

## MANAGEMENT RESPONSE TO A REPORT ENTITLED

### *Evaluation of Industry Canada's Information Highway Applications Branch Youth Employment Strategy Science & Technology Programs*

DATED March 13, 2003

#### **Background**

This evaluation study was commissioned under Industry Canada's ongoing program evaluation process at the request of the Deputy Minister of Industry Canada. SPR Associates Inc. was engaged to undertake the evaluation study on behalf of the Audit and Evaluation Branch of Industry Canada.

The Information Highway Applications Branch (IHAB) has several programs that deliver the Youth Employment Strategy (YES) and receive funding under the Science and Technology Stream (S&T). The current evaluation focused on the following four IHAB YES S&T Programs with objectives related to the Information Highway and to YES:

- SchoolNet Youth Initiative (YI)
- Computers for Schools (CFS) Technical Work Experience Program (TWEP)
- SkillNet Youth Initiative (YI)
- Information Highway, Science and Entrepreneurship (ISE) Camps

The evaluation study addressed the following main issues:

- Is there a need for IHAB YES S&T programs?
- Are the IHAB YES S&T program structure and delivery appropriate?
- What results (intended or unintended) have been achieved by the program?
- What are the lessons learned, how can the program be improved?

The Youth Employment Strategy (YES), announced in February 1997, is led by Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) and delivered in cooperation with 14 federal departments and agencies. The strategy builds on the success of programs and services already in place to assist youth in making a successful transition from school to work. It addresses the issue of high youth unemployment by helping young Canadians access work experience, career planning information and learning opportunities.

YES received an allocation of \$315M, and was to end on March 31, 1999. In December 1998, YES was continued at \$130M per year to offer employment opportunities under four funding streams: International Internships, Science and Technology (S&T) Internships, First Nations and Inuit Youth Internships and Summer Student Placements. Transition funding was approved for fiscal year 2002-03.

On November 5, 2002, HRDC presented to the Cabinet Committee on Social Union (CCSU) a policy framework on a realigned YES to address the changing needs of young Canadians and the labour market. In February 2003, Treasury Board approved the umbrella YES Terms and Conditions and amended SchoolNet and CAP Terms and Conditions.

Under the new administrative structure, the YES has a total budget of \$130M per year of which \$19.807M is allocated to Industry Canada. The YES funds are secured through fiscal year 2007-08.

The renewed strategy realigns YES to three integrated programs: Career Focus, Skills Link and Summer Work Experience. For 2003-04, the YES IHAB S&T programs fall under the Career Focus program. The objectives of this program are to increase the supply of highly qualified people in Canada, to facilitate the transition of highly-skilled young people to a rapidly changing labour market and to promote the benefits of advanced studies.

As indicated in the evaluation, between 1999 and 2002, IHAB YES S&T programs assisted almost 3,000 youth in finding employment and have directly provided Information and Communications Technology (ICT) skills and knowledge to an estimated quarter million Canadians. Evaluation results also indicate a continuing benefit from, and need for, the federal government to invest in IHAB YES Programs. The programs help keep Canada competitive with other countries by expanding Canada's communications infrastructure and by promoting the development of ICT skills, which are essential for Canadians in competing in today's knowledge-based economy. Findings for each main evaluation issue indicate that the program rationale was appropriate, that delivery was generally effective, and that results were significant and positive. Program management is committed to addressing all the recommendations in the evaluation study in light of the realigned Youth Employment Strategy, current Program authority and within the timeframe set out in the detailed Management Response below.

## **1.0 Recommendations for Management of IHAB YES S&T Programs**

### **Recommendation 1: continue and, if possible, expand IHAB S&T Programs.**

*Computer and Internet skills are becoming as fundamental to our society as math and science. ICT-related programs need to continue and/or to grow to meet this increasing need. Evaluation results support expansion of this program (see Sections 4.1, 4.5 and 5.)*

**Management Response:** Agree. The IHAB S&T programs have a solid track record, and provide good value on investment.

**Follow-up Action:** The programs are derived from the SchoolNet program authority, which is scheduled to terminate on March 31, 2004. Industry Canada's YES programs for the following fiscal years will be determined once the future direction of IHAB is established. The youth initiative component of SkillNet.ca may be discontinued in 2003-04 due to the reduction in SkillNet activities<sup>(1)</sup>.

In 2003-04, the programs will promote the youth initiatives to more libraries, ministries of education, educational institutes, and non-profit organizations to support increased access to, and effective use of, ICT by Canadian learners and learning professionals. As an example, CFS TWEP is in the process of implementing a Skills and Career Development Strategy, which will have a positive impact on its young interns, as well as the young volunteers, who help deliver the program.

**Timeframe:** 2003-04

(1) All follow-up actions for SkillNet YI will depend on whether the youth initiative component of the program continues.

**Recommendation 2: streamline proposal/funding** so that organizations receive funding in time to hire youth when they are most needed, with no need for "bridge funding." In addition, providing organizations with an early response from Industry Canada about whether they will receive funding so that they can plan accordingly would be helpful (see Section 5).

**Management Response:** Agree

**Follow-up Action:** Programs are developing a set of criteria that will enable organizations to receive funding in a more timely manner. Early commitment to funding requests will allow recipients to better plan operations and secure the contribution of other program supporters. It will also provide the recipient with the ability to spend core or additional funding within the fiscal year. Furthermore, Industry Canada has entered into discussions with HRDC regarding the timing of the mid-year budget review process to allow decisions on budget reallocation no later than mid-October.

**Timeframe:** 2003-04

**Recommendation 3: improve monitoring and database.** *Monitoring and Evaluation of IHAB YES S&T Programs would benefit from having a more complete, up-to-date database of employer and youth intern contact and demographic information. Industry Canada provided the evaluators with access to their "Youth Exit Survey Database" which contained the names and contact information of all youth who completed an "Exit Survey" at the end of their internship. The database was missing contact information for youth who worked for an S&T program, but did not fill out an exit survey. Industry Canada would benefit from collecting contact information from all youth interns in IHAB Programs, rather than only for those who complete an exit survey. This would allow evaluators in the future to greatly increase the validity of findings by being able to survey a pool of all youth interns rather than the self-selected sub-sample, and also aid long-term studies.*

*In order to compile an accurate database of information and statistics, Industry Canada should require employers to submit more detailed information on their organizations and on their youth interns as part of the administrative process. This could be done on-line, in keeping with the spirit of the program. Additionally, this would fill the need for ongoing employer input, and be especially useful if a brief survey on satisfaction and results were included, possibly including some questions derived from Treasury Board's Common Measurement Tool for client satisfaction (see Sections 3 and 4.7).*

**Management response:** Agree

**Follow-up Action:** SchoolNet's RMAF was reviewed in February 2003 to reflect the essential criteria of the umbrella YES RMAF, including data collection and reporting. As a result, a new set of assessment tools are being developed to allow better tracking of youth who have participated in the programs (please see follow-up action for Recommendation 4). The database

will be reviewed to ensure that the data being collected meets the reporting needs of the new Career Focus program and provides required information about employers and youth interns.

**Timeframe:** 2003-04

**Recommendation 4: assess needs of program users** *in order to generate future information highway impacts of Industry Canada's investments, a more detailed assessment of the programs effect on the consumers of these programs would be of value (e.g. clients of the organizations who employ youth interns, or clients who are taught by youth interns, etc.) (See Sections 4.3 and 4.5.)*

**Management Response:** Agree

**Follow-up Action:** Work resulting from the integration of an updated database and the monitoring requirements, as put forward in recommendation 3, will provide the ability to assess the needs of program users. As a result of the YES realignment, client assessments will be required for Career Focus participants to ensure that the program is assisting youth who fit the participant profile and who can benefit from assistance to develop their careers. This client assessment tool will be developed by the programs this fiscal year. In addition to client assessment, other program specific activities will also be undertaken. For example, the Skills and Career Development Strategy being developed by CFS TWEP will contribute to employability skills development of youth participants.

**Timeframe:** 2003-04

**Recommendation 5: assess needs of targeted Canadian organizations.** *To assess the need for possible expansion of programs such as IHAB YES S&T, an assessment of the needs of organizations nation-wide would need to be conducted. Such a study would investigate issues such as needs for staff who are knowledgeable about computers and/or the Internet, needs for computers and Internet access, and changing types of needs of current staff in relation to ICT knowledge gaps (i.e., does their current staff require training or refresher courses regarding computer, software, or Internet-related issues?) Such knowledge would aid future IHAB YES S&T Programs (see Sections 4.5 and 4.6).*

**Management Response:** Agree, depending on the future direction of IHAB.

**Follow-up Action:** Should the Branch decide on continuing with these types of programs in the future, an assessment of the needs of targeted organizations would be undertaken to improve the alignment between IHAB YES program activities and organizational needs.

**Timeframe:** Post 2003-04

## 2.0 Recommendations Regarding Program Structure

**Recommendation 6: improve program awareness.** *Many youth interns were unaware that they were part of a Government-funded program until well after they were hired and over one-third of respondents were told about the program by a teacher or a friend (see Section 4.7). This points to a lack of proper dissemination of information regarding IHAB YES S&T Programs. Given the subject matter of the internships, information regarding the program might best be accessed if it were placed on the Internet, perhaps on common job-searching web sites, in addition to Government web sites.*

**Management Response:** Agree with the qualification that the dissemination of information on the programs through informal processes (i.e. teachers and/or friends) can be an appropriate means of communication.

**Follow-up Action:** In addition to each program's website, the HRDC Youth Employment Information website, is the main website for information on employment and careers for youth and provides links to all IHAB YES programs. The programs will continue to work with their delivery partners to better promote YES and to raise awareness among youth and employers that these youth employment activities are made possible through federal funding. In addition, for 2003-04, a global Industry Canada YES Communications Strategy is being considered that would encompass all departmental youth initiatives. Various other activities will also be undertaken to improve awareness of the program. As an example, ISE Camps will continue to ask organizations to include information regarding funding on their promotional materials. In addition, CFS TWEP will revise the TWEP Information Kit and will reinforce the practice of distributing kits when hiring.

**Timeframe:** 2003-04

**Recommendation 7: increase duration of internships/provide more flexible internship.** *Both youth and employers felt that the program should last longer than 13 weeks, in order to correspond more closely to the school semester, to respond to increasing needs, and so that youth can obtain more work experience (see Section 5). To address this issue, longer-term or part-time, year-round positions could be created to aid those organizations that require help year-round. Such a program could also aid youth who are still attending school.*

**Management Response:** Agree. Under the new Career Focus Program, the maximum duration of work experience for a participant is one year and normally full time (i.e. 30+ hours per week). Within Industry Canada, guidelines on duration of work experience are flexible to suit the requirements of each program and youth participants (i.e. 4 to 12 months).

**Follow-up Action:** IHAB YES programs will consider reviewing their guidelines regarding program duration to further improve the alignment between program requirements and the needs of participants.

**Timeframe:** 2003-04

**Recommendation 8: Provide better-defined learning opportunities** *because the programs continue to be called "internships," there is an implicit assumption that the interns will learn new skills. However, because employers benefit most from youth who already possess considerable skill and knowledge in the area of computers and the Internet, they will often hire the most experienced youth. As a result, youth who lack experience may not be hired for the program and miss the opportunity to gain experience. In addition, highly qualified youth who do get hired often know more about computers than their employers and often do not feel that they have learned much related to ICT during their internship (see Section 5). To address this issue, the program should be designed to better identify the level of ICT knowledge needed for internships. Employers should clearly communicate their goals and outline, both in their proposal to Industry Canada and to the youth themselves prior to their being hired, the learning opportunities they are able to provide to youth, to ensure that there is no misunderstanding. "Tiering" of internships by level of experience could aid this (see recommendation 9).*

**Management Response:** Agree. As a result of the YES realignment, client assessments will be required for Career Focus participants to ensure that the program is assisting youth, who fit the participant profile, and who can benefit from assistance to develop their careers. As well, other program specific activities will be undertaken to further enhance and define youth learning opportunities.

**Follow-up Action:** The programs are developing the client assessment for this fiscal year. Regarding other program specific activities, SchoolNet, for example, is developing an information kit for both interns and employers that will outline the goals and objectives of the program. Employers will be asked to clearly communicate their goals and outline the learning opportunities in their proposal. This will be communicated to the interns once hired. As another example, CFS TWEP contracted the Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF) to conduct a needs assessment and interviews of participants and instructors at CFS workshops. CFS will review the CCDF findings and assess the opportunities to integrate and build a career development culture within CFS workshops.

**Timeframe:** 2003-04

**Recommendation 9: facilitate more flexible pay scales** *because the interns that tend to get hired are very knowledgeable, both the youth interns and employers feel that interns are not getting paid a salary that reflects their skills (see Section 5). To address this issue, employers should pay highly qualified youth a higher wage, through their own "top-ups," with the help of either increased Industry Canada funding, or through partnerships with community agencies or others. Another possibility which might address some of the above concerns would be to implement a youth intern mentoring program with a tiered pay-scale/funding scale, wherein more highly qualified youth are paid a higher wage to perform their regular duties, while also being responsible for teaching less experienced interns who are paid less yet who are more in need of obtaining ICT-related experience. Changes in this area could be linked to a longer work term.*

**Management Response:** Agree.

**Follow-up:** Employer top-ups of youth salary will continue to be suggested to employers. IHAB will consider a suggested pay scale based on education and experience that would be communicated to employers. The programs will continue to work to offer salary levels that represent the best value per dollar of skills development and employability of youth, within the limitations of program delivery.

**Timeframe:** 2003-04

### 3.0 Recommendations for Future Evaluation Initiatives

**Recommendation 10: plan for future evaluations addressing reach and cost-effectiveness.** *Some of the recommendations noted above regarding annual reports, surveys of employers and improved databases, will aid future evaluations. Additionally, some of the needs-oriented research suggested will aid in the identification of more exact results indicators. Any future evaluation of these programs should consider methodologies for addressing program "fit" with changing ICT needs, cost-effectiveness and reach.*

**Management Response:** Agree. Depending on the future direction of IHAB, program management would support including the study of changing ICT needs, cost-effectiveness and reach in future evaluations.

**Follow-up Action:** This is reflected in the updated SchoolNet RMAF and as such, will be included in future evaluations.

**Timeframe:** Evaluations, post 2003-04