

March, 2025

A New Approach to Assessing Prior Learning

Research findings from piloting a new prior learning and assessment platform
for professionals in the supply chain Industry

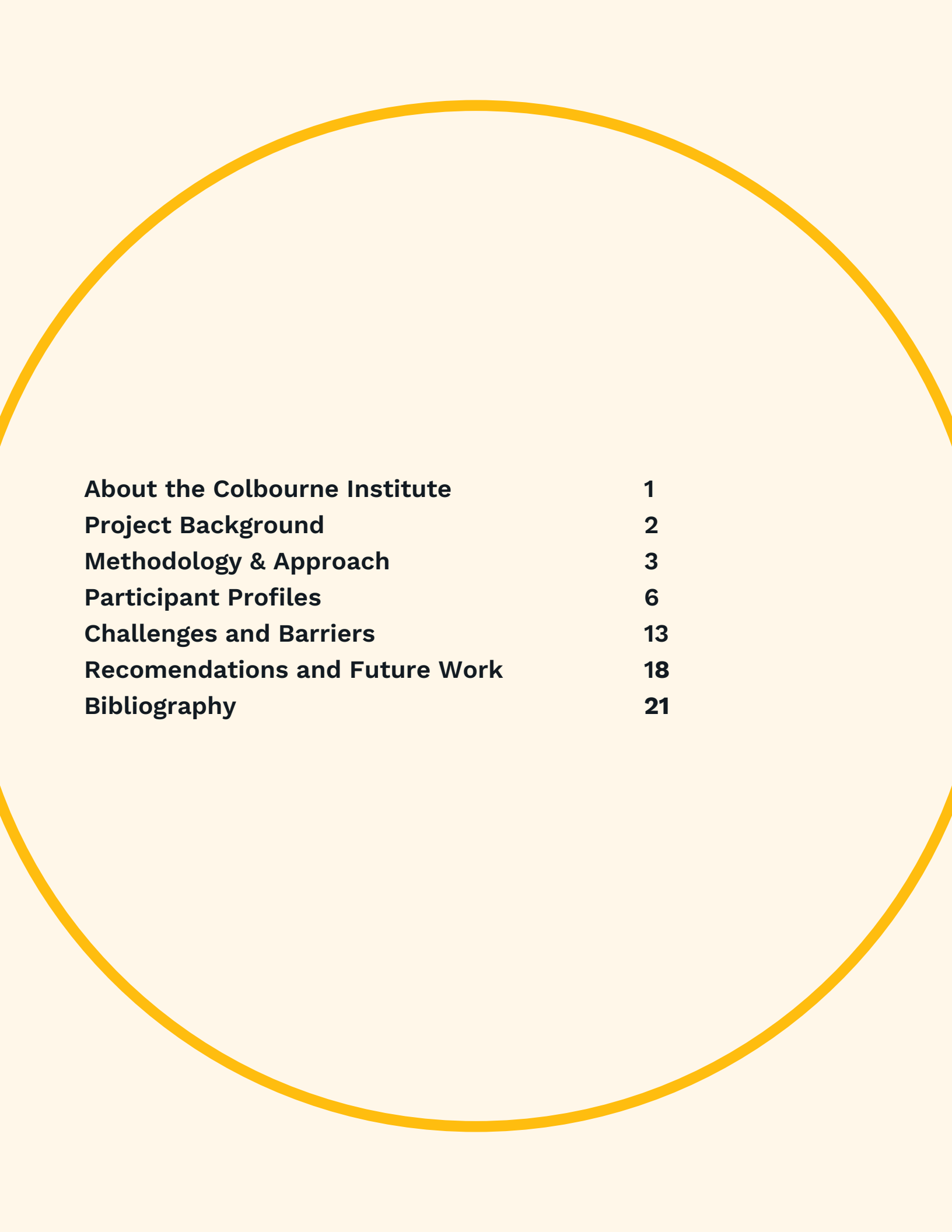
This report was developed on the traditional territories and gathering place of many diverse First Nations including Cree, Blackfoot, Dene, Nakota Sioux, Iroquois, Anishinaabe, Inuit and the homeland of Métis Nation Region 4 of what is now Alberta. In recognizing our privilege of calling amiskwaciwâskahikan or Treaty 6 home, we recognize our obligation and continued commitment to learning from the First Peoples whose histories, languages, cultures, and ways of life continue to influence our vibrant communities for this prioritized work of impacting meaningful social change, of which has been the call of countless Indigenous Peoples, Nations, and organizers for time immemorial. Read NorQuest College's official Land Acknowledgement.

Project funded by



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About the Colbourne Institute for Inclusive Leadership

The Colbourne Institute is a nationally recognized research and consulting firm based out of NorQuest College. In 2023, NorQuest College was listed in the Top 25 of Canada's Research Colleges, ranking number one for research income growth over the previous year, ninth in paid student researchers and tenth in research partnerships. The Colbourne Institute has been acknowledged as a driver of this growth. Experts at the College play a role in 17 research projects, many of which have and EDIA focus.

The institute is a leader in research and training, dedicated to advancing diversity, inclusion, equity, and accessibility. Our work leverages best-practice, research, and lived experiences to support individuals, teams, organizations, and communities on their unique inclusion journeys. We have worked with small to large sized businesses, educational and government institutions, and professional associations.

The Supply Chain PLAR project was funded by the Government of Alberta. The project was designed, developed and delivered with the support of the following individuals.

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Project Background

The supply chain industry in Canada has a persistent labour shortage, and this is expected to intensify in the coming years (Government of Canada Job Bank, 2022). The workforce is also ageing, with a median age of 48 and a retirement age of 60 as of 2018 (Government of Canada Job Bank, 2022).

Given these trends, the industry presents a strong employment opportunity for many Albertans. Jobs in the supply chain span public, private, and non-profit sectors (University of Toronto, 2019).

In 2021, the median salary for supply chain professionals in Canada was \$83,000—well above the national average income of \$70,500 (Association for Supply Chain Management, 2022; Statistics Canada, 2024). However, despite industry demand, skilled newcomers remain underrepresented in the sector. This highlights a gap in labour connections which may be addressed by developing targeted workforce integration interventions and supports. This may also be addressed by working with employers and helping them understand and qualify newcomer experience and training.

Between 2023 and 2025, NorQuest College, in partnership with Supply Chain Canada and local employer partners, was engaged

in a project funded by the government of Alberta to streamline employment for skilled Albertans.

This program targeted a near-ready pool of participants who already possessed foundational supply chain knowledge, experience, and training, but required support to successfully integrate into Alberta's supply chain labour market.

Our innovative Prior Learning Assessment & Recognition (PLAR) platform comprised four interactive, digital supply chain assessments, which are designed to align with competencies outlined in Supply Chain Canada's competency framework: procurement, operations management, transportation, and warehousing.

Successful participants received badges corresponding with their assessment, thus validating their existing knowledge. The program additionally offered work placements, soft-skills workshops, personalized career coaching and membership to industry associations.

Methodology and Approach

The program was launched in September 2023, with open enrolment available until March 2025. A total of 116 participants were admitted into the program. During intake meetings, student advisors invited participants to join the research study. Over the course of the program, 79 research participants were recruited, with data collection occurring continuously. The research participation rate was notably high at 68%.

By enabling individuals without recognized credentials to demonstrate their skills, we hypothesized that the implementation of this pilot project would establish equitable pathways to employment in supply chain fields for skilled Albertans.

To evaluate the program's effectiveness, the research team conducted participant interviews, observed assessments, and distributed surveys. Semi-structured interviews offered insights into participants' experiences of navigating Alberta's supply chain industry, including barriers, successes, professional aspirations, and the emotional toll of the job search process. Selected participants were interviewed in greater detail to document their program journeys.

Assessment feedback and post-program surveys were distributed. Data from government funder intake forms, career coaches, and staff notes offered further context of participants.

Our research drew on user experience (UX) research methodologies to assess the usability and accessibility of the assessment platform. The research coordinator conducted remote observations of selected research participants via Microsoft Teams during one of the four Supply Chain PLAR assessments. Observation techniques were minimally intrusive. Participants completing assessments online shared their device screens and audio with the researcher while remaining visible on camera. The researcher, serving also as a proctor, followed standard proctoring protocols, recorded observational notes, and gathered brief verbal feedback on the platform upon completion.

We mapped participant journeys through the program to identify key transition points. Finally, we developed participant personas from interview data, capturing recurring themes into profiles that reflect the needs, challenges, and motivations of participants.

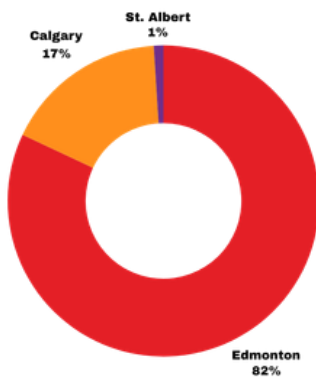


Participant Profiles

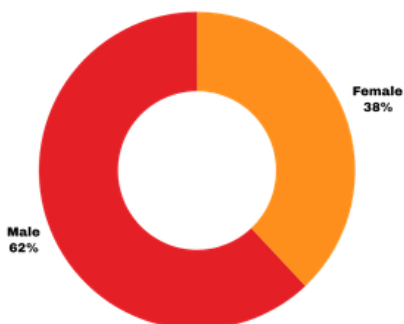
Findings

The demographic breakdown of research participants is as follows:

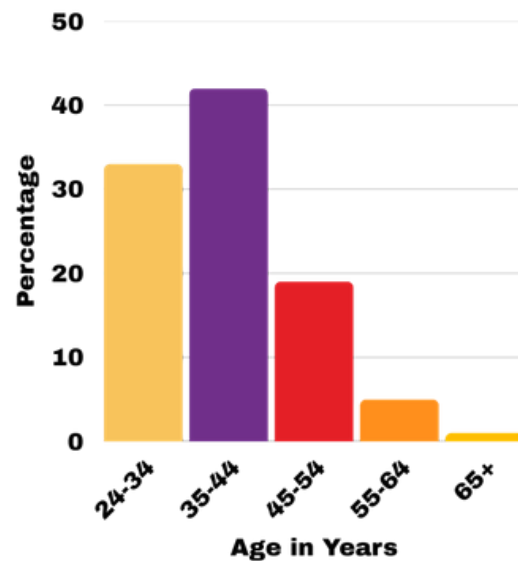
Location: 82% reside in Edmonton, while the 17% live in Calgary, and the remaining 1% live in St. Albert.



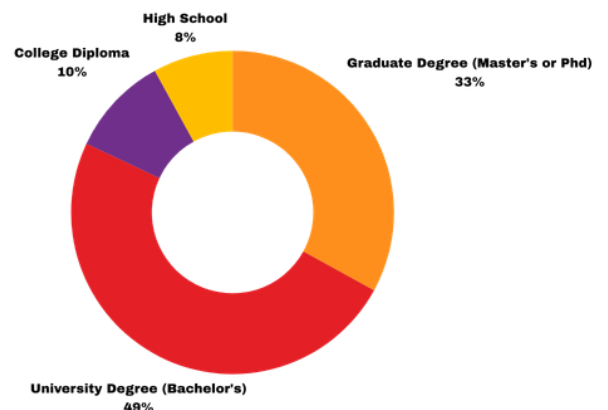
Gender: 62% of research participants are male, while 38% are female. This indicated a fairly high representation of women, which was also an intended equity goal of the program.



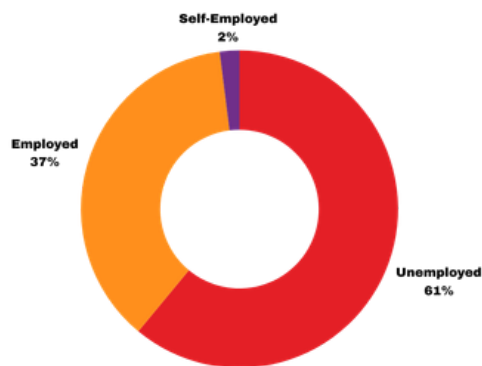
Age Range: The majority of participants were between 25 and 44 years of age, with a median age of 38.



Education: These participants were highly educated and experienced, with 82% possessing either a bachelor's or a graduate degree.



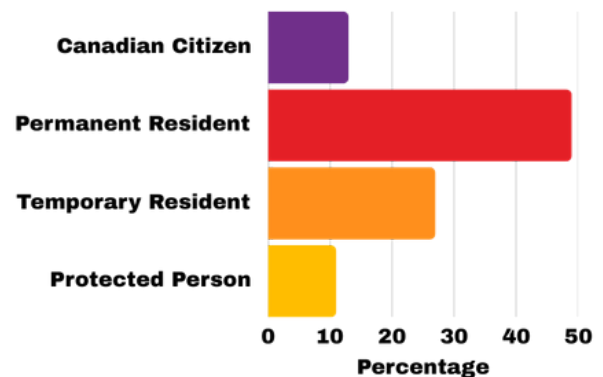
Employment Status: As anticipated, most of the participants were unemployed coming into the program. However, a sizeable number of participants were employed (37%), and a small minority self-employed. Nearly one-third of participants reported having previous management, senior, or executive work experience.



Self-identification: In all, 51% of participants self-identified as belonging to a visible minority. No research participants identified as Indigenous or disclosed having a disability.



Citizenship Status: Nearly half of the research participants were permanent residents (49%), followed by temporary residents (27%), Canadian Citizens (13%), and Protected Persons (11%). Newcomers represented the most significant portion of the participants. Just over half of the participants reported having arrived in Canada within 5 years preceding the 2023 program launch.



Participant Personas

The names below are pseudonymized and the personas do not represent any single participant, but rather are data-driven representations of larger groups of participants.



Joseph Abioye

Gender: Male
Age: 35
Location: Edmonton
Education: Graduate Degree
Arrived in Canada: 2020
Employment Status: Unemployed

Supply Chain Experience

Joseph was a former procurement manager in his country of origin. He has 5+ years of diverse supply chain experience abroad.

Career Goals

- Secure stable role in procurement field
- Future job has opportunities for growth and learning
- Attain management position aligned with experience

Emotions about Job Search

Frustrated

Pain Points

- No Canadian supply chain experience or credentials
- Applied to multiple jobs with limited response
- No feedback after interview rejections
- Limited access to professional networks or personalized support services

Participant Personas



Ksenia Ivanenko

Gender: Female
Age: 42
Location: Calgary
Education: Bachelor's Degree
Arrived in Canada: 2022
Employment Status: Employed

Supply Chain Experience

Ksenia was a former logistics specialist in her country of origin. She has 10+ years of progressive experience abroad. Ksenia is underemployed, working part-time in non-supply chain job.

Career Goals

- Secure a full-time supply chain role
- Workplace culture is friendly and supportive
- Workplace has opportunities for growth

Emotions about Job Search

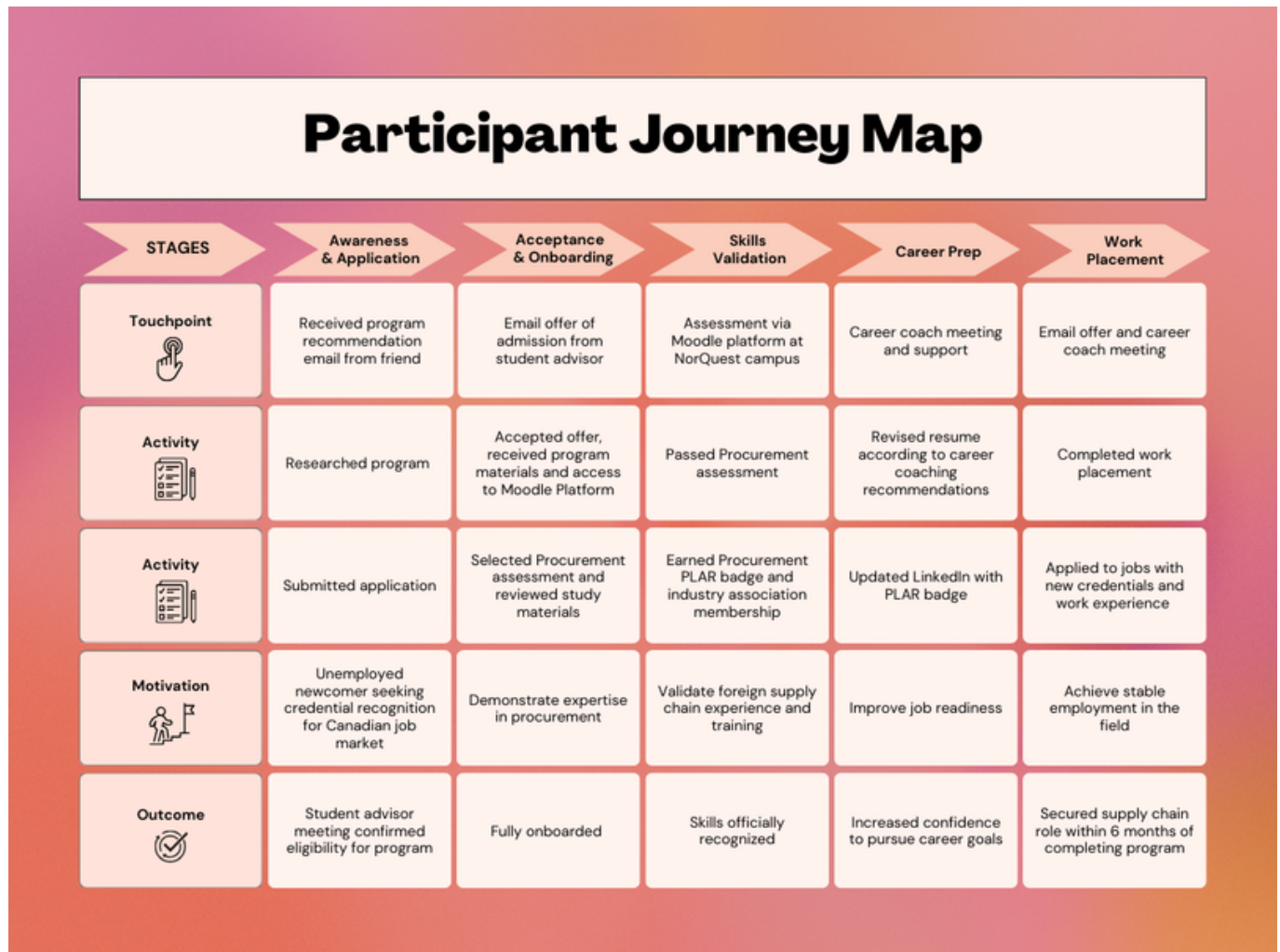
Low Confidence

Pain Points

- Unsure how to navigate the Canadian supply chain job market
- Applied to multiple jobs with no response or feedback
- Proficient in English but struggles to fully express her thoughts

Participant Journey Map

This journey map highlights key touchpoints between a successful participant and the program, while also outlining the participant's motivations and the resulting outcomes.





Challenges & Barriers

Participants identified six key barriers they face when seeking to advance their supply chain careers in Alberta:

- Foreign credential recognition and Canadian work experience gap
- Low employer responsiveness
- Lack of upward mobility in the labour market
- Limited industry awareness and workforce navigation techniques
- Limited access to tailored support services or professional networks
- Communication and English language proficiency

Foreign Credential Recognition and Canadian Work experience Gap

I face one of the big problem that I cannot apply with my experience at my back home because no one will accept me.

This was a common sentiment among participants. A lack of foreign credential recognition and Canadian work experience was cited by 80% of participants as a significant barrier to career advancement in Alberta's—and broadly Canada's—supply chain industry, with men slightly more likely to report this than women.

Until this pilot program, in the absence of an industry-specific PLAR program, these challenges were particularly pronounced for these participants, 87% of whom were not Canadian citizens at the time of enrollment, and slightly more than half of whom were newcomers. The majority of participants acquired their most substantial supply chain experience and training outside of Canada.

The research revealed a strong correlation between those who identified this as a barrier and those who experienced low responsiveness from prospective employers during active job search periods and lacked tailored support services and/or access to professional networks. The program directly addressed this challenge of foreign credential recognition and the Canadian work experience gap by implementing industry-specific PLAR assessments and offering supply chain work placements with employer partners.

By assessing participants' prior experience and validating their competencies through credentialing, the program provided a streamlined pathway for newcomers to gain recognition for their skills.

We successfully achieved our target of 75% of participants passing at least one assessment, thereby earning a PLAR badge. Several participants passed more than one assessment and were issued multiple badges, including eleven participants who earned “mega badges” after passing all four assessments. All badged participants also received membership to the Supply Chain Canada Association and participants who passed the transportation assessment were additionally granted membership to the CITT Canadian Logistics Association.

Participants overwhelmingly expressed satisfaction with the PLAR assessment platform in terms of user-friendliness, accessibility, and visual design. Further, 98% of participants expressed overall satisfaction, rating the assessments as either “excellent,” “very good,” or “good.”

The work placements offered participants an opportunity to gain critical Canadian work experience in the supply chain industry. The program secured nine employer partners to provide 100-hour work placements. In all, 31% of participants completed a work placement. For reasons that will be explored in the “Limitations” section of this report, 55% of participants stated that they were either “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” with the work placements.

I worked in supply chain for about 20 years, then I was scheduled to work as internship in a potato factory, working as a labour. The source of internship is limited and should be improved for supply chain related.

With respect to employment outcomes, post-program follow-up revealed that 51% of participants who earned a PLAR badge, and therefore had their supply chain knowledge and skills recognized in Canada, are currently employed.

Among participants surveyed, program satisfaction was high at 92%.

I am quite satisfied with this program as it helps people who have prior experience and knowledge in supply chain gets a local Canadian certification and also an opportunity to be placed at an organisation to gain Canadian experience. Just a suggestion to onboard more organisations to the list, which gives better opportunities to the students. Nevertheless, the team of career coaches makes their utmost efforts to place students asap and to the good organisations.

Low Employer Responsiveness

In all, 64% of participants interviewed identified persistent rejections and a limited, or a general lack of, responsiveness from prospective employers as a hinderance to labour market integration. In the absence of feedback, participants felt as if they lacked a clear understanding of how best to proceed after unsuccessfully employing a range of application strategies, including sending out mass applications, tailoring resumes, emailing hiring managers and the like.

Because I didn't even receive any feedback saying declined or I will need to wait, you know nothing. So, I think, I'm not kind of sure, you know, it's the application which I know it's related to my application. No, something related to the market itself I'm or, you know, I'm not really sure about it.

Over time, participants described feeling a range of emotions including—and most often—frustration and diminished confidence. However, participants responded to this by pivoting to other strategies to facilitate the workforce entry process, such as upskilling and getting credentials, an impetus for why many participants joined this very program.

The work placements provided participants not only an opportunity to receive work experience but also expand their professional network and receive feedback and evaluations from employer partners, which, according to career coaches, was overwhelmingly positive.

Some participants were even hired by the employer partner upon completion of their work placement.

Here is one such success story:

Adowa moved to Edmonton from Accra, Ghana, in 2022*. She joined the NorQuest Supply Chain PLAR program while underemployed in a non-supply chain part-time role, seeking to have her foreign supply chain credentials recognized and gain Canadian work experience in the industry.

After successfully completing two Supply Chain PLAR assessments in warehousing and operations management, she went on to complete a work placement. Shortly after, she received a job offer in the warehousing department of the company she was placed.

***Identifying details have been changed to protect the identity of the participant.**

Lack of Upward Mobility in the Labour Market

Participants identified a lack of upward mobility and limited pathways to gaining progressive experience as a challenge, despite the apparent demand in the supply chain industry. The research revealed that women were more likely to identify this as a barrier. When participants received offers of employment or were already employed, they disclosed being in entry level, junior, or general labour jobs despite having more

senior experience and applying to a range of roles.

Some participants disclosed self-selecting junior roles with the explicit expectation that they will be able to move up. And yet, this often had not materialized. Participants' workforce entry efforts were not yielding anticipated results. Pathways to career progression were often unclear to participants.

Attitudes toward entry level or junior roles varied. Some participants embraced these roles as a low-barrier entry to gain critical Canadian work experience. Some perceived them as experiential, educational opportunities to learn about Canadian customs, workplace culture, and supply chain processes while also developing professional networks.

Other participants expressed more ambivalence, citing their more senior professional background or even their age, implying or directly conveying a drop in status.

The emotions are unexplainable... The investment I put through in school. Also, my past experiences in supply chain, I felt like a part of me, a piece of me was, you know, ripped away from me...So I feel like I've lost eight years of my life and now I was starting from scratch. And at my age.

Some participants expressed both acceptance and ambivalence. This ambivalence also emerged in the context of the program work placements, where some participants lamented the fact that they were often relegated to entry level roles while having more experience.

If participants secured supply chain industry jobs, it was noted that they often worked in not only roles more junior than their experience but also outside of the supply chain field of interest, training, or expertise.

Nearly one-third of participants reported senior, managerial, or executive roles as their previous employment. It is unclear whether these roles were strictly in the supply chain industry and exclusively foreign experience. However, it was clear that participants would like to regain their formal professional status and secure positions in line with their professional experience and education.

Limited Industry Awareness and Workforce Navigation Techniques

One-third of the participants described feeling as if they possessed limited awareness of the supply chain industry labour market in Alberta. This resulted in employing industry navigation techniques often characterized by reactive adjustments or opportunistic pivots, such as coming across this pilot Supply Chain PLAR pilot program.

Women were significantly over-represented. The research also revealed a strong correlation between participants who reported challenges navigating the industry and those who lacked

Canadian credentials or work experience. Additionally, a moderate correlation was observed with those who identified lack of upward mobility as a challenge.

After completing the program, 88% of participants surveyed reported that the program gave them more skills, knowledge, and/or experience in navigating the supply chain industry in Alberta and also reported that the program gave them more skills, knowledge, and/or experience to advance their career.

Its a good program because it makes us more confident in our job search and our places of work.

What the program did for you is the fact that you get confident definitely about, you know, going forward... the program gives you confidence that, yes, you can certainly achieve your goals.

Limited Access to Tailored Support Services or Professional Networks

The stated lack of industry-specific support services, career coaching, mentorship opportunities, and overall limited access to professional networks presented a challenge for nearly one-third of the participants. Newcomers and women were significantly more likely to report this as a barrier. Catholic Social Services and the Bredin Centre for Career Advancement were reported as some of the agencies that supported participants.

While providing useful information and valuable resume support, some participants described not receiving access to resources that were connected to their specific needs.

In reference to experiences at networking events and job fairs, a newcomer participant expressed the need for tailored support:

I need a personalized help, but all the help that they're giving are already aware.

Communication and English Language Proficiency

Nearly one-third of the participants described communication and/or English language proficiency as an actual or perceived barrier to career advancement, with women being over-represented in this regard. This broad theme encompasses a range of barriers, perceptions, and noted strategies for career advancement. English language proficiency was a chief concern among some participants, and efforts to improve language skills were identified as a goal. When English proficiency was not a direct concern, the perception that accented English could be a cause for lack of career advancement was expressed.

My accent, initially, can be a challenge, you know. As an African man, the English, the language, the accent might become, may be complicated.

I think the most important thing for me is the language barrier...I think it's very hard for me in English sometimes to express the idea that I have on my mind.

In this, we included participants who did not explicitly describe communication or language proficiency as barrier, but nevertheless engaged in strategies for advancement that included efforts to improve cultural competence around understanding the nuances of Canadian English, as opposed to other forms of English that they may have been exposed to in professional settings abroad (including British and American English, which were specifically cited).

While this program was not meant to address English language proficiency gaps, this concern was indirectly addressed through the creation of supply chain refresher courses as an assessment study aid. Prior to this, participants were initially offered lengthy study materials, in the form of lengthy student handbooks, to prepare for assessments. The refresher courses condensed the study materials into a digestible, digital, interactive format accessed on the Moodle platform. This was introduced after assessing participant needs. In the courses, common supply chain terminology and concepts used in Canada's supply chain industry were included. This was intended to be beneficial for participants for whom English was not their first language.



Recommendations and future work

Job Search Strategies

Learning individual participants' job search efforts and strategies could provide valuable insights to identify areas for further program improvement that meets the needs of participants.

Online job banks, specifically Indeed, was mentioned as the most common job search method for participants that are actively seeking work. LinkedIn was often mentioned as well. Participants employed several application strategies, including resume tailoring and skills matching. Particularly savvy participants, understanding the use of AI, tailored resumes for programs that look for keywords.

I always go through the job in detail and then if I find that about 80 or 85%, I possess those skills, I try to tailor my resume accordingly and tailor my cover letter accordingly so that I can apply and at least I should get through that [AI] software. That software should select me for the next step interview and I try to make myself eligible for that.

When possible, participants leveraged social capital by tapping into personal networks for job opportunities. Many participants also engaged in low-barrier job searches, targeting roles with minimal qualifications with the understanding that this could serve as bridge employment to transition to more senior roles in line with their experience. Participants also engaged in a mass application strategy to increase their chances of securing interviews. As part of the job-hunting process, some participants employed a more direct approach and engaged in cold canvassing, going in-person to potential employers.

Among the participants interviewed, there was a considerable variance in the number of job applications submitted prior to entry into the program. At the high end, participants applied for as many as 200 jobs, while at the low end, some applied for none. Participants who were not actively applying for jobs have cited a range of reasons for this, including ongoing research into the job market, limitations due to their status as international students restricted to part-time work, residency status, and a focus on further training, such as participation in this program. Career coaching offered by this program was identified as helpful to participants to further assist them and provide additional support as they navigated the job market.

Program flexibility

The program's fluid enrollment structure was both a strength and a challenge. Gathering post-program employment data proved difficult due to the asynchronous nature of the program. While the program team accommodated a wide range of participant needs, the originally anticipated 16-week completion timeline often extended significantly. This variability made it more challenging to collect accurate employment outcomes data. While students appreciated the flexibility, this made it more difficult to accurately track their progress.

Work Placement Challenges

There was a stated need for participants to access a more diverse range of workplace experiences. Attracting employment partners in logistics and procurement proved more difficult compared to warehousing and operations. This meant that some participants were not receiving relevant work placements. Moreover, offering entry level roles was a challenge because the limited 100-hour work placements were being considered too short for employers (and participants alike), which prevented more senior roles from being offered. It was noted that these participants presented unique work placement engagement challenges according to career coach notes. Many were already employed and used Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) for networking, industry referrals, or career advancement rather than as an entry point into the field. This affected their level of engagement in the WIL experience.

However, there were challenges in accurately tracking post-program outcomes, work placement offerings, and engaging certain target communities, such as Indigenous individuals, people with disabilities, and residents of rural Alberta. These gaps highlight areas where the program could improve and have lasting and measurable impact.

Conclusion

Overall, the program was successful and demonstrated significant promise for further development and expansion. The Supply Chain PLAR program accommodated the diverse needs of participants, offering a flexible and supportive environment that allowed them to validate their supply chain experience and training, while also providing work placements and industry connections, as participants sought to streamline their integration into the labour market. Overall, and most critically, the program addressed many of the core barriers participant reported as preventing them from career advancement in Alberta.



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