

Project Insights Report

Reimagining Equity-Centred Supports for Racialized Changemakers in Metro Vancouver



PARTNERS

Simon Fraser University British Columbia



LOCATIONS



INVESTMENT

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Executive Summary

The first round of funding received by this project was used to co-create and pilot an equity-centred regional social enterprise and social impact incubator and accelerator program. It was designed to serve the unique and varied needs of racialized and newcomer social entrepreneurs, changemakers, and community leaders, particularly those involved in systems change initiatives. The program targeted alumni from RADIUS' (a social innovation hub based at Simon Fraser University) ideation programs, such as the [Refugee Livelihood Lab](#) and [Health Equity Lab](#), as well as other community members who fit the participant profile. The project focused on addressing key questions around the formation of learning cohorts, determining whether these should be based on the stage of venture or shared experiences, and identifying the specific needs of refugee and newcomer participants.

Upon completion of the project, RADIUS was expected to engage over 100 community members to inform program design, host co-creation workshops with diverse stakeholders, and test more than ten new equity-centred support methods. The project aimed to provide at least 50 additional hours of 1-on-1 coaching for 15 racialized founders and teams, creating inclusive and reflective coaching spaces.

The project revealed that the initial curriculum needed significant adjustments to meet the unique needs of newcomer innovators, who are resourceful and skilled but often underserved by standard approaches. Participants' experiences highlighted the importance of refining groupings based on shared values and principles rather than the stage of the venture. Trust and relationality were identified as crucial for a successful accelerator program, particularly for founders who often have to navigate and justify their culturally driven values and ethics within traditional entrepreneurial support systems.

Wanting to capitalize on findings from the first round of funding, the project team focused their efforts on creating a documentary film to highlight how to incorporate equity in the design principles of entrepreneurship, as well as a social innovation concierge service to support racialized entrepreneurs. The delivery format was hybrid, with a mix of in-person sessions in Metro Vancouver and online components to accommodate participants' needs and ongoing health and safety guidelines.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 More than 100 community members were engaged to co-design the accelerator curriculum and pilot.
- 2 Communicating program values helps to build trust and set clear expectations with participants.
- 3 Participants found the one-on-one in-person and phone entrepreneurship concierge service to be one of the most beneficial aspects of the program.

► The Issue

Racialized changemakers and newcomers in Metro Vancouver face unique challenges in the entrepreneurial ecosystem and require tailored support that reflects their experiences and backgrounds. This was particularly important in Metro Vancouver, a region characterized by its diverse population, including a significant number of immigrants and racialized individuals. Existing support mechanisms did not fully meet the needs of these communities, necessitating a program that was equity-centered and responsive to their specific circumstances.

Historically, support programs for entrepreneurs have employed a generalized approach that may not consider the distinct experiences of racialized and newcomer entrepreneurs. Such programs often lacked elements of customization and cultural responsiveness, which are crucial for addressing the barriers these groups might encounter. This gap in support highlighted the need for a more nuanced approach that could adapt to the diverse realities of participants, ensuring that the assistance provided was both relevant and effective.



What We Investigated

In 2022-2023, the first phase of this project aimed to co-create and pilot an equity-centred regional social enterprise and social impact incubator and accelerator program, geared to serve the unique and varied needs of racialized newcomer founders, leaders, and teams in the Metro Vancouver area.

The first phase of the project centred on several key research questions aimed at enhancing the integration and support of racialized newcomers and changemakers in Metro Vancouver. The primary questions explored included:

- *How should learning cohorts be structured—around stage and need, or shared experience?*
- *What are the benefits and constraints of these cohort formations?*

Additionally, the project sought to understand the unique needs of Refugee and Newcomer participants and whether these needs could be effectively met within mixed or tailored cohorts.

Objectives of the initial phase were to map community insights to program ideas, pilot new workshops and cohort models, and develop knowledge pieces on what works and what doesn't. This was informed by an internal assessment and community consultations. The project tested different cohort structures and support types to determine the most effective methods for addressing the specific needs of the target demographic.

The methodology adopted was a co-creative design, involving stakeholders in the development of the program. This included co-creation workshops and continuous feedback mechanisms involving the participants. The project spanned from October 2022 to September 2023, with key activities such as the development of new workshops and support models based on the feedback and insights gathered during the initial phases.

During the initial phase, the project was one of seven involved in the [Incubation Network](#) (2023), a Future Skills Centre initiative designed to create an enabling environment for cross-Canada collaboration amongst innovators in newcomer integration and to identify and troubleshoot implementation challenges with funded projects.

In 2024, the second phase of this project focused on the evaluation of impacts from the cohorts in 2023/2024 and on producing a short documentary to highlight the process of centring equity in innovation acceleration programs. The second phase of this project also allowed for the piloting of a social innovation concierge service from May-September 2024, to connect racialized newcomer entrepreneurs with tailored resources.

What We're Learning

During the first phase, more than 100 community members were engaged to co-design an Equity-Centred Accelerator curriculum and pilot the [BUILD program](#). During the second phase of the project, there were 58 participants in the social innovation concierge service.

Co-creation and feedback loop sessions with communities hinge on trust, which takes time to develop. These sessions must consider the personal priorities of community members, and cannot thrive under pressure. It is crucial to recognize participants for their time and contributions, whether through compensation or other forms of acknowledgement, to ensure their continued engagement and investment in the process. Thus, one of the key learnings from this project was the importance of trust in delivering programs that resonate with racialized communities. The feedback mechanism implemented revealed that participants valued being heard and engaged in a manner that respects their background and experiences. This was particularly evident when one participant emphasized, “I don’t need to be taught. I need to be heard,” highlighting the necessity for programs to be responsive rather than prescriptive.

Being transparent about program values sets clear expectations. The project team found that their approach to publicizing the program’s values and principles, though initially perceived as risky, was well-received. This transparency in communication helped in setting clear expectations and building trust with participants. It also encouraged a more inclusive and participatory approach, allowing the expertise and experiences of participants to influence the program positively. However, the project faced challenges in balancing community and funder languages, which sometimes diverged significantly. This tension highlighted the ongoing struggle to meet funder requirements while staying true to community-centric values. Questions about resource allocation and public transparency were raised, reflecting the need for clearer communication and alignment between project intentions and community expectations.

Creating space for intentional design and stakeholder involvement takes more time & resources than project funding often allows. Programs often operate under the assumption that relationships and worldviews are already aligned, but this is rarely the case. Building these connections requires a deliberate effort, which extends beyond the standard timelines provided by most grants. Additionally, equity-centred programs need sufficient human resources, so it's important to budget for more than one full-time team member to ensure effective delivery.

Providing personalized support to participants can reduce program attrition. For example, following up with a participant who misses a meeting and addressing any issues that may have caused their absence can prevent future occurrences. This was reinforced in phase 2 of the project, where participants praised the authenticity of the documentary on equity, as well as the tailored support offered by the concierge service, providing participants with accessible and valuable support.

Documentary can be an effective way to increase awareness of equity-centred support services for newcomers. The documentary was inspiring for community members and demonstrated some of the values of a human-centred approach. The project team hoped that the documentary would inspire service providers to include sound equity practices to ultimately improve newcomers' livelihoods. While useful, future knowledge mobilization efforts could benefit from concrete examples of the challenges to implementing equity-centred design and strategies used to overcome.

★ Why It Matters

By focusing on the unique needs of racialized and newcomer founders, the project highlighted the importance of adapting support structures to better align with the lived experiences and cultural contexts of these groups. This approach challenges the traditional one-size-fits-all models and underscores the necessity for more personalized and culturally sensitive methodologies in program design and implementation.

From a policy perspective, the findings advocate for a shift in how funding and support are structured. Policymakers could consider frameworks that allow for greater flexibility in funding allocations, enabling organizations to develop and implement programs that are deeply rooted in the principles of equity and inclusion. Concretely, this means using and developing more personalized and culturally sensitive methodologies in program design and implementation. Additionally, the emphasis on relational connections and trust-building points to the need for policies that support long-term relationship development rather than short-term project outcomes.



State of Skills: Leveraging the Skills of Newcomers

Navigating career and training decisions is especially complex for newcomers given the challenges they face learning new systems and unfamiliar workplace cultures. Career development support for newcomers should come early and often.

In practice, the project's approach to forming learning cohorts based on shared experiences rather than just the stage of venture or specific demographic markers offers a valuable model for other organizations. This strategy could be particularly effective in enhancing the relevance and impact of support services across various sectors, not just for racialized and newcomer populations but also for other marginalized groups. By prioritizing shared experiences, programs can foster a deeper sense of community and peer support, which is often crucial for the success of social ventures.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

The project's emphasis on co-creation and continuous feedback loops with community members can serve as a best practice for other organizations aiming to implement community-driven initiatives. This approach ensures that the services provided are not only responsive but also respectful of the community's knowledge and contributions. It challenges the conventional top-down approaches and promotes a more collaborative and inclusive model of service design and delivery.

► What's Next

While the BUILD program is currently on hold, RADIUS continues to operate as a social innovation lab, building capacity and connecting communities to pave the way for transformative ideas to create systemic change.

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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