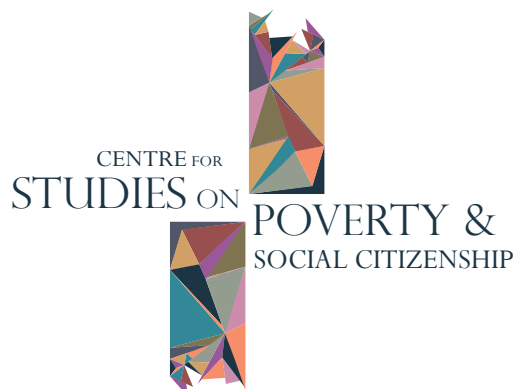


# FINAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT

Identifying barriers faced by Ottawa Somali Youth in accessing  
post-secondary and vocational opportunities

May 2017

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The Centre for Studies on Poverty and Social Citizenship (CSPSC) &  
The Somali Centre for Family Services (SCFS)

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Clockwise from top left: Zoey Feder, Administrative Assistant, CSPSC; Katherine Occhiuto, Research Assistant; Adje van de Sande, Principal Investigator & Chair, CSPSC; Fadi El Masry, Executive Assistant, Office of John Fraser; Abdirizak Karod, Executive Director, SCFS; Abid Jan, Executive Director, AMA; Mohamoud Hagi-Aden, Counsellor/Consultant; Ahmed Hussein, Research Assistant; Ismail Hagi-Aden, Research Assistant; Tara McWhinney, Research Assistant; Absent: Jennifer Colpitts, Research Assistant

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Adje van de Sande  
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The team at work.

## Executive Summary

In 2016, with funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation's Seed Grant program, The Somali Centre for Family Services of Ottawa (SCFS) invited Carleton University's Centre for Studies on Poverty and Social Citizenship (CSPSC) to partner on the completion of a needs assessment focusing on the barriers faced by Somali youth in accessing post-secondary education, and employment training and opportunities. In carrying out this research, the SCFS's main objective was to address social and economic exclusion locally by inviting Somali youth (age 19-30) from the Ottawa area to engage in the conceptualization and design of resources that could best support their participation in educational and vocational programs.

The data collection was led by six researchers in sum, including the principal investigator and three graduate students, all associated with the School of Social Work at Carleton, and two community researchers, youth leaders from the Ottawa Somali community. Over the course of two weeks, this research team ran 4 focus groups to collect input from Somali youth regarding their own experiences in seeking out vocational training, and enrolling in college and university programs. Each group ranged from 6-10 participants, with 32 individuals participating in the research overall. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 30. Both women and men participated in the data collection, with the research team running 3 male focus groups and 1 female focus group. Once transcribed, the focus group narratives were analyzed using the NVivo qualitative data analysis software program. Each research assistant created codes based on five common themes raised within the data.

### **1. Barriers to Accessing Post-secondary Education**

The general consensus emerging from this project was that post-secondary education is highly valued within the Somali community, so youth are often encouraged or pressured by parents to attend.

For research participants, the goal in pursuing education was to graduate and obtain meaningful, well-compensated employment. Yet most of the participants with experience in post-secondary education did not feel they are/were being well equipped beyond their educational credentials to compete for employment within their chosen fields.

## **2. Barriers to Accessing Job Placements and Training Programs**

Many of the Somali youth in this study have taken part in job placement programs such as the federal government's Federal Student Work Experience Program (FSWEP) and the Youth Services Bureau's (YSB) Youth Job Connection program. FSWEP provides youth with work experience in the federal public service, while Youth Job Connection offers workplace training and a short-term job placement. Although study participants appreciated assistance with things like resume writing and the chance to acquire summer employment, many expressed a need to have more job placement opportunities and access to training programs that specifically align with their chosen career path.

## **3. Barriers to Securing Employment**

Barriers to employment were raised by the male youth in this study specifically regarding discrimination and criminal records. The discrimination and labeling of Somali youth within Ottawa creates serious obstacles to employment and opportunities, and the youth who actually incur a criminal record will have an even harder time finding employment in the future.

## **4. A Need for a Somali-focused Employment Resource Centre**

When considering what types of supports could help to alleviate some of the issues raised in regards to education and job training programs, the youth in this study overwhelmingly favoured the creation of an educational/employment centre or resource program to run within a pre-established service centre. The youth expressed that a single place to access thorough information regarding education, training and employment opportunities, including important deadlines, would be helpful. This type of support would help Somali youth to better prepare and plan.

## **5. A Need for Somali Youth Mentors**

Another strong theme within the study was the great need for Somali youth to have mentors who can help to guide them through education and employment decisions. The current lack of mentors within the Somali community was a subject heavily discussed in all four of the focus groups. Focus group participants expressed the importance of having mentors and professional connections that can relate culturally.

## Recommendations

The research team offered four recommendations:

1. The creation of a Somali-focused employment and post-secondary education resource centre/program
2. The development of a mentorship program for Somali youth
3. Creating the role of a private sector liaison
4. Offering subsidized opportunities for Somali youth to design their own placements

## Introduction to the Study

Within Canada, over 80% of the Somali population is under 30 years of age (Naji, 2012). However, many first and second-generation Somali-Canadian youth continue to experience difficulties with integration and social inclusion. Representing both an ethnic and religious minority, the Somali population has become a highly racialized group within Ottawa. The Somali community continues to face alarmingly high rates of poverty, unemployment, and youth crime (Kenny, 2007). Notably, Somali youth face a 67% rate of unemployment after graduation (Somali Canadian Youth Matter, 2016). This highly restrictive access to the labour market makes Somali youth more economically vulnerable, which can further perpetuate cycles of poverty, and exacerbate physical and mental health issues as well as high-risk behaviours.

In 2016, with funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation's Seed Grant program, The Somali Centre for Family Services of Ottawa (SCFS) invited Carleton University's Centre for Studies on Poverty and Social Citizenship (CSPSC) to partner on the completion of a needs assessment focusing on the barriers faced by Somali youth in accessing post-secondary education, and employment training and opportunities. In carrying out this research, the SCFS's main objective was to address social and economic exclusion locally, by inviting Somali youth (age 19-30) from the Ottawa area to engage in the conceptualization and design of resources that could best support their participation in educational and vocational programs. While using a participatory approach, conducting a needs assessment could allow SCFS to begin the process of collaboratively building supports that could directly respond to the Somali population's needs. SCFS conceptualized this needs assessment and its findings as the precursor to a larger program design and delivery project directed at Somali Youth.

## Literature review

As mentioned above, Somali youth face an unemployment rate of 67% after graduation (Somali Canadian Youth Matter, 2016). Research has shown that such a lack of access to the labour market increases economic vulnerability, fuelling high-risk behaviours, exacerbating physical and mental health issues, and perpetuating cycles of poverty (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2009n.d.). These negative factors therefore warrant an examination of the barriers that Somali youth face in accessing the labour market, and by extension, in accessing higher education. It is estimated that 70% of jobs require post-secondary education (Ontario Federation of Labour Young Workers Committee, 2014). Moreover, a study looking at the socioeconomic and demographic trend of Ottawa's immigrant youth revealed that a specific barrier to employment and socioeconomic advancements was in fact a lack of education (Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008).

In a review of the literature, many authors comment on there being a lack of research focusing on immigrant youth (first and second-generation) experiences in accessing higher education (Ferede, 2010; Shakya et al., 2010; Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008). Shakya et al. (2010), suggest that this may be because post-high school education may not be a priority for this population. However, other research shows that it may not simply be a lack of desire, but rather systemic and practical barriers preventing this population from accessing higher education.

Within the existing literature, immigrant youth lacking access to information on post-secondary programs was a common theme (Caidi, Allard, & Quirke 2010; Baum & Flores, 2011), with some researchers reporting it as a serious problem (Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008). Caidi, Allard, and Quirke (2010) term this lack of access as 'information poverty': a lack of necessary resources that enable everyday life information-seeking. Compounding this issue is the fact that many Somali youth are first-generation, with their parents having immigrated to Canada during the 1980s and 90s (Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, 2016). As such, many of their parents have not attended post-secondary school in Canada, meaning they are unable to help their children navigate the often complicated Canadian social system (Baum & Flores, 2011). Youth end up turning to their friends and peer group in order to obtain information (Caidi, Allard, & Quirke 2010; Shakya et al., 2010).

Having a mentor available to help guide youth in seeking out more education was suggested as a possible solution to this information barrier (Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008). Youth commented that having a mentor who could discuss things like the differences between post-secondary programs or the process for applying to these programs, was a measure that could critically increase access to information (Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008). In contrast, the literature strikingly points to the lack of support youth experience from their guidance counsellors at school (Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008; City of Ottawa & City for All Women Initiative, 2016), with implications that these counsellors, along with teachers and administration, have been involved in systemic discrimination and racism (Shakya et al., 2010; Greater Toronto Civic Action Alliance, 2014; Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, 2016; Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008). While there are reports of discrimination and racism for both genders, the



literature suggests that there is a significantly gendered response to immigrant youth (Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, 2016; Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008; City of Ottawa & City for All Women Initiative, 2016), with males reporting higher incidents of discrimination, bullying and physical violence (Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008). Additionally, Somali males often report being directly or indirectly discouraged by teachers from aspiring to higher education (City of Ottawa & City for All Women Initiative, 2016).

While the literature points to many barriers to immigrant youth furthering their education, it also provides a number of suggestions in order to make post-secondary education more accessible. Providing information at the secondary education level would help to prepare youth transition into post-secondary education and create a space where youth could voice their concerns (Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008). The literature points to a need to have teachers from different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds to take action in minimizing the discrimination that youth are currently reporting (Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008). The literature also shows that youth are seeking opportunities to build their experience before, and during their post-secondary education (Greater Toronto Civic Action Alliance, 2014; Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008). Providing opportunities for youth to participate in co-op, practicum, or internships not only builds connection within the community (Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008), but also provides them an opportunity to build the type of wide skillset that is increasing in demand within the labour market (Greater Toronto Civic Action Alliance, 2014).

The research focusing on Somali youth's employment success is similarly sparse to the existing research on their educational attainment (Caidi, Allard, & Quirke 2010; Greater Toronto Civic Action Alliance, 2014; Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008). However, with the sources that do exist, these two research literatures share a recurring theme concerning racism and discrimination (Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008). The rate of unemployment for visible minorities aged 20-34 is significantly higher than the general Canadian population, estimated at 20% (Greater Toronto Civic Action Alliance, 2014). When visible minorities actually do find employment, they face what Block and Galabuzi (2011) deem a "persistent colour code that blocks them from the best paying jobs" (Block & Galabuzi, 2011, p. 3). The literature also points to a lack of connections being an ongoing barrier to obtaining employment (Greater Toronto Civic Action Alliance, 2014; Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008). While those with established roots in Canada can rely on their connections to get their foot in the door, youth of first-generation immigrant families may not have the same established roots in the community or job sector that their child is seeking when they are looking for stable, long-term employment (Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, 2016). Alternatively, being reliant on government programs to help link youth to employment opportunities was seen by some as a disadvantage to the community (Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008). Anisef & Murphy Killbride (2008) report that certain programs such as Change Your Future (CYF), a Canada-wide program that provides counselling, mentoring, and alternative schooling to visible minority youth who are at risk for dropping out of high school, inadvertently label any youth associated with the program as "at-risk", making them a less desirable job candidate (Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008).

Very similar to the suggestions made within the literature concerning post-secondary education,

mentorship was again a common theme in relation to employment barriers (Greater Toronto Civic Action Alliance, 2014; Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008). Providing a mentor that can share information on how and where to find employment, and the skills that are necessary to succeed in the workforce (Greater Toronto Civic Action Alliance, 2014) increases the chance of youth success by providing support and information. Furthermore, the literature suggests that having a mentor from one's own culture, who can relate to the culture clash that many youth report experiencing, is of benefit (Greater Toronto Civic Action Alliance, 2014; Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, 2016; Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008). The literature also suggests that co-ops or practicum opportunities bear great potential for employment linkage (Greater Toronto Civic Action Alliance, 2014; Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008). Again, by having these ties to the community, employers can get to know youth without the label of "at-risk" being attached to the individual, and provide the opportunity for youth to explore the workforce prior to applying for jobs (Greater Toronto Civic Action Alliance, 2014; Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008). Providing a central location in which youth could visit to obtain information on employment opportunities, and learn about the job market is recommended (Greater Toronto Civic Action Alliance, 2014; Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008). Flexibility within existing employment programs is also recommended, so that programs can better respond to the needs, concerns and experiences of immigrant youth populations (Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008). While no examples of flexibility were provided, the literature stresses that programs must be adaptable to the unique needs of the population serviced (Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008). Finally, it is recommended that culturally-specific programs are established and led by a professional of the same racial, ethnic, or cultural background as the youth to, again, reinforce the model of mentorship, but to also provide a space where culturally sensitive topics can be discussed (Anisef & Murphy Killbride, 2008).

## Methodology

SCFS and CSPSC decided to use a participatory design for the needs assessment to gain new insight into the real, rather than perceived experiences of Somali youth within the Ottawa region. The ultimate objective of the needs assessment was to create the necessary resources and/or programs to support Somali youth to both access and succeed in post-secondary programs and employment paths; and so, a participatory design was also chosen to inform changes, transformations and/or the creation of youth-directed services that could sustain better outcomes. This was motivated by the attitude that with greater input and investment from the community, the more likely service implementations are to succeed. This participatory approach included the incorporation of a research advisory committee, the use of qualitative measures and the combination of community researchers as well as campus-based researchers within the needs assessment research team.

The data collection was led by six researchers in sum, including the principal investigator and three graduate students, all associated with the School of Social Work at Carleton, and two community researchers, youth leaders from the Ottawa Somali Community. Over the course of two weeks, this research team ran 4 focus groups to collect input from Somali youth regarding their own experiences in

seeking out vocational training, and enrolling in college and university programs. Each group ranged from 6-10 participants, with 32 individuals participating in the research overall. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 30. Both women and men participated in the data collection, with the research team running 3 male focus groups and 1 female focus group.

Once transcribed, the focus group narratives were analyzed using the NVivo qualitative data analysis software program. The transcription and data analysis of each focus group was shared between research assistants. Using NVivo, each assistant created codes based on the common themes and issues raised within the data. These analysis results were discussed amongst the research team. Then the separate thematic coding files were merged and one assistant conducted a further analysis based on the main thematic results discussed among the research group.

## Findings and Analysis

Research findings were presented within five general themes:

- 1. Barriers to Accessing Post-secondary Education**
- 2. Barriers to Accessing Job Placements and Training Programs**
- 3. Barriers to Securing Employment**
- 4. A Need for a Somali-focused Employment Resource Centre**
- 5. A Need for Somali Youth Mentors**

### 1. Barriers to Accessing Post-secondary Education

At the time of the focus groups, most of the research participants were attending or had attended post-secondary education programs, mostly within universities. The high ratio of university-educated participants could be attributed to the snowball recruitment method employed, or may reflect a tendency among Somali youth to favour university education. The general consensus emerging from this project was that post-secondary education is highly valued in the Somali community, so youth are often encouraged or pressured by parents to attend:

“I know specifically post-secondary education is something we’re all pushed towards. So if a mother sees you, [and] you’re not going to a post-secondary education, then what are you doing with your life? You kind of failed them - that’s taught as well.”

“... Especially with Somali parents who have immigrated here, there is a big influence on children coming to university; the main goal isn't to find a program they like, but they put pressure on them instead to just get into university. So a lot of Somali youth feel pressure to just get into university instead of finding out what they like and, you know, which program would be best for them. So I think that also kind of affects Somali youth.”

The first quote demonstrates the pressures youth can feel in regards to attending university, by connecting a lack of post-secondary education with a failure to meet their parents' expectations. As explained in the second quote, when youth are pressured to attend university, they may choose a program without a good understanding of what career path they want. One participant expresses below how the choices youth make in regards to education are decisions they will have to live with their whole lives:

“I think my goal, mostly, is [to] finish school. Well, finish school in a program [that] I like [because] [...] our parents, [...] they have opinion[s] about our future, they say, 'Oh, you should do this', [and], 'Oh, you should do that'. But at the same time, you want to do what you want to do. [...] When you look back, when you look forward, like, 30 years and you're in your job... it's not their job, it's your job. So I just want to do something that I want.”

Another recurring theme within the focus groups was the lack of knowledge among Somali immigrant and refugee populations concerning post-secondary education. Participants highlighted the need for increased knowledge of existing education and training programs to make informed choices on how to work towards obtaining a meaningful career. The following two quotes express how participants feel their parents and elders don't understand the education system in Canada:

“I think it has more to do with the fact that there is not much guidance from guys, especially the older men in our community because they are not really familiar with this type of system, especially with the background they come from, they don't understand the schooling system very well. And also kids these days are growing up [and] they don't really have someone to point them in the right direction when it comes to their school.”

“Yeah, especially, I feel like for me, my parents, they were refugees. They didn't go to post-secondary. I'm the oldest, so I was just thrown into this whole new world not knowing exactly what I was getting myself into.”

As demonstrated in these statements, most of the youth in this study feel their parents are unable to help them navigate the education system, due to their lack of experience with formal education. Yet, youth feel strongly pressured to pursue post-secondary programs. Youth expressed the need for more guidance on deciding whether to attend post-secondary programs, and on finding programs and classes that lead to meaningful employment.

The focus on university within the Somali community may also stem from the greater availability of supports for these types of programs. For example, there were few focus group participants studying in the trades:

“In our community it is never really an option, it’s post-secondary education or bust there is no real — I guess parents are more open now to trade: there is really good money in it. [But] there isn’t enough training or support for trade stuff.”

While choosing the trades is increasingly being accepted as a good career choice by Somali parents and youth, the availability and lack of knowledge regarding trade programs and financial supports for these programs affect youths’ choice in attending. Financial supports and knowledge on accessing vocational programs are essential if this is to be an option for Somali youth. Of note, this limited access to trade programs was also discussed heavily by the project’s Advisory Committee. Advisory Committee Members pointed out that in order to attend trade schools in Ottawa, an individual often needs to have an apprenticeship arranged with an employer before they can be accepted into a college program. This creates a huge barrier to Somali Youth, who as immigrants, often have a limited network to find and secure an apprenticeship.

Another common feeling was that Somali youth focus too much on specific types of post-secondary programs:

“Speaking about culture, there’s this thing in our community — education is good. We focus on specific programs. What I’m trying to get at is — I met a brother who did water waste management. He went to Algonquin. You don’t see a lot of Somalis doing that; a very essential program. People need that, right? But we keep on going to the same programs. We have to open our focus.”

This focus group participant discussed how, once one community member is successful in a program, others tend to follow in the hopes of obtaining a successful career. For this participant, this type of cycle narrows the educational and employment possibilities for Somali youth, discouraging individuals from carving out new and alternative paths for themselves. In another focus group, the tendency to follow in others’ footsteps was viewed as a positive outcome, and participants discussed how seeing a community member thrive in a specific educational program motivates youth, and encourages parents to broaden their views.

Many participants in the focus groups discussed how post-secondary programs should focus on job readiness, so that what is taught in school translates to the workplace. Youth in this study experienced a disconnection between education programs, and the skills/knowledge employers are looking for:

“...For university programs, what they do is, a lot of times, they teach you material that doesn’t really translate to your workplace...like, you don’t have the necessary skills in order to work for certain jobs. And, most of the time, what they are looking for is a student who has experience in the field. So [if] you don’t have

that, it kinds of puts you at a disadvantage, unless you are a co-op student and [have] been in the situation where you've been working in the field.”

“Most of the time, when you are trying to apply for jobs, you need certain skills and especially when you are a student, all you have done is really [study] and gain knowledge. But you don't have any practical skills.”

For research participants, the goal in pursuing education was to graduate and obtain meaningful, well-compensated employment. Yet, as the quotes above demonstrate, most of the participants with experience in post-secondary education did not feel they are/were being well equipped beyond their educational credentials to compete for employment within their chosen fields. Somali youth also face unique challenges when trying to obtain employment. Consistent with those issues mentioned earlier regarding support in choosing an educational program, youth in the Somali community do not feel they have the same supports as their peers to transition into employment from school. Their counterparts often receive greater guidance from their parents who have been through Ontario's post-secondary education system, and also have long-established careers:

“For the Somali youth, it's a tough battle because the other kids in the education system, their parents are here for three to four generations. Their parents give them the first job — from how to fill out a resume. Our situation — other families from other countries — it's starting from the ground up. They don't have someone to show them how to make a resume, how to find your first job; everything is learning on the fly as you go.”

After completing post-secondary education, some of the youth in this study indicated a tendency to turn to entrepreneurial programs. Some of these participants indicated that they themselves developed a real interest in entrepreneurship, while others suggested it was popular for Somali youth to decide to participate in entrepreneurial training programs because of the resources that are uniquely available to these program participants:

“My goal is to build up some stability, like what he said. Trying to own some companies of my own, working on a few ideas at the moment. Like he said, I do not believe in formal education; there are other ways to attain your goals besides university.”

“He was talking about different government grants that are given in Ottawa for just entrepreneurship itself. There's a ridiculous amount of grants you can do, it's crazy — especially between 18 to 29. If you have a business idea or something, you can go [to] Invest Ottawa. Talk to them; they definitely give you some research. They tell you this is what you need to do — different stages of your business. If you get in as a portfolio company, you get access to an earmark fund which is \$20,000.”

As the statements above indicate, not all the Somali youth in this study preferred formal education. Entrepreneurial programs are perceived as providing an alternate path to employment. Working for yourself and being your own boss, was a common motive for many of the youth in this study. The reasoning they provided behind starting their own business was that it is easier to create the job you

want, rather than trying to find someone to hire you into a job you enjoy. Although not discussed by study participants, a preference for entrepreneurial programs could be associated with a lack of hope in obtaining meaningful employment within the current labour market.

## 2. Barriers to Accessing Job Placements and Training Programs

Many of the Somali youth in this study have taken part in job placement programs such as the federal government's Federal Student Work Experience Program (FSWEP) and the Youth Services Bureau's (YSB) Youth Job Connection program. FSWEP provides youth with work experience in the federal public service, while Youth Job Connection offers workplace training and a short-term job placement. Other programs the youth in this study have accessed, such as Youth Futures and services at the YMCA, provide assistance with job searching and admission to post-secondary education. Although study participants appreciated assistance with things like resume writing and the chance to acquire summer employment, many expressed a need to have more job placement opportunities that specifically align with their chosen career path:

“If you are hired for the summer — the majority of the funding goes to community-oriented organizations that hire individuals for community-oriented jobs. But, if you are in engineering and you are working at some community-oriented organization for the summer, what benefit is that to you? You [get] a job, you [get] paid and [you get] a bit of experience, but [you get] nothing towards what you want to do in life.”

While participants shared a general sentiment of appreciation for community work, they also expressed how these opportunities are not equipping them with the skills they really need to obtain jobs in the private market. One participant raised concern over the stigmatization faced by youth involved in job placement programs geared towards low-income youth:

“If I want to work for a bank, but I get summer employment working at [a community agency], what good is that to me? [...] It is a double-edged sword. You come from a low-income neighbourhood, and it is right there on your resume. You live in a low-income neighbourhood and the only employment you ever had was summer-funded programs [...]. It is like the city's way of shutting people up. You know what this is? What we are doing? We are throwing money at these organizations and they are going to hire your kids for the summer. What benefit does that do?”

This statement reflects the sentiments mentioned earlier about how summer employment does not truly aid youth beyond providing them with short-term employment. In the quote above, the participant points out how employers benefit from public funding for youth employment by obtaining low-cost labour, but questions the actual long-term benefits for the youth within these programs. Some participants discussed the possibility of an employment program that would let Somali youth choose where exactly they want to work (including within the private sector). One participant with experience in such a program briefly expressed that it was a positive experience for them.

As with education, the youth in these focus groups want job training to provide skills related to their field of study or chosen career path:

“Training should include the skills and experience employers want”.

“Um, sometimes I feel like, ah, if you have no experience at all, and all they do is offer you trainings, then [...] trainings aren’t going to fill up your resume, unfortunately, you know? So maybe if they offered experience....”

In the second quote above, a participant explains how popular one-day, short-term training programs are not helpful in providing those skills needed to secure employment. Without the experience employers are looking for, youth have a hard time accessing employment in their field, even with post-secondary education. One focus group indicated that the private sector was the hardest to succeed in:

“There are different barriers in different sectors. There are less barriers in the federal government — just by seeing how many Somali Canadians [are] working there. But you will rarely ever see a Somali person in a fortune 500 company or [in] any sort of private [corporation]. It is like a gentlemen’s club that we are not invited to.”

Participants expressed limited opportunities for Somali youth to connect with employers or other professionals from private corporations. The federal public service has been easier for Somali youth to access seeing as FSWEF continues to provide federal public service placement programs; FSWEF provides a means for Somali Youth to bridge into public service employment. The federal government also notably has employment equity policies in place. By contrast, participants expressed feeling that positions within the private sector were significantly more difficult to obtain without specific job skills or, more importantly, network connections.

The question of when exactly job placement and training programs should be available came up in several of the focus groups. Placement programs, like the Youth Job Connection, are mainly accessed by youth when they are in high school, and those who are in post-secondary education tend to more familiar with FSWEF. One focus group suggested that information on the FSWEF program be made more available to high school students, so that they could access the program earlier on within the span of their post-secondary education. Another focus group discussed how job placement programs should be available to those who have finished school and are looking to kick-start lifetime careers:

“Also, maybe, they already finished school, [are] finishing, like, post-secondary education, or any other — like, even college... the ones who are in school, [...] [or] finished program[s] — doesn’t matter. As long as you are not high school, you know...you are actually looking for a career job, you know, to establish life, you know, or maybe get married or something, you know, like that.”

The consensus within this study is that job placement programs are more available for those in



school than for those who are job searching after completing post-secondary education:

“When I am looking for an internship, it is a lot easier to find a co-op then it is to find a full-time job, right? So when people have graduated — [...] I can get more experience than them just because I am a student, because I am going back to school, while they can’t get any internships or find a job. A lot of people looking for jobs are not in school, and then they can’t get anywhere with any of these programs because they are not in school.”

Co-op programs and internships are often available within post-secondary education programs. Therefore, students have a much easier time accessing these types of opportunities than those that have completed their education. However, participants also indicated problems with internships and co-op programs that coincided with post-secondary studies. Some participants had difficulty acquiring a placement while being a student. Others could not afford to work unpaid and attend school at the same time, and sometimes, fitting the placement into a busy school schedule was just not feasible.

### 3. Barriers to Securing Employment

Barriers to employment were raised by the male youth in this study specifically regarding discrimination and criminal records:

“What is going on in the media with the Somali youth and the violence puts a negative image on all Somalis, so everybody [...] will have the pre-notion that, “Ok, these people come from this type of background”, instead of actually giving us a chance.”

“There are so many times a young kid is labeled something, and then, because of that label, they sort of adopt that kind of behaviour and that track throughout [their life]. If you’re, like, a youth and you incurred a criminal record on one of the many dumb, stupid things that could happen — as a youth, if you do something. And then you incurred a criminal record and then that stays with you... and then suddenly all of those opportunities have narrowed like this...”

The discrimination and labeling of Somali youth within Ottawa creates serious obstacles to employment and opportunities, and the youth who actually incur a criminal record will have an even harder time finding employment in the future.

### 4. A Need for a Somali-focused Employment Resource Centre

When considering what types of supports could help to alleviate some of the issues raised in regards to education and job training programs, the youth in this study overwhelmingly favoured the creation of

an educational/employment centre or resource program to run within a pre-established service centre. Some of the participants wanted this resource program/centre to be specifically for Somali youth. However, others felt that making it specifically for Somali youth would only further stigmatize this population. Currently, Somali youth find it difficult to know what programs are available to them:

“With all of these employment, um, services — they’re not interconnected. Like, do they know what the others [are] offering, so that they can move effectively? And are they sending people to each other? If they’re not, then everybody’s doing something in their own silo; nobody’s letting each other know.”

The quote above described a shared consensus that employment programs across the city are fragmented, and that it is difficult to know what is available across Ottawa, as centres do not communicate information about one another to service users. The youth in this study also indicated that they are not being informed about available opportunities in a timely manner:

“Yeah, I think for me, it was um —like, I heard about FSWEF, like, when I was in high school. But the only reason I heard about it was because, like, I knew a girl. I just happened to know her and was like — she graduated and she got a job through FSWEF, so she told me to apply in my first year. And now I’m in third year and I finally got it, you know?”

“They’re not good at getting the word out, at all.”

“They have deadlines, [and] nobody knows about the deadlines until it’s too late.”

“But the problem is, like, right now, these kids don’t have, um — they’re not told when the deadline is. So they don’t even know when to sign up.”

“I found out —that’s the thing — I really don’t think that there’s a way to find out about these things. I found out through somebody, who found out through somebody...”

The youth expressed that a single place to access thorough information regarding education, training and employment opportunities, including important deadlines, would be helpful. This type of support would help Somali youth to better prepare and plan for the future:

“If you’re about to go into university [and] don’t know what to take, you can come here and we’ll give you guidance; if you’re looking for a job and just graduated, come here and we can set up your resume. We can hook you up with our network of people. I can guide you [and] probably take you to the right direction.”

The participants also expressed a desire to have this centre or resource program run by workers

from the Somali community, or by those who have an understanding of their culture and experience:

“...Yeah, counsellors that understand where we come from and the problems that we deal with. Because most people, most of the older generation, don’t really come from [the] type of mind-set we come from. They only think traditionally, and how they did it back in the day. So it would be good to have people who understand us now, and understand this day and age.”

“And I think that the community centre idea — parents will push their kids to these centres if they know it is being run by, for example, the Somali Centre, where they know the guy who is running it. My parents are more willing to send me towards a program that is run by Somalis because they know the people running it.”

All of the youth in the study wanted those who work in the centre/resource program to have an understanding of their culture and the unique experiences contemporary Somali youth face. As the second quote above indicates, youth feel that their parents would be more likely to encourage them to seek assistance from a centre/resource program if it were to be specifically for Somali youth and run by Somalis. There was some debate as to whether the staff should be youth as well (under 30 years old), but most indicated that age did not matter as long as the staff are able to relate to Somali youth. There were also conflicting views within the focus groups regarding where such a resource centre/program should be located or housed. Some preferred to have it within a post-secondary institution, while others felt it should be placed within the Somali community.

## 5. A Need for Somali Youth Mentors

Another strong theme within the study was the great need for Somali youth to have mentors who can help to guide them through education and employment decisions:

“If we had more mentors out there, especially these older students who are graduated coming back, you know, trying to help the youth and explaining the process of how to choose which courses to go into, and what programs, and how to go about finding jobs...”

This participant states the need to find individuals who can both relate to Somali youth, and who have knowledge of the education system and job searching in Canada. The current lack of mentors within the Somali community was a subject heavily discussed in all four of the focus groups. Focus group participants expressed the importance of having mentors and professional connections that can relate culturally:

“So, the thing is, like, if who you’re working with doesn’t get you, they don’t get your boundaries, like, I can’t even blame him...because he doesn’t understand me, he doesn’t understand my culture. He doesn’t understand my race, he doesn’t

understand my — he doesn't understand at all, and he [maybe] doesn't want to [...] understand.”

Some participants talked about experiences within existing youth programs that involved personal support workers who were unable to relate culturally to Somali youth. Many participants felt the need for mentors from within their community, who would be available to support education and career choices both before and after post-secondary education. When discussing mentors, the importance of connections and networking came up as well:

“Networking is not what we think it is. It's not me sitting down with someone for a coffee and picking their brain asking them what they want to do. There are real barriers that we face in the Somali community. There aren't many people, older people in higher positions who can facilitate not only conversations, but opportunities. It is fine to have a blueprint of what you want to do in life, but if you have constant barriers and do not [have] real resources to attain those things, you are not going anywhere.”

“Because I think it's all about connection- when you get down to the nitty gritty of applying for positions. It's about who you know, you know? And, um, if you don't know anybody, what are you going to do?”

As these participants indicate, finding employment is often aided by knowing someone in a specific field or company, who can vouch for you and connect you to other professionals. Mentors are desired not only to discuss educational and employment goals, but ideally to connect Somali youth to industries and organizations of interest.

## Recommendations

### Somali-focused Employment Resource Centre/Program

There was unanimity among participants that Somali youth within the city of Ottawa would greatly benefit from a Somali youth resource centre or program that focuses on employment and post-secondary education. Participants from all four focus groups emphasized the importance of having a ‘one-stop shop’ that provides information on educational and employment training. While there are many pre-existing programs within the region for which Somali youth may be eligible, the needs assessment revealed that these youth are not always receiving information about these programs when they need it and that this lack of information sharing is a serious barrier.

### Somali Youth Mentorships

Along with a resource centre/program, there was a consensus among participants on the need for a mentorship program. Ideally, these mentors should be people that come from the Somali community, who can relate to youth, who are familiar with the post-secondary education system in Ontario and

who are aware of employment training programs including co-ops and internships. The current lack of mentors within the Somali community was a subject heavily discussed in all four of the focus groups.

### **Private Sector Liaison**

Participants identified a need to build more connections with employers outside the public sector. Research participants voiced that securing employment within the private sector is particularly challenging for Somali youth. Such findings suggest that creating a position (either attached to a new or pre-existing service centre) designated towards an individual who could be a liaison between Somali youth and private sector companies could influence positive change. This type of outreach worker could work to destigmatize and promote youth participants. In turn, companies within the Ottawa region could be inclined to offer internships or voluntary work opportunities, which would give Somali youth practical relevant work-related experience. As mentioned above, the Advisory Committee was particularly concerned for community members that are interested in entering the trades. Such an employee could help provide some groundwork for relationship-building between the community and employers, as well as with trade unions to help connect youth to apprenticeships and advocate for more accessible trade programs.

### **Subsidized Placement Opportunities**

Another approach to minimizing barriers would be to establish a program that could offer subsidies to Somali Youth to design their own placements. While many research participants had known of and/or had participated in public service placement programs and youth-focused employment opportunities, they expressed a dissatisfaction with these experiences; ultimately, these opportunities did not align with their field of study or career goals. Having a program that would allocate funding primarily towards individuals instead of organizations or specific job placements, could create meaningful experiences for Somali Youth, tailored to their needs and individual employment goals.

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