



IMMIGRANT RESEARCHERS SUPPORT NETWORK

PROGRAM EVALUATION REPORT

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Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services
Toronto, Canada
September 2025

This project was led by Courtney Kupka (Research and Evaluation Coordinator). Nickolas Goenadi (MPH Placement Student) & Hannah Arnaldo (MPH Placement Student) prepared this report, supervised by the Research and Evaluation Coordinator, in partial fulfillment of their MPH Practicum Placement Learning Plan at Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services (Access Alliance). The project was overseen by Dr. AKM Alamgir, Director, Organizational Knowledge and Learning.

Propriety Statement

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Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services
340 College Street, Suite 500
Toronto, ON M5T3A9
research@accessalliance.ca
www.accessalliance.ca

Recommended citation: Access Alliance. (2025). Immigrant Researchers Support Network (IRSN): Program Evaluation Report. Access Alliance. Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services. Toronto (Canada).



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background and Objectives

The Immigrant Researchers Support Network (IRSN) was established as a networking and professional development platform to help Internationally Educated Researchers build successful research careers in Canada. The program aims to understand the settlement needs of newcomer researchers and support their professional success through meaningful integration into the labour market. The purpose of this evaluation is to provide an evidence-based assessment of the reach, accessibility, effectiveness, client satisfaction, and impact of the IRSN program. This evaluation aims to better understand the aspects of the IRSN program that have been successful and identify opportunities for improvement.

Methodology

This evaluation used a mixed-methods approach to reflect current best practices in IRSN services and to answer questions about the program's reach, access/engagement, effectiveness, satisfaction, and impact. The evaluation focused on the activities that have happened between the fiscal years 2021-2022 and 2024-2025 to capture the program's performance since the previous evaluation through various sources of data, such as program documents, Electronic Medical Records (for client demographics and program outputs), client surveys, focus groups, and key informant interviews.



Key Findings

- The IRSN program is helpful (87%), and 93% would recommend it to others.
- Those who accessed 1-to-1 appointments, Coffee Chats, email services, and the IRSN portal report high satisfaction with these services.
- Service gap: However, client feedback indicated that not all clients are aware of the various services the IRSN program provides, particularly one-on-one appointments.
- Key facilitators to access include virtual formats, engaging content, and proactive staff.
- Barriers include the frequency of gathering client input on programming, inflexible event scheduling, and insufficient outreach to potential clients.
- Clients report meaningful career benefits, such as improved resumes, expanded networks, and a better understanding of the Canadian workforce. However, gaps remain in addressing professional and settlement needs, with approximately 60% of clients reporting that their needs are met.
- Clients call for more individualized support, clearer job pathways, and increased mentorship and training opportunities.
- Staff and advisors highlight the need for sustainable funding, strengthened partnerships, and enhanced outreach (e.g., social media) to scale impact and improve integration.

Compared to the previous report, which was a small-scale evaluation, the core components of the service have remained the same. These include: 1-to-1 services, coffee chat sessions, a portal, an annual networking session, and email services. To date, the program has both served and engaged more clients. In particular, the average number of Coffee Chat sessions has increased from 16 to 30. However, engagement on the IRSN portal is lower than in the previous report. This is understandable, as client feedback in this report indicates a preference for email communication, and the program staff has adapted to the increase in email use. Based on the previous report's recommendations, the program has implemented regular client feedback mechanisms to tailor improvements within the organizational evaluation framework.





While the previous evaluation objectives were different from the current ones, both highlight the fundamental aspects that support clients. These include building professional networks and directly connecting members to skill-building and employment opportunities. It is not unexpected that the key elements that most support clients have not changed, as these are typical of employment searches and of individuals establishing themselves in a new geographical labour market. However, calls for scaling the program support through sustainable funding, a full-time staff, increased partnerships and more individualized support remain. Additionally, the call to scale program resources reflects the continued need and the unique gap it fills for Internationally Educated Researchers. An area where the program can improve is meeting the client's individual needs, as indicated by a renewed call for evaluation.

Conclusion

Despite areas for improvement, the program is effective and influential in driving system change. This evaluation has identified areas for improvement to more effectively address client needs, increase engagement, and better accommodate clients. Notable challenges of the program include clients' conflicting schedules/priorities/fields of interest; the relevance of program activities to clients; awareness of available resources; and accommodating individual client needs. Overall, the IRSN program should continue to provide practical advice and opportunities within its means to support its clients' settlement and integration needs. While clients are generally satisfied, increased funding for resources and more frequent client consultations can better support their needs and help them achieve their intended career goals.



BACKGROUND

Purpose

This evaluation provides an evidence-based assessment of the reach, accessibility, effectiveness, client satisfaction, and impact of the Immigrant Researchers Support Network (IRSN) program. It will help us better understand the aspects of the IRSN program that have been successful and the opportunities for improvement. As such, the evaluation will identify and explore the IRSN program's (1) effectiveness, (2) strengths, (3) areas of improvement, and (4) trajectory.

Program Description

In 2017, Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services (Access Alliance) launched the Immigrant Insight Scholars Initiative (IISI). This initiative aims to provide paid mentored fellowships for Internationally Educated Researchers (IERs), who may be epidemiologists, statisticians, or clinician-scientists. These individuals may be underemployed or in precarious employment after immigrating to Canada. Access Alliance created this program with the primary objective of the IISI: enabling IERs to gain local experience and establish the professional networks necessary for a successful research career in Canada. Based on research findings from internationally trained professionals in Canada (Alamgir et al., 2020), the program was restructured with redefined objectives and need-assessed goals.



To help the IISI support and enable IERs, the IRSN was developed as a networking and professional development platform for (1) IERs who are newcomers to Canada and (2) internationally trained professionals who want to pursue research as a career in Canada. The services offered by the IRSN program include:

1 1-TO-1 APPOINTMENTS:

This service addresses the needs of IERs (settlement, professional, educational) to identify challenges and provide solutions.



2 COFFEE CHATS

This program provides IERs with an opportunity for networking and professional development by hosting bi-weekly discussions and presentations on various topics by guest speakers.



3 IRSN PORTAL

This is used for posting forums, discussion posts, and job/development postings, providing opportunities to share experiences and access resources.



4 IRSN IN-PERSON ANNUAL EVENT

This event facilitates the development of professional skills and networking through workshops and/or research presentations with guest speakers.



The program's overall goal is to understand the settlement needs of newcomer researchers and support their professional success through meaningful integration into the labour market.

This is achieved by utilizing available community resources and services for career networking and professional development. The program identifies the following outcomes for its activities:

- Increase awareness of available employment and research capacity-building opportunities and resources.
- Increase awareness of alternative career paths available for IERs.
- Increase awareness of the Canadian labour market and processes.
- Support IERs in developing career objectives and goals.
- Build IRSN members' capacity to conduct research in Canada through internal (Access Alliance-provided) or external training opportunities.
- Increase sense of belonging through networking and exchanging ideas between IERs.
- Increase networking opportunities with potential employers and established researchers in the Canadian labour market.



KEY FINDINGS OF THE PREVIOUS REPORT

FY 2019-2020

In collaboration with community stakeholders, services were strategically developed to mitigate systemic barriers hindering meaningful integration into the Canadian labour market. Findings from the 2020 Evaluation Report, which assessed programmatic efficacy and service relevance, indicate that the IRSN framework successfully addressed the specific requirements of its clientele.

Correlated with a longitudinal increase in participant engagement, members reported expanded psychosocial support networks and enhanced professional trajectories, frequently securing employment commensurate with their prior expertise. While the pilot phase yielded positive outcomes, it also revealed critical implementation gaps. Specifically, the evaluation identified a need for moderated digital forums, specialized thematic discussions tailored to member expertise, and expanded vocational upskilling initiatives.

Despite the exogenous pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic, fiscal constraints, and a reliance on intermittent staffing, the sustained escalation in service demand underscores the necessity and resilience of the IRSN model during global crises. To ensure future scalability and institutional stability, the 2020 report advocates transitioning to multi-year funding cycles, recruiting permanent personnel, and formalizing inter-organizational partnerships within the settlement sector.

METHODOLOGY

This mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 2014) (quantitative and qualitative) included a robust evaluation plan that reflected the current best practices of IRSN services (see Appendix B, Evaluation Framework). The evaluation was designed to answer the following questions in Table 1 about the program’s reach, access/engagement, effectiveness, satisfaction, and impact on IERs.

Table 1
Evaluation Questions

Domain	Question
Reach	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the size of the population in the program? 2. What are the characteristics/demographics of members?
Access / Engagement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. How user-friendly is the registration process? 4. What are the facilitators and barriers to accessing the program? 5. What is the meaning of integration to the members?
Effectiveness	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Is the program being implemented as intended/achieving its outputs as intended? If any changes are required, to what extent are they required? 7. To what extent did the program build the capacity of the members, and in which areas? To what extent have members developed and applied professional skills and established network connections to facilitate successful integration into the labour market? 8. How many of the active participants got a desired job? How many active participants were admitted into further education/school programs/certification?
Satisfaction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. In what ways does the program meet the needs of members? To what extent was the program responsive to the members’ needs? 10. What are the experiences of members of the program? (Satisfaction, loyalty, engagement, etc.)
Impact	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. What are the real / perceived impacts on a member’s capacity for professional development over time?. 12. What are the real / perceived impacts on a member’s capacity for career networking over time? 13. How do the members plan to utilize the IRSN platform to integrate into the mainstream labour market?

METHODOLOGY

The evaluation focused on the fiscal years (FY) between 2021-2022 and 2024-2025 to capture the program's performance since the previous evaluation (Access Alliance, 2021). Sequential methods (chronological and typological) were implemented to incorporate multiple stakeholders' perspectives using various data sources. The chronological method involved reviewing retrospective data from program documents and Electronic Medical Records (EMR) for client demographics and program outputs, as well as prospective data collected through client surveys, focus groups, and key informant interviews. However, due to consistency with data inputs in the EMR, only client demographic data from April 2023 onward is used. Additionally, the client survey was sent to all available clients of the IRSN program components, including those registered in the EMR and portal, as well as attendees of the Coffee Chat. The client survey response rate was 41 of 432 (9.5%). For a detailed outline of the methodology (Appendix C: Methodology).

The reported number of clients for different program components varies, as not all components require clients to register. The program is represented as fully as possible, given the available data.



CLIENT PROFILE – DEMOGRAPHICS

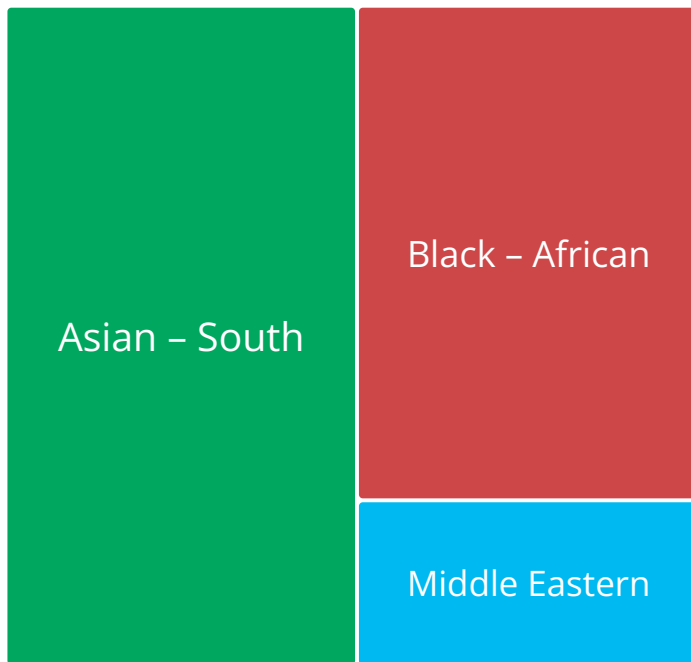
Table 2
Demographic Characteristics of 1-to-1 and Group Clients

Demographic Indicator	Category	1-to-1		Group	
		%	n-Value	%	n-Value
Gender	Female	70.3	128	79.2	95
	Male	29.7	50	20.8	23
Age	15-24	0.6	2	0.5	1
	24-44	75.2	145	68.2	89
	45-64	24.2	31	31.3	28
Racial/Ethnic Group	Asian – South	40.5	45	42.9	36
	Black – African	29.7	33	21.4	18
	Middle Eastern	9.9	11	16.7	14
Length of Stay in Canada	Less than 1 Year	10.5	11	8.0	6
	1 – 3 Years	68.6	72	61.3	46
	4 – 10 Years	19.0	20	25.3	19
	More than 10 Years	1.9	2	5.3	4
Immigration Status	Permanent Resident	48.0	47	54.6	35
	Refugee Claimant	11.2	11	9.1	6
	Visit/Student Visa/Live-in Caregiver	19.4	19	16.7	11
Level of Income	Less than 30K	28.9	33	33.7	29
	Between 30-60K	6.1	7	7.0	6
	More than 60K	14	16	12.8	11
Number of Dependents	1	23.1	25	16.3	13
	2-4	63.0	68	66.3	53
	5-20	4.6	5	7.5	6
Disability	Chronic, physical, sensory	6.0	7	2.2	2
	None	93.9	108	96.6	86

Note: The complete demographic profile for clients accessing IRSN services (1-to-1 and group services) is in Appendix D: IRSN Demographics.

CLIENT PROFILE – DEMOGRAPHICS

Table 2, on the previous page, provides an overview of the attributes of both 1-to-1 and group clients, with the demographic indicators of racial/ethnic group, countries of origin, and immigration status displaying the top 3 categories with the highest proportion of clients.



According to the data, the majority of clients fall within the 25 -44 age range, with most identifying as female and heterosexual. South Asian, Black African, and Middle Eastern individuals make up the top three racial/ethnic groups, and most clients (48% of one-to-one clients and 54.6% of group clients) hold a permanent resident immigration status. The clients' immigration status aligns primarily with the agency's focus on recent newcomer populations, with clients reporting a length of stay in Canada of 1-3 years.

Approximately 30% of clients are below the Low-Income Cut-Off in Toronto, which is \$36,898 for a household of 3 dependents (Statistics Canada, 2025). The highest proportion of respondents reported an annual household income of less than \$30,000, and over 60% of clients reported supporting 2-4 dependents. Finally, the majority of clients did not self-identify a disability (over 93%).



30% ARE BELOW THE LOW
INCOME CUT-OFF

FINDINGS

Access and Engagement

Overall, clients in the IRSN program have typically learned about the program through word of mouth from family/friends (43.9%) or staff members (19.5%), as indicated in the client survey (n = 41). Additionally, 9.8% of respondents were aware of the program through the IRSN website. In contrast, only 2.4% of clients have heard of the program through social media. Most survey respondents (75.6%, n = 41) reported actively engaging with the program over the past year. Respondents who haven't been actively involved with the program in the past year cited repetitive program activities, ineffective or not seen as relevant program activities, insufficient networking, conflicting schedules, or being a new member. Of participating survey respondents, 65.9% (n = 41) joined the IRSN 1 to 3 years ago, compared to the majority of registered IRSN portal members who have been members for more than 3 years (54.5%, n = 424).

From the client survey:

- 85.4% (n = 41) of respondents found the registration process for the program easy
- 100% (n = 30) of respondents felt comfortable and welcome in the program.
- 85.2% (n = 27) of respondents found it easy to schedule a 1-to-1 appointment.
- 66.6% (n = 27) of respondents were satisfied with the frequency of 1-to-1 appointments.
- 85.2% (n = 27) of respondents were satisfied with the duration of 1-to-1 appointments.
- 77.4% (n = 31) of respondents were satisfied with the frequency of Coffee Chats.
- 67.8% (n = 31) of respondents found the Coffee Chat hours suitable.
- 69.7% (n = 33) of respondents found the IRSN portal easy to use.
- 80.0% (n = 5) of respondents were satisfied with the duration of the annual IRSN event.
- 80.0% (n = 5) of respondents were satisfied with the timing of the annual IRSN event.
- 81.9% (n = 33) of respondents were satisfied with the frequency of email services.



Access and Engagement

Based on the client focus group discussions and survey:

FACILITATORS TO ACCESS

- Format of services (virtual);
- Timing of events;
- Regular communication/access to information (emails, website);
- Having interesting/relevant/unique topics/activities; and
- Proactiveness and approachability of the program lead.

BARRIERS TO ACCESS

- Frequency of opportunities for clients to make suggestions for the topics/activities to ensure relevance and interest;
- Inflexible scheduling of IRSN events to work around conflicting priorities; and
- Awareness of available services.

We also asked clients in the focus group discussions and survey to define what successful integration means to them. Responses focused on securing a job in their desired field in Canada, workplace inclusion, expanding Canadian experiences, professional networking, and mentorship. For clients, successful integration means acquiring the necessary skills and experience (Canadian/local/cultural) and understanding the Canadian labour market, enabling them to integrate into the workforce quickly and successfully. This includes establishing meaningful connections, reinforcing one's expertise (knowledge, skills, and self-confidence), gaining a better understanding of opportunities, and obtaining the chance to demonstrate skills and expertise.

From the clients' perspective, they expect the IRSN to support them in navigating systemic barriers, identifying relevant employment opportunities, and facilitating connections with employment organizations. These supports are perceived as pivotal markers of successful integration, as they create space to enhance professional capacity and deepen understanding of Canadian workplace culture, both of which are key determinants of job readiness and retention.



Program Outputs and Effectiveness

1-to-1 Appointments

Table 3 provides an overview of the total number of 1-to-1 appointments per month. In May 2021, a new IRSN program lead started, but did not see their first 1-to-1 client until July 2021. There was another staffing transition in December 2023, during which the role had no program lead until April 2024. There has been mixed achievement of 1-to-1 encounter targets, and in 2023-2024, the target was reassessed to account for the part-time nature of the program lead. Please see Appendix E. Program Outputs provide more detailed information and visualization regarding the achievements of 1-to-1 appointments.

Table 3
Number of 1-to-1 Appointments per Month

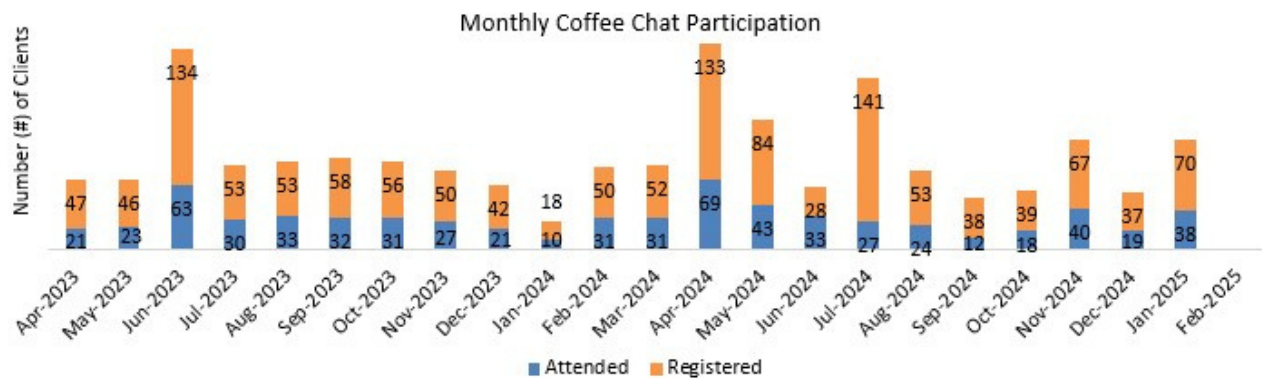
Year	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Monthly Target
2021-2022 FY	0	0	0	1	58	50	41	40	31	38	23	0	44
2022-2023 FY	20	29	14	15	26	29	27	24	32	0	0	0	44
2023-2024 FY	36	40	34	59	34	32	42	31	21	7	7	29	40
2024-2025 FY	26	25	19	11	18	8	31	27	6	21	--	--	40

According to the survey, 27 respondents have attended at least one 1-to-1 appointment. Of those, 77.8% (n = 21) of respondents agree or strongly agree that the 1-to-1 appointments are adequate in addressing their settlement needs. Overall, 81.5% (n = 22) of clients who have attended 1-to-1 appointments find it useful for their needs. Clients report this service as beneficial and essential for supporting their integration into the Canadian workforce. Client feedback indicates a need to ensure the staff are accessible and support the individual needs of clients in these sessions.

Program Outputs and Effectiveness

Coffee Chats

Figure 1
Monthly Coffee Chat Attendance vs. Registration



Coffee Chat attendance has been steadily rising since 2021, growing from 99 in the 2021-2022 FY to approximately 350 in the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 FYs. On average, there are two coffee chat sessions per month. In the last three fiscal years, the program has maintained above 21 sessions annually. However, while attendance has been growing, approximately 50% of IRSN members who register for Coffee Chats do not attend. Over the last two years, the average number of attendees per month has been 31, with 61 registrations, as depicted in Figure 1. From the survey, 75.6% (n = 31) of respondents have attended at least one Coffee Chat, with 93.4% (n = 31) of respondents finding the presenter(s) knowledgeable about the topics discussed and 70.0% (n = 31) of respondents finding the Coffee Chats useful for their needs.

Email Services

According to the survey, 91.7% (n = 36) of respondents received emails from the IRSN program lead. Of those who received emails, 84.9% reported satisfaction with the amount of information received via email services, and 79.8% found the email services helpful for their needs. Clients have also identified emails as their preferred method of engagement, with the IRSN program lead sending about 3-4 emails each week since the FY2023-2024.

Program Outputs and Effectiveness

IRSN Portal

Typically, new IRSN members register on the portal and are then followed up by program staff to provide a 1-to-1 orientation session. However, not all IRSN clients are registered on the portal, and some attend coffee chat sessions occasionally. Since 2021, the number of new members registering on the IRSN portal has steadily increased, averaging 5.5 per month and 65.5 per year. This is reflected in the distribution of membership lengths shown in Table 4, as 18.2% (N = 424) of registered IRSN members have joined within the last year. According to the survey, 92.3% (n = 41) of respondents are registered in the IRSN portal. Notably, 63.6% of respondents expressed satisfaction with the services available on the IRSN portal, and 60.6% (n = 33) found the valuable portal for their needs. Since the 2023-2024 FY, the IRSN program leads have made 393 posts on the IRSN portal, while IRSN members have made fewer than 5.

Annual IRSN Event

Since 2021, the IRSN has hosted three annual events: the Symposium on March 24, 2022, the Empowering Minds on March 18, 2023, and the Bridging Borders, Connecting Talents on April 24, 2024. Attendees for each event are as follows: Symposium – not recorded (virtual event), Empowering Minds - 14, and Bridging Borders, Connecting Talents - 38.

From the survey, 15% (N = 40) of respondents have attended at least one annual IRSN event. Of those who responded (n=5), 100% found the presenter(s) knowledgeable about the topics discussed and reported satisfaction with the amount of peer networking. Moreover, 80.0% (n = 4) of respondents reported satisfaction with the amount of professional networking and found the annual IRSN event to be useful for their needs.

Table 4

IRSN Portal Members' Length of Membership (N=424)

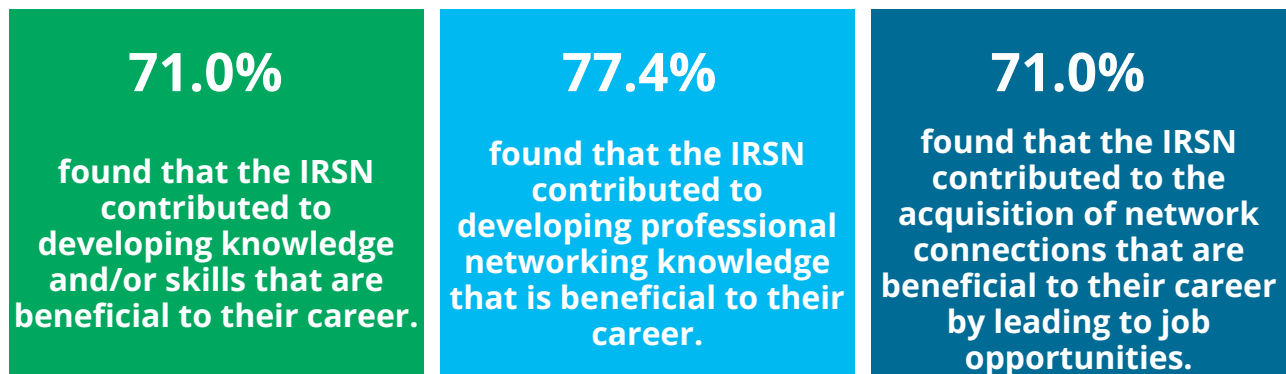
Length of Membership	Percentage of Clients (%)	n-Value
<1 Year	18.2%	77
1-3 Years	27.4%	116
>3 Years	54.5%	231

Note: This represents all registered portal members who are not active



Perceived Impacts

Overall, clients reported positive impacts from joining the IRSN program. According to the client survey, respondents felt that being part of the IRSN had improved their resume writing, provided courses/training that led to opportunities in new roles, increased their awareness of the Canadian workforce, and enhanced their industry-specific knowledge. Respondents also felt that being part of the IRSN created network connections that have led to knowledge development, facilitated positive discussions with potential employers, provided a clear understanding of licensing pathways, and increased their awareness of potential employer organizations. As a whole (N= 31):



Clients also reported that the IRSN had adequately addressed their needs through networking with peers and professionals, providing various program/event resources, acquiring skills/certifications, offering mentorship opportunities, gaining Canadian experience, and securing relevant opportunities (jobs, research, and student placements). Moreover, 63.3% (n = 30) of respondents found that the IRSN has helped improve their feelings of inclusion in the community, with 73.3% (n = 30) of respondents having formed at least one new positive relationship through participating in program activities.



Perceived Impacts

From the client focus group discussions, clients found IRSN activities interesting and suitable for integrating into the workforce overall; however, activities/events that were more relevant to their needs were better received. Clients have reported that IRSN activities, such as group sessions and training (workshops), have been beneficial for establishing connections (peer and professional) while also developing a sense of belonging and community. Specifically, clients found developing and demonstrating their skills and expertise more helpful in supporting their integration into the Canadian workforce. Workshops and training served as a valuable reminder of clients' foundational knowledge in relevant fields, while also providing updates on the latest developments in the field. Through these workshops/events, clients can acquire skills and certificates that provide the tools and confidence needed to take meaningful employment steps, while also fostering team building and peer connections that motivate team members. Clients have reported that being part of a supportive professional network and attending various informative workshops has helped broaden their knowledge, expand connections, and better equip them to navigate employment and settlement in Canada.

Clients also found the 1-on-1 appointments with the program lead to be particularly helpful and impactful. These appointments provided clients with relevant feedback on experience, skills, and the current state of research and the workforce in Canada. Some members also find that more could be done during 1-on-1 appointments to point members towards more relevant aspects of the program and resources that could address their individual needs. It must be noted that some members have never had a 1-on-1 appointment to discuss their individual needs (needs assessment) due to a lack of awareness of this service



Client Satisfaction & Addressing Client Needs

Overall, clients have found the IRSN program satisfactory, with 86.7% (N = 30) of respondents rating the program as good, very good, or excellent, and 93.3% of respondents reporting that they would recommend the IRSN to a family member or friend. However, the client survey indicates that more can be done to address client needs:

- 61.3% (n = 31) of respondents found that the IRSN has improved its overall capacity to transition to the Canadian labour market.
- 66.7% (n = 30) of respondents found that the events, services, and information provided by the IRSN had adequately addressed their professional needs.
- 60.0% (n = 30) of respondents found that the events, services, and information provided by the IRSN had addressed their settlement needs.
- 60.0% (n = 30) of respondents are satisfied with the frequency with which their needs were assessed for professional development.

Based on the client focus group discussions, the IRSN can better support clients through more in-person events, posting recordings of events, providing more information and knowledge sharing, offering more relevant topics and trainings/workshops, and offering mental health support. Moreover, to better address client needs and raise engagement, participants of the focus group discussion suggested the following:

- More individualized assessments to support and address individual needs.
- Transparent information/feedback on potential opportunities to clarify areas of improvement, support individual development, and make future opportunities more accessible.
- Continue and build more bridging programs/opportunities to help integrate members into their field of interest and help establish clear pathways for careers.
- Reassurance that efforts will be beneficial and lead to successful integration.
- Offering more targeted job or mentorship opportunities in relevant fields to demonstrate skills/expertise and build industry-specific connections.
- Attract newcomers before they make early career decisions that lead them to be stuck in survival jobs (awareness of resources and services).
- Tailoring program activities based on needs assessments to address key areas or needs that are relevant to the majority of IRSN members.
- Outreach in different areas, organizations, and places where newcomers gather to attract members outside of mutual connections/recommendations.



Program Planning & Management

Interview with the IRSN Manager

Based on the in-depth interview with the IRSN manager, the IRSN program appears to be a successful initiative, implemented as intended and achieving its desired outcomes, with clients consistently rating the services highly. However, the program's main challenge is finding more opportunities for fellowships, education, and research to bridge clients' skill gaps and provide relevant experience. In addition, funding and support for the program have decreased over the years, leaving few resources to build on the current program. To overcome these constraints, the program manager recommended forming more partnerships and collaborations to provide clients with opportunities through external organizations, thereby enabling them to build relevant skills and gain valuable experience that will help them settle in Canada more effectively. Moreover, the IRSN program manager suggested building a social media presence to enhance outreach to potential clients and inform program partners about the IRSN's current status and ongoing activities. Social media also provides additional connectivity for the program and its members, as well as more potential for partnerships with other relevant programs/organizations.

Interview with the IRSN Program Lead

The Program Lead identifies their lived experience in research and building personal connections as a key factor supporting program success. They possess a unique understanding of the client's perspective and leverage their knowledge and connections to provide adequate support. To move the program forward and support the goals and successful integration of clients, creating or adding fellowship/mentorship/training opportunities with other organizations is essential to achieving the desired program outputs. For future activities, the program should focus on and sustain IRSN activities that can help members build employment capacity and self-efficacy, find employment, and provide training/mentorship opportunities. Finally, while Access Alliance provides contract opportunities specifically for IRSN members, other areas can be explored for more interactive engagements. This could allow members to learn about research and the Canadian work environment through activities such as participating in meetings and shadowing Access Alliance research activities.



Program Planning & Management

Interview with the Experts

The interview with the experts in the field identified several critical success factors of the program. These include having two to three IRSN members receive fellowships or peer placements annually, ensuring that IRSN members find the networking opportunities useful and productive for achieving their desired career goals, and bringing in more researchers from various industries and academia to gain recognition. To achieve these factors, they suggest the following:

- Full-time staff as a resource to fully respond to the needs of the clients by ensuring a smooth and supported transition of clients into the Canadian workforce.
- Frequent needs assessment whenever there are changes (policy or political) to understand clients' shifting needs and respond proportionately to meet their needs.
- Facilitate advocacy efforts for changing the systemic narrative around IERs.
- The program should strive to bring IRSN members directly to the employer's door to enter the job market smoothly and effectively.



PROGRESS OF PREVIOUSLY IDENTIFIED RECOMMENDATIONS

This section evaluates programmatic evolution and progress since the 2020 IRSN evaluation and serves as a framework for institutional accountability, knowledge mobilization, and evidence-based decision-making for stakeholders and community partners. By employing a longitudinal comparative analysis, this report illustrates how strategic shifts in program architecture have influenced participant integration outcomes and generated systemic socio-economic impacts.

While the initial program design focused on foundational implementation and pandemic-era adaptability, the post-pandemic landscape introduced a new set of multifaceted challenges. Factors such as labour market volatility, inflationary pressures, and the urgency of maintaining residency necessitated recalibrating evaluation objectives to remain responsive to community needs.

To ensure a high degree of validity, this analysis prioritizes benchmark indicators directly aligned with organizational goals and stakeholder interests. Furthermore, this evaluation represents a significant methodological expansion: whereas the 2020 assessment relied primarily on telephone interviews, the current framework employs a mixed-methods approach. By integrating quantitative participant surveys and demographic data with qualitative interviews, this report provides a more comprehensive assessment of program reach, user satisfaction, and long-term efficacy.

Comparative Analysis

Relevance, Reach & Satisfaction

Since its inception in 2017, the IRSN program has redefined what a settlement program can entail. As a first-of-its-kind initiative in the Greater Toronto Area, the program was designed in response to a prior community needs assessment that identified persistent barriers faced by internationally educated researchers. Thus, inherent in its design, IRSN was intentionally developed to be relevant, tackling these barriers through a unique combination of settlement services, professional development, and coaching opportunities. As a result, findings from the 2020 IRSN evaluation reflect a strong preference for Access Alliance's services over other settlement programs, largely due to their relevance, convenience, and unique service model. Clients consistently perceived the program as aligned with their needs, particularly in skill development, networking, and access to relevant connections. However, further improvements were recommended, particularly in creating more targeted upskilling opportunities within their respective research niches.



Current findings from the 2025 evaluation indicate continued growth in the program's reach, with increasing participation among permanent-residence newcomers, refugee claimants, and international students. The majority of the program population also reported household incomes below the Low-Income Cut-Off (LICO) threshold for a family of three in Toronto (<\$30,000), as well as caregiving and family care responsibilities. Among clients, participant satisfaction is high. Participants report meaningful outcomes, particularly in skill development, network expansion, and perceived usefulness of the supports. While the earlier evaluation report established that IRSN services effectively identified the barriers and facilitators to meaningful employment, the current report demonstrates the clients' sustained receptiveness to the program design and services. Altogether, these findings suggest that the program is not only effectively reaching its intended population but also remains relevant to clients, ensuring continued satisfaction and increasing demand over time.

Implementation, Access & Engagement

In 2020, the evaluation focused on program implementation, emphasizing design improvements to ensure equitable access to IRSN supports. Despite limited scaling opportunities due to significant pandemic-related constraints, the program continued to be promoted through word of mouth, coffee chat presentations, and formal referrals. However, it was found that, outside these channels of access, many participants learned about the program through informal avenues rather than through promotional materials from partner settlement organizations or online searches. Nonetheless, attendance remained relatively high, as many clients noted the demand for upskilling opportunities and orientation to the Canadian job market, specific to their research interests. Notably, online forums with 125 members were frequently accessed, while networking events had an average of 40-50 participants. While program uptake was strong, further recommendations identified the need to increase scheduling flexibility and to add dedicated staff for consistent activity monitoring and program delivery.



By 2025, the evaluation focus shifted from implementation to access and engagement, as delivery conditions stabilized and program capacity increased. Findings suggest that access to the IRSN program is not only much more established but also with increasingly improved engagement. Participants report greater ease in accessing supports, with a growing number of participants and increased engagement across all program activities. This progression clearly outlines the program delivery continuum, demonstrating how early program implementation under pandemic constraints evolved through the incorporation of client feedback into the iterative design improvements. As delivery conditions normalized and program capacity increased, these improvements facilitated access and deeper engagement, allowing the original program's objectives to be realized to a much greater extent.

Performance, Effectiveness & Impact

The purpose of the 2020 evaluation report was to ascertain the performance benchmark by examining the timeliness of supports, responsiveness to client needs, perceived value and benefits received from the program. While the outcome measure was limited by a small sample size ($n < 30$), findings from the 2020 report indicate that service performance was maintained despite significant constraints, including quarantine mandates, reduced face-to-face interactions, limited program funding, and reliance on part-time staffing. While these constraints drastically affected delivery performance, the needs and demands for these services remained high, with 280 IERs in total participating in Coffee chats, high activity in online forums (20 total blog posts, 20 total forum discussions, 8 success stories, 43 total comments), and roughly 30 participants in the quarterly IRSN meetings despite the limitations specified.

By 2025, the evaluation report introduced a more nuanced framework that could assess not just quantitative performance but also qualitative perceptions of its success, measured through effectiveness and impact. While participation continued to show strong attendance gains, findings also indicate positive perceptions of the program's benefits. With increased confidence and improvements in their professional positioning, upskilling, and knowledge of the Canadian labour market, participants describe these outcomes as positive indicators of improved integration into the Canadian workforce. Collectively, these outcomes illustrate that, as program delivery improved largely through the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions, participants were better able to benefit from the services, with tangible improvements in their ability and confidence to engage meaningfully in the labour market with dignity.



Summary of Trends

Relevance, Reach & Satisfaction

- IRSN remains highly valued by members for its unique and convenient combination of settlement support and professional development.
- Participation has grown since 2020 (especially among permanent residents, refugee claimants, and international students) and consistently reports the program as relevant and pivotal for skill-building, networking, and integration.

Implementation, Access & Engagement

- Early pandemic constraints limited scaling and outreach opportunities, but the program sustained its access engagement through coffee chats, online forums and referrals due to high need and demand for services.
- By 2025, with expanded metrics and lifted mandates, there is a noticeable increase in engagement in attendance, with clients finding it easier to connect with program supports and opportunities.
- Participant engagement remains high, underlining the program's responsiveness to clients' evolving needs.

Performance, Effectiveness & Impact

- The 2020 evaluation report demonstrated that IRSN services continued to be delivered as intended despite operational constraints.
- By 2025, current reports demonstrate improved satisfaction and meaningful outcomes such as confidence, skill development, and perceived usefulness of supports.

Overall impact

- Across evaluation periods, the IRSN has proven resilient. Even during the global COVID-19 pandemic, services remained in high demand despite widespread restrictions.
- Demand has only grown as participation and engagement steadily increased. This underscores the program's ongoing importance and need for continuity.



Implications

Taken together, the comparative findings illustrate the real and perceived impacts of the IRSN services over time. From the perspective of highly skilled immigrant researchers, the program clearly provides an opportunity for meaningful integration through access to networking, coaching, and the development of transferable skills. As experience and individual outcomes improve through these opportunities, clients become better equipped to position themselves to find relevant and dignified work; ultimately, to develop a sense of belonging within the Canadian professional and research spaces.

From a systems-level perspective, IRSN closely aligns with both federal and provincial priorities. Regarding federal priorities, the 2025 Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration (Government of Canada, 2025) emphasizes the need to support skilled immigrants to meet labour market needs and talent retention. Similarly, provincial priorities, as highlighted in the 2025 annual report (Government of Ontario, 2025), focus on improving access to employment, settlement, and skills development services for newcomers. By paving a pathway for highly skilled researchers to enter their fields of expertise, IRSN reduces underemployment and underutilization of talent, addresses workforce gaps, and minimizes overreliance on government support. This demonstrates that IRSN not only supports individual career growth but also delivers tangible, measurable socio-economic benefits that provide a clear return on investment for both funders and policymakers.

CURRENT REPORT'S RECOMMENDATIONS

FY 2025-2026

FY 2019-2020

Areas to Maintain and Sustain

- Referring and connecting clients to potential employers for relevant opportunities.
- Interactive activities/events that promote engagement with the potential employers and peer networking in person.
- Collaboration and networking efforts with external organizations to further advertise the IRSN program to potential clients and establish alternative resources for clients to develop professional skills, network connections, and obtain potential job/research experiences.
- Bridging or other professional certification programs to support clients' integration.

Opportunities for Improvement

- Establish long-term funding/resources to hire a full-time program lead to oversee program services and better support client needs effectively.
- Members of the IRSN program need to be bridged directly with the research department programs through shadowing or contracting for services.
- Improve the IRSN portal to be more user-friendly and effectively display/share relevant information to IRSN members.
- Improve social media presence by sharing IRSN activities/impacts to attract potential members, share experiences with partners, and share IRSN-related information.
- Incorporate advocacy pieces to address systemic barriers that hinder clients' integration into the Canadian workforce.
- Frequent needs assessments to understand clients' individual needs and tailor IRSN activities to target overarching client needs.
- Increase clients' level of awareness of available IRSN services (e.g., 1-to-1 appointments) through frequent reminders and more effective advertisement/displays of relevant information.



Limitations

- Demographic data of registered clients need to be appropriately recorded in the EMR.
- The survey was administered through a census opt-in approach. As such, 41 clients attempted the study, and 28 completed it. Additionally, the focus group discussions included 10 clients. A greater sample size for both data collection methods may produce additional or different insights. Thus, it is advisable to consider the findings within the context of this study, and generalizability may be limited.

Conclusions

The IRSN program at Access Alliance provides clients with opportunities and resources to develop professional skills, gain valuable experience, and establish connections that facilitate successful integration into the Canadian workforce. This evaluation has identified the successes of the IRSN program and highlighted potential areas for quality improvement. While clients are generally satisfied with the program as a whole, modifications can be made to more effectively address their needs, increase engagement, and better accommodate them. Notable challenges of the program include clients' conflicting schedules and priorities, the relevance of program activities to clients, awareness of available resources, and accommodating individual client needs.

Overall, the IRSN program should continue to provide practical advice and, within its means, opportunities to support the settlement and integration needs of its clients.



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**340 College St Suite 500,
Toronto, ON M5T 3A9**



+1416-324-0927 ext.3236



www.accessalliance.ca



research@accessalliance.ca