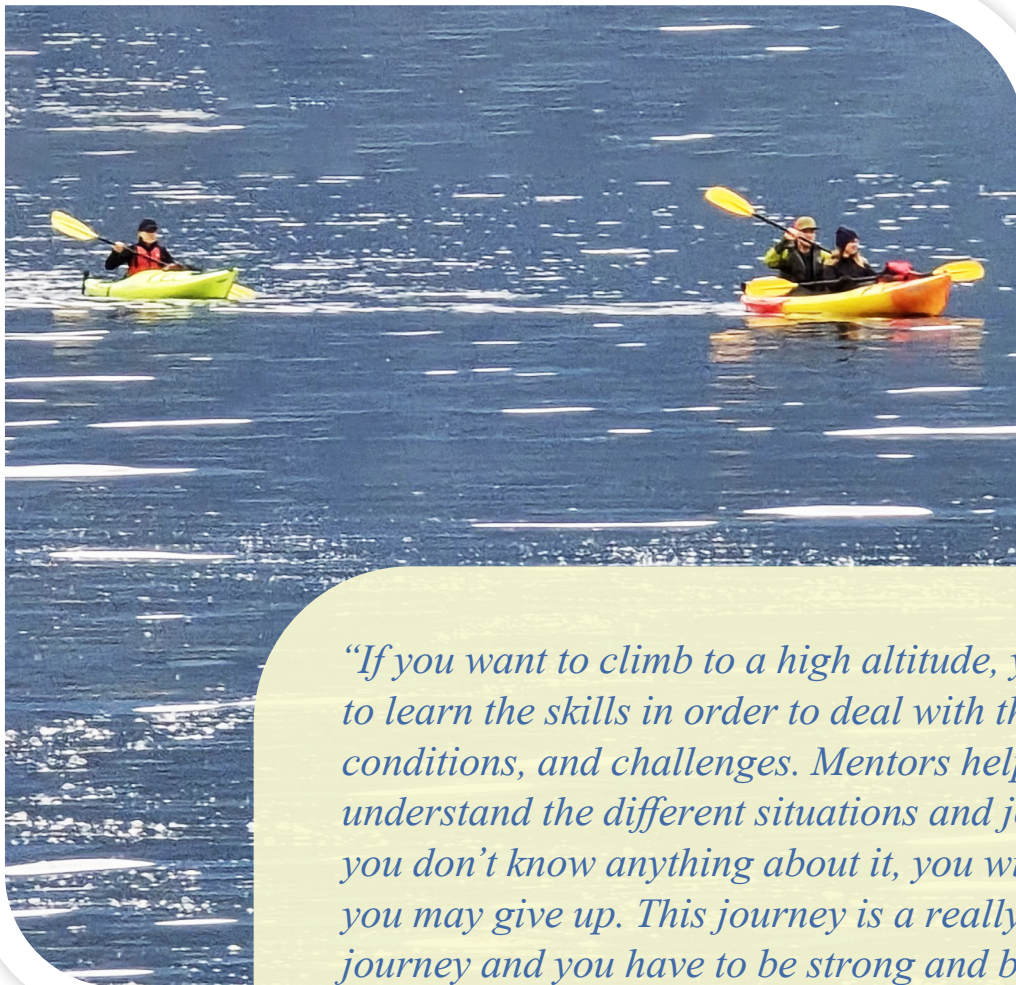
Of the 17 respondents who provided feedback on 1:1 mentorship, most agreed that it helped them progress towards their goals (n=15), supported skill development (n=14), and provided useful professional connections (n=14).

In a joint KII, the two program mentors described their role in providing one-on-one customized support to participants based on their unique circumstances. For example, they had helped participants to:

- navigate the NEP by recommending specific workshops and events;
- develop their business idea by providing relevant suggestions and feedback;
- make connections by introducing them to colleagues and other industry professionals; and
- build their confidence by offering encouragement and empathy.

Mentors described resilience, negotiation, communication, and networking as essential skills for newcomers, which they focused on helping participants further develop. They noted that newcomers frequently display much 'grit' in the face of adversity when settling in a new country. Mentors felt that sharing a similar lived experience helped them understand participants' needs and to act as "bridges", connecting newcomers to relevant resources.

A Photovoice participant further described the value of mentors in the program as follows:



*“If you want to climb to a high altitude, you have to learn the skills in order to deal with the climate, conditions, and challenges. Mentors help you to understand the different situations and journey. If you don’t know anything about it, you will be lost and you may give up. This journey is a really challenging journey and you have to be strong and be equipped with the mental and physical knowledge.”*

**Photo 2:**  
Mentorship in Action

– Photovoice participant

## Comprehensive Training Supports Newcomer Integration

The next evaluation question reflects on activities that support or accelerate the integration of newcomers in Canada through entrepreneurship training. As noted above, this evaluation did not have the benefit of a comparison group, so we are unable to make claims about the speed at which NEP participants integrated to Canada or launched startups compared to a similar group of peers who were not supported through the NEP. Nonetheless, we saw evidence of targeted feedback and support based on the specific needs of each individual helping NEP participants to find their footing and launch their startups.

Making industry connections emerged as the second most commonly reported reason for joining the NEP (n=13), just behind learning about the Canadian entrepreneurship ecosystem (n=14). One survey respondent requested even more targeted activities:

*“If a program can be organized where newcomers or early entrepreneurs can make connections with investors, (it) would be better.”*

– Survey respondent

Nineteen of twenty survey respondents agreed that the NEP helped them integrate as a newcomer (n=11 ‘somewhat’, n=8 ‘very much’, and n=1 ‘don’t know/prefer not to say’).

Photovoice participants described the value of NEP as allowing them to quickly learn many different aspects of the Canadian culture by gaining multiple perspectives:



**Photo 3:**  
Business from  
All Angles

*“Each seat represents a different hat or skill, like sales, marketing, product – and we can look at one problem from different angles. One person should be cross functional, and see all challenges from the different aspects and from the different skills. The NEP allowed me to shift between these roles and gain valuable insights that I wouldn’t have had access to otherwise. This experience was not just about learning one aspect of business but about understanding how each part fits together to form the bigger picture. The program’s focus on adaptability and perspective really helped me see my entrepreneurial journey in a new light.”*

– Photovoice participant

## Safer Spaces and Relevant Connections Can Turn Skills into Experience and Opportunity

The fourth evaluation question explores practices that serve the skills development needs of newcomers. However, as noted by the mentors, newcomers to Canada are typically highly skilled; what they lack is relevant experience, opportunity, and connections in Canada. This was validated in the reasons participants gave for joining the NEP noted above (learning about the Canadian ecosystem and making industry connections, both more commonly noted than skills development). For example, when survey respondents were asked to what extent the NEP contributed to their skills, the item “I am better at taking on a leadership role” produced the strongest agreement, suggesting that the opportunity to practice their abilities in a supportive environment was more valuable than specific skill development. Similarly, mentors noted that increasing in-person connections and giving participants a friendly, low-stakes environment in which to develop their business idea/pitch were valuable practices.

One Photovoice participant described the NEP as allowing time for self-discovery, reflection, and clarity. Once again, this supports the notion that entrepreneurship programs for newcomers don't need a heavy focus on skills development, but rather personal and professional development, allowing newcomers the space to invest in themselves and their ideas.



**Photo 4:** Climbing Towards Clarity – Gaining Knowledge, Finding My Path

*“The stairs represent the journey I’ve taken since joining the Newcomer Entrepreneurship Program (NEP). Each step symbolizes the courses, workshops, and mentorship that have elevated my skills and broadened my perspective. As I climb higher, I move away from the crowded, everyday challenges and distractions, gaining clarity and finding my unique path forward. The NEP has provided me with a structured roadmap, helping me ascend to new heights in my entrepreneurial journey with a clearer vision and stronger foundation.”*

– Photovoice participant

Nonetheless, all 20 survey respondents agreed that NEP contributed to their skills development (n=11 'somewhat' and n=9 'very much'). Mentorship and experts-in-residence were noted as the most influential activities contributing to skills development. Additionally, as described above, the 'a la carte' approach of NEP centred inclusion by meeting newcomers where they were at, allowing each participant to build on their unique skills.

## Inclusive Entrepreneurship Programs Recognize Structural Barriers

The final evaluation question asks how entrepreneurship programs can be more inclusive and recognize barriers such as bias and discrimination. Survey data suggests that the NEP represents a good model for inclusive entrepreneurship programs – 17/20 respondents agreed that the NEP felt inclusive to them (with the remaining n=3 replying 'don't know / prefer not to say').

Specifically, respondents identified that NEP helped address systemic barriers by offering free or low-cost services, including covering the registration fee for the Collision conference. Additionally, when asked to what extent the NEP reduced discrimination and bias often faced by newcomers, the modal response was 'very much'.

A Photovoice participant provided an example of a specific barrier or challenge that the program helped them overcome. They described the professional communication course as helpful to understanding different cultural backgrounds and avoiding common mistakes. They further identified the course as contributing to their proficiency in negotiating to get what they want.

Photo 5: Overcoming Barriers Together



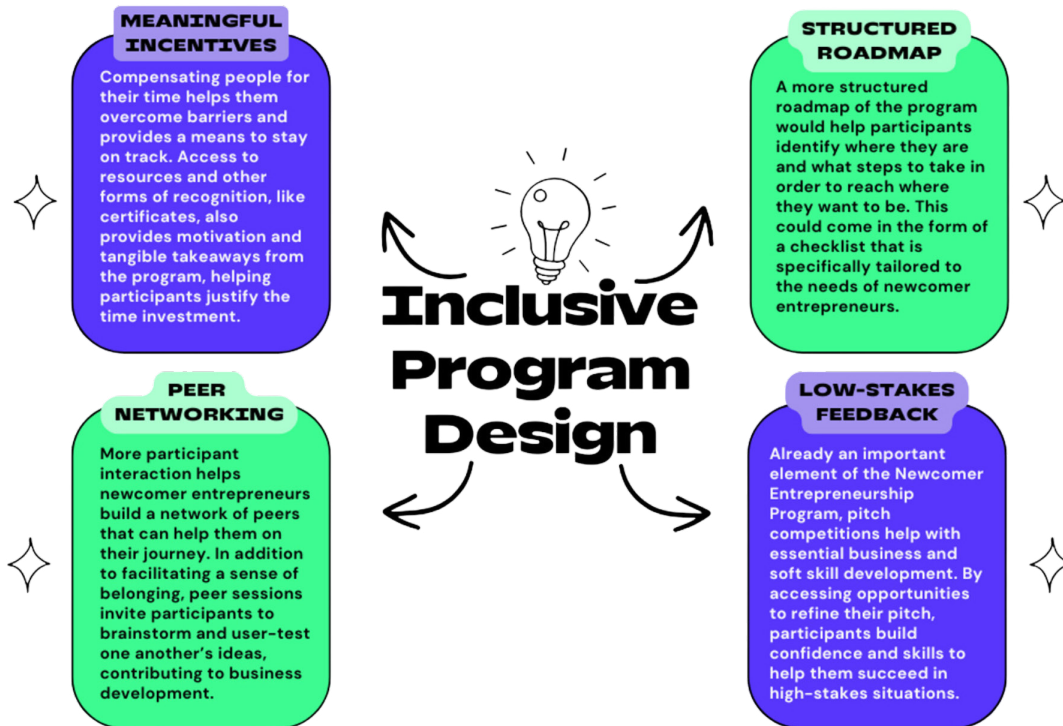
*“My experience with the Newcomer Entrepreneur Program has been like standing at the edge of a new world, with mentors and peers providing the support to help me see beyond the barriers. Without their guidance, it would have been hard to fully understand the opportunities that lie ahead or how to navigate the complexities of the business landscape in a new country. NEP gave me the tools to look beyond the limitations and obstacles, showing me that with support, it’s possible to find new perspectives and paths forward.”*

– Photovoice participant

Mentors identified the following ways that programs for entrepreneurs can be more inclusive, summarized below in Figure 2:

- **Incentives** to help keep participants motivated and able to address the challenges posed by devoting so much time to the program. This could include a grant at the end of the program to help with setup costs, a certificate or competition that shows their achievement, and/or legal clinics that can provide specific advice when participants cannot afford a lawyer. Mentors shared how setup fees are many and often present barriers to newcomers and suggest that *“a grant, no matter how small, \$4000 or \$5000,”* to offset registration and accounting costs could be a significant boost.
- **A structured roadmap/syllabus** of the program that helps newcomers identify all the “little” tasks they must do to launch their business. Similar checklists exist already, but not tailored to the needs of newcomers, who may need to obtain a SIM card and credit card, for example. Such a project management tool would help newcomers identify where they were in relation to where they would like to be, and the steps they would need to take to achieve their goals.
- **Peer-to-peer sessions** to build community and allow participants to help test one another’s applications. This was identified as a commonly overlooked need, as Canadian-born entrepreneurs often already have a network of peers to help with user-testing. Having meet-and-greet sessions would help newcomer entrepreneurs overcome the barrier of not having an established network in Canada and would facilitate connection between like-minded individuals.
- Continue with live-action **DMZ pitch simulator** experiences that allows participants to refine their pitch and get low-stakes, friendly feedback on the spot. Mentors described pitch competitions as relatively infrequent, so continuous access was noted as valuable to both perfecting their pitch and helping to build confidence.

Figure 2 Suggestions to Increase Inclusivity in Programs for Newcomer Entrepreneurs



## Conclusions

Phase 2 of DMZ's Newcomer Entrepreneurship Program was intended to help newcomers overcome barriers to employment by providing a specialized training program with access to mentorship and entrepreneurial opportunities. Program data suggests that participants entered the NEP from a range of starting points and chose the combination of activities that they felt were most relevant to their unique circumstances.

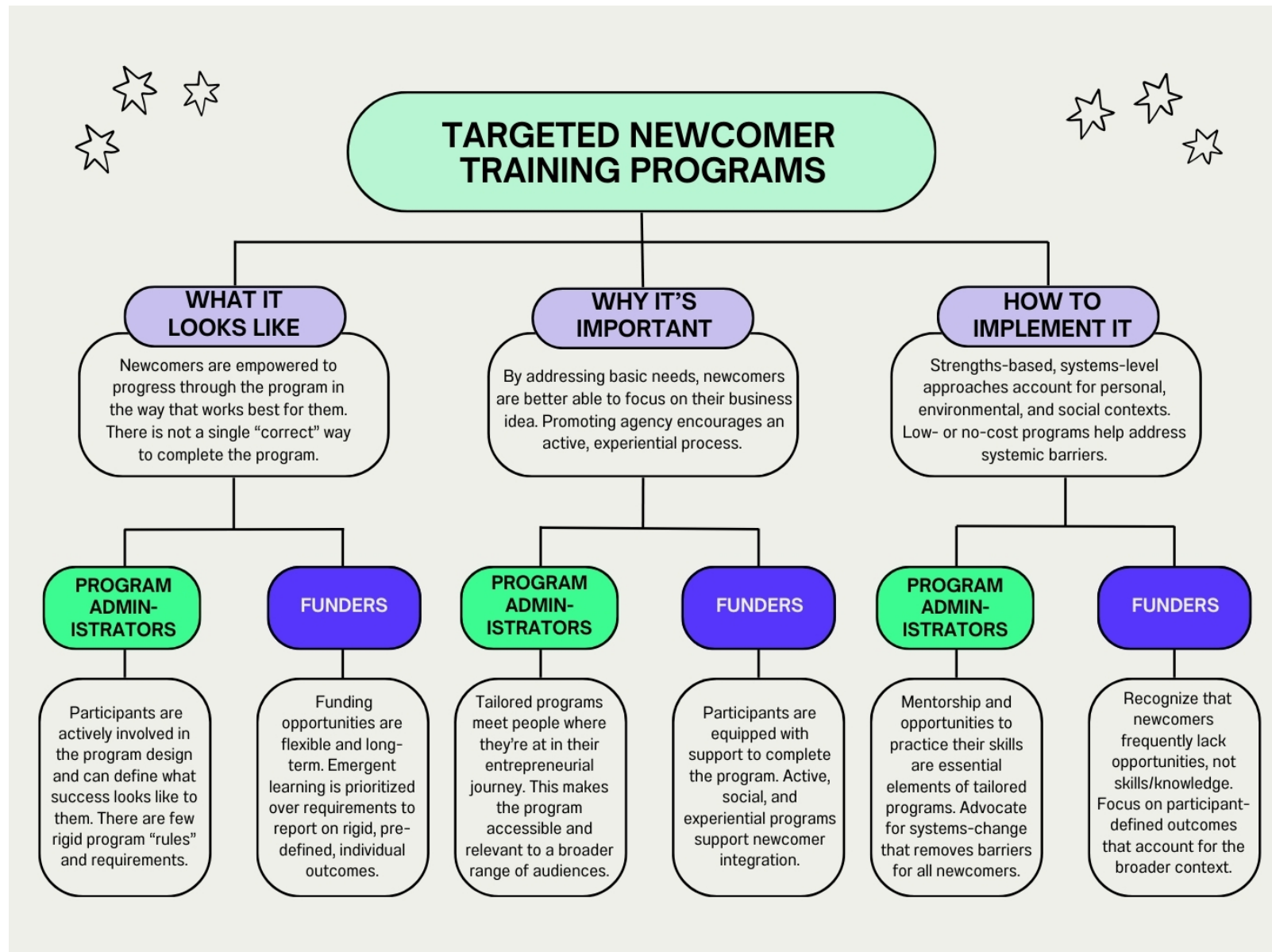
The anticipated short-term outcomes from the NEP logic model and observed results are summarized in Table 2. NEP achieved the intended short-term outcomes.

**Table 2 Intended and Actual Short-Term Outcomes**

Intended Outcomes	Results	Description
Participants satisfied with career advancement opportunities	✓	All survey respondents agreed that NEP helped them progress in their professional development, and most agreed that it helped them advance in their career.
# meaningful connections per participant from Level 2 activities	✓	While the number of connections per participant was not assessed, survey respondents reported connecting with mentors, experts-in-residence, and peers through networking opportunities during the NEP.
Participants satisfied with the program	✓	All aspects of the NEP were highly rated among those who accessed them and responded to the survey.
Development of soft skills	✓	Most survey respondents reported improving their communication, problem-solving, and teamwork skills as a result of participating in the NEP.

Multiple data sources point to the importance of individualized, targeted programming over a generic ‘one-size-fits-all’ as key to the NEP’s success. Program administrators, mentors, and participants all agreed that the NEP’s ‘a la carte’ approach enabled participants to select which activities were most relevant to them. This meant participants could be strategic and invest their time as they saw fit. This empowered participants to take an active role in their program progress and supported them to achieve their version of success rather than meet pre-defined outcomes or success metrics. Newcomers are by nature a diverse group with multiple intersecting identities, strengths, needs, and goals. **Tailored supports that consider each individual and their context are thus highly effective.**

Figure 3 Summary of Recommendations Related to Tailored Supports for Newcomers



Additionally, individualized programming was noted as a way of supporting integration, promoting inclusion, and serving skills development needs of newcomers, all of which were relevant to the NEP. The ability to iterate in a supportive learning environment allowed participants the opportunity to practice their skills and perfect them for when the stakes were higher.

Mentorship emerged as an essential element of the NEP and specifically as a way to provide tailored, personalized supports. Mentors helped participants navigate and make the most of the NEP, as well as connected with participants on an individual level, providing support, confidence, and relevant industry connections.

Removing financial and time barriers (which are often features of skills development programs) were also essential elements of the NEP. Mentors described taking a person-first approach and acknowledging that basic needs like child care and reliable income can deter newcomers from pursuing entrepreneurship and training programs. Although the NEP was not always able to address such barriers, recognizing them and developing realistic goals helped program participants feel heard and supported. Implications for service providers and policy makers are summarized in Figure 3.

A common challenge with individualized programming, which was also noted in this evaluation, is the difficulty in assessing outcomes. This is in part because each participant accesses different aspects of the program and in part because meaningful outcomes can take longer to observe than the typical project funding period. Also program size tends to be modest, which limits the power of an evaluation to attribute outcomes to the program with confidence. Tailored approaches can be difficult to deliver at a large scale – which makes generalizing for replication and scaling challenging. Indeed, while the evaluation plan for this project was ambitious, recruiting evaluation participants was challenging, likely because newcomer entrepreneurs are incredibly busy people. Flexibility and meaningful compensation for participating in evaluation activities is recommended, along with an understanding that success in such a program will look different and take place over a different time frame for each person. An evaluation focused on pre-determined individual outcomes (such as particular skills or knowledge gains) is unlikely to yield significant positive results even in highly effective customized programs.

Importantly, the NEP aligned with a strengths-based approach to newcomer entrepreneurship training. DMZ recognized that newcomers faced systemic barriers; the challenge was thus not primarily a lack of skills but a lack of equal opportunity and access. This sits uneasily with an evaluation focus on skills development. Future evaluations would add more insight by shifting focus from individual skills gains, which can imply that the challenges faced by newcomers would be solved by further skills training, to how well entrepreneurs are equipped and supported to leverage their existing skills.

## APPENDIX A

# Framing Questions

Five framing questions were developed by SRDC researchers. These questions were designed to guide the reflections of the participants about their experiences in the Newcomer Entrepreneurship Program.

### What picture would you take to...

1. Tell a friend about the NEP and what was unique about it?
2. Demonstrate how your entrepreneurship journey has changed as a result of participating in the NEP?
3. Showcase how your skills have evolved since beginning the NEP?
4. Reflect how the NEP helped you overcome systemic barriers or challenges?
5. Share a message about the importance of mentorship for newcomer entrepreneurs?