

The City School Model

Researching the Impact of Employer-Designed
Career Access Programs in Improving
Outcomes for Underserved Communities:
Final Report

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A final report by:

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Overview and background

The employment pathways project explores how City School programming helps to connect jobseekers to an employment pathway. City School's employment pathways strategy is designed to serve two purposes. First, the strategy is based upon collaborations with a wide range of local and regional employers in the development and launch of customized course programming that responds directly to sector recruitment needs. Engaging employers in curriculum design and program delivery is central to this component of the strategy, with such engagement customized according to employer size, capacity, and sector. The second aim of the strategy is to boost the job-readiness of individuals with weak labour force attachment by connecting them with an employment pathway while providing varying degrees of life stabilization wraparound support. City School courses are designed to help jobseekers upskill or reskill, depending on their chosen career pathway. In essence, the City School strategy is a response to provincial and federal calls to strengthen targeted supports and to implement more customized employment pathways for, underrepresented and underserved groups (Government of Ontario, 2013; Weerakoon & MacDonald, 2018; Employment and Social Development Canada, 2020).

The employment sectors addressed in the research include:

- Long-term care
- Healthcare support
- Food and beverage processing
- Goods movement and transportation (including Hamilton Port and shipyards)
- Steel Construction
- Construction

The purpose of the research was to engage with a range of individuals who could offer insights on connecting socially-excluded populations with an entry-level employment opportunity. This goal was achieved by drawing upon literature reviews, policy documents, and semi-structured interviews with employers, social service providers, representatives of community-based and non-profit organizations, students, and college faculty and staff. In conducting the research, we hoped to learn about the challenges involved in delivering employment training programming that meets the needs and expectations of engaged stakeholders. Our research objectives include:

- (1) Researching the recruitment and retention challenges experienced by employers.
- (2) Examining the efficacy of the delivery of customized skills training programming that responds directly to industry sector needs.
- (3) Exploring employer perceptions of recruiting potential employees from socially-excluded populations.
- (4) Critically assessing the potential of the City School model in boosting career access

opportunities for socially-excluded populations.

A key rationale of the research is to critically assess what the interview data tells us about the efficacy of employment pathways programming. What dominant themes emerge from the interview data? What recommendations can we offer to enhance programming? What does the research tell us about postsecondary programming that seeks to benefit equity-seeking populations? In the report, we begin by exploring concerns regarding the employment landscape from the perspective of both employers and jobseekers. We then present an overview of our methodological orientation and research design. Following this, we provide an overview of each interview data set, followed by a summary of key themes and observations. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our research and provide a list of recommendations resulting from the research.

Skills training as an equity issue

Although Ontario has the highest rate of postsecondary attendance among low-income groups in Canada (Ford et al., 2015), Canada in general lags behind peer countries regarding investment in skills training and active labour modernization policies, with employers increasingly expecting postsecondary institutions to fulfill this role (Verma, 2012; Macpherson & Rizk, 2022; Munro, 2019; Urban and Johal, 2020). Beyond the cultivation of sector-specific (hard) skills, employers have increasingly emphasized the importance (or lack thereof) of employee socio-emotional skills. In the local context, Workforce Planning Hamilton's (2019) top five identified work competencies include work ethic, dependability, teamwork/ interpersonal skills, self-motivation, and technical/ industry-related skills (Workforce Planning Hamilton, 2019). According to the City of Hamilton, the top three competencies employers are looking for are work ethic, dedication, and dependability (City of Hamilton, 2017). A complicating factor to note is the lack of consensus between employers and educators regarding the skills they think jobseekers need to be successful (Cunningham & Villaseñor, 2016; Pakula & Smith Fowler, 2021). Complicating matters further, the specificity of such skills can lack definitional precision among and between various stakeholders.

Problematically, evidence suggests that employers can be particularly disengaged regarding tapping into under-or-unemployed or precariously employed Ontarians (Holmes & Hjartarson, 2014), and a number of reports suggest that skills-training opportunities are less likely to be accessible to those who would benefit the most; namely, individuals unemployed or precariously employed (Envionics, 2020a; Pakula & Smith Fowler, 2021). Furthermore, individuals who are not eligible for employment insurance and/or who are tenuously attached to the labour market are often unable to avail of provincially funded employment and training programs (Government of Ontario, 2016, 40; Urban & Johal, 2020, 26). Evidence also suggests that socially-excluded populations are underrepresented in growth occupations and continue to face discrimination in pursuing existing services, programs, and employment supports (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2020). To this end, it is important to note that

such structural inequity has been shaped by historical practices of colonization and racialization that continue to influence the composition and workings of the contemporary labour force.

Employment pathway strategies that target underserved populations typically involve a comprehensive package of interventions that include training in both hard and soft skills, wrap-around support services, and post-employment supports (Loewen et al., 2005). As such, the support offered must necessarily target the disparate factors that impact both the barriers specific populations face in accessing employment opportunities, as well as the challenges they face in remaining employed.

I think employment can impact so many other aspects of healthy living and being able to function and enjoy life and the hardest thing is when we hear people come in, and their families are split because of not having work, or they're living on the street because they can't find work and it is just, like to me, work shouldn't necessarily define you but in a lot of ways, having a stable income is such an important part of being able to benefit from everything life has to offer

(Social Service Provider Interview # 13).

Employment pathways and labour precarity

A challenge for contemporary employment pathways initiatives lies in addressing and reconciling two interrelated trends; a labour/ skills shortage in specific sectors, and the growing number of people in conditions of precarious employment (Ontario Chamber of Commerce, 2017; Sullivan, 2017; Gabler & Gromley, 2022). Recommendations to raise the minimum wage or to implement a living wage are often resisted by employers and their representatives. For example, the Canadian Federation of Independent Businesses (2018) has argued that hikes to the minimum wage can damage business profitability. Fundamentally, interventions aimed at building employment pathways for marginalized populations will have limited efficacy regarding addressing the underpinning causes of such marginalization; that is, the growth of precarious labour, systemic/ structural disadvantage, and ongoing labour market instability. Many of the employment opportunities available in the Hamilton region are entry-level, minimum-wage positions of limited duration, with limited potential for career laddering (Social Impact, 2019). Indeed, employment pathways programs that lead to causal, unstable, or poorly-paid employment are likely to exacerbate existing precarity.

Sanford suggests that the semantics of there being a “labour shortage” perpetuates an employer-centric perspective, one that deflects attention away from the reality of there being an abundance of low-quality, and low-paying jobs (2023). Indeed, a healthy and robust provincial and/or federal employment rate can mask growing labour precarity and working conditions (Smith-Carrier, 2016; Environics, 2020b). Trends that exacerbate employment precarity and which compound existing systemic threats to worker security and employment stability include contracting out, outsourcing, automation, and the entrenchment of non-traditional employment

arrangements as facilitated by the “platform economy” or “gig economy” (Zizys, 2011; Workforce Planning Hamilton, 2020). Systemically, the growing entrenchment of precarious labour, and temporary/ contractual rather than full-time employment in the “gig economy” (Tiessen, 2014) remain formidable barriers to life stabilization and the ability of marginalized populations to access “good” jobs (defined as ones that pays a living wage and which include benefits and opportunities for advancement).

Employer challenges

Although Ontario’s postsecondary credentialing system is relatively well aligned with labour market requirements (Colyar et al., 2022), employers continue to report a gap between the workforce readiness of postsecondary graduates and the expectations and realities of the workplace (Alsharif, 2023; MacMillan & Young, 2015; Munro & Stuckey, 2013). Previous City School research focused on Hamilton Port employers found that 69% were experiencing difficulty filling job vacancies (Mohawk College Foundation, 2020). In terms of the recruitment challenges they experience, employers cited a shortage of qualified and skilled workers (e.g., those with sector-specific professional designations), a lack of socio-emotional (or soft) skills among employees, labour force instability due to absenteeism and an over-reliance on part-time positions, the unpopularity of shiftwork schedules (in select sectors), and employees moving on to positions elsewhere (Alsharif, 2023; City of Hamilton, 2017). An additional challenge lies in incentivizing job-seekers from outside of the city to move to the Hamilton area, particularly in light of the city’s reputation as a blue-collar, industrial “steel city” (City of Hamilton, 2017).

Challenges for employers in employee recruitment are mirrored by challenges in workforce retention. Specific barriers include: limited transportation options outside of the urban core, the inability of small-to-medium-sized businesses (SMEs) to offer competitive wages compared with larger employers, an aging workforce (with knock-on effects for organizational succession planning and internal promotion pathways), the changing nature of work due to technological disruption, a lack of practical experience among college and university graduates, and changing job-seeker expectations regarding compensation levels and working conditions (Government of Ontario, 2016; City of Hamilton, 2017).

In broad terms, the City School employment pathways strategy is indicative of a growing appetite among employers to partner with postsecondary institutions to address their labour

I think it's pretty simple. There are all kinds of employers out there who can't find people for the jobs they have available. Or can't retain people for the jobs they have available. And then there's a lot of folks who can't get a job. And that seems like a fairly simple formula to kind of solve, like identify each side of that equation and introduce people to one another and build bridges to get people across whatever span is dividing them.

(College Personnel Interview # 23)

supply concerns. Such increasing levels of collaboration are necessary given that existing employment support structures and workforce development models tend to be fragmented and siloed (Social Impact, 2019). Although employers throughout Canada have been experimenting with a variety of new approaches to recruitment and skills training, such efforts tend to be conducted in an uncoordinated and disjointed manner (MacMillan & Young, 2015; Urban & Johal, 2020). In seeking to overcome the limitations of existing workforce development models, the City School employment pathways strategy is based on ongoing collaboration and communication between engaged stakeholders, in a manner that allows programming to be customized as needed, and with a particular sensitivity to the challenges faced by equity-seeking populations.

Barriers to employment

Barriers to employment and overall life stabilization for socially-excluded populations include physical and mental health challenges, housing and/or food insecurity, family and/or childcare responsibilities, and a lack of education/ qualifications. Such populations can include low-income residents, newcomers, older adults seeking to return to the workforce, Indigenous Canadians, persons with disabilities, and individuals with fragmented educational and/or employment histories (Government of Ontario, 2016). In Hamilton, 11% of residents were living with low-income in 2020, a decrease from 15% in 2015 (Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton, 2022). Despite this improvement, entrenched poverty and glaring income inequality remain a daily feature in the lives of the City’s most vulnerable residents and a detriment to their health and well-being. Throughout Canada, for example, it has been estimated that income inequality is a contributing factor to 40,000 premature deaths every year, with low-income men and women having a 67% and 52% chance respectively of dying prematurely compared to more affluent demographics (Social Impact, 2019, 23).

Regarding specific populations, women face multiple barriers regarding their participation in traditionally male-dominated skilled trade sectors and in securing apprenticeships. At present, women compose just 3-5% of the skilled-trades workforce (YWCA, 2020) and 4.5% of apprenticeship registrations in construction, manufacturing, and transportation (Daviault, 2020). Jewell et al. (2020) have highlighted the contextual impact of settler-colonialism as a factor in the exclusion of Indigenous individuals from the labour market, in part due to the “epistemic exclusion” of Indigenous ways

One of the things that the pandemic also highlighted is that employers really need to be offering benefits...people need to have sick days, paid sick days. People need to have healthcare insurance. They need to be able to go to the dentist and all those things are in the employer's best interest because not only do they not then have the turnover, but they have the loyalty and you can then build a workforce...I don't know the business model that they're following, but it's not working.

(Social Service Provider Interview # 19).

of knowing. Crucially, such exclusion is viewed as both a structural and ongoing process. Regarding newcomers and immigrant populations, Buist (2022) notes that two out of three people coming from abroad to join the Canadian labour force are brought in on temporary work program contracts with no well-defined pathway to long-term employment or residency stability. Such circumstances render newcomers and other socially excluded groups vulnerable to a range of precarious labour conditions.

Marginalized and disadvantaged populations, and especially women, were also disproportionately impacted by the pandemic-related economic downturn and the implementation of public health measures (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2020; Cicman, 2021; Ontario Federation of Labour, 2021; Powell & Richardson, 2021). Even before the pandemic, labour precarity had become an entrenched feature of the employment landscape, with concentrations of unemployment among younger population cohorts, women, immigrants, racialized populations, and Indigenous peoples (Tal, 2012; Environics, 2020b). In addition, long-term unemployment or underemployment compounds socio-economic disadvantage over time, leading to the erosion of human capital skills, and a lost connection to the labour market (Tiessen, 2014).

Methodology

Our methodological orientation is based upon a qualitative research design that includes conducting literature reviews, employment pathway policy analysis, and semi-structured interviews with a range of engaged stakeholders. Theoretically, we have adopted a socio-ecological approach that identifies systemic mechanisms of disadvantage as key barriers to employment training for equity-seeking populations (Pakula & Smith Fowler, 2021). For this reason, we view the barriers that individuals face in employment fundamentally through an equity lens, and have pivoted our analysis to view individual-level deficits (i.e., the skills that jobseekers are lacking) as instead resulting from systemic deficits (i.e., the absence of equitable employment pathways to “good” jobs). In this view, skills gaps are driven and compounded by structural barriers rather than predominantly resulting from either individual-level deficits or labour market misalignments between individual skill levels and the needs of employers/industry. The courses explored in the research include the following:

- Careers in Community and Long-Term Care
- Personal Support Work (PSW)
- Exploring Careers in Steel Construction
- Explore Careers in Food and Beverage Processing
- Explore Careers in Goods Movement
- Skills Advance Early Childhood Education (ECE)
- Introduction to Construction
- Residential Settings: Culinary and Environmental Services

- Women in Meat

An overview of the interview process

Phone interviews were conducted with forty-three participants as the courses detailed above were delivered. A more detailed overview of the overall interview sample can be found in Appendix A. The employer interview cohort includes (1) Employers with direct involvement in City School programming, whether this be that they have collaborated with college staff/ faculty on curricula design and/or course delivery, or that they have provided a direct employment pathway for participating students, and (2) Employers whose involvement with City School is more tangential, but who are well-placed to offer insights on the role of employers in postsecondary and on the labour market more generally. The social service/ community interview cohort was more broadly sourced, and variously worked in social service provision, in a labour market or community research capacity, or the non-profit sector. Interviews were also conducted with a range of college personnel, including faculty, learning support specialists, training specialists, and employment consultants. Finally, interviews were conducted with students recruited from a representative sample of course offerings.

Given the distinct character of the interview cohorts, the design of our interview questions varied depending on the interview cohort. Interview questions for all participants focused on obtaining further insight into the challenges and barriers that each cohort faced, the course/ program delivery experience, the changing nature of postsecondary education, and employment/ labour market-related challenges.

The overall aim of the interview process was to attain an in-depth overview of the knowledge and experience individuals bring to programming from their unique perspectives. Including the perspective of students was a research priority, and builds upon previous City School research projects (see Bourke et al., 2019). For instance, students were asked about their experience of education and their views on the employment landscape. Asking such questions helped to build a framework of understanding regarding who is choosing to participate in City School programming, what they hoped to achieve through their experience, and their outlook on the employment sector they were exploring via the course. It is also important to note that many participating students are already employed, albeit typically precariously or intermittently so.

Analyzing the interview data

Interview transcripts were analyzed through a process of thematic analysis (TA). This involves identifying, analyzing, and discussing patterns and themes emergent from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Employed in a range of theoretical and epistemological perspectives, TA is an interpretative process of meaning-making in which key themes and sub-themes are identified and categorized (Nowell et al., 2017). Our analysis of

interviews was conducted in an iterative manner involving a sequential process of coding and the subsequent identification and generation of themes.

A methodological issue impacting the interview sample is that those responding to an interview request were already engaged stakeholders, and likely held a positive view of programming and the overall partnership. For example, students who responded to our interview request successfully completed at least one course. As such, we are mindful that the voice of those with more negative and/or critical views of programming, or whose experience may not have been particularly positive, may be absent or underrepresented in the research. Furthermore, we realize that employer or community sector-based interview respondents likely have a partial view of the workings of City School programming as a whole, and so may raise issues or concerns that College staff are either aware of or are working to address.

An interpretive challenge lay in harmonizing the disparate interview cohorts, as we realize that the guiding concerns and priorities of employers are likely going to be quite different from those of social service providers, and again in the case of college personnel and students. In light of this, we anticipated considerable differences of opinion within each distinct interview cohort regarding overall research themes. Our approach to addressing this challenge is to present a summarized overview of the interview data for each cohort. We have endeavored, as much as possible, to present a synthesized summation of the data in order to minimize the repetition of topics and views raised by each cohort. In the overviews of the interview data, we have included a thematic summary of responses to key questions. Our overview is interspersed with direct quotes in order to foreground the voice of respondents.

Following the presentation of the interview data overviews, our critical assessment of the data is detailed in the section titled *Themes and Observations*. Following this, we present a select list of recommendations. These recommendations, however, should be considered in light of the systemic/ structural factors impacting the possibility of their actualization. While City School employment programming represents an innovative community-based approach to socio-economic exclusion, we are mindful that the socio-political factors determining such exclusion (i.e., macro-economic trends and structural inequities), and which serve to perpetuate precarious labour conditions, originate from outside of the community, and therefore limit the efficacy of any locally implemented poverty reduction employment pathways strategy.

Interview data overview

In this section, we present a summary of findings from each interview cohort, beginning with employers, followed by social service providers/ community representatives, college staff, and participating students. Dominant and recurring interview themes are highlighted in bold font. Our summaries are presented directly and without analytical interpretation. Our analysis and interpretation of the interview data is presented in the section of the report titled “Themes and Observations”, and is used to inform our concluding recommendations. We have also included some direct quotes from respondents in italics.

Employer interviews

Question: What challenges does your industry/ organization experience?

An overall labour shortage:

- Employers report a shortage of available and qualified job candidates (especially in the healthcare and transportation sectors). This shortage predates the COVID-19 pandemic, although it has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Employers in sectors with specific occupational requirements (i.e., health and safety certifications) experienced reduced numbers of qualified applicants.

An overall soft skills shortage:

- A related theme to the above among employers is that employees can lack the skills they need to be successful. Although some spoke of a lack of hard (sector-specific) skills, there was a particular emphasis on the lack of soft skills (i.e., norms of professionalism and

the ability to work as part of a team). Throughout interviews, employers spoke of the importance of potential employees having the right mindset and aptitude required to be successful in the workforce.

Employee retention challenges:

- Employers in sectors where a significant amount of physical exertion is required on behalf of employees (i.e., in the meat industry, and food and beverage processing) were particularly troubled by high rates of absenteeism and employee retention issues. Employers attributed this to the physical/ repetitive nature of the employment.

Employee labour conditions regarding work schedules and compensation:

- Certain employment sectors experience difficulty attracting applicants due to the work schedule. For example, the transportation industry can require

drivers to be away for multiple days, and during holiday periods, and the food and beverage sector can involve shift work schedules that are unattractive to employees.

- Some employers acknowledged that entry-level compensation rates were not particularly attractive to job-seekers, which they suggested partly explains their employee retention challenges.

Resume flooding:

- Employers in some sectors report being flooded with resumes and having difficulty differentiating between genuine and non-serious applicants. Regarding the latter, there was suspicion among some employers that some individuals apply solely for the sake of appearing to do so (i.e., for Employment Insurance (EI) purposes), and in order to maintain the appearance of actively seeking employment.

Digital skills:

- Employers report that potential applicants often lack digital competency skills, a situation worsened, in their view, by the impact of the pandemic and lockdowns. A number of employers also noted that marginalized populations may lack the technology they need to adequately search for and apply for positions.

Recruiting women to work in male-dominated sectors:

- Recruiting women in male-dominated sectors continues to be a challenge for some employers, despite initiatives in

recent years that focus on boosting the representation of women in areas where they lack representation.

Misaligned jobseeker expectations:

- Employers reported that newly recruited employees were reluctant to start at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy and work their way up. Several employers cited a common (and intensifying, in their view) disconnect between job-seeker expectations regarding salary, the nature of work tasks, and the reality of the job.

Embedded stigma regarding the skilled trades as a career option:

- Employers commented on how certain sectors (i.e., the steel industry, and certain areas of the skilled trades) are stigmatized as undesirable occupations and/or occupational environments. Employers suggested that greater interest among students needs to be cultivated and nurtured from high school onwards to counter such perceptions.

The way the education system is structured is that it doesn't guide people to some of these options. I think it's incumbent upon industries to try to take it upon themselves to craft the workforce that they know they're going to need... That's why we've engaged with City School and we would like to... as much of it as possible to drive training and awareness of skilled trades so that we have access to a resilient and competent work force (Employer Interview # 12).

Lack of employer capacity to invest in employee training:

- Employers generally reported a lack of capacity to deliver in-house training to new employees. This was explained by some as partly a product of too frequent employee turnover.

Question: How can City School/ the College assist you in addressing challenges related to recruitment and training?

Hiring from programming:

- Employers involved in course design/ delivery have hired directly from programming (i.e., Personal Support Work (PSW)) and appreciate the opportunity it offers to observe/ recruit potential employees.
- Employers greatly value the provision of a subsidized training program component (in sectors where such subsidies are available).

I always say to the teachers whenever I'm talking to them to remind the students that we're really assessing them as employees for the organization. So, if they're sitting in a classroom, and they're behaving themselves, and they're showing interest, and they're asking questions, then we're sort of taking note as to who these people are (Employer Interview # 1).

Programming helps educate potential employees on workplace realities and expectations:

- Employers appreciate how programming

provides students with insights into the types of job responsibilities they would likely be tasked with. Courses provide students with enough knowledge to support their entry into employment and allow them to work with tradespeople colleagues. In particular, employers appreciate how courses inform job-seekers about workplace realities (i.e., occupational norms and expectations) and the importance of developing soft skills and norms of professionalism.

How can we better prepare them for the reality of the work environment where people can be tough on you, when deadlines are looming and priorities are shifting, how can we do that? So, they come in sometimes with their brilliant expectations for immediate success. I don't think we maybe correctly teach them how to deal with failures, to adopt resilience (Employer Interview # 4).

- Employers value the inclusion of job placements (in courses where such placements are an option) and their role in helping employees learn and adjust to occupational roles and responsibilities. In general, employers like how programming offers potential employees the opportunity to learn and explore an occupational sector, regardless of their background or level of education.
- Some employers (depending on the sector) were actively engaged in course delivery and instruction. For example, employers (depending on capacity) appreciate the opportunity to participate in speaker panels in course deliveries to

share with students the working realities of the industry. Select employers also assisted in practice interview panels in order to help students build their interview skills.

We hope that when people actually apply to jobs, they know what they're getting into and they're at least going to give it an honest, good try [...] I think what programs like City school really provide is that people are showing up with a thorough understanding of what they're getting themselves into... they're not going to have a strong foundation in the skills that they need to succeed but they'll at least have some understanding of what the skills are and they've given those skills a try.

(Employer Interview # 12).

The inclusion of digital skills training:

- Employers value the inclusion of a computer/ digital skills training component, to varying degrees, depending on the sector, which they saw as lacking among new employees.

The partnership helps raise awareness of local jobs:

- Employers appreciate how programming helps raise awareness in the community of the job opportunities available in the local area, including jobs in the skilled trades, and in areas where women are underrepresented.

Question: What kinds of attributes/ characteristics would you like to see employees possess?

Programming highlights the importance of soft skills to job-seekers:

- Employers consistently highlighted the importance of a wide range of professional norms and values, depending on the specific sector, such as work ethic, communication skills, humility, problem-solving skills, willingness to learn, respect, flexibility, honesty, and punctuality (including informing employers of potential lateness/ absence)
- Several employers emphasized the importance of socio-emotional skills/ competency, and the ability of potential employees to be flexible, adaptable, and reliable.

I think that people come into the field they choose sometimes not really realizing they have to learn things like how to get along with people, the things that schools don't necessarily teach. So how do you expose people to all that cultural stuff that they're going to experience so that they know what they're stepping into and that really helps them to hit the ground running whenever they graduate
(Employer Interview # 1).

- Employers spoke of a willingness to provide training for entry-level positions if a potential employee was a good fit in terms of the ABC criteria (i.e., attitude,

behaviour, competency). Several employers emphasized the importance of soft skills and the above-mentioned ABC criteria over the importance of having hard (technical) skills., given that these can be taught.

Definitely work ethic...one of our core values is to take ownership, get it done... there are ways to do things differently here and we can teach that, but we need people to be reliable, we need people to be...we have to be able to count on them. (Employer Interview # 4).

Question: What attributes/characteristics should employees possess?

- Be a team player
- Willingness to learn/work
- Honesty and respect
- Flexibility/ adaptability
- Professionalism
- Punctuality/ dependability
- Work ethic and reliability
- Communication
- Problem-solving
- Conflict resolution
- Computer/ digital skills
- Socio-emotional intelligence/ skills
- Motivation/ self-direction
- Listening skills/ ability to follow directions

Question: City School delivers programming to a wide variety of students with barriers. How does this compare to your current employee workforce/ profile?

Employer views on their employee profile diversity:

- Employee profiles vary significantly among respondents. Some employers reported having a diverse employee profile, including those from low-income populations and recent immigrants. A number of employers reported being proactive in addressing the gender disparity in their typical employee base.

What we find is that new Canadians are much more willing on the whole to adjust and things like that, simply because they've already had to adjust to a new culture. So, they are actually willing to listen and take that feedback faster than some of our Canadian-born folks (Employer Interview # 1).

Employer views on the education levels of their employee base:

- Depending on the specific sector, employers report a relatively high degree of diversity regarding the educational attainment levels of their employee base, ranging from those with university degrees to high-school diplomas. In several sectors, entry-level positions require minimal formal education, although attaining further educational credentials is a prerequisite for positions higher up the occupational hierarchy.

- Certain sectors are not educationally intensive in terms of expected postsecondary credentials, and more focused on attracting employees with the right skill sets and aptitude.
- Employers in sectors where educational credentials are minimal value how City School programming assists in connecting interested job-seekers to their sector

Question: What is the most significant benefit that City School could provide for your industry/ organization?

- Recruitment assistance in providing a talent pipeline
- Being a true partner and their willingness to collaborate
- Consultation on curricula design
- (Co)teaching technical skills
- Opportunity to improve employee diversity
- Programming emphasis on teaching soft skills and introduction to workplace norms and employment expectations
- Provision of foundational sector-specific skills (or knowledge thereof) to potential employees

Question: What is your sense of how employers/ industry perceive of City School?

City School programming highlights the value of community connection:

- Employers value the opportunity that programming presents to reach out and

connect with the community, even if programming is not a direct source of job candidates.

Employer views on the City School vision:

- Employers had a positive view of the City School vision and how it offers the opportunity for job-seekers to boost their job-readiness. Employers in certain sectors (i.e., food and beverage) considered their sector to be particularly conducive to recruiting potential employees from marginalized populations due to the more minimal expectations regarding educational credentials and sector experience.

Question: What do you think the role of employers/ industry is in education? What issues or problems do you see in the current postsecondary delivery model?

The challenge of maintaining an up-to-date curriculum:

- Employers were critical of what they perceived to be the often academic and outdated nature of what students learn, and consider themselves more up-to-date on industry changes and developments (i.e., technological innovations). Employers acknowledged that the pace of technological change (i.e., automation) presents challenges regarding maintaining an up-to-date curriculum at the postsecondary level.

Collaborating on curricula design:

- Employers value collaborating with educators on the skills they want potential employees to learn. Several employers felt that curricula design should begin with the input of what they are looking for in potential employees. Industry/ employer input should be solicited on a regular (i.e., annually or semi-annually) basis, particularly on shifting skill requirements and emerging occupational gaps.

Postsecondary environments and practical learning:

- Employers felt that conventional college programming needs to include education/ training on skills required beyond technical knowledge/ certifications, such as norms and values of professionalism, collaboration, and communication.
- Employers place a high value on programming that includes a practical learning environment component (i.e., regarding the day-to-day realities of working in a given sector), which they feel is often lacking from conventional postsecondary programming.
- Employers are critical of how the education that postsecondary students receive (although university more so than college students) leaves them too

often disconnected from “real-world” experience and the practicalities of the workplace. In particular, employers felt that educators should have such experiential, and practical/ anticipatory knowledge of the workplace of the (near) future.

- **Educational requirements and the future of work:** Some employers questioned the value of currently offered diplomas/ degrees given the changing nature of work. A number of employers see the potential value of using micro-credentials as a complement (rather than a replacement) to conventional postsecondary educational qualifications. Others suggested a shift from diplomas/ degrees to a bundling of micro-credentialing.

Our program provides micro-certifications. I think it's really beneficial for clients who have their high school and are looking to get into a career because it's something that they put on their resume and it shows that they've been dedicated to that sector and I think it really shows their want and need to get into (their sector) (Employer Interview # 2).

Social service providers (SSP)/ community representative (CR) interviews

Social service provider roles/ tasks:

- Supporting/ advising jobseekers with employment counselling
- Advocating to employers on behalf of jobseekers
- Referring clients to other agencies/ organizations (i.e., to City School)
- Working with specific populations (i.e., persons with disabilities/ LGBTQ+)
- Mapping labour market information
- EDI/ cultural competency training
- Client interview preparation/ resume building
- Informing clients on employee/ employer rights and responsibilities
- Connecting with employers regarding job/ career fairs

Connection with Mohawk College

- Client referrals (to and from the College)
- Training assistance (informing training curricula/ delivering training)
- Assist/ advise clients regarding sector-specific licensing/ certifications)

Question: What perceptions do you think employers/ industry have of City School programming?

Overcoming negative employer perceptions of socially excluded populations:

- Respondents valued the opportunity that City School programming presents to help overcome employer negative perceptions regarding job-seekers from socially-excluded populations.
- Respondents are cognizant of the difficulty of shifting negative perceptions/ stigma among employers

regarding at-risk populations. In particular, there is a need to foster greater employer awareness of the needs of specific client cohorts (i.e., LGBTQ+ populations, immigrants/ newcomers).

- Respondents expressed concern regarding preconceived notions and the “othering” of marginalized populations by employers. In light of this, respondents were mindful of revealing the nature of job-seeker barriers/ challenges to potential employers given the possibility of negatively influencing perceptions.
- Respondents commented on how the

lack of resources for deaf and visually impaired job-seekers remains an ongoing challenge and source of frustration.

It's getting employers to understand the unique needs...the unique opportunities that an employer has to engage with folks they might not otherwise engage with.... I think its human nature to want to work with people who look like you, who sound like you, and who behave like you. But the folks that we work with do not fit into a box that is nice and neat and tidy. They have very unique and diverse needs. And employers are not always as open to either accommodation or accepting or understanding their diverse needs. They're not always as open to that as they could be (SSP Interview # 17).

Questions regarding the commensurability of City School and Mohawk College courses:

- Respondents suggested that employers may question the extent to which City School programming is commensurate to Mohawk College programming in terms of its academic rigour.

There is always a kind of concern... is the training as legitimate as a regular college certificate or diploma? Is it Mohawk level...? I know its Mohawk City School, but that word City School, I think many people would be like, what does that mean? Is that an alternative version of Mohawk? I think that in itself sometimes is what employers wonder about or question (Employer Interview # 13).

Employer implicit/ systemic bias regarding newcomers:

- Respondents acknowledged that some employers can have an implicitly biased or prejudicial view of newcomers (i.e., immigrants or refugee populations). As such, respondents commented on the need to boost employer awareness of the prior education/ experience of immigrant/ refugee populations and the value of global/ international experience.

When I look at what I think are barriers to employment, a lot of it comes from the employer side because employers need to use experience outside of Canada. We find that employers are stuck on the idea of "Canadian experience" ... It comes up time and time again. So that's something that, as a community, and as service providers, we all need to work on with employers, to talk about the value of global experience. That's something that employers really need to open their eyes to... (SSP Interview # 18).

I always share with employers the missed opportunities that their organization is going to miss if they don't start looking at international experience or valuing international experience. We always talk about out-of-the-box thinking. Every organization we go to says we need to think outside of the box. Well, you know, somebody coming from a completely different background, they're going to have very different ideas...their ideas are already out of the box thinking (Employer Interview # 18).

Strengthening the City School brand resonance among employers:

- Providers suggested the brand resonance of City School could be strengthened (compared with the Mohawk College brand), particularly among small-to-medium businesses (SMEs), although they acknowledged that City School programming has gained considerable traction and recognition among the employers they work with.

Question: What challenges and/or barriers remain for individuals in pursuing an employment (or postsecondary) pathway?

Client life stabilization barriers:

- Respondents remarked that clients may not be job-ready given their current life situation and/or may lack confidence or concrete direction regarding an employment pathway. Clients can also have physical/ mental health barriers that can hamper their ability to persist in employment. Overall, respondents suggested that clients can exist on a wide spectrum of job-readiness. Furthermore, client self-perceptions of their job-readiness may not accord with their actual job-readiness, as assessed by the social service provider and/or employer.
- Respondents commented on how the pandemic compounded existing client barriers and life stabilization challenges, particularly for those lacking in digital access/ digital competency.

Foregrounding client lived experience:

- Respondents emphasized the importance

of placing the lived experience of social exclusion, in all of its complexities, at the centre of pathway programming. For example, jobseekers (typically women) who were also primary caregivers due to childcare/ eldercare responsibilities can face significant barriers in employment given the lack of accommodation to their life circumstances and responsibilities.

I kind of think that it's too simple to say, oh, here are a bunch of people available to work, and let's give them some training and get them into jobs. Because a lot of the folks that are on social assistance have child care responsibilities, and child care is very expensive. They have housing challenges; they have transportation difficulties. And as soon as you get any kind of a job, when you're on social assistance, your funding gets clawed back. And the kinds of jobs you can get don't cover things like medical care, or your dental care, that kind of thing. And if you have kids and you don't have a car, the kind of job that would attract you to come off of social assistance would have to be a very high-paying job and a lot of openings for jobs are not high-paying (SSP Interview # 19).

Client challenge of self-advocacy:

- Respondents spoke of how their clients can lack the ability to self-advocate and/or market themselves to a potential employer. They attributed this to, oftentimes, a lack of confidence, but also to the difficulty clients can have in articulating their existing skills to employers.

Confidence is what people lack when you get in the system because they rip it away from you (CR Interview # 30).

Job-seeker unrealistic job expectations:

- Clients can sometimes have unrealistic expectations regarding job tasks, working conditions, compensation rates, and expectations regarding career advancement. Respondents commented on how a key value of City School programming is how it helps better inform job-seekers of such expectations and realities.

Sometimes people go into the course thinking it's something they want to do but they try it out and come away thinking no that's not what I want to do, and so in a way it's good because it kind of acts like a trial before they go to an employer and waste the employer's time (SSP Interview # 15).

They (employers) are looking for people who are... day-one work-ready, which means that they come in with the foundational skills, not necessarily with complete knowledge, but with the foundational skills necessary to understand certain elements of entry-level roles, and with the attitude of showing up for work, showing a positive attitude, and a willingness to learn... Employers tell us that if you send us people with those three things, we can train them on the technical skills (SSP Interview # 16).

Strengthening client job-search skills:

- Respondents commented on how the clients they work with can be lacking in essential job-search skills (i.e., navigating online job application search databases and application portals) and interview preparation skills. Clients can also be disadvantaged in their pursuit of certain employment pathways given their incomplete education, lack of required certifications/ licensing, and lack of previous experience.

Job compensation levels:

- Respondents suggested that employer recruitment retention struggles (depending on the sector) can be the result of poor compensation rates, a lack of employment benefits, and the absence of a living wage. Full-time hours and/or a fixed work schedule may also not be available or flexibility regarding in-person/ remote work schedules (in sectors where this may be an option). Respondents suggested that employers cannot expect loyalty from employees due to the above factors and the high cost of living, which can understandably compel job-seekers to continue to search for better opportunities.

I think...those (employers) that are finding it really difficult to hire...maybe they don't want to pay as much as the next guy. Maybe they don't train as much as the next guy. Maybe they're just not investing in their workers. We can do part of it, we can help with part of the mission, but not the whole thing (SSP Interview # 17).

I think they can adapt first off by making their position competitive. What I mean by that is they are not offering the minimum salaries; they are maybe not even offering the minimal comparable salaries you know; they are putting their salaries at the top end for that position compared to others in the area. That draws attention right away (SSP Interview # 13).

Question: What challenges exist with regard to engaging/ working with employers/ industry?

Lack of employer recruitment capacity:

- Respondents suggested that employers need to be more willing to engage in grassroots employee recruitment. Smaller employers, in particular, tend to look for employees who can start working with limited supervision and/or mentoring. However, respondents readily acknowledged that employers can be overextended and lacking in their ability to commit time and/or resources to engage in non-traditional recruitment strategies. Furthermore, the ability of employers to train/ mentor new employees can be limited due to human resources capacity issues, even in cases when a wage subsidy is available.

Lack of employer awareness regarding the potential benefits of partnering with City School:

- Interviewees suggested that it can be difficult to obtain employer buy-in given

their lack of awareness of the potential benefits of hiring from non-traditional employee talent pools. Respondents suggested emphasizing a “what’s in it for me” type angle when seeking employer buy-in.

Once the employers are engaged with us, we're able to keep them engaged, because the staff are knowledgeable in the areas that they wouldn't have knowledge in; the cultural competency areas, rights and responsibilities, those areas...once engage somebody, they're there for the long haul. The challenge comes with those who are not engaged (SSP Interview # 18).

- Respondents spoke of the difficulty of building awareness among employers that funds/ financial incentives may be available to cover/ supplement client salaries for a limited period of time.

I think that for employers who are kind of on the fence or who aren't sure, it incentivizes them to take a chance. But honestly, some employers don't even want the incentive. They just say, this is the right thing to do for the community, I'm going to take a chance.... and by hiring that person, they were very happy to have a different demographic on their staff, someone who brought a different perspective (SSP Interview # 17).

Employer awareness of the barriers facing women:

- Respondents spoke of the lack of employer awareness and/or understanding and/or willingness

regarding the accommodation of women with childcare/ eldercare responsibilities, and how this impacts the ability of women to not only access an employment pathway but to continue with employment.

- In addition to the above, respondents commented on the difficulty of shifting gendered workplace norms regarding the recruitment of women into traditionally male-dominated occupational sectors.

Getting women into non-traditional occupations has been difficult. It's not difficult to get the women into the programs, it's difficult to get them to stay with an employer, because of that "othering" that happens, that they don't "fit" into the workplace... (SSP Interview # 17).

- Respondents commented on the need for more women-centred employment pathway funding, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic which had a disproportionately negative impact on the employment trajectories of women compared with men.

One of the things that was really glaring was the impact on women, in terms of the pandemic and women being the primary caregivers in most families when children were not attending school... Women were leaving the workforce as a result of those responsibilities (SSP Interview # 19).

- **Employer lack of soft skills:** A number of interviewees commented on how

employers can be lacking in communication/ soft skills, despite emphasizing the importance of such in potential employees.

It's a tough one for me because the buzzword is always soft skills, like employers want soft skills (but) employers themselves (sometimes) don't have soft skills... (SSP Interview # 17).

After the (practice) interview I debriefed with each of the students and (some) were a little bit surprised about the questions. They weren't as in-depth as what we had practiced, but one of the students said she felt like the (employer) interviewer wasn't paying attention to her. She would mute her microphone and she could tell she was talking to somebody in the room (SSP Interview # 13).

Disconnect between the espousal of EDI principles and their implementation in practice:

- Respondents emphasized the ongoing challenge of encouraging employers to view their recruitment practices/ policies through a social/ equity lens. For example, current education/ employment systems fail to recognize/implement Indigenous knowledge/ approaches. Furthermore, respondents commented on the difficulty they experience in encouraging employers to see the benefits of integrating EDI principles into their hiring practices.
- Respondents commented on how current labour/ skills shortages can serve as an

incentivizing force regarding nudging/ compelling employers to diversify their employee profile and engage in non-traditional recruitment strategies.

Question: What do you think is the role of employers/ industry in education? What issues or problems do you see in the current postsecondary delivery model?

Necessity of incorporating practical/ experiential learning into postsecondary:

- Respondents suggested that there is a need to integrate more practical experiential learning and/or co-operative learning opportunities into postsecondary curricula/ programming. Implementing such opportunities requires deepening the degree of collaboration between postsecondary institutions and industry. A number of respondents stressed the importance of providing a well-rounded education to students, one not solely focused on employability and work skills.

In the changing world, we are in, it's talked more and more about getting people into the job quickly and getting them through some quick skills training, but I'm an advocate for academics and people having some education and diversifying their experiences and knowledge. I think it does help you with your future career goals and your ability to function in life and move forward from there. For me, I think it is important that individuals will have

those opportunities, and not everything is necessarily about the quickest way to get a job (SSP Interview # 13).

Challenging negative perception of the skilled trades:

- Respondents commented on the need to counter the negative stigma attached to the skilled trades given that it is a priority area of employee recruitment. Despite the prospects for upward occupational mobility in such areas, a number of respondents remarked that parents can discourage their children from pursuing a skilled trade career pathway due to the negative perception they may hold of such sectors. The societal value placed on obtaining (ideally) a university education also adds to the stigma.

We have to address the stigma that is attached to the trades because we know that that is an area that is much needed in our country...it's seen as second-class to university or a postsecondary education... I really think it's the old blue-collar/white-collar stigma that's been around for a long time...I still think it's a hurdle. I still think it's seen as though, unfortunately, that the trades are for the students who aren't as smart (SSP Interview # 19).

Question: What suggestions (if any) do you have to improve City School program delivery for both clients and industry/ employers?

Deepening the degree of college-industry collaboration:

- Respondents place a high value on the strength of their collaborative relationships with the college and employers and emphasized the importance of remaining responsive to the needs of various stakeholder groups (i.e., community, industry).

Streamlining the employment pathway process:

- Respondents suggested implementing a more streamlined process for students enrolled in courses that do not have a direct employment entry point. For students seeking employment, respondents recommended continuing to strengthen the integration of Community Employment Services. For students interested in pursuing a career that requires further education, a clearly defined “next steps” component is important. In both cases, respondents were mindful of the necessity to manage learner expectations regarding their chosen pathway.

Strengthening supports for client employment persistence:

- A point stressed by respondents centred on how boosting access to employment opportunities is a vital first step, but greater emphasis needs to be placed on employment persistence; that is,

ensuring that clients have the ongoing support they need to retain employment.

Tracking students from course completion to employment:

- Although they acknowledged that tracking students from course completion to employment varies depending on the nature of the supporting grant or funding mechanism, respondents stressed the need to develop a comprehensive and consistent tracking system capturing the number of City School students who transition to employment and/or further education. Such a system would provide all stakeholders with a clear view of the efficacy of programming. Several respondents suggested that, in some cases, the perceived success of City School programming is a little too reliant on anecdotal data.

Strengthening the delivery of programming in rural areas:

- Respondents highlighted the need to continue to expand the delivery of programming in rural areas where transportation remains a barrier for learners.

Using employer testimonials to boost awareness of City School:

- Respondents suggested using employer “champions” as a promotional tool to encourage greater employment involvement/ engagement in programming and provide employers with testimonials of successful employment pathways exemplars. Such

testimonials would help strengthen awareness among employers of the value of collaborating with City School.

It's a mixed bag. I feel like once they (employers) know about us, it takes a while for them to almost be sold on what we can do, and once they're in, they are usually pretty good, but I think the awareness isn't there on a larger

scale... We will send back money to the ministry at the end of the year because not enough employers take advantage of it... I think awareness is probably the biggest challenge (SSP Interview # 13)

College staff (CS) interviews

Question: What have been the main challenges or the most significant learning curve you have experienced in your role:

A limited number of engaged partners:

- Although college staff commented positively on size of the employer networks they worked with, a couple noted that the number of actively engaged employers they worked with was limited. Respondents were mindful of the volume of “asks” when working with specific community/ industry partners, and of expecting too much from a limited number of engaged partners.

Challenges of working virtually:

- Working virtually was a challenge for some College personnel as they felt disconnected from colleagues working on similar portfolios. Respondents commented on the learning curve challenge of familiarizing themselves with the various City School/ Access programming components.
- Faculty experienced challenges in using/ navigating Zoom (i.e., students appearing in a black box format presented difficulties in establishing a connection with course participants).
- Despite the challenges of conducting classes virtually via Zoom, faculty were appreciative of how conducting classes

via Zoom helped to boost the participation of employers given the virtual flexibility of the format.

Course delivery challenges:

- Staff/ faculty expressed frustration when individuals register for a course but do not follow through and attend. Although they acknowledged this to be partly an inevitable byproduct of making signing up for a course barrier-free, they also recognized that course participation can be challenging for individuals living in precarious and unstable circumstances. In other words, individuals may sign up for a course with the full intention of attending, but changing life circumstances may make attending no longer feasible.
- Respondents suggested that students be provided with a detailed learning plan on day one of a course, complete with upcoming schedule and learning activities so that students can be as informed as possible on what to expect.
- Faculty remarked that there were students reluctant to try using equipment (select programs) and required considerable encouragement and mentoring.
- Respondents suggested that support staff (i.e., learning support specialists) can be stretched too thin during busy parts of the term, although this also varied considerably between courses.

Faculty autonomy and academic freedom regarding course delivery:

- Although the curriculum in some courses is standardized due to the inclusion of sector-specific proprietary licensing or industry requirements (i.e., the food and beverage sector), respondents suggested that strengthening involvement in curricula design and development would be beneficial. In some cases, for example, faculty were handed a pre-determined curriculum that they found challenging to work with. All faculty recognized that course curricula must remain responsive to the changing needs and priorities of some employment/ industry sectors.

The challenge of fulfilling funding requirements:

- Some respondents commented on the challenges of navigating the intricacies of the bureaucratic processes they engage with in order to implement and achieve program objectives (i.e., ranging from college-level processes to ensuring compliance with Ministry guidelines). For example, one challenge lay in working to satisfy funding requirements while working with the internal structures/ deadlines of the College, which can differ from employer timelines.

Question: What challenges exist with regard to engaging/ working with employers/ industry?

Challenges regarding college-employer time commitment when

building collaborations:

- Respondents were mindful of the lengthy process entailed in building a collaborative relationship with employers while advocating on behalf of students. Respondents commented on how some employers do not have the capacity to adequately engage.

What I can say is that if you are open to trying to improve your business model and understand where your weaknesses are, and there's.... an institution that's willing to help you find solutions to your problems, you quite frankly, would be an idiot not to look at what they offer (CS Interview # 27).

- Respondents found working and communicating with employers in organizing job placement opportunities to be particularly time-consuming, and remarked that some employers were not willing to invest sufficient time/ resources in collaborating but expected to benefit nonetheless.
- Some faculty remarked that employers demonstrated a lack of engagement in courses and seemingly wanted results, albeit with inadequate investment from their end.

With employers the challenge is that some of them want results from us but are not willing to invest time on their end to help us get to those results...we need those employers who are really struggling to find workers to spend some time working with us to develop programming (CS Interview # 23).

Employers with inadequate compensation/ benefits:

- College staff expressed the view that certain industry/ employment sectors offer inadequate compensation and/or training regarding their investment in potential employees.

After the pandemic, the labor market shifted from demand-driven to supply-led. What's happening right now in the labor market is that there are jobs that are being left open, because after COVID, some of the...expectations around what people are willing to go out and do for the amount of cash that they're being provided is being seen as less acceptable, right?
(CS Interview # 31)

Question: What perceptions do you think employers/ industry have of City School programming?

Employers' views on City School programming:

- Staff reported receiving considerable positive feedback from the employers they worked with (particularly in the case of Personal Support Work (PSW)/ Early Childhood Education (ECE) programming). Faculty commented on how employers were able to gauge the potential of prospective employees through their engagement in programming.
- Staff/ faculty were greatly appreciative of employers who contributed as guest speakers, who spoke with students about job expectations, provided information

on obtaining an apprenticeship, and who provided information on labour conditions and compensation.

*The speakers are like the gems of these Explore Careers classes because they're people actually in the industry [...]
When I've done these explore careers classes, those are the most talked about ones because...you have the industry leaders at your fingertips
(CS Interview # 20).*

They (students) completely trusted what the (guest speaker employee) panel said. They liked the answers they got. They felt comfortable asking them questions. They walked away from that thinking you know, I could be one of those people, I can work there, right? And I can do this and I can have the same experience (CS Interview # 22).

Employer expectations gap regarding the job-readiness of students:

- Staff remarked that (some) employers were generally unaware of the objectives and mission of City School and/or were under the impression that participating students were fully job-ready.
- Staff suggested that more marketing would help disseminate the City School message/ mission and help “reintroduce” programming to a wider employer pool, thereby helping to expand the pool of engaged partners.

Question: What other ways (if any) would you like to see employers engaged? How could programming be better tailored to meet those expectations?

Scaling-up employer engagement:

- Respondents suggested continuing to expand the dominant programming focus on the small-to-medium employers (SMEs) which typify the Hamilton employer landscape, but to also seek out opportunities to engage with employers with greater capacity and scaling-up potential.
- Staff suggested nurturing a closer collaborative relationship with industry sectors through the attendance/participation of an employment consultant at meetings. Such collaboration would help City School staff to be as informed as possible on shifting industry trends, developments, and workplace policies.

Collaborating with employers on curriculum development:

- Staff were appreciative of the ongoing contribution of employers in developing customized programming material/curricula (the closer the collaboration the better) and in recommending possible faculty for course delivery.

Potential benefit of micro-credentials:

- Respondents commented on how micro-credentials could be used strategically to make jobseekers more marketable to employers, to enhance the employability of newcomers who lack Canadian

experience, as well to enhance the overall appeal to jobseekers of City School programming. Offering students the opportunity to obtain a micro-credential could also help make course participation more attractive to them.

Many of them [students who are also newcomers] have no Canadian work experience, right? And they have nothing to put on their resume for Canadian work experience. By getting that micro-credential and being able to put it on their resume, it shows they attended, they were committed, they got this credential. It's very, very helpful and it gives their self-esteem a bit of a boost too, and their confidence a little bit of a boost. So, I think that's another critical part of these courses is that micro credential...People are all over that. They really want to earn that micro-credential (Interview # 22).

In terms of looking at it from the perspective of City School and sort of these non-credit courses, why would I want to take a non-credit course other than for general interest, but if I can earn a micro-credential that's got the Mohawk College stamp of approval on it, that just ups the validity of the course... (SSP Interview # 22).

Question: What skills do you think industry/ employers are looking for in students?

- Time-management
- Organizational adaptability

- Punctuality
- Work ethic
- Flexibility
- Communication
- Teamwork/ collaboration
- Attitude and a willingness to learn
- Digital skills

I think that in a lot of instances, if you focus too much on just the hard skills, then if an individual decides they want a career change or for whatever reason, it's just not a good fit, then they can still take pieces of their education and apply it to new situations (Interview # 27).

Question: In general, how ready do you think students are to pursue an employment pathway? Or what is your sense of the employability or job-readiness of course participants?

Perceptions on the job-readiness of students following course completion:

- Respondents espoused the value of programming in shifting job-seeker self-perceptions and boosting confidence levels. Staff felt that students who completed a course were generally ready to be connected with an employment opportunity, although some required an ongoing degree of support due to life stabilization issues (which varied significantly among students).

You really have to look at things very differently through the lens of the job seeker, and each job seeker brings their

own journey... and the framework of what it's (City School) about is to really elicit that relationship and that support system and really help them shift their self-perception of themselves and giving them that opportunity to really explore this (CS Interview # 24).

- Faculty remarked on how many students are job-ready and are able to use the course as a launch-pad for workforce engagement, whereas some students use the course to enhance skills. Overall, respondents stressed the importance of adopting a long-term view regarding the job-seeker journey.
- There was variation between programs in terms of the job-ready status of students (i.e., students in the PSW courses were perceived of as particularly job-ready). Although many students were motivated to begin working, some students were better informed as to employment sector job tasks and expectations but were not quite job-ready due to individual level barriers.

I think sometimes there are unrealistic expectations where if you graduate from X program, then you're going to walk into a position that is higher than entry level. So not being open to working towards your dream job instead of just landing in at the second that you finish your programming (CS Interview # 27).

- Staff/ faculty commented on the benefits of providing students with hands-on learning opportunities in order to boost their job-readiness.

We talk (to students) about a career versus a job. Some people don't see it that way until they take this course and they go OK, yeah. I can see why general labor can be a career because I can move up and I can do this [...] So, it is a springboard or a launching pad for people I would say. It definitely... enhances their employment prospects because of the networking aspect, but it also branches off into OK yeah, I realize I'm going to need more education. I'm going to need to take a computer technology course or whatever. I'm going to need to learn welding. It does sort of set them either on a path to go ahead and start applying for entry-level positions or thinking about enhancing their skills to get where they want to be in terms of education (CS Interview # 22).

Question: What challenges and/or barriers remain for students in pursuing an employment (or postsecondary) pathway?

- Access to transportation
- Childcare/eldercare responsibilities
- Financial/ income security
- Health issues (mental and/or physical)
- Substance/ addiction issues
- Limited availability in terms of hours
- Concern that employment would result in loss of benefits associated with Ontario Works (OW) or the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP)
- Implementing equity, diversity, and

inclusion (EDI) principles

Question: What skills do you think students are lacking and/or need to develop?

- Communication and language skills
- Problem-solving
- Organizational
- Adaptability
- Self-direction and resourcefulness
- Digital skills/ computer literacy
- Establishing a digital presence/ resume (i.e., creating a LinkedIn profile)
- Self-advocacy skills
- Professionalism
- Teamwork/ collaboration skills

Question: What suggestions do you have (if any) to improve program delivery for both students and industry/ employers?

Programming works best when connected to an employment pathway:

- The overall view among respondents is that programming worked well as a recruitment tool for employers (thereby clearly illustrating the value of the partnership), although depending on the extent to which courses were connected to a direct employment pathway. In general, the more involved the employer is in course design and/or delivery, the better.

Expanding the number of engaged employers.

- Respondents suggested that

programming would benefit from a greater diversification of engaged employers.

Inclusion of work placements:

- Programming would benefit from more and lengthier work placements (beyond two weeks).

Communicating program progress to employers:

- Staff suggested continuing to provide engaged and dedicated employers with regular updates regarding anticipated student completion rates and numbers available for possible work placements.

Student interviews

Previous education of respondents:

- High-school diploma (4)
- Some high school (2)
- College Diploma (2)
- Some College (3)
- University degree (1)
- Some university (1)

- Students learn about City School programming from a variety of sources; including, Ontario Works staff, employment services, family/ friends, social media (i.e., Facebook), and the Mohawk College website.
- At the time of the interviews, participants worked in various positions including personal support worker, retirement home companion, housekeeper at retirement care-home, construction, Tim Hortons, and one was an OW recipient.

Question: What is your employment/ educational pathway of interest?

- PSW
- Nursing
- Manufacturing
- Construction/ landscape construction
- Culinary/ hospitality
- Healthcare
- Further (unspecified) education

Question: Do you have plans to pursue further education?

- Yes (10)
- No (2) (due to money/ time/ resources)
- Unsure (1) (undecided, currently needs to work to support self)

Question: What challenges or barriers regarding finding employment remain for you?

- Childcare commitments
- Financial insecurity
- Health issues (physical and/or mental)
- Impact of COVID-19 (i.e., laid-off at

- work)
- Finding full-time work (i.e., underemployment)
- Limited opportunities due to current career path
- Resume building challenges
- Licensing barrier (sector-specific)
- Lack of information on next steps

Question: How did you find the course experience?

Course as employment re-boot opportunity:

- Students who successfully completed a course found it to be a motivating experience and commented on how the course helped them get back on track regarding pursuing an educational/ employment pathway. All students appreciated that the course was tuition-free. Half of those interviewed planned to move into a new occupational field and saw the course as an opportunity to do so. Others planned to move on to better opportunities within the field they are currently working in or have experience in.
- Students greatly valued courses that included work placement opportunities, and suggested that it be explicitly stated in a course description/ introduction if there is a direct connection to an employment opportunity.

The sort of having no-cost accessibility to school is a game-changer, and it definitely helped me make my choices (Student Interview # 3).

There's a lot of people backing you is what I learned the most, actually. And there's a lot of support and I was very grateful for it (Student Interview # 4).

Enhancing personal skill sets:

- Students were appreciative of the focus on both hard and soft skills and commented on how the course experience helped them better appreciate the interplay between each.
- Students valued such course components as resume-building, building interview and communication skills, and learning how and when to contact or follow up with employers.
- Students valued the opportunity to obtain certificates (i.e., CPR/ first aid).

I want to say it's amazing. It really is. For someone like me who's doing a career change...and not really having the resources or the ability to go back to school full-time or do an apprenticeship or do a full-time program, it's absolutely given me the ability to transition into a new career in a practical, real-world way. It's given me the confidence to try things that I wouldn't even have considered trying as a woman in the trades (Student Interview # 3).

What I took from it is, you can get trained.... You can be trained to do a certain task, but they want you to build a good work ethic, come on time, be prepared, that sort of thing (Student Interview # 4).

Courses provide valuable insight into employment pathways:

- Respondents commented positively on how courses were effective in providing them with insight into employment/ industry entry points and occupational expectations.

I learned that they (employers) are looking for people who have the skills and even if they don't have the experience, but have the skill or are willing to learn, employers are willing to take you on (Student Interview # 7).

- There is a general perception among students that it is a job-seeker's market given that employers are having difficulty finding suitable employees (although job-seekers can experience difficulty in learning about opportunities).

Enhanced job-market knowledge:

- A number of students remarked that some occupational fields are characterized by precarious forms of employment. For example, it is difficult to obtain full-time employment as a PSW without working 2-3 jobs.

Course participation as providing confidence boost:

- Students commented positively on how course participation helped them gain the skills and confidence that will help them in finding employment.

Question: What did you learn about the types of skills industry/

employers are looking for?

- The importance of having general/ transferable skills (i.e., digital skills)
- Willingness to learn
- Customer service
- Communication
- Work ethic (reliability and punctuality)
- Job-specific technical skills
- Teamwork and conflict resolution

Programming as a motivating force during COVID-19:

- Respondents valued the opportunity to participate in programming remotely during the pandemic, with some commenting on how they would not otherwise have been able to do so due to other commitments. Several respondents commented on how course participation provided them with the impetus to embark on an educational/ employment pathway.

The program helped me out in a lot of respects. One is that during COVID, I kind of became complacent, and I was staying up very late at night. And it (the course) forced me because my work ethic kicked in, that I would have to convert my hours back to regular daytime hours, business hours. So, it helped me with my sleep patterns, for one. Number two, it got me out. We were all pretty isolated during COVID....and so it helped me in that respect socially, and it got my mind working. I got a lot of pertinent information that I can use just generally in my life (Student Interview # 5).

Question: What assistance would you like from City School/ Mohawk in terms of finding a pathway to employment?

- Help with referrals/ connecting with employers
- Resume-building assistance
- More information on the industry sector of interest
- One-on-one counselling/ advising regarding job search
- Method of measuring skills following course completion

Question: What are your next steps related to employment and/or education?

- Further education
- Work and eventual return to education
- Conduct a job search
- Complete work placement and search for employment
- Pursue GED credentials
- Complete education

Question: What recommendations do you have for improvement?

Enhancing the “next steps” component:

- Respondents suggested more administrative guidance could be provided regarding employment referrals/ job fairs, resume assistance, indication of next steps, and one-on-one career planning.

- Respondents suggested a need for assistance regarding obtaining licenses/ certifications required to work in a specific sector.

Maybe like a one-on-one, sort of... "Okay. This is your goal. This is the career you want. This is how we're going to help you achieve it." And then you start applying (Student Interview # 6).

Final course assessment/ evaluation:

- Students suggested that some courses would benefit from a final examination that would allow students to gauge their improved knowledge base.

City School course alert notification:

- It would be beneficial if prospective students could get some form of alert when a course they have an interest in is scheduled to run.

I would like to click on City School and see all the courses they've offered, what they have coming down the pipe, when the dates are, so I can kind of gauge and plan out my education (Student Interview # 3).

- **Enhance the practical, experiential learning component of courses (where applicable):**
- Respondents suggested a recommendation to include more practical/ hands-on learning in specific courses (i.e., more cooking in culinary courses)



Themes & Interpretations

An innovative workforce development model

Conventional workforce development models tend to be premised on antiquated models of human capital development predicated on the notion that unemployed individuals need education and/or skills training to succeed (Cunningham & Villaseñor, 2016; Holmes & Hjartarson, 2014; Pakula & Smith Fowler, 2021; Zizys, 2018). To some extent, such models can help connect jobseekers to an employment opportunity, albeit one with limited potential for further career progression. Furthermore, such models can fail to adequately account for the complex interplay of barriers that socially excluded populations face.

A finding from our interview data is that the City School model overcomes some of the limitations of conventional models due to the extent of employer consultation in course design, the involvement of social service providers in supporting students with (depending on the program) pre-bridging and post-bridging support, and the support offered to students via college learning support specialists and employment consultants. The holistic nature of the model helps mitigate a central challenge of building a program that avoids an overly reductive focus on achieving transactional goals (i.e., matching job-seekers with employment opportunities, albeit without adequate potential for career progression) in favour of one that is potentially more transformative (i.e., connecting job-seekers to a career opportunity in order to help them achieve a greater degree of life stabilization).

Building campus-community solidarities

Our findings suggest that the employment pathways partnership is helping to strengthen the social capital among community and employer stakeholders which is crucial to boosting employment equity (Loewen et al., 2005; MacMillan & Young, 2015). Students learn of the employment opportunities available in the community and a potential pathway by which to connect with them, and employers have the opportunity to connect with interested jobseeker cohorts and potentially diversify their employee base. In doing so, programming helps to boost visibility to employers of jobseekers currently unattached to the labour market, but who have the potential to be engaged with training opportunities that connect them to entry-level employment opportunities. A crucial component is a bridging system that includes pre-bridging components (i.e., accessible training opportunities that include wraparound services) and post-bridging support (i.e., access to ongoing support if and when needed). Such bridging can help facilitate the process of “career laddering”; that is, the provision of a support structure designed to smoothen the transition from education to stable employment (Loewen et al., 2005).

Boosting job-readiness

Our findings suggest that City School employment pathways programming is helping to boost the job-readiness of students, to varying degrees, depending on the course and the extent to which an employer is attached. Student feedback from programs where there was greater employer involvement indicated an appreciation for the opportunity to speak and connect with employers directly. Integrating employer and employee panels (in select courses) provided students with direct access to industry personnel, and students greatly benefitted from having a space to openly inquire about job prospects, skills required, pay expectations, and more. Such access was greatly beneficial in helping to bridge the gap between student/ jobseeker expectations and the reality of the workforce, as panels provided a realistic sense of the career trajectory students could expect beyond course completion. To this end, including a clearly articulated “next steps” component is crucial. An exemplar is the PSW program, as the employer is engaged in program design and delivery, and actively recruits students directly from courses.

As documented in previous research on City School programming (see Bourke et al., 2019), the tuition-free component incentivizes individuals with weak labour force attachment to explore an introduction to basic sector skills and begin planning a career pathway. In essence, courses allow students to pursue their interest in a new field without the financial burden of pursuing postsecondary education. Following course completion, some students expressed interest in pursuing further education. For example, students in the personal support worker program reported interest in pursuing a career in nursing, a possibility that was introduced to them through the program.

Upskilling/ reskilling opportunities

A recurring theme emerging from the student interview data is the opportunity courses provide to either upskill or reskill without a financial cost to participants. Students typically fall into two categories. One group are seeking career advancement in a field they either are already working in or have experience of, and so course participation provides the opportunity to explore what additional skills or certifications may be required for career advancement. The second group are seeking to pivot from one occupational sector to another, or are looking for a way out of a cycle of un/underemployment. Individuals whose employment was impacted by COVID were able to take advantage of free programming to reskill. For both groups, courses serve as an introduction to the foundational elements that allow individuals to build upon their existing skill sets and interests. Some courses (in select programs) provided access to certifications, equipment, employers, job placements, and more. Students also greatly benefitted from the rehearsal interviews and resume-building components, gained further skills to distinguish themselves as potential job candidates, and gained knowledge of how to make themselves more marketable to potential employers. Courses with work placements were particularly valued by

students in how they helped facilitate their transition to a new field.

The role of employers in curriculum design

The inclusion of employer input and feedback in course programming was identified repeatedly in the interview data as a crucial component in the efficacy of the employment pathways strategy. Collaborating with employers in course design and/or delivery (for select programs) allows for up-to-date education and creates a workforce better equipped with the tools they need to succeed. Employer involvement can occur to varying degrees, with some providing feedback on what programs need to be offered, while others get involved in the curriculum design and course delivery. Collaborating on curriculum provides the opportunity for employers to advise on the skills they are looking for in potential employees, and for which they are unable to provide in-house training for.

Comments provided by respondents in the social service and community-based sector, however, would seem to support a more cautious approach regarding the degree of employer involvement, given that employers can be (as one would expect) primarily focused on economic rather than educational goals. Such caution chimes with Lauder and Mayhew's (2020) concern regarding the entrenchment of an instrumental view of education whereby the primary role of postsecondary institutions lies in fulfilling market-oriented imperatives. Such concerns raise the question of whether an overt focus on economic efficiency can be reconciled with achieving equity/ social justice aims that target structural inequities. For example, one manifestation of the instrumental focus that has gained traction in higher education is the priority placed on the cultivation of "soft skills", albeit often explicitly conceptualized in terms of the skills deemed essential for workforce participation and economic productivity. In light of such concerns, we suggest that such collaboration in curriculum design be *employer-informed* rather than *employer-driven* in order to preserve the integrity of maintaining a more holistic conceptualization of the value of acquiring a postsecondary education.

Shifting the perception of the skilled trades

In working to address the labour/ skills shortage identified by employers, City School programming aims to fill in-demand job vacancies, particularly in the skilled trades. The lack of interest in such careers among students in high-school, and their ongoing stigmatization as undesirable sectors, were identified by respondents as the leading reasons for why there is a worker shortage in these areas. For job-seekers interested in pursuing a career in the skilled trades, respondents emphasized the need for a clearly defined and accessible pathway regarding obtaining the necessary certifications. Employers in the trades expressed the need to reintroduce the trades as a serious consideration for younger generations, with an emphasis on the

importance of doing so at the high-school level.

Employment pathways and labour precarity

Although the labour/ skills shortage concern repeatedly highlighted by employers as an ongoing challenge regarding recruitment and retention is certainly one that presents difficulties for their day-to-day operational efficiency; a far more pressing issue is the systemic deficit whereby available employment opportunities are lacking both in extrinsic benefits (i.e., adequate compensation rates and benefits) and intrinsic benefits (i.e., employment satisfaction). A recurring theme in interviews with respondents working in the community and social services sector is that employers who face ongoing recruitment and (particularly) retention issues are likely experiencing such challenges due to a combination of poor compensation, poor recruitment strategies, unattractive work schedules (i.e., shift work), a lack of employee benefits, and the absence of adequate sick day allowances. Our research suggests that such factors can fail to incentivize certain populations (i.e., OW recipients) to an employment pathway, given that it may have marginal impact on their life stabilization challenges.

Several of the industry sectors particularly susceptible to precarious working conditions, including the factor of workplace risk in performing occupational duties, are the focus of City School programming. Such sectors include transportation, healthcare, the meat and culinary industries, and construction. We argue that special attention needs to be paid to ensure that the risks of sector precarity are clearly laid out to students, in order to allow individuals to make fully informed decisions in pursuing their goals. While employers (to varying degrees depending on the sector) may have the capacity to adapt to such ongoing recruitment/ retention instability, a constantly shifting employee pool serves to undermine the collective agency of workers and their ability to achieve improvements in their working conditions. On this note, it is important to note that City School programming is typically used by participants as a stepping stone to either an employment pathway or further program of study. While this intention is due partly to the nature of the funding, which does not extend to cover the cost of a fuller program of study, it is also due to the programming focus on connecting learners to an entry-level employment or educational pathway. The anticipation is that providing such connections will help strengthen the life stabilization of participants, and possibly at a future point allow them to progress in their career with further training and/or education.

Disrupting the employment pathways paradigm through an Indigenous lens

Before we proceed to our concluding discussion and presentation of our research recommendations, we present the following insights from one of our research contributors, which reflects on the City School employment pathways project through an Indigenous lens.

A Reflection on the Seven Grandfather Teachings and Indigenous Knowledge in City School Research

by Michelle Rivers

Canadian colleges and universities are currently experiencing a paradigm shift regarding the epistemological relationship between Indigenous pedagogy and knowledge and Western ways of thinking and doing. Striving to decolonize postsecondary teaching and learning, educators are drawing upon Indigenous perspectives to teach students about the climate crisis, social inclusion, fairness, and equality. Indigenous teachings are holistically embedded in interconnectedness, reciprocity, and land-based philosophies that help guide people to know who we are, where we belong, and what our roles and responsibilities are as global citizens. Indigenous epistemology, ontology, axiology of the land, and culture encompass a complex and sophisticated understanding of the environment and its surroundings (Bruchac, 2014; Augustus, 2015; MacDougall, 2017).

With the coming of European settlers, Indigenous people were subjected to discriminatory legislation enacted through the Indian Act of 1876 and the cultural genocidal intent of the residential school

system, leading to multigenerational and intergenerational cycles of trauma and harm. The legacy of colonial violence has had long-lasting effects on the educational outcomes and employment trajectories of Indigenous peoples. The final report of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (2015) and the *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* (2019) remind us that colonial ideologies and government inaction remain an ongoing structure and process impacting First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) communities.

Integral to shaping stories and traditions into teachings in the Anishinaabe First Nation are the *Seven Grandfather Teachings*, a set of principles and moral precepts for living in peace, compatibility, and in harmony with people, plants, animals, land, and waters. The foundation of the teachings is to secure the future for the next seven generations by living according to their core values. The *Seven Grandfather Teachings* consist of *Knowledge, Love, Respect, Bravery, Honesty, Humility, and Truth*; each of which includes a

representative animal.

The values of the *Seven Grandfather Teachings* are echoed in the education and employment support offered to communities through City School programming. The first teaching is *Knowledge* (Nbwaakaawin). It is the Beaver who uses their natural survival skills to create environments to meet their needs. They use their gifts wisely to benefit the environment and to supplement their own sustainability. Gaining wisdom is about respecting knowledge and recognizing differences in others. It is a virtue that promotes learning, using good judgment, and benefiting from life's experiences. To be wise is to not put limits on learning. The second teaching is *Love*. The Eagle represents the word Love (Zaag'iwin) because it has the capacity to bring strength to all its teachings. The Eagle can see things from many different angles, and it represents how humans should see themselves and others. To know love is to show love. The Buffalo represents the teaching of *Respect* (Mnaadendiwin). Prior to colonization, the Buffalo provided food, shelter, and clothing for Indigenous people. In Indigenous knowledge, respect is about living honorably and with high regard for all living things. City School is built upon a foundation of mutual respect nurtured between partners for the benefit of students.

The Bear represents *Bravery* (Akaw'ode'idiwin). It takes bravery for potential students to make hard decisions that are positive choices for their future. It takes courage to face your fears and overcome challenges. City School demonstrates bravery by valuing diversity, equality, and inclusion. The fifth teaching is

Honesty (Gwekwaadziwin) and is represented by the Raven. The Raven is closest to the Creator and lives with integrity. The Raven knows who they are and what their role is. It is not about competing with others, but about competing with oneself for truth in life. There is a deep sense of honesty emanating from people who come from places of inequity and who want to make positive change for themselves. City School staff espouse a set of values that place integrity at the forefront and which recognize the importance of working collectively in honesty and transparency for the benefit of students. The Wolf represents *Humility* (Debaadendiziwin), meaning one's actions are not selfish, but rather selfless and kind. To be humble is to never see yourself as better than others. When we understand that we are all interconnected, we can live peacefully. The last of *The Seven Grandfather Teachings* is *Truth* (Debwewin), represented by the Turtle. The Turtle represents creation in Anishinaabe belief. Turtles are slow and scrupulous when it comes to life, and they understand that the journey is slow, one to be lived with caution and care. Truth in living is to be sincere and honest, especially to live in truth with yourself.

The value of incorporating Indigenous knowledge and the *Seven Grandfather Teachings* lies in its potential to nurture an inclusive education that is sensitive to the challenges that individuals face. There is a world of possibilities that opens for students, educators, and employers who believe systematic barriers can be overcome by working together (Battiste,

2017). Indigenous Knowledge and *The Seven Grandfather Teachings* should be implemented in all levels of education as we collectively work to build communities of inclusion, equality, and diversity. *The Seven*

Grandfather Teachings are a way to show how to live according to the sacred laws of the universe and how to cherish life and the land for the next seven generations.



Building equitable, diverse, and inclusive pathways to employment

Our research testifies to the efficacy of developing customized skills training that responds to industry sector needs. In some sectors, particularly those in which students are directly connected to an entry level career opportunity, the employment pathways strategy is helping to ameliorate the recruitment and retention challenges that employers face. More generally, there was a consensus across interviews that the emphasis placed in courses on nurturing students' socio-emotional and soft skills competencies is one of the most valuable aspects of City School programming. Granted, this is likely due to the specific nature of the occupational sectors City School programming has focused on. In light of this, achieving job readiness is best conceptualized as requiring a bundle of transferable skills and competencies that are often not captured in traditional academic credentialing (Social Impact, 2019; Environics, 2020a; Cowan, 2021).

Our research also indicates that employer recruitment and retention challenges are increasingly pushing employers to engage with previously neglected talent pools and to be more flexible regarding education and experiential requirements (Manpower Group, 2018). In terms of the employment landscape more broadly, there is growing evidence to suggest that organizations that embrace diversity in their recruitment practices, and who pursue non-traditional employee recruitment strategies, benefit from enhanced organizational performance and improved financial and economic outcomes (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2020; Hunt et al., 2015; McKinsey & Company, 2015). Through our research, we found that engaged employers have positive perceptions of recruiting from socially excluded populations. However, as we detail in a number of our recommendations below, the challenge remains of convincing more to come on board.

In addition to the efficacy of City School programming, the challenges faced by employers regarding recruitment and retention also have the potential to strengthen the bargaining power of job-seekers, both in terms of working conditions and compensation rates (Buist, 2022). For example, there seems to be growing recognition among employers that recruitment challenges can be addressed by improving workplace culture and conditions, boosting compensation, improving health and safety protocols, and by nurturing more respectful working environments (Workforce Planning Hamilton, 2020, 22). This was a point particularly emphasized by respondents in the social service provision and community sector, albeit less so among employers.

Despite the necessity of employment pathways programming implemented through an equity lens, a central mitigating factor is the fact that an increasing number of occupational sectors have become characterized by precarious employment. For example, PSW workers in Ontario have been described by Zagrodny and Saks (2017) as a “new precariat”, due to low full-time employment opportunities, a lack of job security and opportunities for career

progression, and issues pertaining to injuries incurred through employment. Given that the PSW workforce can be primarily composed of racialized and immigrant women (Pinto et al., 2022), the extent to which students are connected to a career pathway that may help ameliorate life stabilization issues is open to question, and may even exacerbate them. Although we see value in encouraging students to build individual-level resiliency by boosting their skillsets and overall employability, we are mindful that such discourses of resiliency obscure the extent to which labour precarity has become entrenched in the employment landscape. In light of this, such sectors need to do better to truly address systemic precarity, given that compensation and employee benefits may often be inadequate or lacking, and given that employee workload and the physical demands of the job can be substantial. Similar precarious labour practices have come to typify several industry sectors addressed in our report, sectors in which women and racialized workers are particularly vulnerable to undesirable work schedules and exploitative working conditions.

Despite the increase in calls on the provincial and federal governments to commit to progressive labour and employment policy reform to support vulnerable workers (Ontario Federation of Labour, 2021), what is needed is a dismantling of the structural/ systemic barriers that prevent marginalized workers from accessing stable and adequately-compensated employment pathways. To this end, we are hopeful that an employment pathways strategy rooted in a socially just and collaborative pedagogy, one in which all stakeholders have a voice, can have a transformative impact in the lives of socially-excluded populations by building equitable, diverse, and inclusive pathways to employment.

Continuous education is something that is never going to go away. We will be required to learn continuously all throughout our adult life and whatever form it's going to take is whatever form it's going to take. City School is tremendous at offering different resources and opportunities for people to do just that. To grow. (Employer Interview # 7).



A paved path winds through a dense forest. The trees are covered in vibrant autumn foliage, with shades of yellow, orange, and green. The path is scattered with fallen leaves, and the overall atmosphere is serene and natural.

Recommendations

Recommendation # 1: Strengthening data harmonization

A challenge encountered in the research process was the challenge of obtaining data regarding the number of students who successfully completed a course and transitioned onwards to either employment or education. Although all learners are surveyed following course completion, and have been consistently since 2022, we recommend the implementation of a centralized data collection and harmonization process across all programming in order to more efficiently gather and compile such data for reporting purposes, given that such information is a key metric of success.

I think we need [employer] champions in the community. I think we need employers who are benefiting and utilizing it to tell others why they should be involved. One of the strategies we use is connecting with some of the local chambers... trying to utilize testimonials from other local employers, especially in those rural smaller communities.

SSP Interview # 13.

Recommendation # 2: Employer testimonials

A number of respondents in the social service provider sector commented on employer reluctance/ skepticism regarding the potential benefits of City School engagement, particularly with regard to understanding the benefits of implementing an EDI approach to employee recruitment. We recommend showcasing evidence/ results of successful partnerships that testify to the efficacy and potential benefits of involvement. The showcasing of employer “champions” through testimonials may assist in encouraging the involvement of employers hesitant to collaborate.

Recommendation # 3: Strengthening Employment Equity

A limitation of our research is the lack/ absence of data regarding information on the compensation and benefits engaged employers are offering potential employees. Given the entrenchment of precarious labour in the employment landscape, we strongly recommend engaging with employers who are in a position to offer adequate compensation and benefits to prospective employees. The Ontario Living Wage Network (Coleman, 2023) has calculated a living wage in Hamilton to be \$20.80, and we recommend adopting this as an ideal to aspire to when choosing which area employers to collaborate with.

Recommendation # 4: Fostering employer-informed curricula

It is clear from our research that employers have a valuable role to play concerning program design and course delivery. Employer involvement allows for up-to-date education and creates a workforce of employees better equipped with the skills they need to succeed. Employer involvement can occur to varying degrees, with some providing feedback on what programs need to be offered, while others get involved in the curriculum design and delivery process. However, we recommend maintaining an approach whereby curricula are *employer-informed* rather than *employer-led* in order to preserve a focus on pedagogical imperatives and student-centered learning. In particular, emphasis needs to be maintained on providing students with a postsecondary experience that nurtures an appetite for life-long learning, contextualized within an educational paradigm that aspires to achieve transformative rather than transactional goals (Kinchin, 2023).

Recommendation # 5: Strengthening faculty involvement in course and curricula design

We recommend that faculty play a central role in curricula and course design given that they are likely to be better versed in teaching pedagogy and in issues pertaining to achieving student success. A number of respondents described course material/ content as lacking a central organizational structure or commented on the challenge of teaching a pre-designed course. Although this issue is more pronounced in the career exploratory courses rather than those focused specifically on hard skills training, it gestures to the tension that can exist when seeking to reconcile pedagogical concerns and employer priorities.

Recommendation # 6: Strengthening the student support system

Respondents commented on how students can exist on a spectrum of job readiness. In light of this, the involvement of learning support specialists (LSO) and employment consultants (EC) is crucial so that students who lack job readiness can be (re)directed to the supports they need. Our research also suggests that such personnel can be stretched thin in their capacity to

fully support students, both in terms of pre-bridging and post-bridging support. Reassessing the job duties performed by LSOs and ECs to better align with student demand would greatly benefit student success.

Recommendation # 7: The role of micro-credentials

Our research supports the view that the postsecondary landscape appears to be experiencing a moment of transition. One indicator of this has been a shift away from measuring traditional academic credentials in favour of recognizing competencies, as potentially captured through the use of micro-credentials. Although by no means a replacement for conventional postsecondary credentialing, micro-credentials can be beneficial if used effectively. For example, micro-credentials can help students articulate the attainment of a specific technical skill or competency. Regarding newcomers whose qualifications are not recognized in Canada, micro-credentials can potentially be used to articulate their existing expertise and skill sets to employers.

Recommendation # 8: Life-long learning

We recommend maintaining an emphasis in all courses on the transferable skills and competencies that course participation provides to students. Throughout interviews, respondents made regular comments on the importance of having a diverse skill set in order to be best placed to pivot employment sectors. Given the fluid and unpredictable nature of the contemporary workforce (in light of rapidly changing technological change and the increasing use of AI), and the likelihood of individuals experiencing diverse and shifting career pathways, emphasis needs to be maintained on the value of education as a transformative and empowering process. We also recommend that City School personnel continue to explore opportunities that allow for the decolonization of program curricula and the greater integration of Indigenous and non-Western pedagogies.

Recommendation # 9: Sustaining women-centered programming

Women-focused programming suffers from a lack of sustainable funding. As indicated in

interview data, women are often primary caregivers and are sometimes unable to continue with schooling and/or work due to their responsibilities. Furthermore, women were disproportionately impacted economically during the pandemic. Greater support for employment supports that encourage and help to sustain women-centered employment pathways (i.e., accessible and affordable childcare) remains an imperative, not only in terms of boosting access to career pathways in which they are currently underrepresented but also in terms of strengthening their capacity to persist in employment.

Appendix A:

Interview cohorts

- Total = 44 (27 female, 17 male)

Employers

Interview sample = (14) (8 women, 6 men)

Direct involvement in City School programming

- Interview # 1 (Personal Support Worker)
- Interview # 2 (Food and Beverage Foundations)
- Interview # 3 (Early Childhood Education)
- Interview # 4 (Steel Construction)
- Interview # 5 (Goods Movement)
- Interview # 6 (Goods Movement)
- Interview # 7 (Culinary Arts & Residential Settings)

Indirect involvement in City School programming

- Interview # 8 (Hamilton Port (Transportation/ Storage))
- Interview # 9 (Transportation/ Storage)
- Interview # 10 (Transportation/ Storage)
- Interview # 11 (Hamilton Port (Storage))
- Interview # 12 (Hamilton Port (Shipyards))

Social service providers/ community representatives

Interview sample = (8) (6 women, 2 men)

- Interview # 13 (Community services, employment)
- Interview # 14 (Community services, employment)
- Interview # 15 (Community-based social services organization)
- Interview # 16 (Community-based social services organization)
- Interview # 17 (Community-based social services organization)

- Interview # 18 (Community services, employment)
- Interview # 19 (Non-profit organization)
- Interview # 20 (Workforce development organization)
- Interview # 30 (Community representative, advocate)

College staff/ faculty interviews overview

Interview sample = (9) (5 women, 4 men)

- Interview # 21 (Instructor)
- Interview # 22 (Instructor/ Learning Support)
- Interview # 23 (Instructor)
- Interview # 24 (Instructor)
- Interview # 25 (Training Specialist)
- Interview # 26 (Employment Consultant)
- Interview # 27 (Training Specialist)
- Interview # 28 (Employment consultant)
- Interview # 29 (Training Specialist)
- Interview # 31 (Training Specialist)

Student Interviews Overview

Interview sample = (13) (8 women, 5 men)

- Interview # 1 (PSW)
- Interview # 2 (PSW)
- Interview # 3 (PSW)
- Interview # 4 (PSW)
- Interview # 5 (Culinary Art & Residential Settings)
- Interview # 6 (Culinary Arts & Residential Settings)
- Interview # 7 (Culinary Arts & Residential Settings)
- Interview # 8 (WAGE)
- Interview # 9 (WAGE)
- Interview # 10 (Landscape Construction)
- Interview # 11 (Food and Beverage Foundations)
- Interview # 12 (Food and Beverage Foundations)
- Interview # 13 (Food and Beverage Foundations)

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