Growing Talent for the Landscape and Horticulture Industry

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Introduction

This report assesses a newly developed in demand-led employment strategy and program being trialed by the Ottawa Community Coalition for Literacy and Landscape Ontario (the Horticultural Trades Association). This research partnership, led by Rideau-Ottawa Valley Learning Network and Landscape Ontario, brought together employers and adult educators to develop and deliver an 8-week experiential learning curriculum for barriered job seekers in the Ottawa region. The curriculum featured both in class essential and employability skills training and on-the-job, pre-employment “job tasting” experiences from several participating employers. Learners benefitted from talent-to-role fit assessment, contextualized learning, and employment support while employers benefitted from developing a pool of recruitment-ready and enrolment-ready talent. The program built on existing research and programs from a range of academic, government, and third sector resources.

Context

Gaps between the supply and demand side of the Ontario labour market are of concern to stakeholders of all kinds and at all levels, particularly jobseekers looking to find fruitful and meaningful work, job holders looking to strengthen their careers through personal development or strategic transition, and employers seeking the most skilled and qualified candidates to fill open and anticipated positions. Demand-led employment strategies may be defined as efforts championed by industry leaders and their governing bodies or professional associations to narrow existing gaps and better anticipate future gaps through development interventions on the employer side: for example, through workplace training, education, or accreditation.

Statistics Canada’s now inactive Workplace and Employee Survey (WES; 2007) categorized these strategies as either classroom-based or on-the-job training developing a dichotomy between general knowledge and specific knowledge, respectively (see Dostie and Montmarquette, 2007). In their literature review of the WES, Dostie and Montmarquette (2007) noted the claims made by Chaykowski and Slotsve (2006) that either strategy was often determined by the broader strategies of the organization offering the training. For Chaykowski and Slotsve, these were research and development, organizational, and cost reduction strategies, each of which were argued to have varying effects on the degree to which employer-initiated training occurred in Canada and the intensity of such efforts. Dostie and Montmarquette further reviewed additional studies that had drawn on what WES had claimed. These studies included, for example:

- one suggesting that technology and innovative practices had a positive effect on training outcomes;
- another that argued that unionization had a positive effect on training;
- another suggesting that training helped decrease staff turnover and increase employee stability;
- yet another that argued that immigrant populations benefitted only moderately, if at all, from employer-led training;
- and so on (2007).

All these studies are highly provisional, of course, and are based on analysis that is both out of date and that removes the nuance of regional and local idiosyncrasies. Nevertheless, some of the terminology this review deploys can be carried forward to ongoing research in the field.
As Holmes and Hjartarson argue in the “Moving Forward Together” report (2014), demand-led efforts in Ontario are typically hindered by one or more of several common barriers. It is important to note that while material and resource barriers may be actual, perceptual barriers (including value-laden assumptions about resource allocation and ROI) are prevalent as well. For Holmes and Hjartarson, there are four common types of barrier:

1. Scale (or capacity)
2. Cost
3. Risk
4. Lack of Awareness

**Scale**
The authors first talk about the problems of scale and capacity, particularly as barriers for SMEs. Larger firms, such as those with dedicated human resources departments, were far more likely to consider and implement demand-side interventions than their smaller-scale counterparts.

**Cost**
The authors then discuss cost as a perceived barrier to employers, who often imagine both after hours and work hours investments (that is, paying for tuition for adult education courses or “off the floor,” on-site training, respectively) as being too expensive and time consuming to finance.

**Risk**
Related to cost the authors cited risk as another perceived barrier for employers, who argue that training investments in an unstable economy may result in paying for employees to be “poached” by other employers once they have been upskilled. As a knock-on effect, the authors propose that “The fear of employee turnover also impedes the training of new or prospective employees” (p. 9).

**Lack of Awareness**
Finally, Holmes and Hjartarson argue that many employers lack awareness of the various government services and incentives available for supporting training on the employer side. The authors bluntly state “Many employers consulted were not familiar with Employment Ontario (EO) or the services it currently offers.” They add that the plethora of service providers available in most regions makes finding and retaining the most appropriate one for a particular sector a particularly challenging task – a challenge noted in OCWI’s “Conversations” report as well (Ontario Centre for Workforce Innovation [OCWI], 2017, p. 16, 20).
Program Summary and History

Key Project Partners

The Growing Talent for the Landscape and Horticulture Industry pilot project, also known as the “Ready, Set, Grow” training program, is operated in partnership between the Rideau-Ottawa Valley Literacy Network (ROVLN), Landscape Ontario, Ottawa Employment Hub, and the Ottawa Catholic School Board.

ROVLN is a part of the Employment Ontario employment and training network, a provincial government program dedicated to connecting workers with employers (Government of Ontario 2018). ROVLN provides programming, research and public education to support adult literacy and learning services in Ottawa and the Ottawa Valley, including the counties of Renfrew, Lanark and Prescott-Russell. ROVLN provides a range of services, among them:

- information and referral services
- professional development for literacy instructors
- resource development
- community service planning, and
- outreach.

Landscape Ontario, also known as the Landscape Ontario Horticultural Trades Association (LOHTA), represents more than 2000 horticultural professionals in Ontario. Members of LOHTA include interior landscapers, landscape contractors, landscape designers, garden centre owners, nursery growers, arborists, and lawn care operators, among others. LOHTA works to maintain trust and confidence in horticulture as a profession, and promotes horticulture-related education and research, funding green communities through public horticulture events across Ontario. LOHTA works with a range of sectors to meet the needs of various industry groups, working closely with local professionals and volunteers to build solutions to local- and sector-specific issues.

Ottawa Employment Hub is funded by Employment Ontario as one of eight Local Employment Planning Council (LEPC) pilots across Ontario in 2016-2017. Administered by Algonquin College, Ottawa Employment Hub was designed to be an 18-month pilot. Ottawa Employment Hub works with a range of LEPC partners (including the Ottawa Chamber of Commerce, ROVLN and rest of the Employment Ontario network) to provide funding for community-based projects to support the local workforce. These programs are designed to improve coordination and planning of employment and training services, as well as to assist employers, workers, and job seekers to make informed choices about careers and training. Ottawa Employment Hub strives to improve local labour market information by anticipating local labour gaps in Ottawa. Ottawa Employment Hub’s credo is “connect, plan, learn, work”. This reflects its commitment to connecting job seekers and learners to employment; liaising with employers, service providers, and stakeholders for mutual learning; collaborating to identify local challenges and opportunities in the labour market; and linking job seekers and learners to programs and services that will provide them with skills valued by local employers.
The Ottawa Catholic School Board (OCSB) runs an Adult Literacy and Basic Skills program out of St. Nicholas Adult High School, which operates two campuses in Ottawa. The Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Program works to develop literacy, numeracy, digital and other basic skills for adult learners in Ottawa. This includes assisting learners in:

- upgrading their reading, writing, math, oral, and/or computer communications
- preparing to take high school credit courses
- accessing employment and workplace training
- receiving a range of non-credit upgrading
- building health and family literacy
- accessing e-Learning

The Adult Literacy and Basic Skills program at the OCSB is free for Ontario residents who are age 19 and older, and offers a range of social and economic supports to eligible students, including transportation, childcare, a food bank, and a clothing drive.

Overview

The 8-week Ready, Set, Grow training program ran out of St. Nicholas Adult High School in central Ottawa from Monday-Friday for six hours per day. It responds to challenges faced by job seekers and employers in the landscape and horticulture industry in Ottawa. The central goals of this project are:

- to fill current and future job vacancies in the landscaping and horticulture industry with inspired and informed workers
- to increase awareness of the job/career entry and training pathways that exist across the landscaping and horticulture industry
- to develop psychometric testing to support worker alignment with and integration into the landscaping and horticulture industry
- to explore how employer engagement in the delivery and design of training programs can assist workforce development goals
- to promote a more positive, balanced public image of jobs in the landscaping and horticulture industry, and
- to show that the landscaping and horticulture industry in Eastern Ontario offers viable career pathways

Landscape Ontario approached ROVLN in 2017 with the hopes of developing a program to address the skilled labour shortage in Ottawa’s landscape and horticulture sector. Although there are more than 65,000 people employed in landscaping and horticulture in Ontario, each year there are more jobs in every sector of this industry than there are skilled workers to fill them. According to Statistics Canada, between 2017 and 2021 71% of this sector’s job openings will be replacement jobs resulting from retirement, death and emigration. This means that 46,150 job vacancies will be created in the landscaping and horticulture industry across Ontario by 2012. In other words, there is – and will continue to be – a range of occupations and
careers available to jobseekers who possess landscaping and horticulture-related skillsets. However, there is currently not an adequately skilled workforce to fill these positions.

This shortage, faced by the landscaping and horticulture industry as a whole, is unique to this industry and occurs for a range of reasons. This industry employs workers in a wide range of occupations and careers, ranging from low-skilled to high-skilled positions. Due in part to this diversity, pathways to occupations or careers in landscaping and horticulture are not always clear to jobseekers, students, or career counsellors. Misconceptions of the landscaping and horticulture industry are also prevalent, notably including stigmas about landscaping work and, more generally, skilled trades and apprenticeship training.

The partnership between Landscape Ontario and ROVLN addresses this need to lessen the gap between labour supply and demand in the landscaping and horticulture industries, while strengthening pathways to employment outcomes across the sector. The Ready, Set, Grow program draws together key industry and Employment Ontario service providers from Ottawa and Eastern Ontario. In doing so, it looks to develop and deliver a training program with wraparound supports for clients and outreach to employers.

The goal of the Ready, Set, Grow training program is to bring together employers and adult educators to develop and deliver an experiential learning curriculum for barriered job seekers. This curriculum features in class and hands-on essential and employability skills training, various certifications, and on-the-job training in the form of job placements or “job tastings” with local employers. This program looks to develop committed and skilled workers in the landscape and horticulture industry. Clients who complete this program will have the basic communication, numeracy, and literacy skills required for further training and to fill vacant jobs in landscaping and horticulture in the Ottawa region. Clients will be offered talent-to-role fit assessment, contextualized learning, and employment support. Employers will benefit from developing a pool of recruitment-ready and enrolment-ready talent, and will be better able to accept contracts and expand to meet demand across Ottawa and Eastern Ontario. The Essential Skills for Ontario’s Trades project is funded in part by OCWI.

Curriculum

The curriculum of the Ready, Set, Grow training program is designed to prepare unemployed and under-employed clients with:

- the skills needed for a career in landscaping and horticulture
- a cost-free opportunity to explore an interest in landscaping and horticulture
- a direct pathway into a job, and/or
- career pathways to academic upgrading, an apprenticeship, or a certificate/diploma program.

This program involves five core components:

1. Psychometric assessment: during the initial recruitment and intake process, ALiGN psychometric talent-to-role fit assessment tests are administered to clients. These tests respond to labour shortages by linking clients with job postings based on personality attributes and interests. These tests precede
administration of the classroom and hands-on curriculum, and ensure that interested and motivated clients are prioritized for program enrolment. Once clients are enrolled, a combination of ALiGN assessments and front-end counselling provides clients with ongoing support and guidance as they move through the curriculum.

2. Contextualized and technical skills sessions: clients are provided with four weeks of hands-on experiential learning, involving a range of certifications (including but not limited to Health and Safety, First Aid and WHMIS), technical and general skills training, guest speakers, on-site tours of workplaces, and practical skills demonstrations.

3. On-site job tasting: clients are offered two weeks of job placements with local employers in landscaping and horticulture. Local employers seeking to fill permanent vacancies have access to financial grants to help offset training and orientation costs. Clients and employers who take part in job trials receive ongoing support by service providers and program developers.

4. LBS and career pathway learning: clients are provided with two weeks of soft skills training and literacy and basic skills training (focusing on numeracy and English). This is supplemented by career pathway exploration where clients consult online job postings and conduct labour market research and online research on the landscaping and horticulture industry. Clients are also provided with exit interviews with their employers from stage 2, where they hear feedback about their job placements and gain insight regarding potential next steps for employment.

5. Hands-on experiential learning: in tandem with classroom learning, clients are provided with a range of opportunities to take part in hands-on landscaping and horticulture activities with an instructor who is also a trained landscaper.

Project Management

The core management and coordination team of the Ready, Set, Grow training program is made up of six individuals. The program is overseen by a lead project coordinator at the Rideau-Ottawa Valley Literacy Network. This coordinator is located in Ottawa, and is responsible for program administration and logistical support for the program. The lead coordinator’s duties include:

- managing the project’s financial administration, including developing and administering budgets, overseeing payroll, and issuing reimbursements for expense claims
- arranging job trials
- scheduling guest speakers
- organizing class excursions, demonstrations and field trips
- networking and maintaining ties with local employers and local employment service providers
- managing the creation and implementation of program curriculum
- arranging any required travel, accommodations and catering
- serving as the key point of contact between various stakeholders and representatives of the project
- providing guidance to learners about pathways into careers in the trades
The lead project coordinator is supported by five other coordinators based at various employment, educational, and industrial service providers in Ottawa. These secondary coordinators, representing both employers and service providers, provide administrative and logistical support to the lead coordinator throughout the development and administration of the program. Drawing from their own expertise to strengthen the Ready, Set, Grow project, they bring decades of industry, employer engagement, adult education, employment services, and workforce development experience to this initiative.

Two of these five coordinators represent employer and industry expertise. These include an employer and industry lead from Landscape Ontario and an industry advisor who is an apprenticeship program coordinator with Landscape Ontario. Together, these coordinators inform program development, provide employer orientation, support basic training and employment, work directly with apprentices, support client selection, support client workplace preparedness, and introduce landscaping and horticulture as a viable career opportunity.

The remaining three coordinators represent service delivery and workforce development expertise. These include an employment advisor from Pinecrest Queensway CHC (an Ottawa-based Employment Ontario employment centre), a literacy and basic skills advisor from the Ottawa Catholic School Board, and a workforce development and labour market information advisor from Ottawa Employment Hub. Together, these coordinators provide specific expertise in their areas (employment services, adult education, and workforce development), access to their literacy and basic skills or employment service networks, take part in community-wide outreach, and provide systems-level support, including access to new technology or access to existing tools and resources.

**Program Development and Delivery (January – May 2018)**

The core team of program coordinators and affiliated service organization representatives met several times as a steering group between January and March 2018. The goal of this initial planning phase was to conduct outreach to employers, disseminate information about the program, recruit landscaping and horticulture employers to serve on a program advisory group, recruit clients for the program, and to prepare the program for launch. This planning phased involved:

- reviewing and discussing the implementation of the Ready, Set, Grow training program
- assembling an advisory group of landscape and horticulture employers for research interviews and feedback, ultimately leading to curriculum development
- undertaking additional research and accessing any new data to better inform labour market demand
- preparing data collection tools and distributing an initial survey with landscaping and horticulture employers
- orienting the project coordinator and the instructor to the project deliverables
- conducting interviews with the advisory group of landscaping and horticulture employers
- conducting organizational needs assessment and employee benchmarking with Landscape Ontario members and a technology liaison
conducting an information session with participating Employment Services service providers to outline project deliverables and expectations for funded placements

conduct marketing of the Ready, Set, Grow program and deliver information about client suitability and eligibility to literacy and basic skills partners, employment services partners, and community partners in preparation for referral of clients

holding dialogue sessions with employers to collect further input

beginning and conducting recruitment of clients

confirming all guest speakers, site tours, and credential training, and

identifying and hiring a course instructor

Once the instructor was hired, there was a four week period where the instructor assisted the team of program coordinators in developing the blended curriculum for the Ready, Set, Go program. Curricular components were adapted in part from the Career Access to the Trades Program (a similar pilot project in the Ottawa region, dealing with trades and manufacturing). These included numeracy, English, soft skills, and specialized knowledge of landscaping and horticulture.

Over the course of April-May, 2018, the Ready, Set, Grow training program was delivered in class. Delivery of the curriculum was designed to include classroom learning; hands-on experiential learning; certifications in Health and Safety, First Aid, and WHMIS; guest speakers, on-site tours, and demonstrations during the first four weeks (April, 2018). During the first two weeks of May, 2018, clients took part in job placements (indoor or outdoor, weather permitting) and on-the-job training at their placements. After these job tastings, clients returned to class to meet with the project coordinator for a debrief of their job placement experiences, to discuss their learning, and to complete the remaining components of the curriculum. During the last week of the program, it was scheduled that students would attend specialized structured classes and individual discussions on carpentry, plumbing, construction and design, representing four key pathways into careers landscaping and horticulture.

Throughout the training program, it was planned that clients would conduct individual projects on trades of individual interest, carry out labour market research, conduct information interviews and perform online job research. Instructors and project coordinators were expected to liaise with clients to support next steps and pathways to employment for each client, including potential registration as an apprentice, academic upgrading, or registration in diploma or certificate programs. Upon completion of the training program, clients would be provided with work boots, eye wear, and basic tool boxes.

Following successful completion of the Ready, Set, Grow training program, program coordinators were expected to assist clients in negotiating placements with local employers in landscaping and horticulture. This process would make use of the employer advisory group established during the planning phase of this project. Clients were expected to be provided with job placements in companies of personal interest that aligned with their skill level and would result in their addition to payroll, presumably in entry-level positions. The duration of job trials was expected to be negotiated on an individual basis according to each client’s ultimate career decision (for example, employment, apprenticeship, or academic upgrading). Leveraging Employment Ontario Employer Incentives, it was planned that employers taking part in these job trials would be offered financial support to offset the cost of training new employees.
Research Objectives

The proposed research had four overall objectives. The first was to build and develop a skills training program for barriered job seekers in the Ottawa region with the collaboration of the Ottawa Community Coalition for Literacy and Landscape Ontario (the Horticultural Trades Association). The second and third objectives both made up the core components of the research, running a full iteration of the Ready, Set, Grow training program. The second objective included various types of knowledge-training for clients including classroom-based learning; hands-on experiential learning; providing clients with relevant certifications such as Health and Safety, First Aid, and WHMIS; and expose clients to guest speakers, on-site tours, and demonstrations linked up to horticulture and landscaping. And the third was to successfully give clients necessary tools for horticultural work, giving them a placement in the industry during the program, and trying to place clients in a position upon program completion. And the last objective was to complete a program evaluation based on the experiences of the clients who participated in the program. The goal of the Ready, Set, Grow training program is that learners would benefit from talent-to-role fit assessment, contextualized learning, and employment support while employers will benefit from developing a pool of recruitment-ready and enrolment-ready talent. As such, this report offers a program evaluation based on the experiences and outcomes of the learners who participated as well as feedback from instructors. All of these goals were shaped to answer the research question: How will a hybrid training program – collaboratively developed by training providers, employment services, and employers to provide both in-class experiential learning and on-site job tasting – improve the ability of the Landscape and Horticulture industry to attract, recruit, and retain a skilled and committed workforce?

Methodology

This research was carried out over a period of many months where the Ready, Set, Grow course was planned and developed, carried out, and assessed. Initial meetings between the various partners took place in October 2017 during which initial conversations about course content and goals were discussed. Final meetings took place in March 2018 with Landscape Ontario (factual check?) to review any final queries or necessary adjustments to the course material with particular attention to the needs of industry upon hiring workers. The course was carried out in Ottawa at St. Nicholas Adult High School from April to May 2018, with most of the program evaluation research being carried out in the classroom and following completion of the program. Field observations and focus groups were carried out with the learners, and exit interviews were carried out with the program instructors upon completion of the course.

The Ready, Set, Grow curriculum was created with input across the partner organizations and took place in three phases over the span of eight weeks, beginning in April 2018:

1. Contextualized and Technical Skills Sessions: Four weeks of hands-on experiential learning, comprising a range of technical and general skills training and education experiences, such as Health & Safety, First Aid, WHMIS credential training, guest speakers, on-site tours, and demonstrations;
2. On-Site Job Tasting: Two weeks of job placements with employers, and featuring ongoing support by service providers; and

3. LBS and Career Pathway Learning: Two weeks of basic and soft skills training connected to career pathway exploration, as well as exit interviewing with employers.

The curriculum committee adapted and enhanced the Literacy and Basic Skills Landscaping and Grounds Maintenance curriculum currently being offered by Ontario colleges, such as Algonquin. While other psychometric tests were proposed to accompany the training, this type of assessment was ultimately not administered in favour of qualitative methods such as focus groups, interviews, and participant observation during and after the program.

An exploratory case study approach was adopted for this project as the participating partners were looking to create real-life interventions to help job-seekers gain employment in the areas of horticulture and landscaping. Preliminary research for this project highlighted the need for employer-initiated education and training in the field, and so this training program sought to address recent labour market trends in the horticultural sector by providing classroom and skills-based training for job seekers. Therefore, assessing community needs and the service activities necessary to meet these needs meant drawing on an exploratory approach. This method helps best identify what services should be provided and the best approaches to providing said services, it is also helpful in determining what outcomes should be measured based of the types of services offered. In this case then, assessing whether or not the training program was felt to be helpful for both job-seekers and employers in the horticultural and landscape industry is helpful in future program building, and for bridging innovative learning strategies within the practical limitations of the sector.

The research is driven by pragmatic epistemology in that the study is grounded in understanding the practical consequences of how academic and intellectual learning impacts life outcomes and chances. In this case, the goal is to assess how the Ready, Set, Grow training program impacts the goals of job-seekers and employers. And more importantly, the extent to which job-seekers found their learning helpful. In order to thoroughly examine the efficacy of the program, pre-and post-training surveys were given to learners and employers, focus groups were carried out with learners as well as exit interviews with instructors, and fieldwork observation was carried out in the classroom. The approach to this project followed a sequential pattern where preliminary research highlighted the needs of the industry and job seekers in the field of landscape and horticulture skills in Ontario. Once this background research was completed, a curriculum was built for the Ready, Set, Grow program in consultation with partners and potential employers. This was followed by a pilot of the program with 8 job seeking individuals taking part, and on completion of the program the qualitative, evaluative research was carried out (this will be the focus of discussion in the results portion of the report).

The recruitment strategy was open-ended and sought to target job-seekers who were interested in the industry and who needed skills-based training and support. The program was advertised through word of mouth, on the St. Nicholas Adult High School website and in the programs directory, social media, and in person at an open information session. The inclusion criteria were: aged 18 or older, seeking gainful
employment, or without work, and/or in the process of determining next steps for their career, and interested in manual labour in landscape and horticulture. In total, 8 learners and 2 instructors participated in the qualitative program assessment research, while X companies participated in placements.

One focus group was held with program participants with semi-structured questions to guide the conversation, this session was approximately an hour and a half long. Two semi-structured, in-depth interviews were held with each instructor which lasted about participant. These lasted approximately 30 minutes each. They were conducted in person, with the sessions being digitally recorded and then transcribed. To maintain anonymity, participants were not named. Data analysis was iterative and interpretive using a thematic analysis, where the researchers identified analyzed patterns in the data, which keeps the findings empirically driven as opposed to trying to match up to a particular theory. Due to its flexibility, thematic analysis allows for rich, detailed and complex description of the data and allowed the researchers to pull out the primary themes that emerged naturally from the data. These themes link back to the research question in that they assess the value of a hybrid training program – collaboratively developed by training providers, employment services, and employers to provide both in-class experiential learning and on-site job tasting – in the Landscape and Horticulture industry to attract, recruit, and retain a skilled and committed workforce. Five central themes were deductively established from both the learner and instructor data, and one theme specifically drawing on the instructor perspective. Two researchers undertook the data analysis and worked together with regular consultation and discussion in order to reach consensus on the themes emerging from the data.

Results

Thematic Analysis

There were five central themes that emerged from the research data across learner and instructor groups that the research team deemed as most important for the purposes of program evaluation. These five themes are broken down as follows: the positive aspects of the program, the need for more hands-on and practical learning in the course, lack of diversity in employment, pay rate concerns, relevant skills not learned in course, and divergence between course content and landscape and horticulture work specifically. The sole theme taken alone from the instructor group focused on administrative and organizational issues in running the program. Throughout the analysis we sought to link the learner and instructor experiences back to broader questions around efficacy and suitability of the course to helping job-seekers find employment, and to see if such a pathway program is effective in placing people in an industry that is in need of labour.

Positive Aspects of the Program

Individual learners who completed the program highlighted a number of elements that both incentivized them to take the program in the first instance, as well as the positive aspects of the course that they discovered as they were taking part in it throughout the duration.
A number of individuals who took part in the course were new to Canada and cited the course offerings as being beneficial to their overall adjustment to the Canadian job market, for skills building, and networking, as well as more social elements. One learner stated that there were no downsides to taking the course as a newcomer to Canada, “Bus tickets were paid. I had nothing to lose except time. When you were newcomer, you leave everything behind (…) the socializing, the networking, and all sorts of everything. So this course was a good way for me to socialize the human factor in my life. I love gardening but where I come from, I instruct an assistant to do things for me. Whereas here I was able to touch the soil, and the plant, and everything myself.” Another learner echoed this statements saying that when they saw the course description and knew what skills and learning was available to them “everything that was in there spoke to [them].”

The cost of the course was another important aspect for a number of the learners. The course was free to clients and many stated that they wouldn’t have been able to afford such a course, or if they had access to the necessary funds, they were not sure whether they would have been able to spend them on a training course. Many cited the fact that it was free coupled with access to certifications as being very beneficial to their career and job prospects, one individual stated: “I like that it had certifications, certifications were a big thing.” Some individuals highlighted the cost as incentive for taking it, one individual stated: “I needed to do something and I would have done something instead of paying to take this course. Depends on the money too, you know, how much it was going to cost. You know, um, if it was a small amount I would definitely do it. If it was a big amount I wasn’t going to do it.” So the willingness to pay for the same course would depend on the actual cost, and this was a trend across the group.

Another element that appealed to many of the learners was the support they received throughout the Ready, Set, Grow program. They felt that it was very beneficial to be able to speak to professionals in the industry, stating that they received insight into the industry which they might not had otherwise, saying “[w]e also had people from various companies coming in and we got an insight into the industry that I might not have had before, which was really great.” Yet other individuals stated that they were happily surprised with the level of support that was available to them throughout the course citing the equipment they were provided with and the transportation costs being covered as being very helpful to them. One learner stated that because these costs were covered, “[they were] able to come out and feel good and, you know, be excited to come out of the program and everything. It was really big. It was huge, the transportation.”

Other learners echoed the sentiments about equipment and transportation being provided to the participants as extremely important and helpful but said they worried about other aspects of the course like the placements because they feared they would be overlooked or unsuccessful. One learner stated: “We heard about some of the companies that were coming through and I thought I’m not gonna be able to do this, and I have to quit the course. It’s just always made me feel bad. [But then I was told] It’s possible. Yes, you can do it. Don’t worry. Don’t worry. We’re gonna find a place. Yeah. And I went and came into the store. I didn’t know we were getting boots and gloves. Yeah, I get the boots and me but um, but it was I mean I just felt giddy from the incentive.” So while individuals were nervous about their job prospects, they found the overall offerings and support in the course helped them overcome their fears. This seemed to be key in boosting the confidence of the job seekers, this is reflected in the following quotations:

“All you need to do is be there because you got the money. You know, there was food upstairs, you know, like, uh the coffee and and whatever, just show up, you know, you got your transportation. You got your
boots. You got your clothes. You got real, you know build confidence. Actually, I would say that this morning that I could feel myself changing from really, you know, six months ago. Yeah, I really appreciate this program."

The Need for More Hands-on/ Practical Training

Another primary theme that emerged from the learners' assessment and experiences of the program, and one that was echoed by instructors as well, was the need for more experiential, hands-on, practical learning in the field. This was compounded with concerns about the logistical and pragmatic issues with scheduling in that a lot of learners did not enjoy doing work outside before coming into the classroom for theory work. One learner stated that: “once we started outside we know our skills. And frankly endurance, because you’re gonna be working, right? So for me, it was, like, dirty. You went outside in the morning and you were filthy and then you have to come back inside with that. I felt, you know, it didn’t work.” They also felt that the work outside, in the field, was more important than “being stuck in the classroom”, and that if the theory was condensed and preceded the field experience then it would have been a better, more meaningful experience for them.

This issue around wanting more hands-on experience was compounded by the learners' difficulties in doing theory work in the class. One individual argued that “sitting in the classroom doing the work was the biggest challenge. I mean being outside doing the work, the only thing that was challenging for me was the speed. And getting used from the winter to the, you know, to the hot sun that blasted us, but that’s about it.” Some individuals highlighted the fact that spending so much time in the classroom was impractical for preparing them for work in the field of horticulture and landscaping. They argued that the course should be a better reflection of what things might be like in the industry, in practice: “it could be maybe 20% classroom and 70% of hands-on because that’s how they do it. I’m going to be working 80/20 inside. It’s the practical. Because where you’re going to end up, outside. You need your knowledge so that you don’t mess up, you know, but the knowledge is mostly when you’re doing, you know. You learn more if you do some, mess it up, and then you have to fix it.” This idea of wanting more time in the field was juxtaposed against the material in the classroom being too repetitive and specifically cited an excess and repetition of health and safety training where the exact same material was covered twice. This learner stated that the material was "exactly the same as we covered and so it was like, yep. We kept getting the same thing... I know it’s important, but like we already got the certificate."

However, despite concerns with daily scheduling and a preference for more experiential learning, a number of learners stated that not taking the course would have been a loss for them. However, they also stated that the course “could be more of a pathway to employment. If the course could be sort of slightly geared toward path to employment in this industry, then it might help a little bit more. It could be more of a pathway to employment. As in this is what you’re going to need to get jobs in the industry. This is what it’s going to entail, it’s going to have 11 hour days.” This echoes the above concerns about spending too much time in the classroom versus receiving practical training. Another individual highlighted how some very simple tasks were not taught in the classroom but that they weren’t learned in the field either because they were taken for granted. They stated that once they were in the field they:
“didn’t want to ask how to blow [leaves], because they said it was easy and it looked easy to pull a plug, but there’s more to it than that. There’s an organization in which you’re going to put those leaves in order to gather them all together, and I wasn’t too sure in my head how to do that, and I didn’t want to go there and waste my time for them to get hasty with me because I’m not doing it right. So that was my barrier right there. So if they had some hands-on in here showing how to use it, and even some films, some videos that, you know, like if you have a massive amount of, you know, leaves, how you would get them to go [together].”

Instructors also echoed the students’ desires for more hands on training, one instructor said that “some of the students said, like, they wanted more practical stuff, that it would be better.” Another comment from the instructors was that hands on practice would allow for better training on how to work in a team, arguing that “it can bring people along in terms of effective communication and teamwork and patience, you know, and I think a lot of that doesn’t have to be, you know, directly taught a lot of that.” One instructor then stated that in one particular field practice “they’re doing experiential learning. He’s treating people with respect. He’s getting people to work in teams. You know, he’s good at, like, utilizing people that have good skills or good leadership to take the lead and things like that, you know, so that’s that was a really effective way of doing it rather than doing them, you know in class about soft skills as well. So I mean the practical component is really important.” In this case the instructor argues that in the field the learners would be able to learn about the practicalities of landscape and horticulture and how to do the various tasks and learn the skills that the job entails, but they also highlight how many of the soft skills needed to work in this industry need to be learned in the field too.

Additional instructor comments included the need to fine tune the program in terms of what the experiential learning should be as part of a course like this. They argued that the course is trying to accomplish too many things in teaching some people literacy and basic skills where most individuals do not need this training and so the overlap might be an issue. They stated that since the program is primarily geared to get people jobs and train them specifically for the field, then the focus needs to be fine-tuned.

**Lack of Diversity in Employment**

A number of learners expressed frustration in the fact that their placements lacked diversity in terms of preparing them with enough varied experience to go and work in landscape and horticulture, stating that: “if they had mixed it up, if you had the opportunity to touch on each experience to say, well, this is where I fit [it would have been more effective]. But you only had the experience for one thing.” This was further amplified by some learners feeling like they had obtained enough knowledge in a short time in one position that they would have benefitted from working with different people in different places. They argued that a rotation between positions might have been better so they could learn more about the field, because it was “pretty much the exact same thing every day from like 7:00 to 5:00 every day, right, constantly. And it’s like, I get the point now.”

More learners echoed this concern about repetition and a lack of full awareness about the industry because the placements were so narrow in their focus that they would learn about one area in depth but then get no practical experiences in all the other areas. Some stated that “if you didn’t like the placement you’d have to
stick it out,” and they would have preferred variation not only to see what they liked but “that would be to the advantage and the school’s advantage or the course’s advantage, you know, to have that ability to give the person that chance to change, to sort of get the job that they want.” Yet more learners spoke to how this could be improved for the course in the future, making the suggestion for more options and offering flexibility for learners in their placements where all individuals would be offered the option for multiple placements during that portion of the course. Some individuals who really enjoyed their placements however, might also be allowed stay in the one position to get a better sense of it as a permanent job of career.

Labour and Pay Rate Concerns

There was a lot of concern by individuals in the course about the rate of pay being commensurate with what is expected of them in a role that requires intense, physical labour for the most part. This issue around the rate of pay as it relates to the intensity of the physical labour required was further compounded by concerns about the seasonal nature of work in the landscape and horticulture industry. One learner stated that “I did not know at the time though, it was six days a week, you know, I didn’t think it makes sense. Because it’s seasonal and it’s only so many months so you have to make up for the other month. I know it’s a very small amount of time. It’s kind of insane, you’re running from place to place and you have a certain amount of time to get a big amount of work but then at some point in time you’re gonna burn out.”

Hard physical labour was also linked to possible health and safety issues for prospective employees, where learners stated that the industry can only expect to fill their need for labourers if they better meet the needs of employees. “The labour demand, like the days seem to be like a surprise to people,” one individual stated, “if they want us out there and if they want women out there, then they’re going to have to have certain facilities for women, you know, and they need to have pay us money, you know, because we’re gonna burn out, accidents are going to happen.” As with this learner, the question of gender and certain accessibility related questions come to the fore in thinking about an expanding work force in this area. Another learner stated that “many accidents [happen], and this and that and the other now if you’re pushing people things will happen. If you give them the time to do it and you are paying them more then things will happen, better things will happen.”

One individual brings rate of pay and labour safety together in the following quotation: “You know, these guys need to get paid a lot of money because they do a lot of work. I would do it for two days a week. Because at least I would put some money into my insurance in case anything happened to me, you know, but um, and I would not sit down so that I wouldn’t cause injury to myself. But I wouldn’t do it for a week. They don’t have a lot of part-time positions for landscaping.” Here, the feasibility of long-term, sustained work in the industry is at question due to the labour being intense and physically demanding. More so, this individual argues that part-time work in this area is most feasible for physical reasons, but that part-time jobs were presented as being difficult to find so this acts as a barrier to possible labourers.

An instructor further highlighted the issues expressed by students about the labour demands and rate of pay, stating: “I think someone realized the demands and decided I’m not gonna do that for that pay. Yeah, you know, which is fair enough.”
Relevant Skills

A number of learners felt that the course was not necessary for an entry-level, labourer job in horticulture and landscaping, with one person stated: “My understanding is purpose of this course is to train laborers to go into the landscaping industry, which is desperate for employees at this point in time. There is no training that we got in this course that is required to get a job at any of these employers. They’re looking for strong individuals who can lift heavy stuff and work 11 hours a day. I think two guys got jobs just by talking to the employers that came here.” This sentiment echoes some of the sentiments expressed under the earlier theme about the need for more experiential, hands-on learning because at the entry level all the employers are looking for is physical capabilities but with the right hands-on learning and skill building, individuals could present themselves as more experienced and knowledgeable in the industry.

In the instructor interviews there was a big question about whether the course really highlighted the right skills or relevant skills specifically for landscaping and horticulture. More so, they questioned whether the relevant skills in the course were need for entry level landscaping jobs at all. One instructor stated that “for future programs, I think that something to be considered is that for entry level landscaping jobs we need to see people interested in the field. Because I think doing both [generating interest and building essential skills] in the same program is doable, but it kind of changes content and the focus, look of the program.” This quotation highlights the concern about skills training and whether there is sufficient focus in the course because the course acted as an interest generator for gaining possible employees for industry and then training these same individuals for a role in the industry.

Other quotations highlight the difficulty in trying to teach essential skills, such as “like literacy and numeracy,” because “there’s not a lot of time to do anything in eight weeks when [it’s jam-packed full of really good stuff, like all the certificates and the trips and the speakers and the outdoor stuff. So there’s not, you know…it’s too short to actually improve those skills.” Other concerns expressed by instructors about the relevance of the course content are around the fact that students liked the structure more than the job or industry specifically, and yet other learners wanted to attend the course because they felt helped and valued but not because they were learning skills for a specific industry. The general benefits of a course dedicated to job-specific knowledge and skills training was not underestimated however, because “these types of programs can more on an individual level kind of connect somebody to the workplace who might not have connected otherwise, who’s been out of work for a long time, especially so I do think it has value in that sense.”

The future offering of the Ready, Set, Grow course, however, was questioned because a course is not really needed to have, obtain, or possess the relevant skills for a job in landscaping. One instructor states their concerns about choosing to run programs when funding is limited:

“If we can only run, you know, one program because of funding, I don’t think this will be the best one to run. I think there’s other ones that will be better, you know, because I think the problem is if somebody’s really keen on working in landscaping, they don’t need to be in the program to do it. They could just go get hired. […] All they need to do is go to an employment center and they could connect them. You know, I mean employers told me that you know, like they’ll hire, that they’re willing to give anyone a job, you know.”
Program Difficulties

Instructors had concerns and difficulties with the administration of the program being both too much and ineffective, and expressed concerns with the lack of support that they received in their teaching roles. One sentiment that was frequently expressed was that the number of people involved in running the program made it too complicated to actually carry things out and make things happen. This was amplified by a frustration about lack of clarity being passed down from the administration to the instructors: "Ideally decide that on the goal and then set proper targets."

Questions about support for instructors were raised because there were not sufficient instructor hours to develop and set up the program. This was amplified by a lack of support for the learners in setting up their job placements where the instructor ended up working in an employment services role to help establish partnerships with employers in order to ensure students had a placement. More so, the relevance of the job placements in relation to the rest of the course content was questioned as instructors were not given sufficient time to build on the placements before bringing students back into the classroom. They stated that when "they come back and then we might we modify...we could use the feedback from employers and the students to kind of determine the curriculum for the last couple of weeks."

Strengths and Limitations

The 8 participants in this program represented a relatively heterogeneous group in that they were almost evenly split across genders, with most learners being over 50 years of age and with an equal number of newcomers to Canada and Canadians, and they all lived in the same area (Ottawa). Our findings could have been reinforced by having a larger sample size and increasing the types of data collection used, but due to the small nature of the group, the focus group setting worked best to really draw out the in depth experiences and feedback of the learners. Likewise, the semi-structured interviews were ideal for engaging with the instructors. These methods allowed us to gain a comprehensive perspective on the opinions and experiences of both learners and instructors in terms of assessing the program.

Participants in the study seemed very comfortable about both the positive aspects and the negative aspects of their engagement in the course and their general assessments of the program. Further follow up with participants would be useful in assessing whether or not the course helped them gain meaningful, permanent employment based on their participation in the Ready, Set, Grow course. However, based on the thematic analysis, it seems that the program in that format was more negative than positive for the learners and the instructors in terms of meeting the goals that it set out to accomplish. Holmes and Hjartarson (2014) suggest that implementing flexibility in how training is offered is crucial. For them, this means helping finance and support in-house (employer-led) training where third-party resources and expertise simply do not exist. While these items were addressed in the program and appreciated by the learners, a number of gaps existed in what the program claimed to do, and how and what it actually did for the learners. There needed to be more variation in terms of the learner job placements but this work was too laborious for the instructors to
take on. As such, the heavy administrative load taken on by the instructors should have been carried out by the inflated administration. This echoes earlier research for this project that makes the case for positioning professional associations as both *intermediaries* between employers and third party trainers as well as *advocates* for prospects and novices is one worth exploring further. However, in the case of this program, it seems the administration was more cumbersome than helpful in facilitating placements and training as well as lacking in providing support for the instructors.

**Discussion**

The findings in this study provide some important insights about how to craft and carrying out a hybrid training program, with the primary finding indicating a greater need for synchronization between the training and the specific type of employment. The findings are especially important given the need for workers in the horticulture and landscaping industry as they highlight gaps in interest, training, and standards of employment expected by labourers and employers, respectively. A primary detractor for this course directly contracted one of the research questions in that participant interest was actually weakened following their job placements because it was at this point that they saw a gap between their training and what was actually required of them in an entry-level position in landscaping and horticulture. So in this sense, the program curriculum and goals need to be placed in line with each other.

According to provincial labour market data (Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development [MAESD], 2017), jobs and careers in the horticulture and landscaping sector have had an “above average” outlook over the past five years, and will continue to be “above average” compared with other jobs through at least 2021. The data does not delve into specifics for the skilled trades of Arborist, Horticultural Technician, or Utility Arborist, all of which are classified as “voluntary trades” under the Ontario College of Trades Apprenticeship Act. Although presumably there are advantages to acquiring and maintaining Journeypersons status or Red Seal endorsement in these particular trades versus gaining employment in related technical occupations in the sector, the data develops no clear picture of what such advantages might be, or the extent to which such advantages (such as labour mobility with interprovincial harmonization strategies) might be. However, based on the experiences of the learners in this course there is a misconception about the skills needed for the jobs being offered, and this is negatively amplified by what many learners perceived to be a low rate of pay for physically demanding work. As such, the findings of this project might feed back into best practices for industry as they attempt to address their labour shortage.

The notion of “opportunity structures” (Lehmann, Taylor, & Hamm, 2015) has implications for this project in terms of strategic decisions for demand-led employment strategies. Lehmann, Taylor, and Hamm discuss the findings of a survey of former high school apprentices in both Ontario and Alberta, claiming that the apprenticeship experiences were a more or less significant component of the opportunity structures available to these youth. Opportunity structures refer, in part, to the agglomeration of postsecondary education (PSE) and employment experiences available to any individual. However, they also imply the material resources and limitations that individuals face in and across other dimensions of life experience. In the study, for
example, the authors made clear that factors like geography (taken as distance or proximity), income, and the strength and presence of apprenticeship support structures (such as mentorship or counselling) significantly impacted the choices youth felt that they could make. These findings seemed to be echoed in this project, where equipment provision, and transportation funding proved incredibly incentivizing and useful for the learners. However, these supports seem less important overall than the curriculum and training itself.

Therefore, there needs to be much revision of the administration, curriculum goals and delivery, and the overall focus and funding allocation for this program before it is implemented in more than a trial capacity. However, the findings do provide helpful insights and feedback for industry and the curriculum committee for future endeavours.

**Conclusion**

The findings confirm that while the Ready, Set, Grow program was a meaningful and helpful course for job seekers, more work is necessary to help and improve employee recruitment for the Landscape and Horticulture industry. Client preparedness for work based on this training program does not seem to align with the entry-level jobs that the industry is looking to fill and so this was a point of upset for a number of learners in the program and might actively dissuade them from pursuing work in the horticulture and landscape industry. On this point, the job tasting experiences seemed generally to be dissatisfactory for a number of the clients and so the question must be asked about how well these placements were aligned with the goals of the training program. The instructors had to take on much of the role of helping clients secure placements rather than the administration or industry representative taking on this role which might be a duty better suited to those groups. This was further an issue for instructors as they were already overstretched and lacking support in their jobs. Overall, this project has shown some promise in the idea of hybridized learning but there needs to be a lot of fine tuning in this program specifically before it can move ahead in other iterations. Due to the challenges being faced in the landscape horticulture industry around lack of labour, rapid growth, and lack of awareness about this industry this program should have been able to go a long way in filling the gap. However, changes are needed for such a program to provide a valuable entry point for job-seeking individuals who want employment in this industry.
The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada or the Government of Ontario.