

## **MEETING THE EMPLOYMENT NEEDS OF MARGINALIZED YOUTH: A REVIEW OF PROMISING YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS**

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**Abstract:** The Youth Job Connection program in Ontario, Canada is designed to help multi-barriered youth transition into the workforce. As part of an evaluation of the program, a review of comparable employment programs in Canada and similar English-speaking countries was conducted, which involved 57 national and 36 international programs. The purpose of the review was to identify promising programs and explore how they support the successful transition of NEET (not in education, employment, or training) youth into the labour market. A major finding was that promising youth employment programs not only address the work needs of marginalized youth, but also life skills and life stabilization. Such programs incorporate pre-employment training, mentoring and job coaching, paid work placements, life skills training, and life stabilization supports. Life stabilization supports varied across programs, with different amounts and types offered; further research is needed to determine what life stabilization supports best help NEET youth to secure and maintain employment. Considerations for improving the quality of employment programs for NEET youth are discussed. Lastly, given that NEET youth are not a homogeneous group, youth employment programs should target subpopulations of NEET youth, like those that are marginalized.

**Keywords:** marginalized youth, youth unemployment, workplace transitions, NEET youth, youth development, young workers

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Youth unemployment is a major social concern in Canada and abroad (Bălan, 2014; Canada 2020, 2014; Choudry et al., 2012; Crisp & Powell, 2017; Foster, 2012; Versnel et al., 2011). Canada's youth unemployment rate is 9.9 % for 15- to 24-year-olds who are actively seeking work, which is just slightly lower than the 10.8% average for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) 38 member nations (OECD, 2023b). Finding and maintaining stable employment may be particularly challenging for youth who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) and who lack connections and skills needed to secure a long-term job (Government of Canada, 2016; OECD, 2023a). The NEET youth category originates from population statistics and refers to youth from ages 15 to 29 (Labour Market Information Council, 2019). It is important to note that the NEET label does not reflect a homogeneous group of youth (Holte, 2018; MacDonald, 2011; Paabort et al., 2023). NEET youth are defined by what they are not — not engaged in education, employment, or training. The group includes a range of individuals, from those with stable backgrounds who become NEET temporarily to those facing challenging life circumstances that lead them to remain NEET for longer periods (André & Crosby, 2023). Youth in the latter group often face multiple personal, family, and social risk factors that hinder their successful integration into the workforce (Youmans et al., 2023). Examples of such risk factors include: low socioeconomic status, living in an “at risk” community, addictions, poor housing conditions, unemployed parents, negative experiences with schooling, and low educational attainment (Canada 2020, 2014; Government of Canada, 2017; Inui, 2005; Marshall, 2012; Mawn et al., 2017; Mendolia & Walker, 2015; Pullman & Finnie, 2018; St. Stephen's Community Housing & Access Alliance, 2016; Zudina, 2017). In addition, marginalized NEET youth report feeling a sense of unbelonging and discrimination, and a lack of support from the education system (André & Crosby, 2023; Briggs, 2018). They tend to lack direction and work aspirations, which can make career pathway planning a challenge (Egdell & McQuaid, 2011). It is not surprising that NEET youth report lower subjective well-being than their employed counterparts (Jongbloed & Giret, 2022), and do not benefit from the friendship and socialization opportunities that workplaces provide (Besen, 2006). In Canada, 11% of youth from ages 15 to 29 are classified as NEET (Statistics Canada, 2024), which amounts to 853,343 youth (Statista, 2024).

The Government of Canada (2017) commissioned an expert panel on youth development to identify and address barriers to youth unemployment. The expert panel uncovered six barriers: (1) lack of information about the labour market and how to navigate it, (2) youth being undervalued by prospective employers because they are young, (3) facing uncertainty in securing and maintaining work, (4) lacking the necessary skills and competencies to secure long-term employment, (5) experiencing discrimination in the workplace based on multiple risk factors, and (6) lacking social connections and networks that facilitate employment. To help NEET youth overcome employment barriers and successfully transition into the workforce, social programs often incorporate skills development, career guidance, and job placements (Youmans et al., 2023).

While skills development is the most common youth employment intervention, other effective youth intervention strategies include helping youth navigate the world of work (e.g., job search assistance) and comprehensive youth employment programs (Betcherman et al., 2007). Comprehensive programs go further by providing mentorship, counselling, financial literacy training, and mental health services, recognizing that employment barriers are often linked to personal challenges (Betcherman et al., 2007; Fox & Kaul, 2018; Paabort et al., 2023). Some also offer practical support like transportation and child care (Betcherman et al., 2007). Given that employment in adolescence is associated with a more positive outlook and increased self-confidence, job placements may be a crucial part of employment programs for NEET youth (Purtell & McLoyd, 2013). Ideally, marginalized NEET youth should participate in job matching that is in line with their capabilities and interests (Egdell & McQuaid, 2016). To be successful in entry-level work placements, employers report that the following skill sets are needed: a high-quality job application, a positive attitude, skills that align with the job, and soft skills (Lindsay et al., 2014) — the social skills, higher-order thinking, communication, and self-control that are required in today’s increasingly global economy (Ignatowski, 2017). Innovative youth employment approaches, such as jobs created through social enterprises and public–private partnerships, create sustainable employment pathways by combining job creation with achieving important social goals. These approaches enhance job readiness and promote long-term career development and social inclusion for NEET youth (Betcherman et al., 2007). Entrepreneurship programs also show promise as a successful youth employment intervention (Betcherman et al., 2007; Fox & Kaul, 2018).

As part of an evaluation of Youth Job Connection (YJC), a provincial social program in Ontario, Canada, a program review of comparable youth employment programs that address the needs of marginalized youth was conducted. In line with evidence about successful effective youth employment intervention programs, the YJC program offers a range of services to help multi-barriered youth learn about jobs and gain work experience (see Kluge et al., 2019). The range of services provided by the YJC program is intended to address the multiple needs of marginalized youth. In addition, YJC attempts to provide a holistic approach to programming, calling on service providers to be flexible and responsive to the needs of individual youth. This approach is typical of youth interventions that focus on creating a safe space where participants receive a lot of emotional support and can develop greater self-confidence (Paabort et al., 2023). Ontario’s YJC program, which was designed specifically to address the needs of NEET youth who require assistance with developing employment skills, consists of the following components: (a) client service planning and coordination (CSPC); (b) pre-employment services; (c) job matching and placement; and (d) education and work transitions support (Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development [MAESD], 2018).

The purpose of the program review (or “scan”) was to identify similar promising youth employment programs for marginalized youth, and the critical program components that promote successful workplace transitions. It included programs in Canada and similar English-speaking

countries, namely the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. Our main research questions were: “What are the characteristics of youth employment programs that are comparable to Youth Job Connection? What insights or lessons might we draw from such programs?” The following subquestions were used to further focus our inquiry:

1. What is the nature and scope of coverage of current employment programs for multi-barriered youth that are offered across Canada?
2. What is the nature and scope of coverage of current employment programs for multi-barriered youth that are offered across the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand?

To respond to the two subquestions, established methodological frameworks for scoping reviews were used (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005; Peters et al., 2015) to provide a systematic approach to documenting the youth employment programs under investigation. The approach for the scans included the following steps:

1. Identify the research questions;
2. Identify the scope of the scan;
3. Identify the key attributes of the programs;
4. Collect and chart the data according to the key attributes; and
5. Summarize the findings and analyze patterns within the data.

### ***Scope of the Program Review***

Programs included in the review provided employment services for multi-barriered youth. The review was limited to programs offered by governments, registered charity organizations, non-profit organizations, and for-profit organizations, as they supply the majority of employment programs offered to young persons across Canada and internationally. Programs that required an individual to pay a fee to participate were excluded from the search. All 10 Canadian provinces and all three territories were included. Numerous steps were taken to compile an inventory of employment programs available across Canada, in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. The inventory was compiled using searches of government-funded websites, private-sector websites, and targeted internet searches using key terms.

### ***Key Programmatic Questions***

To begin the program review, the research team identified the names of promising youth employment programs targeting marginalized youth in each of the national and international locations. In addition, the level of government (e.g., federal/national, provincial, territorial) for

each program was recorded. Once the programs were identified, information for each program was recorded for each of these key programmatic questions:

- What are the promising practices/best practices within the youth employment program?
- What is the mission of the program?
- Who is the program delivered by?
- What is the funding source of the program?
- What is the average length of the program?
- Are there mandatory components to the program?
- What are the eligibility and suitability criteria for the program?
- Does the young person need to be referred to the program?
- Does the program teach general job readiness (i.e., life, employability, or education skills)?
- Does the program provide skills training (e.g., Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System, First Aid, Food Safe)?
- Does the program support the youth's costs to participate in the program (i.e., training stipend, transportation subsidy, and equipment and apparel costs)?
- Does the program provide the young person with a work placement? Is the work placement a mandatory component of the program?
- Does the program utilize a social enterprise to provide the young person with a work placement?
- Does the program provide the employer with a wage subsidy for the work placement?
- Does the program provide the young person with a job coach or mentor?
- Does the program provide youth with life stabilization supports (e.g., referrals for, or partnerships with, services for mental health, housing, addiction)?

### ***Data Searches and Charting***

Data collection began by conducting targeted searches of government websites for relevant programs. In addition, internet searches (using Google's Canadian site, google.ca) were conducted to complete data collection for each of the 13 Canadian jurisdictions and four international selections. Our searches identified existing program lists collated by researchers, government, charities, non-profits, or other organizations. The program lists were used to conduct further targeted searches throughout the jurisdictions. Systematic search strings were employed, using combinations of terms such as "youth", "employment", "NEET youth programs", "unemployment", "barrier", "ministry", "government", "privately funded youth employment programs", "private-sector youth employment programs", "state funded programs", "United States", "United Kingdom" (including "Wales", "Northern Ireland", "England", and "Scotland"),

“Australia” (including “New South Wales”, “Northern Territory”, “Queensland”, “South Australia”, “Tasmania” and “Victoria”), “New Zealand” (including “Waikato”, “Wellington”, “Taranaki”, “Manawatu-Wanganui”, “Bay of Plenty”, “Northland”, and “Hawke’s Bay”), “Canada”, “British Columbia”, “Alberta”, “Saskatchewan”, “Manitoba”, “Ontario”, “Quebec”, “Newfoundland & Labrador”, “Nova Scotia”, “New Brunswick”, “Prince Edward Island”, “Nunavut”, “Northwest Territories”, and “Yukon”.

### ***Inclusion Criteria***

The initial national jurisdictional search yielded the following totals: Alberta (869,000), British Columbia (646,000), Manitoba (426,000), Newfoundland and Labrador (383,000), Nova Scotia (477,000), New Brunswick (429,000), Northwest Territories (20,300), Nunavut (109,000), Ontario (342,000), Prince Edward Island (37,800), Quebec (33,000), Saskatchewan (413,000), and Yukon (147,000). For the jurisdictional search, our research team examined the first 100 sources that resulted per search term. Jurisdictional results were further examined and 283 were chosen for analysis against the inclusion criteria. The initial international search results yielded the following totals: United States (137,500), United Kingdom (42,692), Australia (345,000), and New Zealand (235,418). For the international search, our research team examined the first 200 sources that resulted per search term. The international search results were further examined and 310 sources were chosen for analysis against the inclusion criteria.

Programs were excluded from the scan if they did not meet both inclusion criteria:

1. The program focused on young people (under 30 years old), and;
2. The program focused on people who face barriers to employment.

For the national jurisdictional scan, 226 results were excluded, leaving a sample of 57 youth employment programs that were included in this review. In the case of the international scan, 274 results were excluded, leaving a sample of 36 youth employment programs that are included in this review.

## **Results**

The Canadian and international scans of youth employment programs targeting marginalized youth are presented. The results include an overview of the programs and information about the services provided. Descriptions of the services were obtained from each program’s website. The availability of employment programming is often subject to a number of factors, including existing funding and resources, staffing and staff turnover, and interest among community members. For the purposes of our review, programs had sufficient information available on their websites.

### ***Canadian Jurisdictional Scan Findings***

The Canadian jurisdictional scan sought to identify employment programs that targeted marginalized youth across a province or territory in Canada and had similar components to the

YJC program (outlined above). The scan covered all 13 provincial and territorial jurisdictions of Canada. Our search identified some programs that were very similar in their targeted population, but were not necessarily offered across the jurisdiction to all qualifying youth. Instead, they were available within selected regions of provinces and territories. Where appropriate, these regional programs were included, as they contain valuable components of employment programming for NEET youth.

In response to our program review parameters for national jurisdictions, 57 programs were selected from the online search for review. These programs were analyzed and grouped into two categories:

- Provincial or territorial youth employment programs ( $n = 6$ )
- Regional youth employment programs ( $n = 51$ )

#### *Provincial or Territorial Youth Employment Programs*

To be considered comparable to YJC, a program had to be dedicated to young persons facing barriers to employment and to be available to all young persons in the selected jurisdiction using service delivery partners. In addition, participants had to be provided with a work placement experience. The scan uncovered six youth employment programs that were similar in nature and structure to the YJC program.

**1. Skills Link (Federal):** Employment and Social Development Canada, a Canadian government department in charge of delivering social programs, provides approximately \$138 million per year in funding to employers and organizations that work with youth with barriers (Aboriginal youth, single parents, people with disabilities, early school leavers, new immigrants, and youth living in rural communities) to assist them in developing knowledge, skills, and experiences to successfully participate in the labour market. Employers, community organizations, training providers, and local governments are invited to submit proposals for service delivery. Projects are normally 12 months in duration. Most funding provided to projects supports work experience placements for participants.

**2. Youth Now and 3. Partners with Youth (Manitoba):** Both programs are delivered through the MB4Youth Branch, a division of the provincial Department of Education and Youth. Eligible participants are 18 to 29 years of age and either are receiving income assistance or are unemployed and facing multiple barriers to employment. MB4Youth Branch sets up contracts with non-profit organizations, community-based groups, institutions, and private agencies to develop and deliver project activities. Projects offer a variety of activities aimed at providing employability skills training and work experience placements that will prepare participants for employment. Additional components may include academic upgrading, specific skills training, job preparation, and job search techniques. Youth Now is an initiative of the Department of Children and Youth Opportunities, while Partners with Youth is a joint initiative of the Department of Children and Youth Opportunities and the Department of Intergovernmental Affairs.



**4. Aim for Employment (Quebec):** The Aim for Employment program is funded by the Ministry of Employment and Social Security and is delivered by Emploi Quebec and Services Quebec. The purpose of the program is to offer young people under the age of 25 financial assistance and personalized support to help them enter the labour market and become financially self-sufficient. Participants work with an employment-assistance officer to create an individualized labour market entry plan, which outlines the steps and activities that will assist the participant in finding employment. Participants may be provided with employment training, social skills training, and work experience placements depending on their needs. The program lasts between 12 and 24 months.

**5. Linkages (Newfoundland):** The Linkages Initiative is supported by the Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills, and Labour. Community agencies can apply for funding to provide programming for youth (ages 18–30) who have limited skills to transition to work or who have limited academic skills. Programming for youth includes life skills, career planning or employment readiness programs, and employment follow-up services. In addition, Linkages supports youth in a 26-week job placement by providing the employer with a wage subsidy of up to \$9.00 per hour. Upon successful completion, youth receive a bonus of up to \$468 towards the cost of post-secondary education.

**6. Youth Development Initiative (Nova Scotia):** The Youth Development Initiative is supported by the Government of Nova Scotia. The goal of the program is to provide work experience opportunities for youth aged 16 to 20 who are connected to the Department of Community Services. The program is designed to help youth consider learning and employment plans for their future by providing employment or educational programming opportunities. Wage subsidies are provided to both private sector and not-for-profit community-based organizations that create and deliver quality work experiences for youth.

#### *Regional Youth Employment Programs*

The remaining 51 youth employment programs identified during the jurisdictional scan were not available to all youth across a province or territory. Instead, these programs were only offered in particular regions of the province or territory through employment agencies, non-governmental and charity organizations, and universities. British Columbia was home to 39% ( $n = 20$ ) of the youth employment programs, followed by Ontario (35%, 18), Manitoba (10%, 5), Alberta (6%, 3), Saskatchewan (6%, 3), Newfoundland (2%, 1), and Yukon (2%, 1). No regional programs were found in Quebec, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Nunavut, and Northwest Territories. These programs were largely operated by non-profit organizations (63%, 32); employment agencies, often funded by the government (29%, 15); and post-secondary institutions (2%, 1). Most programs (45%, 23) served youth with multiple barriers to employment. However, targeted programs existed for: Indigenous youth; youth involved in the justice system; youth requiring mental health supports; youth dealing with homelessness, poverty, or low-income; youth with a disability; youth transitioning from foster care; newcomers; those who have dropped out of

schooling (early leavers); and young parents. In addition, only 17% ( $n = 9$ ) of programs required youth to be referred to their services by outside organizations. The average length of programs was 14 weeks, with program lengths ranging from 6 weeks to 30 weeks.

### *Analysis of Canadian Employment Programs for Marginalized Youth*

This section presents an analysis of Canadian employment programs for marginalized youth in relation to job readiness and skills training, youth participation support costs, and work placements. These aspects of youth intervention programs were analyzed because they are all features of the YJC program. Analysis revealed that all programs included employability skills training. However, there was variability in whether programs provided additional skills development (e.g., life skills, literacy and numeracy development, certification). While all employment programs attempted to provide support costs for youth participants, they differed in how this was achieved (e.g., minimum wage, fixed amount, debt assistance programs). Most programs offered guaranteed work placements for youth and a mentor or job coach, indicating a strong emphasis on practical experience and guided support. The variability in these programs suggests a need for more standardized approaches to ensure consistent employment and training outcomes across all youth intervention efforts. The youth employment program components are considered in detail in the following paragraphs.

#### *Job Readiness and Skills Training*

Employability skills training was offered by all programs. Examples of employability skills included the following: resume and cover letter preparation, interview skills, professional conduct, workplace communication, networking, computer skills, and customer service. While all Canadian employment programs for marginalized youth prioritize employability skills training, the scope and depth of this training varies widely. A common emphasis on resume preparation, interview skills, and workplace communication provides essential tools for entering the job market. Life skills were also taught in a majority (61%,  $n = 35$ ) of programs. Examples of life skills included the following: budgeting, time management, and conflict management, counselling, goal development, anger management, and nutrition and health information. The inclusion of life skills training in 61% of programs suggests a recognition that employability extends beyond professional skills; it encompasses the ability to manage personal responsibilities and navigate challenges that might affect work performance. Support for literacy and numeracy skills development was provided in only 9% ( $n = 5$ ) of programs. The relatively low emphasis on literacy and numeracy skills development may indicate an assumption that these basic skills are already in place or that they are outside the primary focus of these employment programs. This gap is significant, as literacy and numeracy are critical for many job functions and could be a barrier for those without adequate proficiency. Skills training through certification courses such as WHIMIS, First Aid, and SmartServe were offered by 32% ( $n = 18$ ) of programs. The fact that these certifications are not universally offered suggests that not all programs have the resources or the strategic focus to

provide these additional qualifications, which could be a missed opportunity to further enhance employability.

### *Youth Participation Support Costs*

Some programs paid young persons minimum wage to attend training while others offered a fixed amount for attendance. One program offered a debt assistance (e.g., payment of phone or hydro bill) program. Transportation subsidies were offered by way of bus tickets, subway tokens, or monthly transit passes in 14% ( $n = 8$ ) of programs. Equipment or apparel needed for work placements were provided by 9% ( $n = 5$ ) of programs. The variability in financial support reflects different strategies to incentivize youth participation. While some programs address economic pressures with minimum wage or fixed payments, the inconsistency may lead to unequal access. Limited subsidies for transportation and work-related equipment also pose barriers, particularly for financially vulnerable youth.

### *Work Placements*

Work placements provide marginalized youth with paid work experience. Seventy percent of programs ( $n = 40$ ) provided a guaranteed work placement. The emphasis on guaranteed work placements is a strong feature, ensuring that the majority of participants gain practical experience. Social enterprises were utilized for work placements in 12% ( $n = 7$ ) of programs. Social enterprises operate like a business by producing goods and services but manage their operations and redirect their surpluses in pursuit of social goals (such as the training and employment of people typically excluded from the mainstream economy). The relatively low use of social enterprises (12%) suggests untapped potential in integrating social goals with economic activities, which could offer greater employment training opportunities for marginalized youth. A mentor or employment coach was provided by 63% ( $n = 36$ ) of programs. Employers were provided with wage subsidies in 19% ( $n = 11$ ) of programs. Employers were also offered training or support by 7% ( $n = 4$ ) of programs. This training included how to support youth and assist them to integrate with other staff at the job site. Employment program staff also provided support to employers if issues arose during a youth's work placement. The wide availability of mentors and job coaches addresses the importance of guidance in navigating work environments, but the low percentage of employer training indicates a gap in preparing workplaces to effectively integrate and support marginalized youth.

### *International Scan Findings*

The international review identified programs that shared similar goals and target populations as the YJC program. The scan included youth employment initiatives in the United States (14), United Kingdom (11), Australia (6), and New Zealand (5). These countries were chosen because they have cultural, social, and economic contexts comparable to those in Canada. All sources were published between 2000 and 2018. Most of the selected programs were dedicated to youth facing barriers to employment and were available to all young persons in the jurisdiction through service delivery partners. In addition, innovative NEET programs that did not solely focus on employment

were included because they provided valuable information. For example, some featured programs had components that offered youth various life stabilization supports, which are services needed to secure and maintain employment (counselling, housing, etc.), along with employment assistance, recognizing the connection between youths' well-being and employment.

#### *U.S. Youth Employment Programs*

In the United States, 11.8% of males between 15 and 29 are NEET, compared to 16.3% of females in the same age category (OECD, 2018). There were two levels of NEET programs in the United States: federal and state. Federal programs were funded by the U.S. Department of Labour, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. Department of the Interior and Agriculture. State programs were funded by state departments dedicated to employment or youth services. Fourteen U.S. programs were analyzed in this review — seven at the federal level and seven at the state level. The seven selected federal programs were similar to YJC in that they generally served disadvantaged youth 14 to 25 years of age. In addition, they provided paid job placements and subsidies for employer costs, skills training, employment training, counselling, and mentoring, and to support academic skill development. The program components that were not the same as YJC were those that offered more comprehensive supports for youth. For example, Job Corps is a residential program that enrolled approximately 60,000 youth across the United States per year. Job Corps provided free housing, meals, medical insurance, child care, and a living stipend. In addition, participants received free legal advice and counselling support for up to 21 months after they had completed the program. The National Guard Youth Challenge Program also offered residential programming for the youth, and comprehensive supports. The seven selected state-run programs were analogous to YJC in program delivery, with the exception of programs such as Youth Opportunities Unlimited that also provided entrepreneurship training.

#### *U.K. Youth Employment Programs*

In the United Kingdom, the percentage of males 15 to 29 who were NEET was 10.2%, compared to 16.2% of females in the same age category (OECD, 2018). One of the unique features of the U.K. context is that the acronym NEET is used in program descriptions and program titles. For example, *NEET Community Engagement Program*, *Really NEET*, *Sport for Life NEET Program*, and the NEET program of the city of Oxford. Many programs were funded by the European Union (EU) Social Fund. The EU Social Fund represents 10% of the European Commission's operating budget and is used by EU member countries to fund social programs. Other funding sources specific to the United Kingdom include The King's Trust (formerly The Prince's Trust), local councils, and local non-profit organizations. The selected programs were generally analogous to YJC in that they served disadvantaged youth aged 16 and older, and provided employment placements, support, and employment training. Unlike the U.S. context, none were residential programs offering free housing. Some U.K. programs such as the Salford Foundation Targeted Intervention provided support for youth who may be at risk of becoming

NEET. The Youth-Can-Do-It program offered an e-mentoring option for participants who were unable to attend the site.

### *New Zealand Youth Employment Programs*

In New Zealand, the percentage of males 15 to 29 who were NEET was 8% and the percentage of females in the same age category was 14.8% (OECD, 2018). Youth Connections was the only employment program targeting marginalized youth that was found during the international program review. Youth Connections is an Auckland Council program supported by the Tindall Foundation. The program components that were not like YJC included Youth Connection's YouthFull — a learning and recruitment platform designed specifically to help young people with limited experience and qualifications begin their careers. It provided direct access to employers and jobs: instead of having to go through a standard recruitment application process requiring a resume, young people were able to pitch for jobs directly to employers, using video presentations, among other formats. YouthFull also provided free online courses to help young people acquire the soft skills that employers look for, like communication, time management, and self-awareness. Finally, Youth Connection's JobFest was an employment event that attracted approximately 2,000 young people and 70 employers looking to recruit youth for hundreds of jobs. It was New Zealand's largest recruitment event for young people.

### *Australia Youth Employment Programs*

In Australia, the percentage of males 15 to 29 who were NEET was 9.1% and the percentage of females in the same age category was 13.6% (OECD, 2018). In Australia, there are two levels of NEET programs: federal and state. Federal programs were funded by the \$840 million Youth Employment Package announced in the 2016–2017 budget and delivered through the Department of Jobs and Small Business. State programs were funded by non-governmental agencies and state departments dedicated to employment, youth, or Indigenous services.

Two of the three selected federal programs (Youth Jobs PaTH and Transition to Work) were similar to YJC in that they served disadvantaged youth between 15 and 24. In addition, they provided employability skills training to help young people become job ready. Training included helping young people develop resumes, improve interview techniques, and focus on job preparation and job search skills. Employability skills training consisted of developing workplace skills and knowledge, acquiring information technology skills, problem solving, and communication skills, to meet the expectations of employers. Youth were provided with unpaid internships or paid work experience placements. Finally, wage subsidies or lump-sum financial incentives were given to employers who hired eligible young job seekers.

Empowering Youth Initiatives was the third and final federal program; however, it was unlike YJC because it invited non-profit community organizations to put forward proposals for innovative pilot programs offering different approaches to those currently available. The \$50 million program supported 38 initiatives throughout Australia — some Australia-wide and others at state or regional

level. One such pilot program, Building Stronger Futures, was like YJC in that it supported young people who were blind or had low vision by providing pre-employment support and mental health counselling.

Two of the four state programs (Industry Employment Institute Youth Pilot and the Youth Employment Program) were like YJC in that they generally served disadvantaged youth 15 to 24 years of age. In addition to providing training, mentoring, and work experience placements for young persons, service providers worked closely with employers to understand existing employment opportunities and skills. They then worked backwards to design a training pathway to support potential candidates for those roles. The Infrastructure Skills Legacy Program was similar to YJC in that intensive up-front training and support was provided to prepare young persons for construction jobs; however, eligible participants had to already be apprenticing or training. Participants were not required to be within a certain age range, but the project had minimum targets: 8% of the total project workforce was to be less than 25 years, 1.5% of the contract value was to support Aboriginal participation, a goal of doubling the number of women in trade-related work was stipulated, and apprentices and trainees were to comprise 20% of the total labour force. The program also supported engagement and outreach programs for high school students regarding opportunities in the civil and general construction sectors. The Opportunity Hubs program was unlike YJC because it was a school-based program to help Indigenous students in Grades 5 to 12 transition into post-secondary education, training, or employment. However, Opportunity Hubs also had program offerings similar to some offered by YJC. For example, students participated in group workshops and one-on-one mentoring and career planning sessions with advisors. Advisors also coordinated work experience, employment mentoring, scholarships, internships, and volunteer work.

### ***Analysis of International Employment Programs for Marginalized Youth***

An examination of 36 programs offered for NEET youth across the United States, United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia revealed similar approaches in program structure and content, suggesting that NEET youth face similar challenges worldwide. This may be an important finding, as it reaffirms that policymakers and program designers can learn from each other's best practices. On the other hand, it may also be that international youth employment programs targeting marginalized NEET youth are too broad and need to focus on NEET subpopulations to achieve greater success. For example, in New Zealand, one employment program was designed to better meet the needs of Indigenous youth specifically. This targeted approach makes good sense and could be applied to different subpopulations, enhancing the impact of such programs. Common to all the programs reviewed was the provision of job readiness training, work placement for youth participants, mentorship (formal or informal), and employer incentives or benefits. Most of the programs included access to other wraparound services, like addictions counselling, or various health treatments. However, limited information was provided about the accessibility and utility of such supports to individual participants. This gap in understanding suggests a need for more rigorous evaluation of support services to ensure they meet the needs of individual youth. Many

government programs had partnerships with non-profit or private sector organizations that assisted with program delivery. There were noteworthy programs (e.g., Opportunity Hubs in Australia) that worked with youth still in high school to help prevent them from falling into NEET status. Such partnerships indicate a forward-thinking approach that could inform similar efforts elsewhere. Many international programs used the term “NEET” in the names of their programs, which is less common for youth programs targeting marginalized youth in Canada. This difference in terminology may reflect varying cultural or policy perspectives, which could influence program design and delivery.

## Discussion

Youth Job Connection (YJC) is an Ontario government-funded program designed for NEET youth aged 15 to 29 who experience multiple barriers to employment. It provides intensive supports beyond traditional job search and placement opportunities, including pre-employment training (which youth receive a stipend for), paid employment experiences, mentoring, and education and work transition supports. This type of comprehensive employment program actively reduces obstacles to youth employment by including multiple components that address a variety of workforce needs (Government of Canada, 2016; Kluge et al., 2019). Moreover, YJC focuses on fostering a responsive environment that provides emotional support and opportunities to increase self-confidence, which are important features of effective youth employment intervention programs (Paabort et al., 2023).

A review of similar employment programs targeting marginalized youth across Canada and internationally was undertaken. Within Canada, Ontario and British Columbia appear to offer the most innovative and comprehensive employment program initiatives while targeting youth with the highest needs. This may be because these provinces are highly populated, with larger NEET populations and more resources for coping with them than other provinces. Funding for some programs across the country are unstable; this means that the quality and lifespan of the programs are largely dependent upon available financial resources. Staff turnover and low commitment from community members, along with low cross-sectoral collaboration, also significantly impact the quality and continuity of youth employment programs.

Promising practices identified in Canadian youth employment programs for marginalized youth included: sufficient and secure funding, intense job training for youth, life skills training, ongoing coaching/mentorship, youth leadership development, use of communication technology and digital interventions, and pooling of resources by cross-sectoral collaborators to help youth overcome the challenging circumstances that are often characteristic of marginalized NEET status (e.g., poor physical or mental health, poverty, homelessness, addiction, domestic violence, conflicts with the law; Youmans et al., 2023). To strengthen the quality of Canadian employment programs for marginalized youth, program developers may want to ensure practical supports for youth (e.g., transportation, child care), consider partnership with social enterprises or the private

sector to create sustainable youth employment programs, and provide opportunities for entrepreneurship (Betcherman et al., 2007; Fox & Upaasna, 2018). Moreover, there is a major gap in the provision of literacy and numeracy skills training in employment programs for marginalized youth, with only 9% of programs in our Canadian review emphasizing this area. This is concerning given that basic skills lay the foundation for lifelong learning: continuous workplace learning is critical because Canadian employers are increasingly automating low-skilled jobs (Lane & Scott Murray, 2018). Increased opportunities for Canadian youth to earn valuable workplace certification or microcredentials could improve their employment prospects. Another large gap identified in Canadian youth employment programs was a lack of preparation provided to employers about the unique needs of marginalized youth and additional supports they may need in the workplace — only 8% received such training. Variability in employment programs for marginalized youth across Canada indicates that there is considerable room for improvement, and considerable gaps — lack of literacy and numeracy skills training, insufficient employer preparation — that remain to be addressed.

Internationally, several youth employment programs took a holistic approach that incorporated life stabilization supports, along with work placements. These programs recognized that marginalized youth typically need assistance with pressing issues that hinder their ability to find and secure employment. For example, Job Corps, a program in the United States, provided free housing, meals, medical insurance, child care, and a living stipend for youth. Job Corps was the most comprehensive youth employment program in our review. Given the variability in the life stabilization supports provided by employment programs targeting marginalized youth, it would be valuable to investigate the relationship between program effectiveness and degree of life stabilization supports. It may be that youth participating in employment programs with greater levels of life stabilization supports experience greater success with securing long-term employment.

Another promising practice revealed in the international program scan was the use of technology to make skill development more accessible. The Youth-Can-Do-It program in the United Kingdom made mentoring available to program participants online, and the YouthFull program in New Zealand offered online courses for training. Offering components of youth employment programs via technology can be an efficient use of time and reduce expenses associated with travel for youth, like transportation costs and child care. However, it is important to ensure that such components offered through technology are high-quality alternatives that meet the needs of marginalized youth. Interestingly, many international programs were funded by multiple sources and were well connected to community partners. Funding partnerships between governments and the private sector tend to offer strong, far-reaching, programs. In addition, these types of employment programs become better aligned with labour market development needs. Lastly, some international youth programs targeted marginalized youth at risk of falling into NEET status. For example, Opportunity Hubs, a school-based program in Australia, provided mentoring



and career counselling for both elementary and high school students. These types of proactive approaches should be evaluated, and expanded if found to be effective.

As indicated earlier, countries tend to treat NEET youth as a homogeneous group. Trying to meet the employment needs of this broad group may be less effective than targeting the employment needs of subgroups, such as marginalized youth. YJC is an example of an employment program specifically designed to meet the employment needs of marginalized youth. Moving forward, it may be beneficial to identify specific categories of marginalized NEET youth, so that even more effective employment interventions can be developed and evaluated to meet their respective needs. Such evaluations would need to be conducted using high-quality methods, as most youth employment program evaluations tend to provide only weak evidence of their effectiveness (Betcherman et al., 2007).

### ***Conclusion***

In conclusion, this review of employment programs for marginalized NEET youth revealed programs that hold promise for equipping youth to find and maintain stable employment. Such programs are designed to meet the employment, life skills, and life stabilization needs of such youth. They are marked by suitable funding and incorporate pre-employment training, mentoring/job coaching, paid work placements, life skills training, and life stabilization supports. Considerations for improving the quality of employment programs for NEET youth include a greater focus on literacy and numeracy training, preparing employers to be responsive to the unique needs of marginalized youth during work placements, increasing amounts of life stabilization supports, offering program components via technology to make them more accessible, promoting cross-sector collaboration, and implementing proactive programs to meet the needs of potential NEET youth while they are still in secondary school. It is important to note that many governments already provide programs to meet the employment needs of marginalized youth. Evaluations of such youth employment programs should be regularly conducted to gain greater knowledge of which programs (and which program components) successfully reengage NEET youth in the labour market. Lastly, policymakers should consider targeting youth employment programs for subpopulations of marginalized NEET youth to improve their chances of success.

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