



Project Insights Report

# Driving Labour Market Inclusion for Refugee Youth in Nova Scotia



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## Executive Summary

Refugee youth represent a rapidly growing and economically important demographic in Atlantic Canada, yet they encounter multiple and intersecting barriers to workforce inclusion. These barriers include disrupted education, limited English or French proficiency, small social networks, and unfamiliarity with Canadian workplace culture. Despite these barriers, refugee youth contribute significantly to the region’s economy and exhibit high long-term retention. About 44% of refugees admitted to Nova Scotia over the past decade were under the age of 18. These realities underscore the need for evidence-based employment supports tailored to their unique experiences.

This project, led by Atlantic Region Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies (ARAISA), investigated how settlement service providers can design and deliver effective employment programs for refugee youth by examining two established models – the Immigrant Youth Employability Project (IYEP) and the Immigrant Youth Career Exploration Project (IYCEP). Research explored which program elements drive labour market inclusion, what outcomes emerge for youth and employers, how wraparound supports reduce direct and indirect barriers, and how these practices can be adapted or scaled across the employment ecosystem. Methods included interviews and focus groups with refugee youth, staff, and employers; analysis of program materials and evaluation data; and ongoing guidance from a youth advisory committee.

Findings show that effective programs integrate three core components — content learning, paid work placements, and career action planning — and are strengthened by wraparound support and ongoing case management. Youth experienced both employment outcomes (permanent jobs, Canadian work experience, skills development) and integration outcomes (expanded social networks, increased confidence, improved language fluency). Employers also reported gains, including more inclusive workplace practices and increased willingness to hire underrepresented groups.

These insights matter because they offer a practical, evidence-based framework for building inclusive workforce pathways for refugee youth. This is an essential step toward addressing labour shortages, supporting immigrant retention, and strengthening community inclusion in Nova Scotia and across Canada.

#### KEY INSIGHTS

- 1** 44% of refugees admitted to Nova Scotia over the past decade were under the age of 18, highlighting the importance of employment programs that support the integration of a rapidly growing youth demographic.
- 2** Employment programs are most effective when embedded within coordinated wraparound supports that address both direct and indirect barriers to labour market inclusion for refugee youth.
- 3** Employer participation increases when programs provide structured support and incentives, such as wage subsidies, leading to more inclusive hiring practices and stronger long-term partnerships.

## The Issue

Refugee youth are a distinct newcomer population whose successful inclusion in the labour market is essential to the economic and social vitality of Atlantic Canada. Canada admitted nearly 77,000 refugees in 2024, with Nova Scotia welcoming over 1,200 refugees that year — many of whom were young. While only 19% of the general population of the province is under 20, nearly 44% of refugees admitted to Nova Scotia over the past decade were under age 18. This demographic reality positions refugee youth as a critical future workforce. Moreover, refugees show unusually high retention rates in Atlantic Canada; 86% of refugees admitted to Nova Scotia in 2016 were still living in the province five years later, far exceeding retention rates for economic immigrants. Strengthening refugee youths' employment pathways is therefore essential not only to address regional labour shortages but also to support long-term population growth and economic resilience.

Yet refugee youth face multiple and intersecting barriers to labour market participation. Many have experienced interrupted schooling, inconsistent access to skills training, or trauma related to conflict, displacement, or discrimination. Some have limited English or French proficiency, small social networks, and unfamiliarity with Canadian workplace norms and expectations. Additionally, youth commonly encounter barriers such as a lack of Canadian work experience, difficulty navigating job searches, transportation constraints, and limited access to certifications or employer networks. These challenges are compounded for racialized refugee youth who may confront additional biases and institutional barriers.

While programs such as Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia's (ISANS) Immigrant Youth Employability Project (IYEP) and Immigrant Youth Career Exploration Project (IYCEP) have shown success in helping refugee youth transition into employment, evidence-informed recommendations from prior evaluations have not been integrated at a systems level. Most employment programs for newcomer youth still operate in silos and lack robust frameworks that connect skills training with wraparound support, employer engagement, and culturally responsive program delivery. This fragmentation limits the ability of the settlement sector and the broader employment ecosystem to address the full range of social, structural, and economic barriers refugee youth face.



## What We Investigated

This project examined how employment programs could more effectively support labour market inclusion for refugee youth in Atlantic Canada. The research drew on the Immigrant Youth Employability Project (IYEP) and the Immigrant Youth Career Exploration Project (IYCEP) as case studies. It focused on identifying the core elements of successful skills-based programming, the outcomes associated with these models, and the conditions required for adaptation or replication in other contexts. The overarching research question guiding the project was: How can settlement service providers develop evidence-based employment programs to improve labour market inclusion for refugee youth in Atlantic Canada? In other words, what do successful newcomer youth employment programs look like, and what are the core elements that make them successful?

To address this question, the research explored several related areas: What employment barriers do refugee youth encounter in Nova Scotia? How do employment programs specifically help to address and overcome these barriers? How are employment programs integrated with wraparound support to better enhance newcomer integration? The research also examines the question: What are the employment- and integration-related outcomes of newcomer employment programs for both refugee youth and employers?

Additional research questions were developed to support systems-level learning:

1. What practices, strategies, and frameworks do IYEP and IYCEP use to drive labour market inclusion for refugee youth?
2. What aspects of the IYEP and IYCEP can be scaled and replicated by other impact organizations in the Atlantic, and what is the roadmap to do this?
3. What are the long-term outcomes for refugee youth who participate in skills-based training such as IYEP and IYCEP?
4. How can skills-based programs like IYEP and IYCEP be integrated with wraparound services into systems-level solutions to reduce barriers to employment for refugees and other racialized newcomer youth?

Using a mixed-methods approach, the research included 40 interviews with refugee youth, four focus groups with IYEP and IYCEP participants, five interviews with ISANS staff, five interviews with employers, and 10 interviews with external stakeholders such as policymakers and educators. This primary research was supplemented by administrative and evaluation data collected by ISANS since 2017, including demographic profiles, employment and education outcomes, program satisfaction, and employer feedback.

An advisory committee of eight refugee youth served as co-researchers, guiding methodological decisions, supporting data collection, validating emerging themes, and ensuring that the research remained grounded in their lived experiences. The combined data sources enabled the development of a comprehensive implementation framework reflecting effective program design, delivery, and integration of wraparound supports to strengthen employment pathways for refugee youth in Atlantic Canada.

## **What We're Learning**

## **Employment programs for refugee youth generate both employment and broader integration outcomes**

Across interviews, focus groups, and program data, refugee youth consistently described improved employment readiness, increased familiarity with Canadian workplace culture, and greater access to work experience, certifications, and job-specific skills. Programs such as IYEP and IYCEP helped youth secure permanent jobs, build essential competencies, and return to school or pursue further training. Outcomes extend beyond employment: participants reported expanded social networks, stronger confidence, greater self-awareness, and feeling more prepared to succeed in multiple areas of life, including education and community engagement. These findings highlight that employment programs play a dual function — supporting labour force entry while advancing social and psychological integration.

## **Employment barriers for refugee youth are varied, intersecting, and often rooted in systemic and situational factors**

The most frequently identified barrier was limited familiarity with Canadian workplace culture, including not knowing how to search for jobs, write resumes, or prepare for interviews. Other commonly cited barriers were limited Canadian work or education experience, small social networks, and language and communication challenges. Region-specific challenges, such as a shrinking job market, transportation barriers, and limited employer flexibility, further constrained labour market access. Notably, nearly one-third (31%) of past clients reported that they did not face employment barriers because they had secured work through program support. This fact underscores the importance of early intervention and structured pathways into employment.

## **Integrating employment programs with wraparound supports is essential to address the range of barriers refugee youth encounter**

Refugee youth may experience barriers before, during, and after program participation, including those related to language acquisition, mental health, transportation, housing stability, or caregiving responsibilities. Robust intake processes help identify needs early and ensure clients are referred to appropriate supports, both within and outside the core employment program. The report emphasizes that parallel services, such as counselling, language training, or academic support, strengthen retention and reduce external stressors affecting participation and job performance. Continued follow-up after program completion helps address emerging barriers and reinforces long-term stability in employment. Wraparound support therefore enhances the effectiveness and equity of employment programs by ensuring they respond to the lived realities of refugee youth.

## **Successful employment programs require three core components to prepare refugee youth for labour market success**

Evidence from IYEP and IYCEP shows that effective programs integrate: (1) content learning; (2) paid work placements; and (3) career action planning. Content learning delivered over 10–15 weeks builds self-awareness, workplace knowledge, and job search skills. Youth valued interactive approaches, certifications (e.g., First Aid, WHMIS), and exposure to guest speakers. Work placements of at least 600 hours offered meaningful opportunities to apply skills, gain Canadian work experience, and transition into permanent positions. Career action planning provided individualized support, aligning youth goals with concrete steps toward employment or further education. Together, these components address foundational skill gaps and create clear, supported pathways to work.

### **Employment programs foster inclusive workplaces and generate positive outcomes for employers**

Employers participating in placements reported strengthened cultural awareness, improved capacity to support diverse employees, and changes in training or onboarding practices to be more inclusive. Many employers hired participants into permanent roles or became repeat partners, recognizing the value of subsidized placements and strong staff support. Program involvement also shifted employer attitudes toward the readiness and capability of refugee youth, creating ripple effects that increased openness to hiring other underrepresented groups. These findings reinforce that employment programs contribute both to youth success and workplace inclusion across sectors.

### **Employment programs create the foundation for more inclusive communities across Nova Scotia and Canada**

Employment programs strengthen community belonging, reduce social isolation, and promote integration. Many youth described increased hopefulness, independence, and capacity to navigate life in Canada — outcomes that extend beyond employment and contribute to long-term retention in the region. Employers who participated in IYEP and IYCEP also became more willing to hire newcomers and youth from other equity-deserving groups, showing that inclusive employment pathways can reshape community attitudes. These findings highlight employment programs as both workforce strategies and community-building mechanisms.

### **A systems-level approach is required to sustain and scale effective practices**

While IYEP and IYCEP offer evidence-based models, the research revealed that systemic adoption of promising practices has been limited across the settlement and employment ecosystem. Organizations require adequate resources, staff capacity, and cross-sector coordination to deliver high-quality programs that integrate wraparound supports. The research underscores the need for implementation frameworks, shared tools, and cross-organizational collaboration to support replication across Atlantic Canada. The findings provide a roadmap for developing adaptable, scalable, and equity-focused employment programming that improves labour market inclusion for refugee youth and other racialized newcomer populations.

## **Why It Matters**

Employment programs for refugee youth matter because they generate meaningful employment outcomes while advancing newcomer integration. These programs help refugee youth secure work that aligns with their skills, interests, and goals, and they also address both direct and indirect barriers, including limited language fluency, unfamiliarity with Canadian workplace norms, and small social networks, which restrict full labour market participation. The research findings showed that participants not only gained Canadian work experience and essential competencies, but also reported increased confidence, expanded social networks, and greater self-awareness. These integration-related outcomes are foundational to successful settlement and long-term economic participation. By helping youth overcome intersecting barriers, employment programs lay the groundwork for more inclusive labour markets and healthier communities more broadly.

A further contribution is the program's advancement of evidence-based practice in the settlement and employment sectors. The development of a practical implementation framework — grounded in research, program evaluation data since 2017, and extensive stakeholder consultation — provides service providers with concrete, actionable guidance. This replicable model can be adapted by organizations across the Atlantic region and nationally, and help build shared language and standards across service providers, employers, educators, and policymakers, enabling more consistent and coordinated support for refugee youth.

The project's insights have implications for workforce development policy and practice across Canada, beyond the Nova Scotia context. Refugee youth represent a fast-growing demographic that plays a critical economic and social role in the Atlantic region, where refugee retention rates are high even as labour shortages are emerging across multiple sectors. Many newcomers belong to racialized populations and face systemic and institutional barriers to employment. The project contributes evidence on how specialized programming can mitigate inequities and improve outcomes for vulnerable newcomer populations, including refugees, protected persons, and youth with interrupted education or trauma histories.



### **State of Skills: What Works for Newcomer Integration**

Despite the overall success of Canada's immigration system, a number of challenges persist. When compared to other nations, labour market mobility for newcomers in Canada is not as strong as other dimensions of migrant integration.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

A key insight is that employment programs are most effective when integrated with wraparound support. The framework from this project shows how needs assessments, parallel service referrals, ongoing engagement, and post-program follow-up work together to reduce barriers before, during, and after program participation. The research shows that wraparound support, such as language training, mental health resources, academic advising, and childcare, are essential components rather than optional add-ons. However, their provision requires stable funding, cross-organizational coordination, and policy environments that recognize the holistic needs of refugee youth. Funders and policymakers can use these findings to design more flexible, integrated funding models that enable organizations to deliver comprehensive support without compromising program quality.

The project also offers insights into how employment programs can meaningfully involve the communities they serve. A refugee youth advisory committee co-designed research questions, informed data collection, and validated findings. This co-creation approach demonstrates how lived experience can shape program design, implementation, and evaluation in ways that increase relevance, cultural safety, and effectiveness. The study identifies barriers to community participation, including time constraints, language needs, and lack of compensation, and demonstrates how stipends, interpretation supports, and flexible participation structures can enable full and equitable engagement by refugee youth.

Finally, the broader significance of the findings lies in their applicability to other equity-deserving groups and sectors. While the research focused on refugee youth, many barriers identified, such as limited social networks, transportation challenges, and unfamiliarity with Canadian workplace expectations, are shared by other underrepresented populations. With minor adjustments, the model could inform program design for racialized youth, newcomers in rural areas, 2SLGBTQ+ youth, or individuals living with disabilities. By scaling evidence-based approaches that address both employment and integration needs, employment programs can contribute to more inclusive labour markets and strengthen community belonging for all.

## ► **What's Next**

As an umbrella association representing 39 Anglophone and Francophone settlement organizations, ARAISA will integrate project findings into ongoing professional development, training, and sector-building activities.

The project's next phase focuses on knowledge mobilization to reach organizations supporting refugee youth across Atlantic Canada and beyond including a dedicated project webpage to host the implementation framework, research insights, practical tools, and future updates. This site will serve as a central hub for organizations seeking guidance on designing or refining employment programs for refugee youth.

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

### How to Cite This Report

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The Future Skills Centre acknowledges that the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee share a special relationship to the 'Dish With One Spoon Territory,' where our office is located, bound to share and protect the land. As a pan-Canadian initiative, FSC operates on the traditional territory of many Indigenous nations across Turtle Island, the name given to the North American continent by some Indigenous peoples. We are grateful for the opportunity to work in this territory and commit ourselves to learning about our shared history and doing our part towards reconciliation.

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