

MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

Final Evaluation of the Student Connections Program (SCP) November 2007

Background

This evaluation study was undertaken by Government Consulting Services (GCS), on behalf of Audit and Evaluation Branch of Industry Canada and the Small Business Policy Branch of Industry Canada. The purpose was to provide Industry Canada with information pertaining to the relevance, the success and the value of the Student Connections Program (SCP).

The evaluation methodology included a document review, review of survey data and administrative data and interviews with 34 key stakeholders. Interview candidates were drawn from the following stakeholder groups: Industry Canada program staff, delivery organization senior officials and staff, school administrators and program coordinators. Two business organizations were also interviewed.

The following is a brief summary of the findings of the evaluation which are provided in more detail in the evaluation report:

1. The Student Connections Program continues to be relevant and necessary.
2. The program continues to meet its performance targets of number of clients trained and number of youth hired.
3. The program is providing its expected benefits to its target groups.
4. The program has produced a number of unintended effects, including increased awareness on the part of youth of entrepreneurial issues and the unique challenges faced by small and medium-sized enterprises.

Student Connections aims to help small and medium-sized businesses become more competitive in the knowledge-based economy by providing practical and affordable Internet and e-commerce training to allow them to adopt on-line business practices.

The program is funded under the Youth Employment Strategy (YES). The strategy and its programs' terms and conditions have been extended for one year and are scheduled to be renewed before March 31, 2009. Findings of this evaluation will provide additional information that will be taken into account in the renewal.

Program management is committed to addressing each of the recommendations found within the evaluation study as set out in the detailed Management Response below. The recommendations include re-examination of some program targets and investigation of program design changes that could assist in assessing the cost-effectiveness of the program in the future.

MANAGEMENT RESPONSE TO THE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Program targets

With regards to Student Connection Program targets, IC should re-examine its targets relating to:

- a) ratio of training done on national products,
 - b) ratio of training on e-commerce products, and
 - c) ratio of sales revenues to the IC allocation of funding,
- to ascertain whether these targets are still useful and valid.

If IC retains the national target relating to the ratio of training done on national products, guidance should be provided to the centres as to how to determine if training is considered national product training. If IC retains the e-commerce target, IC may wish to adjust the target to examine what percentage of Student Business Advisors (SBA) training hours are spent on e-commerce training.

Management Response : Agreed

Targets provide a useful means of measuring, in a quantifiable way, the achievement of program objectives. Student Connections Program targets are set to encourage centres to strive for meaningful results. Most of the targets have remained the same over the three years covered by the evaluation period.

Training targets relating to the ratio of training done on national products and on e-commerce products were developed as a means of ensuring emphasis on particular skill requirements. In 2004-05, centres delivered Student Connections training using paper training manuals that were difficult to update and keep current due to the rapid evolution of information technology and the need for frequent changes to the training modules. In 2005, an electronic content management system (CMS) was purchased. This enabled Centres and outside sources to update sections of the same training products faster and at a reduced cost. The content management system also allowed users to develop customized training modules by assembling sections of several different training products. These new practices may have led to under reporting of training done on national and e-commerce products.

To ensure accurate reporting in the future, program management and the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC), the sole recipient of the contribution, will elaborate clearer parameters for centres to determine how to classify training modules when reporting types of training delivered. Program management is also reviewing the ratio for national and e-

commerce training products to ensure these are appropriate, and will revise the wording of future contribution agreement to strengthen accountability for the achievement of targets.

The program target relating to ratio of sales revenues to the IC allocation of funding is primarily in place to help the recipient monitor the success of individual centres. However, other factors also influence the success of a Centre including its number of years of operation, its available market share and its ability to network with organizations that serve the small business community. Revenue generating activities vary in importance from one Centre to another. Some of the institutions sub-contracted by the recipient do not put significant emphasis on revenue generation as they see the program as an effective way to promote their institution and provide a meaningful work experience to their youth population. Program management will review this target, and if possible, will seek to incorporate other factors mentioned above into the assessment of the success of individual centres in 2008-09.

2. Cost effectiveness

IC should investigate other programs with the aim of identifying comparable programs (if they exist) that can be used as comparators in assessing the cost-effectiveness of the Student Connections Program. In addition, IC should establish targets relating to costs, both at the national and Centre level, and monitor costs.

Management Response : Agreed

The evaluation report concludes that while it appears that the Student Connections Program is cost-effective in light of benefits generated, it is not possible to say so definitively in the absence of centre level cost targets and comparison to similar programs.

Program management, in conjunction with the ACCC, will establish centre level cost targets in the 2008-09 project description and will monitor them as a means of obtaining information to improve program delivery and cost-effectiveness.

The current program design makes it difficult to make cost-effectiveness comparisons with other similar programs (Student Connections is based on reimbursing student interns at an hourly rate, whereas other YES programs fund provide project funding). Should the Youth Employment Strategy be renewed beyond 2009, Program Management will ensure the re-design of the program incorporates measures to demonstrate cost-effectiveness.