



Future Skills Centre

Centre des **Compétences futures**

Project Insights Report

Facilitating Access to Skilled Talent



PARTNERS

Immigration
Employment Council of
British Columbia



LOCATIONS

Across Canada



INVESTMENT

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CONTRIBUTORS

Gabrielle Dark
Val Duarte

☰ Executive Summary

Canada’s aging population and growing labour shortages have made immigration critical to sustaining the country’s workforce. However, many newcomers face barriers to finding meaningful employment that matches their skills and experience, often due to a lack of professional networks, unrecognized credentials, and unfamiliarity with Canadian workplace culture. The Immigrant Employment Council of British Columbia’s Facilitating Access to Skilled Talent (FAST) Program addresses these challenges by offering free, online, sector-specific employment preparation for newcomers in Canada. FAST helps participants build job readiness, navigate Canadian workplace culture, and connect with credentialing resources, with six sector streams ranging from information technology to seniors care.

Since expanding Canada-wide, FAST has partnered with service providers and employers, enrolling over 1,500 participants. While program completion rates remain a challenge, employment outcomes are promising, with job rates rising from 45% at program exit to 72% nine months later. Participants identified workplace culture training as the program’s most valuable feature.

To translate these lessons into system-level change, the IECC launched the FutureWorks Canada Tour, a national initiative designed to gather, synthesize, and mobilize insights on how immigration and skills development can better serve Canada’s future workforce. Across five regional forums and three national convenings, more than 500 employers, policymakers, educators, and community partners shared a consistent message: Canada is not short on talent; the challenge is alignment to make sure the right systems, supports, and pathways are in place so that talent can actually move to where it is needed.

KEY INSIGHTS

1

Newcomers who participate in the FAST program experienced increased employment rates – with 45% employed at program completion to 72% employed nine months post-program, with earnings increasing by 25% over the same period.

2

The majority of FAST participants are landed immigrants, highly educated, and racialized.

3

Workplace culture training was one of the most useful program components for supporting participants' job search.

▶ The Issue

With Canada's aging population, immigration is critical to alleviating widespread labour shortages across many sectors. While levels continue to fluctuate, Canada is one of the top destinations in the world for immigrants. However, once they've arrived, newcomers face significant barriers to utilizing the skills and experiences that allowed them to immigrate in the first place.

Newcomers in Canada face challenges finding meaningful employment, with many immigrants citing a lack of professional connections, employers not accepting qualifications and experience, or their international education not being recognized, as key barriers. Certain groups of immigrants face more barriers than others: women, older immigrants and those without previous education or work experience in Canada have lower employment rates.

When newcomers to Canada do find employment, it is often not commensurate with their prior experience, education and expertise. In one large-scale survey, employment rates for immigrants actually declined as years of international experience increased, and at each successive degree level, with rates of employment higher for those with college diplomas than for those with doctorates. Many immigrants change work sectors post-migration, with less than half working in the same sector as they were pre-migration (though most would have preferred to stay in the same sector), and far fewer working in management positions.

The intent of Canada's immigration policy is to ensure the country has the workers it needs to fill critical labour market gaps and support a strong economy. To realize this intention, there is a need for initiatives that help support newcomers to leverage their skills and fully integrate into the Canadian economy. Yet even where effective programs and employer readiness exist, fragmented systems, inconsistent credential recognition, and limited coordination across immigration, labour, and education continue to slow progress, making it harder for talent to move to where it is needed.



What We Investigated

FAST is a program designed by the Immigrant Employment Council of British Columbia (IEC-BC) to prepare immigrants for their careers in Canada. FAST's objective is to increase the employment readiness of newcomers and improve their confidence to enter their industries of interest.

FAST is a free-to-use, self-paced, online employment preparation program that helps newcomers better understand their target occupation and industry, along with broader workplace culture. FAST has six sector streams: Information Technology (IT) & Data Services, Biotechnology & Life Sciences, Skilled Trades, Accounting & Finance, Culinary Arts and Seniors Care.

Each sector stream includes industry-specific content on workplace culture and workplace readiness assessments; technical competencies; referrals to credentialing services and professional designations where appropriate; and job search and career navigation supports. The combination of the online modules orienting users to Canadian workplace norms and culture, and industry-specific assessments sets users on a pathway to receive an industry designation, or access further learning to improve employability.

The original aim of this project was to expand the pre-existing FAST online portal to provinces outside of BC, to be used with immigrants ahead of their arrival in Canada. However, due to travel restrictions brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the very few immigrants on route to Canada at that time, the project sought to expand its reach instead by collaborating with like-minded, values-aligned immigrant-serving organizations across Canada and provide training, communications, and marketing materials that supported these service providers to include FAST as part of the services they were providing to immigrants who had already arrived in Canada.

Phase Two of FAST sought to evaluate participant experiences, program outcomes, and areas for refinement to inform future iterations. Specifically, this phase of the project assessed how the program supported employment outcomes, the variations in satisfaction and results across different streams, and the opportunities to enhance participant engagement and program delivery. The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from administrative records and participant surveys with qualitative insights from interviews with participants, service delivery partners, and industry. This multifaceted methodology provided a comprehensive understanding of FAST's impact while identifying key challenges to address in Phase Three.

Interim findings from Phase 3 of the project, based on data collected from April to November 2024, explored uptake, experience, and outcomes of three new program variations, including:

- A shorter, time-bound (eight-week) version of FAST versus the standard one-year model using A/B testing;
- A cohort-based approach, where a small group of participants shared a start date, peer-learning opportunities, and group sessions led by an IEC-BC facilitator; and
- A standalone workplace culture module, designed as a light-touch introduction to FAST for international students and temporary workers.

Data analyzed to date in Phase 3 include administrative data, an eight-week follow-up survey of participants, and participant focus groups. To share, collect, and synthesize insights from the FAST program and beyond, IEC-BC, in collaboration with the IECC Network, launched the *FutureWorks Canada Tour*, a national knowledge mobilization initiative that convened more than 500 employers, policymakers, educators, regulators, and community partners across five regional forums and three national convenings. Using a Knowledge Mobilization Framework built on three stages, share, collect, and synthesize, the project gathered employer feedback, survey data, facilitator observations, and advisory input to uncover the deeper system patterns shaping workforce outcomes across Canada, with the goal of equipping businesses, educators, and policymakers with the insights needed to build a future-ready workforce.

What We're Learning

The first program expansion of FAST enlisted 81 service delivery partners, 17 employer partners and 5 industry associations across Canada to integrate FAST into their own service offerings. As a result of this engagement, 565 participants enrolled in FAST between September 2021 and June 2022 (in addition to the 646 that were included in the previous cohort, bringing the total to 1211). The majority of participants came from Ontario (34%), Nova Scotia (26%) and British Columbia (17%). Only 4% of FAST users were not in Canada, reflecting the pivot towards focusing on landed immigrants, rather than pre-arrival supports.

Similar to previous cohorts, the majority of FAST participants during this period were landed immigrants (86%), highly educated and racialized (66%). Most of the participants were enrolled in just two of the sector streams: 50% of those enrolled in IT & Data Services, 29% in Biotech & Life Sciences. There was lower enrollment in the relatively newer sectoral streams: 14% of participants enrolled in Accounting & Finance, and only 1% enrolled in Culinary Arts.

During this cohort, only 23% of participants completed the full FAST program, with most participants choosing to only engage with a selection of program modules. This is a decrease in completion rates compared to the previous cohort between November 2019 and March 2021 at 37.9%. Participants in Biotech & Life Sciences were more likely to complete FAST than other sectoral streams. The Skilled Trades and Seniors Care streams experienced lower satisfaction and completion rates due to misaligned expectations or overly technical content. Across sectoral streams, respondents reported that workplace culture training was the most useful program component for supporting their job search, which included information about non-verbal communication, culture shock and sector-specific professional language. Participants highlighted the need for clearer communication about FAST's offerings and greater support during the program.

During Phase 2, FAST successfully reached a highly educated and diverse cohort of newcomers, with 83% identifying as racialized and 85% balancing care-giving responsibilities. The program's employment outcomes were encouraging, with employment rates increasing from 45% at the program's exit to 72% nine months later. Participants reported higher confidence in their job readiness and found the workplace culture training particularly useful, with 77% rating it as very or somewhat helpful. Cultural training was once again confirmed as a priority by employers across regions at the FutureWorks Canada Tour.

Despite these successes, the program faced challenges in engagement and completion, with a 21% overall completion rate. Underperforming streams, such as Skilled Trades and Seniors Care, experienced lower satisfaction due to misaligned expectations or overly technical content, and participants highlighted the need for clearer communication about FAST's offerings and greater support during the program.

Midway into Phase 3, interim results showed that:

- Time-limited participants were more likely to complete FAST than those in the standard version, with both groups reporting similar satisfaction, likelihood to recommend, and perceived utility. No differences in employment or earnings were observed between the two versions.
- Cohort-based participants had nearly double the completion rate of open enrolment participants, along with higher satisfaction and greater perceived utility. They found skills gap training and webinars more useful, and described how FAST helped develop industry-specific skills, validate existing knowledge, and build workplace culture awareness. Employment rates and salaries were similar across both models.
- The Prepare for Work in Canada module enrolled 195 participants, mostly already in Canada, with an average age of 35. Satisfaction and utility scores were high, with 87% and 81% respectively rating 5/5. International students and temporary workers found the content valuable for building knowledge of Canadian workplace culture and felt greater career readiness upon completion.

The FutureWorks Canada Tour confirmed that program-level solutions need system-level support to scale

More than 500 employers, policymakers, and community partners identified the same barriers FAST participants face: slow credential recognition, fragmented pathways, and limited employer capacity, particularly among small and mid-sized businesses. With 94% of Tour participants rating sessions as good or excellent and 93% intending to apply what they learned, the Tour demonstrated a strong national appetite for practical, employer-informed solutions. Programs like FAST are necessary but not sufficient, and sustained impact requires better alignment across immigration, education, labour, and community systems.

★ Why It Matters

Despite recent changes in levels, Canada will continue to rely on immigration to address labour and skills shortages as a result of an aging population and a low birth rate.

The findings demonstrate that programs like FAST are critical for addressing labour shortages by helping skilled immigrants integrate into the workforce and align their expertise with Canadian standards.

The program's success highlights the value of accessible, low-barrier interventions that combine sector-specific skills assessments with workplace cultural training. Most participants in FAST valued the Canadian workplace culture training, calling it the most useful component of the program, and in Phase 3, participants felt greater career readiness and preparation for the Canadian workplace after completion. This further reinforces the need for this type of information to be included in all workforce initiatives targeting newcomers, prior to their arrival and after they've arrived. A lack of familiarity with Canadian workplace culture can create intercultural bottlenecks between employers and newcomers, reinforcing the very barriers that keep newcomers from reaching their full potential.



State of Skills: What Works for Newcomer Integration

Industry-specific, employer-driven initiatives have been successful in accelerating and enhancing the employment prospects of newcomers. The collaborative approach of engaging with employers directly improved the relevance of the training and curriculum delivered and facilitated connections between employers and newcomers post-training.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

However, program-level solutions alone are not enough. The FutureWorks Canada Tour confirmed that even where effective programs and motivated employers exist, fragmented systems, slow credential recognition, and uneven employer capacity continue to limit impact at scale. Lessons from FAST and the Tour together point to the same conclusion: Canada needs flexible, accessible programs for newcomers and better alignment across immigration, education, labour, and community systems to fully realize the economic potential of the talent already here.

Programs like FAST and its FutureWorks Canada Tour initiative can inform broader policy and practice by emphasizing the importance of flexible, scalable solutions that respond to regional labour market needs and reduce systemic barriers for immigrants.

► What's Next

IEC-BC has produced a [summary](#) of their knowledge mobilization work to share with stakeholders and a [short video](#) on key methods and themes.

IEC-BC continues to implement and iterate [FAST](#) and is in the midst of Phase 3, where it is testing:

- A shorter, time-bound (eight-week) version of FAST versus the standard one-year model using A/B testing.
- A cohort-based approach, where a small group of participants shared a start date, peer-learning opportunities, and group sessions led by an IEC-BC facilitator.
- A standalone workplace culture module, designed as a light-touch introduction to FAST for international students and temporary workers.

The final report for Phase 3 will include updated participant and outcomes data from the eight-week and follow-up surveys for all participants who enrolled in FAST by summer 2025. It will include additional insights into variances in program uptake and participant outcomes within key program iterations. It will include insights into post-secondary education (PSE) referral partners' experiences with referring FAST to students, their perceptions of FAST, and employer perceptions of the program.

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

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