

Strategic Initiatives Evaluation



Success Nova Scotia 2000



Human Resources
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A Process Evaluation of Success Nova Scotia 2000

Final Report

Evaluation and Data Development

Strategic Policy

November, 1996

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This report is one of three evaluation reports to be produced on Success Nova Scotia 2000. The second report, an interim report planned for 1997, will focus on issues associated with the development of a learning culture. The third report, a summative evaluation of the initiative, will assess the impact and cost-effectiveness of the program and is planned for 1998-99.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This report presents the findings of a process evaluation of the *Nova Scotia Links (NS Links)* component of *Success Nova Scotia 2000 (SNS 2000)*. The program is a joint Canada/Nova Scotia initiative supported as a pilot project under the federal government's *Strategic Initiatives Program*. This project, initiated by the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture, is supported by contributions from the Province of Nova Scotia and Canada.

SNS 2000 is a five year, \$13.94 million federal-provincial project designed to bridge the gap between educational experience and the world of work for up to 3,000 post-secondary students in Nova Scotia.

Evaluation Findings: Implementation

NS Links had completed two work terms and its first year of operation at the time of the evaluation. Some 310 students and 220 employers had taken part in the program during this period, ending in September 1995. Total funding for the program was \$2.17 million, including \$1.63 million in wage subsidies provided by the public sector sponsors, and \$0.54 million contributed by employers.

The evaluation examined three major issues along with several secondary issues:

- program need and focus, related to student and employer client eligibility;
 - who should be the student clients of the program and what are their needs;
 - who should be the employer clients and what are their needs; and
 - what kinds of jobs in what kind of industries and occupations should be eligible?
- the function and role of advisors within the organizational structure, and providing community input to placement decisions; and
- developing inclusionary strategies for minority groups, and in particular, ways to improve the participation of Black and Mi'Kmaq students.

Other issues concern the unintended impact of the wage subsidy, the potential overlap and duplication with post-secondary co-op programs, the marketing of the program and the quality and completeness of baseline data for the impact evaluation.

The *NS Links* program was inaugurated within the Department of Education and Culture with a small staff complement who were given a mandate to establish systems and procedures, and develop a working administrative structure. Within the Department and Division, in-kind contributions were elicited from a number of sources. Regional Career and Transition Services staff contributed their time and resources to developing and delivering *NS Links* training modules, monitoring placements, and facilitating Regional Working Groups at the local level. A group of in-house managers from the Adult Learning and Innovation division contributed their time during the development stage of the program to the formation of a *NS Links* management team.

Evaluation Findings: Program Results

These “results” presented are the first-level outcomes and preliminary impacts of *NS Links*, based on activity to date.

Student Participants

Student participants identified a number of factors that made their internship a positive experience. The internship:

- *NS Links* career goals and objectives to a real job while providing real skills and experience;
- applies theory in the workplace;
- teaches team skills;
- permits independent work with appropriate supervision;
- enhances personal growth and responsibility; and
- exposes interns to the business world.

Virtually all of the students completed their internships; the completion rate was 94 percent. Three of the six students that left before completion left as a result of “getting a job”.

Two thirds of the 34 students who found a job after their placement were hired by their *NS Links* employer; 77 percent of these “hired” students were working full-time when interviewed.

Employer Participants

To employers, the wage subsidy is the single most important feature of *NS Links* compared to other internship programs —55 percent of the 80 employer respondents cited this feature. The ease of the application process and the reputation of the program accounted for 19 and 12 percent of the reasons for participation, respectively.

Employers do not see the subsidy as a “bonus”. By itself it is neither necessary or sufficient to encourage employers to hire. The employer must first be open to the idea of student employment as a first step in the process. The evaluation found that the subsidy serves to solidify the interest into a commitment. The placement process was well received by employers. Three out of four employers reported that they were “very satisfied” with the *NS Links* placement process.

About 88 percent of employers from the summer work-term that completed the Project Evaluation questionnaires reported they would hire their student for a full-time job if one were available.

One *NS Links* objective is to change the opinions of employers about hiring students and learning. Results from the evaluation do not indicate any significant changes in company attitudes towards learning to date.

The three greatest strengths of the program from an employer perspective, ranked by importance are:

- the subsidized wages;
- benefits accrue to both students and employers; and,
- the ease of [administrative] access to the program.

NS Links also allows employers to test out a potential employee for several months without having to commit to hiring them full time.

NS Links will increase its effectiveness and long-term results if it concentrates on smaller companies that have not been, or can not afford to be, committed to student development through the internship experience of *NS Links*.

Suggestions for improving the program by employers generally focused on the timing of the work terms and the approval process.

Recommendations

NS Links is doing a good job in helping Nova Scotia students to obtain career-related work experience. Employers are generally pleased with the program and support its goals of student development. The program has encouraged some employers to hire students where they would not have done so in the past. *NS Links* is particularly helpful to small businesses in the province.

There is no doubt that the anticipated immediate results — career-related placements for students — are being attained. Our recommendations focus on program delivery adjustments in order to produce the anticipated *longer term impacts* in a cost-effective and accountable manner. The recommendations are also designed to strengthen the linkage between the program and HRDC's *Strategic Initiatives Program*.

The recommendations require minor program modifications to focus the program to best meet the needs of its clients — students and employers — and its stakeholders.

The seven recommendations designed to improve the implementation of *NS Links* and facilitate the impact evaluation of the program are:

- Recommendation 1: Focus the Program on Non Co-op Students;
- Recommendation 2: Continue to Encourage Participation by Small Business;
- Recommendation 3: Improve the Marketing of the Program;
- Recommendation 4: Continue to Develop an Inclusionary Student Model;
- Recommendation 5: Examine the Wage Rate Subsidy;
- Recommendation 6: Establish a Database for Effective Program Management;
- Recommendation 7: Establish a Mechanism for Student Follow-up.

Work to implement several of these recommendations is already underway and should continue. The recommendations related to the database and student follow-up require both a management and a resource commitment.

The more challenging recommendations, dealing with the focusing of the program, are the most important to the longer term success of *NS Links*. The program must implement these in order to meet its objectives and support the *Strategic Initiatives Program*.

Management Response

The *SNS 2000* Joint Management Committee, a group consisting of representatives from the two signatories to the *SNS 2000* cooperation agreement, Human Resource Development Canada and the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture, was responsible for the development of this management response. The process evaluation has provided a unique opportunity for both partners in *SNS 2000* to highlight and discuss the major issues, both positive and negative, which have arisen during the first operational year of *NS Links*.

The process evaluation itself deals primarily with the more technical aspects of *NS Links*, such as client groups, organizational structure, and administrative issues. The concepts of fostering a learning environment in relation to student internship, promoting the further development of a learning culture in the private sector, and forging successful partnerships with relevant stakeholders are not analysed in detail in the report. However, these concepts are all established components of the main goals of *SNS 2000* and the *NS Links* program. Because the major portion of the research for the evaluation report was conducted during a period when the *NS Links* program was still in its initial year of development, most of the recommendations made in the evaluation document had already been identified as issues by program staff and, in some cases, appropriate action responses had been implemented prior to the completion of the final report.

The major findings of the evaluation and subsequent action taken by *NS Links* program staff to date are as follows.

Recommendation 1: Focus the Program on Non Co-op Students

The report points out that students enrolled in co-operative education programs already have the benefits of many of the career-related development activities that NS Links aspires to obtain for students. Therefore, the program should target the majority of post-secondary students who are not enrolled in a Co-op program, but not completely exclude Co-op students from participation in the NS Links. The most viable option to address this issue is believed to be a marketing strategy which is aimed at non Co-op students and employers who have not hired students in the past.

Response: At the outset of the process evaluation, *NS Links* had been in operation for one year and during that year just over 40% of program participants were Co-op students. The primary reason for this relatively high percentage was that Co-op programs had the necessary infrastructure and employer network in place to react quickly when the new program was announced and thereby provided the Province with

the ability to become involved with the opportunity presented by *NS Links*. Since that time, considerable marketing and communications effort has been directed at non Co-op students through employment centres/student services offices at post-secondary institutions. As a result, the percentage of 1996 Co-op participants has been reduced to 33%, including a low of 24% during the 1996 summer term. These recent figures are well below the recommended ceiling of 40% Co-op participants set by the consultants and this trend should continue over the next three years as marketing and communications efforts are improved.

Recommendation 2: Continue to Encourage Participation by Small Business

The evaluation found that NS Links has been successful to date in encouraging small business to hire students for career-related placements. The consultants' rationale for continuing to emphasize small business is two-fold. First, it appears as if larger businesses are more likely to hire students without a wage subsidy while small businesses often need the financial incentive to hire. Second, focus group and survey research revealed that students placed in small business felt that they were exposed to a wider range of work experience than students who worked in large businesses. Increased marketing of the program to smaller businesses and using the subsidy as a mechanism to lever small business participation were seen as possible options to deal with this recommendation.

Response: According to the evaluation report, approximately 53% of employers who participated in the program in 1995 had 10 or less employees and only 28% had more than 25 employees. In 1996, this trend has continued as approximately 55% of employers to date have had 10 or less employees and 25% have had more than 25 employees. Due to the predominance of small business in the Nova Scotian economy, combined with a steady increase in marketing efforts, this trend is expected to continue.

Recommendation 3: Improve the Marketing of the Program

This recommendation is linked to the two previous recommendations to address the two primary clients of the program, students and employers. Comments from various NS Links clients indicated that the program was not as widely known as could be expected after one year of operation.

Response: Since the evaluation research was conducted there have been significant developments in terms of marketing and communications. As of the Spring of 1996, a network of six Regional Working Groups (RWGs) has been established and formalized. These groups consist of private sector representatives, students, government officials and other stakeholders in the *NS Links* program. Part of the mandate of these RWGs is to help informally market the program on a local level and activity is beginning to take shape in relation to this aspect of their mandate. In terms of marketing, a term staff member has been brought on to design a marketing strategy for the program and province-wide focus group research, looking specifically at the marketing-related needs

of the program, has recently been completed by a private sector firm. As a result of these marketing activities, new promotional materials for the program are being developed and existing materials revised. Also, a media- communications campaign is currently in its initial stages.

Recommendation 4: Continue to Develop an Inclusionary Student Model

The report indicates that NS Links has made a good start in developing an inclusionary delivery model for minority students and program staff should continue to make the necessary minor adjustments to the program in order to continue developing this model with the Mi'Kmaq and African Nova Scotia communities.

Response: Prior to the evaluation, a partnership was forged with the Unama'ki Training and Education Centre in Eskasoni in order to develop placements for a number of Aboriginal post-secondary students in Cape Breton. This partnership, referred to as the *NS Links* Multicultural Facilitation (LMF) program, has been re-negotiated for this fiscal year and will continue to provide career-related placements in that region. Recently, the delivery model used for the LMF has been used as a resource in the establishment of a partnership with the Black Educators Association to develop placements for African Nova Scotians. A limited number of placements are being run with members of this community during this summer term while the formal partnership is being finalized. *NS Links* staff are also in the initial stages of working with a variety of stakeholders in order to develop placements for persons with disabilities.

Recommendation 5: Examine the Wage Rate Subsidy

The evaluation research indicated that some employers, especially very small businesses and businesses outside of the Halifax Metro region, are not supportive of the wage rates they are required to pay under the NS Links program (basically \$8/hour or \$10/hour). The report states that these wage rates are having an unintended impact on some employers who have to pay wages that are equal to or higher than those paid to other full time or non-NS Links staff. A system through which wage rates are negotiated with employers based on market rates and an additional education subsidy is paid directly to the student is proposed as a possible solution to this problem.

Response: When the *NS Links* program was originally designed, the required wage rates were set at \$8 or \$10 per hour in order to address the stated program objective of helping students reduce their future student debt load. In other words, the wage rates were established based on student needs rather than employer needs. As the wage subsidy is phased out, it is probable that this issue will become more problematic. To date, the wage rates have remained at stated levels. A system such as the one proposed in the report, while potentially desirable, is simply not possible due to the administration involved in negotiating and establishing a separate wage rate with each employer. In the process of researching and possibly testing alternative funding

schemes during the latter years of the agreement, there does exist the potential to try innovative approaches in dealing with the wage rate issue. However, it is important to reiterate that the focus of the wage rate is not to discourage employers but to ensure that students are being paid a rate that is consistent with the increasing cost of post-secondary education.

Recommendation 6: Establish a Database for Effective Program Management

At the time of the evaluation, no consistent database of NS Links participants had been developed. The consultants indicate that a computerized database is essential for the effective linking of information and for the success of the final evaluation. The recommendation is that a database be established "as soon as possible" to maximize the usefulness of the information collected now and to minimize additional work that will be required later in the evaluation.

Response: During the current summer term, a computer science student was hired to develop and implement a database system for *NS Links*. The database has been selected (Microsoft Access) and developed in consultation with program staff. By the end of the summer, all former and current student and employer participants were entered into the new system.

Recommendation 7: Establish a Mechanism for Student Follow-up

One of the most important success indicators for the NS Links program is the degree of success former participants have in securing career-related employment upon graduation. According to the report, without the capability of contacting student participants it will be difficult to accurately assess the impact of NS Links. To this end, a mechanism which provides an annual postcard to former interns and includes a financial incentive for students who keep in touch is proposed.

Response: Because most of the *NS Links* interns from the first two years of the program are still attending school, there is no follow-up data available on *NS Links* participants at the current time. However, a number of *NS Links* questions have been included on a post-secondary graduate follow up survey being conducted by the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission. The telephone survey is being administered to the 120 former *NS Links* interns who have graduated as of the spring of 1996. The results of the entire survey should be available for analysis by *NS Links* staff in the fall of this year. It is unclear as to whether both the funding and partnership to support this mechanism will be in place over the long term. If not, a system similar to the one proposed by the consultants but which imposes less of a financial and administrative burden on the *NS Links* program may have to be pursued.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background to NS Links: Strategic Initiatives

SNS 2000 is a joint Canada/Nova Scotia initiative supported under the federal government's *Strategic Initiatives Program* announced in the Federal Budget of February 22, 1994. This pilot project, initiated by the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture, is supported by contributions from the Province of Nova Scotia and Canada.

SNS 2000 and other pilot projects funded under the *Strategic Initiatives Program* throughout Canada are intended to enable the federal government, in partnership with the provincial/territorial governments, to experiment with new and emerging ideas about social security. *Strategic Initiatives* projects concentrate on improving job opportunities for Canadians and enabling those facing serious labour market problems to overcome barriers to successful adjustment, while reducing their dependence on the social security system. The pilot projects are meant to provide significant contributions to the process of social security reform now underway at the federal and provincial levels.

The overall objective of the *Strategic Initiatives Program* is to learn new approaches for dealing with social security challenges within the constraints of the fiscal framework facing all levels of government. Pilot projects supported under the program must have various specific objectives to assist in achieving that goal. Projects may be designed to:

- demonstrate ways of reducing reliance on government assistance
 - by removal of disincentives to employment and training; and
 - by increasing incentives to participate in meaningful opportunities which result in long-term labour market attachment;
- demonstrate ways of eliminating duplication among programs offered by different governments;
- improve service to clients and increase efficiencies to reduce administrative costs by better linkages between labour market training/education and social services; and,

- strengthen partnerships, not only with provincial and territorial governments, but with communities, learning institutions, employers, unions, and sectoral organizations, as well as individuals and families in developing skills and job opportunities.

Criteria for funding *Strategic Initiatives Program* pilot projects emphasize unique methods of dealing with the identified problems of federal client groups. Under the *Strategic Initiatives Program*, the federal government planned to allocate a total of \$800 million in the 1995-96 and 1996-97 budgets towards *Strategic Initiatives*¹. Federal funding for projects started in 1994-95 was through a reallocation of \$92 million from existing resources.

Evaluation is an important and integral component of the pilot projects. All funded *Strategic Initiatives* projects are designed to allow an objective evaluation of the selected approach. Lessons learned from these projects on what works — and what does not — will be shared widely so that governments can learn from each others' experience and avoid duplication of effort. Results of pilot projects will be assessed for consistency with federal and provincial/territorial objectives and their impacts and effects.

1.2 Purpose and Focus of SNS 2000

Labour Force Survey data from 1994 indicate that average unemployment rates in Nova Scotia for youth aged 20-24 years exceeded 22 percent. The comparable national rate, 15 percent, was two thirds of the Nova Scotia rate. The overall provincial unemployment rate of 13.3 percent was 60 percent of the rate for the youth of the province.

SNS 2000 is meant to address one of the major issues related to this high youth unemployment rate: a lack of work-related experience amongst new post-secondary graduates. *SNS 2000* is a five year, \$13.94 million federal-provincial initiative funded under the *Strategic Initiatives Program* and designed to bridge the gap between educational experience and the world of work for up to 3,000 post-secondary students. *SNS 2000* provides the opportunity to test innovative approaches to transitional employment-related programming. Details on the program design are presented in the following chapter.

¹ This amount was reduced to \$400 million in the 1995/96 federal budget.

The overall objective of *SNS 2000*, described in Schedule A of the Canada/Nova Scotia *SNS 2000* Agreement, is “to employ an inclusionary philosophy that will provide structured pathways to the world of work and foster the development of a life-long learning culture in Nova Scotia”. *SNS 2000* has two components:

- *NS Links Program*: a post-secondary internship program designed to facilitate labour market entry for students through career-related work-placements in the private sector.
- *Training Culture Communications Strategy*: a communications strategy delivered through an awareness campaign that emphasizes the value of creative internships and the importance of developing a learning culture.

This evaluation of *SNS 2000* focuses on the *NS Links* component. The Training Culture Communications Strategy is presently in the implementation stage of development and is not included in this evaluation.

1.3 Approach and Objectives of the Process Evaluation

The design of *NS Links* encompasses a commitment to monitoring and on-going evaluation of the program. This approach is meant to provide timely and pertinent information to program managers as well as federal and provincial policy officers. The evaluation is meant to be conducted in three major phases: a formative or process evaluation, an interim evaluation and a summative evaluation.

The first phase evaluation concentrates on the linkages between the stated objectives of *NS Links* and its program design. The objectives of this process evaluation are twofold:

- to provide timely information on the administration, management and operations of *SNS 2000* so that improvements in project design and delivery can be implemented where necessary; and
- to contribute to the process of social security reform now underway in Canada.

The process evaluation is designed to examine the issues and questions related to program relevance, implementation, design and delivery and other program characteristics. Moreover, the evaluation is meant to ensure that “all necessary elements for a rigorous phase three summative evaluation are in place.”²

The second phase evaluation — an interim evaluation — will be undertaken in 1997 and will focus on the issues associated with the development of a learning culture. The third phase evaluation — the summative evaluation — will be undertaken near the end of the five year pilot phase of *SNS 2000* and will focus on the outcomes and longer term results of the program — its impacts and effects.

At the time of this evaluation, *NS Links* had completed two work terms and its first year of operation. Some 310 students and 220 employers took part in the program during this period, ending in September 1995. Total funding for the program to the time of the evaluation is \$2.17 million, including \$1.63 million in wage subsidies provided by the public sector sponsors, and \$0.54 million contributed by employers. The completion of this initial start-up and implementation phase of the *NS Links* program serves as the basis for the phase one process evaluation.

1.4 Evaluation Methodologies

The evaluation used the following methodologies to address the *NS Links* process evaluation issues:

- *Key Informant Interviews* with 20 senior officials and designers of *SNS 2000*, employers, persons involved in the design and delivery of co-operative education and persons within the *NS Links* program environment;
- *Focus Groups* with Provincial Steering Committee, Regional Working Group in Yarmouth, Career Services Officials, Co-op and Non Co-op Student Participants and Employers in Halifax and Truro;
- *Case Studies* on the implementation of *NS Links* within the African Nova Scotian and Mi’Kmaq communities;
- *File and Document Review* of *NS Links* program documents, proposal, and research materials related to the program;

² *SNS 2000* Monitoring and Evaluation Framework, April 1995, page 22.

- *Survey Analysis* of 246 Baseline Surveys completed by *NS Links* Students from the two 1995 work terms and 84 Employer Project Evaluations completed by employers from the 1995 summer work term; and,
- *Client Surveys* of a random sample of 100 students and 36 employer clients.

Details of the methodologies are provided in Appendix E.

1.5 Overview of the Report

This report is organized in three main parts, following this introductory chapter. Part A provides the context to the report, including the design of the process evaluation and the characteristics of the *NS Links* clients. Part B presents the findings of the process evaluation. Five appendices provide additional details on the process evaluation. The specific chapters are:

Part A — The Program Design

Chapter 2: *The Design of NS Links* — describes the underlying rationale for *NS Links*, the need for the program and its anticipated impacts and effects;

Chapter 3: *Evaluation Issues* — identifies the evaluation issues and focus of the evaluation;

Chapter 4: *Characteristics of NS Links Clients* — profiles the student and employer clients of *NS Links* based on characteristics from work term self-evaluations;

Part B — The Evaluation Findings

Chapter 5: *The Implementation of NS Links* — sets out the findings with respect to the main evaluation issues including program relevance, organizational structure, program response to minority students and other issues;

Chapter 6: *Results from 1995 Program Activities* — provides preliminary program results from our analysis of program activities, interviews, focus groups and sample surveys of students and employers; and

Chapter 7: Addressing the Issues — presents recommendations for improving the *NS Links* program, based on the analysis provided in the previous chapters.

Appendix A: Issues Matrix Concordance — is a table that cross-references the evaluation findings with the issues set out in the Issues Matrix developed for the Evaluation Framework;

Appendix B: Interview Protocols — includes the protocols for focus groups with students, employers and others as well as interview guides for key informants; and,

Appendix C: Student and Employer Questionnaires — provides the student and employer questionnaires used in the evaluation; frequency responses to each question are included as well.

Appendix D: Summary of Student and Employer Focus Groups — includes salient results from the employer and student focus groups.

Appendix E: Evaluation Methodologies — presents the methodologies employed in conducting the process evaluation.

2.0 The Design of NS Links

2.1 Underlying Program Rationale

2.1.1 Need for the Program

NS Links is designed to improve the employability of Nova Scotia youth with post-secondary education. The basic premise of this supply-side approach is that employment of post-secondary graduates will grow as a direct result of an increase in career-related experience and a more focused awareness of how to achieve their career goals. Related supply-side barriers to increased employment include an inadequate or under-developed appreciation by the private sector of the mutual benefits of hiring post-secondary students and a commitment by the private sector to a learning culture.

Secondary to the program goal of increased employment is the more immediate need of students for income to finance their education. *NS Links* is meant to provide wage income to students to increase their ability to continue their post-secondary education and decrease their overall indebtedness.

A different perspective is obtained when youth employment is viewed in the context of structural changes to the economy. Employer demand for new skills and for new employees is strongly tied to these changes. Some of the salient characteristics in the emerging Canadian economy include:

- changes in the structure of the labour market, including a shift from full-time to part-time jobs;
- changes both in the type of jobs and industries, including an increased reliance on knowledge, technology and innovation;
- increased competition from global companies;
- increased downsizing of traditional industries, including government, along with increased contracting out of “non-core” skills and activities; and,

- changes in employee skill and attitude requirements, from those of traditional task-driven employees to flexible, multi-skilled team players who can think creatively.

The Nova Scotia economy faces a number of similar challenges. The following factors had an influence on the design of *NS Links*:

- the reliance on traditional but declining resource-based industries, particularly in communities outside the Halifax area;
- the substantial but diminishing role of government in the economy and a high reliance on transfer payments within the provincial economy;
- low levels of innovation, technology adoption and adaptation³; and,
- generally conservative attitudes on business risk-taking, resulting in low internal levels of business investment and an underdeveloped entrepreneurial culture.⁴

These factors contribute to weak employment demand for new post-secondary graduates in the province. The importance of the linkage between employment and appropriate skills and experience is clear from the results of an August 1995 survey of the small-business sector in Atlantic Canada by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business. Responses to the survey by some 450 member-companies in the province indicate that “33.9 percent of businesses in Nova Scotia would hire if they could find people with appropriate skills”.

Labour force data reveal a paradox of unfilled, high-skill jobs in knowledge-based industries in the midst of high overall unemployment levels. This situation is further evidence of the need for programs that provide post-secondary students with the range of skills and experience that employers require. *NS Links* is specifically designed to address these needs and the factors cited above.

³ Canada Consulting Group, “Developing a More Innovative Economy - A Research Component of the NS Economic Strategy Project”, pages 8-12, April, 1990.

⁴ ACOA, “The State of Small Business and Entrepreneurship in Atlantic Canada - 1994”, ISBN 0-662-98937-6, 1994, pages 78-83.

2.1.2 NS Links Objectives

NS Links is meant to integrate the demand-supply perspective. Schedule A of the Canada/Nova Scotia co-operation agreement concerning “*SNS 2000*” sets out five objectives of *NS Links*:

- to establish partnerships between the educational sector and the private sector which create structured pathways to the work world;
- to enable students to gain work experience relevant to their career goals [and to assist them to evaluate their career direction based on that experience];
- to assist the private sector to benefit from the information and new ideas that students bring through their participation in business and industry;
- to assist students in obtaining the necessary financial resources to continue in post-secondary education and reduce their student debt; and,
- to encourage self-sufficiency by defining the role of entrepreneurship and life-long learning in career/life planning, thereby decreasing future dependency on the social safety net.

These objectives are encompassed in the design of *NS Links*.

2.1.3 Unique and Innovative Program Features

Programs funded under the *Strategic Initiatives Program* are meant to incorporate new approaches or features that address the particular, identified needs of a target group. In the case of *NS Links*, the target group consists of:

“Nova Scotia youth, in the 18 to 24 year age range, making the transition from post-secondary educational institutions to the labour market, following completion of their studies.”⁵

The broad criteria for support under the *Strategic Initiatives Program* are provided in the initial description of the Program in Chapter 1 of this report. Of these, the following is most relevant to *NS Links*:

⁵ *SNS 2000* Monitoring and Evaluation Framework, April 1995, page 5.

- strengthen partnerships, not only with the provincial and territorial governments, but also with communities, learning institutions, employers, unions, and sectoral organizations, as well as individuals and families in developing skills and job opportunities.

NS Links design concentrates on this criterion, with a particular emphasis on developing partnerships with employers. In the short term, *NS Links* hopes to increase student employment by using a wage subsidy to encourage employers to change their views and behaviour on learning. The Communications Strategy component of *SNS 2000* will be critically important to the success of this approach over the longer term.

According to interviews with program officials, the *NS Links* training module element is the main innovative feature that differentiates the program from other similar work-placement programs. The three modules link the student's work experience with career planning and goals, entrepreneurship and self-sufficiency.

There is an implicit level of duplication amongst work-placement programs. The evaluation found that employers and students are not always aware of the subtle differences between program objectives and criteria. This is particularly true in the case of *NS Links* and co-operative education programs. This finding is discussed in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

3.0 Evaluation Issues

3.1 Issues Identification

An important component of the planning phase of the *SNS 2000* process evaluation was the development and finalization of a set of evaluation issues and related methodologies. There were two sources of evaluation issues:

- those in Table 1 from the Terms of Reference for the evaluation; and
- those identified by the evaluation team through key informant interviews and the focus groups.

The issues and methodologies, set out as the Issues Matrix in Table 1 in the Terms of Reference, are summarized as a concordance in Appendix A. The Issues Matrix includes six broad groups of Project Success questions. Several of these Program Success issues are “impacts” issues that are best addressed once *NS Links* has been in operation for a longer time period. These will be addressed in the phase three impact evaluation.

During the initial phase of the evaluation, several additional issues were identified. These include the following, expressed in question format:

- What is the underlying need that *NS Links* is meant to address?
- Did *NS Links* duplicate or overlap with other programs or projects designed to meet the needs of its clients?

The “need” issue is part of several of the “relevance” questions in the Terms of Reference. Our interpretation of these questions is that they assume that the need for *NS Links* has been articulated. This is not clear to us. We have made the “need” issue more explicit here in order to increase the profile of this important issue and its linkage to the design and delivery of *NS Links*.

It is clear that the Department of Education and Culture has a strong commitment to the philosophy embodied in *NS Links*. This commitment is evident in the research undertaken both at the initial pilot stage, through additional research on issues related to the success of *NS Links* and through ongoing adjustments to the program.

3.2 Focus of the Process Evaluation

The evaluation issues and questions resulting from the consultation process in this first phase of the *NS Links* coincided very closely with those in the Issues Matrix.

The major focus of these evaluation issues lies with the Relevance and Project Design and Delivery categories. While we have answered the questions in the Issues Matrix, the issues or questions that received highest priority are as follows:

Relevance

- What is the underlying need that *NS Links* is meant to address?
- What is the client or target group for *NS Links*? How are equity groups involved in *NS Links*?
- Does *NS Links* duplicate or overlap with other programs or projects designed to meet the needs of its clients?
- Is it reasonable that *NS Links* will have an impact on educational programming within post-secondary education?

Project Design and Delivery

- How is *NS Links* organized? What is its organizational structure?
- What is the role and responsibility of the Provincial Steering Committee and the Regional Working Groups, as well as other partners?
- What are the role of employers?
- How is the program administered and delivered?
- What is the most effective internal communication structure for *NS Links*?
- Has the program been effectively marketed to its clients?

Program Success

- How and to what extent did *NS Links* enhance communication between employers and educators?

- Are employers committed to the vision and objectives of *NS Links*? How likely is it that the program will result in a recognition of “learning” within firms?
- What have been the experiences of student participants to date?
- How likely is it that the program will increase the level of self-sufficiency amongst student participants?

4.0 Characteristics of NS Links Clients

4.1 Defining the Clients of NS Links

This chapter describes a number of salient characteristics of the clients of *NS Links*. There are two main client groups of the program: students and employers. *NS Links* and the *Training Culture Communications Strategy of SNS 2000* also expect to have some impact on the post-secondary institutions in the province, by encouraging employer-institution communication. Consequently, the educational institutions are clients of *SNS 2000*, albeit secondary level clients.

The data for the information in this chapter are largely drawn from the summer 1995 *NS Links* Student Baseline Survey and the Employer Evaluations.

4.2 Student Demographic Profile

The Baseline Survey was completed by 246 students during the two 1995 work terms; 186 students took part in the summer term and 60 in the winter term. This section profiles the students based on our analysis of the Survey responses. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 246 students.

NS Links participants averaged 24.1 years in age, with a range of 19 to 44 years; 72.5 percent were from 18 to 24 years old, inclusive. The median age was 23.3 years.

Determining the geographic distribution of 1995 student participants from the Baseline Survey in the 1995 work terms is problematic. Students provided either their address while at a post-secondary institution — most common for winter term students— or their “permanent” address; these may have been the same for some students but it is not clear which address the student has supplied.

Table 1
Characteristics of Student Clients

Characteristic	Percent	Percent
Gender	Female: 39.6	Male: 60.4
Language	English: 99.6	French: 0.4
Canadian Born	Yes: 95.1	No: 4.9
Canadian Citizen	Yes: 98.8	No: 1.2
Afro-Canadian	Yes: 0.0	No: 100.0
Aboriginal/First Nation	Yes: 0.8	No: 99.2
Other Visible Minority	Yes: 4.9	No: 95.1
Person with Disability	Yes: 1.2	No: 98.8

Source: *NS Links* Student Baseline Survey

The results, combined with a review of program applicants and evaluation forms, suggest that students from the Halifax Metro area accounted for at least half, and possibly two thirds, of the student participants during 1995. Interestingly, six students reported their addresses as outside Nova Scotia in New Brunswick and Newfoundland. Our review of 110 Student Evaluation reports found that students from Dalhousie University and the Technical University of Nova Scotia accounted for 45 percent of the *NS Links* students in the 1995 work terms.

Table 2 presents the educational status of 1995 *NS Links* students.

Table 2
1995 NS Links Student Educational Attainment Levels

Highest Level of Education	Percent (n=245)
Some Private Trade School	0.4
Completed Private Trade School	0.8
Some Community College	2.0
Completed Community College	7.3
Some University	38.4
Completed University Undergraduate Degree or Diploma	44.9
Post-graduated University	4.5
Other	1.6
Total	100.0

Source: *NS Links* Baseline Survey

Table 3 presents the marital status of the 1995 *NS Links* participants. The majority of *NS Links* students are single; married students account for 13 percent of participants.

Table 3
Marital Status of NS Links Students

Marital Status	Percent (n=244)
Single	86.5
Married or Living Common-law	12.7
Separated or Divorced	0.8
Total	100.0

Source: *NS Links* Baseline Survey

Students in the program mainly lived at home with their parents or with roommates, as Table 4 illustrates.

Table 4
Living Situation of NS Links Students

Living Situation	Percent (n=244)
Living with Parent(s)	43.4
Living with Roommates (not related)	30.7
Married/Common-law without Children	9.8
Living Alone	9.4
Married/Common-law with Children	4.1
Other	2.5
Total	100.0

Source: *NS Links* Baseline Survey

4.3 Student Labour Force Participation Prior to NS Links

The Baseline Survey asked students a series of questions related to their work history. The results presented in this section are based on student responses to these “work history” questions.

Student participants were asked to indicate their status as co-op students and their labour force status for the two years prior to their *NS Links* participation. The response to these two sets of questions, combined in the following table⁶, was inconsistent. It appears from the responses that the intent of the question on co-op participation was not clear to students. Some interpreted “Employed in a Co-op Program” to refer to work placements while others viewed this as an “enrolment” question.

Table 5
Labour Force Status of NS Links Students (weeks)

Status	In the last 52 weeks (average # weeks)	In the 52 weeks before that (average # weeks)
Employed in Co-op Program Full-time	5.5	4.4
Employed in Co-op Program Part-time	0.4	0.2
Employed Full-time	8.5	8.2
Employed Part-time	11.8	11.1
Unemployed & Actively Looking for Work	2.4	3.3
Not Actively Looking for Work	3.0	3.3
Attending School	30.4	27.4
Enrolled in Training Course	2.6	0.9

Source: *NS Links* Baseline Survey

Some 93 percent of students held full or part-time jobs of one or more weeks duration prior to *NS Links*; 22 percent of these held more than one job at a time. Their main job averaged 36 hours per week and paid \$8.70 per hour on average. This rate varied

⁶ Months have been converted to weeks for the labour force question.

considerably — the standard deviation for the wage was \$3.90 per hour. Those with a second job worked an average of 4 hours per week at it.

Self-employment income levels amongst students prior to their *NS Links* participation were not high; 14 percent of the 222 students who answered this question reported earning part of their income from self-employment.

4.4 Employer Profile

All *NS Links* employers are asked to complete a project evaluation questionnaire about their project. This anonymous, voluntary questionnaire is mailed to employers. It does not contain company profile questions; 84 questionnaires were returned from the 1995 summer projects.

To obtain profile data, we included several profile-related questions to our telephone survey of employers. The results presented here rely on the findings from the survey, based on a random sample of 36 employers from the 1995 summer work term. Employers in the survey were located throughout the province, as the following table indicates:

Table 6
Geographic Distribution of NS Links Employers (1995)

Company Location	Percent (n=36)
Metro Halifax	33.3
Sydney	8.3
Towns	33.3
Rural areas	25.0
Total	100.0

Source: *NS Links* Baseline Survey

These *NS Links* companies had an average of 31 employees per company, although several larger companies skewed this result. The median number of employees was 9.5 per company. As the following table shows, some 44 percent of employers in the survey employed five or less persons. Companies with more than 25 employees accounted for 28 percent of the sample.

Table 7
Employment Size Distribution of
NS Links Employers (1995)

Number of Employees	Percent (n=36)
1 employee	11.1
2-5 employees	33.3
6-10 employees	8.3
11-25 employees	19.4
More than 25 employees	27.8
Median number of employees	9.5

Source: *NS Links* Evaluation Employer Survey

Companies participating in *NS Links* tend to be growing quite strongly. We asked employers to categorize their revenue growth over the past five years. The results in the table below exclude the 17 percent of employer-respondents that had been in business less than five years. Close to one in four *NS Links* companies reported revenue growth in excess of 10 percent per year.

Table 8
Average Annual Revenue Growth of
NS Links Employers (1995)

Category	Percent (n=29)
No growth or negative growth	6.9
Slow growth (1-3 percent per year)	17.2
Moderate Growth (4-10 percent per year)	48.3
Strong growth (more than 10% per year)	27.6
Total	100.0

Source: *NS Links* Evaluation Employer Survey

We attempted to determine the industry sectors in which *NS Links* employers were operating by asking employers a simple question about their company and the kind of work undertaken. A more formal and precise industrial categorization is difficult without undertaking more extensive questioning. The following table provides a broad indication of the results of the industry classification, based on the “Standard Industrial Classification” coding scheme.

Table 9
Industry Grouping of NS Links Employers (1995)

Industry Category of <i>NS Links</i> Employers	Percent (n=36)
Agriculture	13.9
Manufacturing	8.3
Transportation, Communication & Utilities	8.3
Wholesale and Retail Trade	25.0
Finance, Insurance & Real Estate	16.7
Community, Business and Personal Services	27.8
Total	100.0

Source: *NS Links* Evaluation Employer Survey

This classification only indicates the sector within which the company operates. It does not provide any information on the occupation or type of work done by the *NS Links* student.

Additional characteristics and perceptions of employers are discussed as part of the analysis components in the following chapters.

5.0 The Implementation of NS Links

5.1 Introduction

This section presents our findings on the issues related to the implementation of *NS Links*. For the most part, these relate to the evaluation categories of “relevance”, and “program design and delivery” and arise from the points raised earlier in Chapters 3 and 4. The results are based on a synthesis of the input received from interviews, focus groups and questionnaires administered to employers, students and key informants. This “multiple lines of evidence” approach is designed to strengthen the findings of individual evaluation methods; all results presented here have been corroborated with at least one other study methodology.

From a process evaluation perspective, the main issues are as follows:

- program need and focus, related to student and employer client eligibility;
- the function and role of advisors; and
- developing inclusionary strategies for minority groups.

Our rationale and analysis of each issue comprises the remaining sections of this chapter. Additional issues related to program delivery are included in section 5.5.

5.2 Program Relevance: Who are the Clients?

The program need issue is the major issue related to the *NS Links* program. It encompasses a number of the evaluation questions in both the “relevance” and “design” categories. It affects all clients — students and employers — of the program and has important implications for both the immediate and longer term success of the program.

The issue has three inter-related components: given the objectives of *NS Links* and the *Strategic Initiatives Program*, and the current eligibility and delivery of *NS Links*:

- who should be the student clients of the program and what are their needs;
- who should be the employer clients and what are their needs; and
- what kinds of jobs in what kind of industries should be eligible?

In other words, should the *NS Links* program have any particular strategic focus or priority or should it be broadly based and concentrate on finding career-related jobs for post-secondary students? How does the *NS Links* program support the *Strategic Initiatives Program*; what are its innovative and distinguishing features?

The needs of post-secondary student clients which *NS Links* means to serve are both immediate and long term. In the immediate term, the most basic need of students is a job to earn income to help them continue their studies while minimizing their debt load. Career-related internships give students a chance to test out their own “fit” to an occupation. *NS Links* responds to these needs.

In the longer term, students need career-related experience, presumably in occupations that have some potential for long term sustainability and growth, in sectors that have development potential. Moreover, an increased supply of students educated and experienced in emerging industries generates long term benefits to the Nova Scotian economy — a societal as well as an employer need. *Meeting these long term needs requires focus, commitment and communication amongst the partners in post-secondary education.*

The 24th Report of the Senate Standing Committee on Finance released in January 1996 noted the importance of skill development for the growth areas of the economy. Because of changes in the labour market, skills acquired in one industry may not be needed in another. The report points out that:

“These developments do not mean that traditional industries and professions are no longer important generators of employment. Often, however, it means they are seeking fewer, more highly skilled people, requiring the same kind of technology-based skills that are being sought in newer areas of employment growth.”

NS Links has to meet these immediate and long-term needs with finite human and financial resources. This requires that program resources are allocated to maximize benefits for program stakeholders — students, employers, educational institutions, government and society. Given the existence of other work-experience placement programs, *NS Links* needs to focus on its particular niche. *We understand this niche to be in finding viable, career-related internship placements for students that do not have the benefit of being enrolled in co-op programs, and providing special support to these*

students through the training modules. According to the *Success NS 2000 Proposal*, this niche includes some 85-90 percent of all post-secondary students in the province.

During its implementation, the *NS Links* program made efforts to be flexible and adaptable in its eligibility criteria; this has both a benefit and cost to the program. Regions outside of the Halifax region, for example, have fewer companies in the emerging economy than within the Halifax area. This has resulted in an adjustment from the original criteria based on growing or emerging industry sectors to broader eligibility criteria related to community-based needs.

On the one hand, this broad approach may be necessary if *NS Links* is to be applicable throughout the province. On the other hand, by expanding the criteria for employer selection too broadly and not focusing on skills required in growth industries, *NS Links* may be in danger of jeopardizing the value of the internships and the “raison d’être” for the program, as well as its innovative features. In the worse case, relying on “career-related” internships, without careful attention to the long-term potential of the industries in which the jobs occur, may produce “experienced” students with skills for which industry has little demand. This latter situation is counter to the *Strategic Initiatives Program* objective of reducing demand for government assistance.

5.2.1 Student Clients

The following points set out our analysis of the *needs* issue from a student-client perspective. This analysis is based on document reviews, a random sample of 100 *NS Links* students from the 1995 work terms, an analysis of 246 Baseline Data Surveys completed by students and two focus groups, with randomly selected student participants. Interviews with key informants were used to corroborate the analysis.

- A very small percentage of Nova Scotia post-secondary students are enrolled in co-op education programs. The *NS Links* internship is meant to “allow access to the job market for those students that do not enjoy the benefit of being enrolled in a co-operative program.”⁷
- The program, in its design, was meant to serve the needs of students and employers in emerging industries and growth sectors — the so-called “new” or emerging economy — within the Nova Scotia economy.

⁷ *SNS 2000 Proposal to HRDC, Strategic Initiatives Program, Sept. 1, 1994. Appendix B.*

- Many emerging industries and growth sectors are science-related and served by co-op education programs, but co-op programs are not the exclusive suppliers of students for growth-oriented jobs.
- The majority of the “emerging” economy companies are located in the Halifax metro area.
- Co-op education programs have a well-established marketing system and a support network of committed employers to provide career-related experience to students. Even so, many co-op students have to go outside Nova Scotia for work placements.

Participation in a co-op program is the main characteristic that partitions *NS Links* students into two “need” categories, according to our analysis of student data. This characteristic is not part of the eligibility criteria for *NS Links* but merits discussion since we believe the current level of involvement of co-op students in *NS Links* influences the program’s response to need. Before discussing this issue, it is important to define what we mean by co-operative education.

The co-operative education programs referred to in this report are limited to those post-secondary programs that meet the definition of the Canadian Association For Co-operative Education (CAFCE):

“Co-operative Education Program” means a program which formally integrates a student’s academic studies with work experience in co-operating employer organizations. The usual plan is for the student to alternate periods of experience in appropriate fields of business, industry, government, social services and the professions in accordance with the following criteria:

- *each work situation is developed and/or approved by the co-operative educational institution as a suitable learning situation;*
- *the co-operative student is engaged in productive work rather than merely observing;*
- *the co-operative student receives remuneration for the work performed;*
- *the co-operative student’s progress on the job is monitored by the co-operative educational institution;*
- *the co-operative student’s performance on the job is supervised and evaluated by the student’s co-operative employer; and,*

- *the total co-operative work experience is normally fifty percent of the time spent in academic study, and in no circumstances less than thirty percent.*

The evaluation found that employers may be confused about co-op education programs, since over the past decade, “co-operative” education has become synonymous with any program that provides work experience to students, regardless of type of institution, program design and eligibility criteria. These generic “co-op” programs may include secondary and post-secondary students as well as non-student programs. The programs may be funded or not, of varying duration, for academic credit or not.

The early awareness of *NS Links* amongst co-op coordinators, the coincident timing of the initial *NS Links* work terms with co-op work terms, and the strong networking capabilities of post-secondary co-op programs resulted in co-op students getting 40 percent of the work placements in the 1995 work terms. Many co-op students indicated in both the focus group and survey that they would have found career-related work placements without *NS Links* financial assistance.

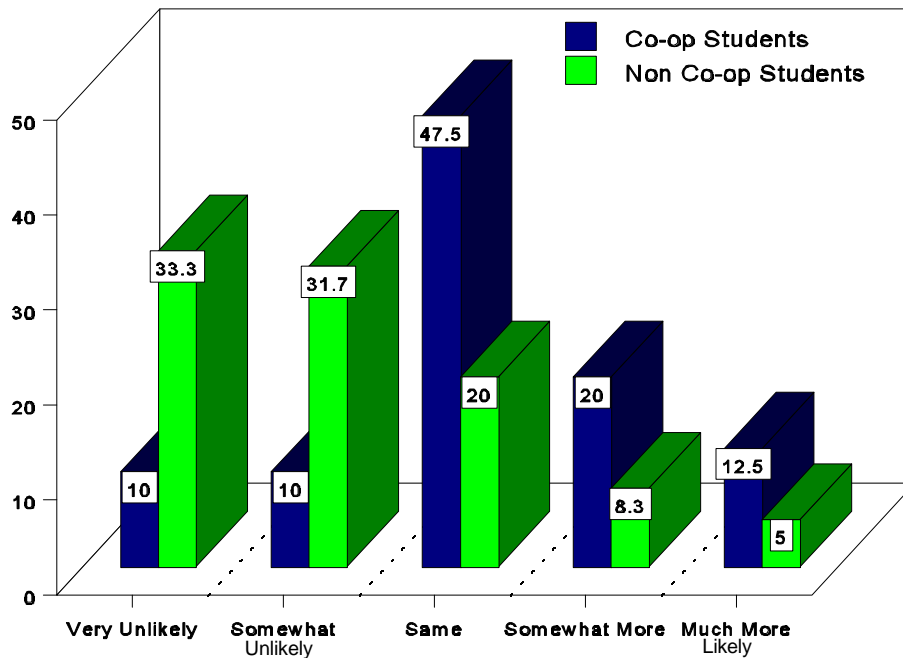
Some 48 percent of the 40 co-op students responding to the student survey reported that the likelihood of finding a *career-related* job was “about the same” with *NS Links* as without. Twenty percent of these co-op students stated that it was unlikely that they could have got a job without the support of *NS Links*, as shown in Figure 1⁸. These findings were substantiated in the focus group with co-op students.

This result is in contrast to that of students who were not in a co-op program. Only 20 percent of the 60 students in this group rated their chances of finding a career-related job as “the same” without *NS Links*; 65 percent felt that it was unlikely that they would obtain a career-related job without *NS Links*. Again, these findings were substantiated in the focus group with non-co-op students.

We asked all students in the survey to differentiate between an “internship or placement” and a *career-related* internship or placement. We analysed the differences in response to whether *NS Links* improved students’ chances of getting an “internship or placement” in comparison to a *career-related* internship or placement and found no statistically significant differences in the responses.

⁸ Some students indicated that it was more likely that they would have got a job without *NS Links*. The meaning of this response is not obvious to us; it is likely that this part of the question was unclear or misinterpreted by students.

Figure 1
Likelihood of Getting a Career-related Placement Without NS Links %



Source: *NS Links* Evaluation Student Survey

Finding *career-related* placements, and gaining career-related experience, are some of the major reasons why students initially enrol in co-op programs. Co-op programs have full time coordinators whose job it is to find placements with employers. The coordinators have established extensive networks with employers that enable them to place students on an on-going basis. An interview with the Nova Scotia CAFCE chair-elect revealed that many university co-op students in Nova Scotia are placed outside the province due to a lack of placement opportunities in the province. *NS Links* funding provides an incentive for Nova Scotia employers to hire Nova Scotia students.

The difference in the need for *NS Links* amongst co-op and non co-op students is highlighted in the unprompted, contrasting survey responses to the “best feature of *NS Links*”, shown in the following table. For 49 percent of co-op students, the best part of *NS Links* was the “funding” for employers; funding secures the job and makes it easier for employers to hire them. Features such as the “opportunity for gaining experience” and the training modules were cited as the best part of the program by 14 percent of co-op participants.

Table 10
The Best Characteristic of NS Links —
The Three Main Reasons

Feature	Co-op Students (%, n=40)	Non-Co-op Students (%, n=60)
Funding	48.6	16.9
Opportunity for experience	13.5	32.2
Training Modules	13.5	15.3

Source: *NS Links* Evaluation Student Survey

One third of non co-op students in the survey viewed the “the opportunity for gaining experience” as the best feature of *NS Links*; the next most popular feature was the funding, noted by 17 percent of the students.

In the student survey, we asked co-op students to distinguish *NS Links* from the co-op program in which they were enrolled. Some 38 percent of students, unprompted, rated “funding for employers” as the main difference; 30 percent cited the training modules.

Each and every student attending the “co-op student” focus group stated they would have found similar employment *without NS Links*. Further, each co-op participant indicated that almost all of their classmates had found good summer employment related to their study goals through the co-op program, without *NS Links*. One participant went so far as to state that the *NS Links* program should be restricted to non co-op students only:

"I hate to say it, but we already have enough advantages."

Several students responding to the student survey voiced similar views:

"It's a waste to let Computer Science students take part because we all get work term placements anyway."

"Co-op students shouldn't be involved; they already have enough resources."

"I had graduated and had three co-op work terms previously; the government should have spent the money on a student without any prior work experience."

In contrast for the non co-op students, *NS Links* provides “the edge” required to obtain employment in their field of study. Prior to the establishment of *NS Links*, the non co-op students indicated they had not been able to find summer employment in their field of study. As well, all the non co-op students agreed that the work experience acquired through *NS Links* will assist them in obtaining permanent work in their field in the future.

"I've got my foot in the door of a growing company ..."

"The things I've learned will look good on my resume."

Based on the evidence from the study methodologies, we believe that *NS Links* resources are better used if the original intent of the program is followed — to provide career-related internship experience to the approximately 85- 90 percent of post-secondary students who are not enrolled in co-op programs. This is not to say that the co-op students did not benefit from their *NS Links* placements, both in terms of gaining career-related experience and income to support additional studies. Co-op students rated the features of the program as positively as non co-op students.

HRDC has provided funding to post-secondary institutions to establish *new* co-op education programs in the past. Funding changes as a result of the February 1995 federal budget and the introduction of the Employment Insurance program will see HRDC funding for co-operative education terminate as of July 1, 1996. However, existing co-op programming is relatively strong, well established and self-financing in some instances. Students at some institutions now pay a fee to enrol in a co-op program, as well as a fee when they are placed in a job through the program.

Our findings from the various evaluation methodologies indicate that in many cases, co-op students would have been hired anyway. Consequently, there may be little, if any, longer-term incremental benefit gained by the program and by Nova Scotia in supporting co-op students. Funding co-op students reduces the fiscal ability of the program to support long-term development of students not in co-op programs.

5.2.2 Employer Clients

Employer clients⁹ are part of the client base of *NS Links*, and the *Communications Strategy* component of *SNS 2000* is clearly aimed at employers. Since *NS Links* aims to develop in employers a long-term commitment to learning, an important

⁹ Results in this section are based mainly on the analysis of 84 Project evaluations completed by employers from the 1995 Summer Work term, a random sample of 36 participant employers, and two employer focus groups.

characteristic is whether *NS Links* employers have been encouraged to hire students as a result of *NS Links* and are “first time”, non co-op employers, since employers that have hired students in the past through a co-op education program presumably have some commitment to learning. In keeping with the overall vision of *SNS 2000*, it is also important to obtain a sense of the degree to which employers are committed to learning.

The *NS Links* employer group for the 1995 work terms was dominated by co-op employers, partly a consequence of the way *NS Links* was marketed during the 1995 start-up period. By “co-op employers”, we mean employers who have hired co-op students in the past as well as under *NS Links*. The 80 employer evaluations we analysed indicate that 63 percent of employers had previously hired co-op students¹⁰.

The evaluation “employer survey” asked 36 randomly selected employers from the 1995 summer term about the frequency of their student hiring. The results, shown in the following table, show that *NS Links* succeeded in attracting new employers to the program 25 percent of the time; some 17 percent of these employers represent new companies. However, two thirds of the employers already have a long term commitment to hiring students, either on a “frequent” or “always” basis.

These findings¹¹ indicate that *NS Links* has made progress in reaching employers that may not have considered hiring students in the past. However, the majority of the 1995 *NS Links* employers surveyed already support student employment, according to the evaluation findings indicating that many of these employers frequently hire students. The employer focus groups, mainly co-op employers, found that most of these employers would have hired students anyway, and are likely to hire in the future.

Company size is another factor to consider in assessing employers’ needs. The employer base in the province can be categorized in many ways, including employment size, urban/rural location, “emerging” versus “traditional” industry sector and so on. Of these, the findings of the process evaluation lead us to conclude that an important characteristic of employers is their employment size — small/medium sized businesses, or larger corporations

¹⁰ The question dealing with this topic on the Employer Evaluations inadvertently screened out employers who had hired co-op students in the past, but did not hire co-op students this work term.

¹¹ Additional details are presented in Chapter 6.

Table 11
Past Hiring Practices by NS Links
Employers in Past Five Years

Category	Percent (n=36)
Never hired a student for a work term/summer employment	25.0
Seldom	8.3
Frequently	22.2
Always	44.4
Total	100.0

Source: *NS Links* Evaluation Employer Survey

The *NS Links* employers we surveyed are predominantly small businesses with under 10 employees. As the following table shows, 28 percent have more than 25 employees. In fact, the average employment size for this group is 92 employees, although there is significant variability in the size of these larger companies.

Table 12
NS Links Employers by Number of Employees

Category	Percent (n=36)
One Employee	11.1
2-10 Employees	41.6
11-25 Employees	19.4
Over 25 Employees	27.8
Total	100.0

Source: *NS Links* Evaluation Employer Survey

Both employers in small businesses and students believe students benefit from working in small companies. The focus groups and interviews with both sets of clients confirms this finding. Students recognize that there is particular value in the program for the small sized company. In their opinion, larger companies can afford to take risks and hire students, while the smaller company is less likely to do so without an incentive like that offered through *NS Links*.

Students in the focus groups that had experience working in both large and small companies commented on the strength of their internship experience with a smaller company compared to that with a larger firm. They noted that they had obtained more valuable experience with the smaller firm. Students placed with smaller firms reported they were given greater responsibility and a greater variety of tasks. Smaller firms may provide a better role model for students entering the labour force. Smaller firms typically expose students to the spirit of entrepreneurship and self-sufficiency more than in larger corporations. The focus on entrepreneurship is an important development strategy for both sponsoring governments.

The employer focus groups raised an important distinction between small and large firms concerning the longer term rationale for *NS Links* participation. Small firms use *NS Links* as a means to “try out” students as future employees; this approach came up frequently in the focus groups. This is less likely for larger employers. Small firms see *NS Links* funding, in part, as a means to this end.

Employers want to [and do] hire the same students for several years. Over this period, students and employers get to test out their mutual fit.

When we hire someone, we look down the road. We don't think that about NS Links students, it's considered short term help. (Large company)

I'm looking at long term as well. The nature of the business is up and down. Last year I worried about my job and now I'm hiring two more people. I'm pleased with the student's ability - we will re-hire her. I like that the co-op program (sic) provides feedback, and the wage subsidy lowers the risk. (Small company)

The type of work I do, the student's term is a trial period for a possible career. ...I'll have to find an awful good reason not to hire these two when they graduate — they were great. (Small company)

The following table compares the frequency of hiring by employment size, according to whether an employer is a co-op employer or not, i.e. has hired co-op students in the past. With the exception of the 2-10 employee size category, the non co-op employers are fairly evenly distributed by employee size. Co-op employers, on the other hand, are predominantly larger companies.

Table 13
Employment Size by Co-op Employer Status (%)

Category	Co-op Employer	Non Co-op Employer
One Employee	6.2	15.8
2-10 Employees	25.0	57.9
11-25 Employees	31.2	10.5
Over 25 Employees	37.5	15.8
Total	100.0	100.0

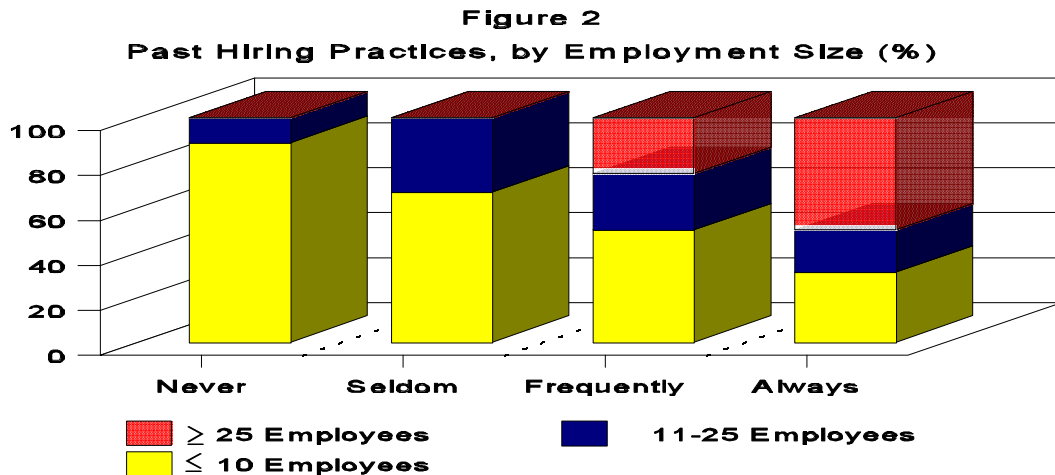
Source: *NS Links* Evaluation Employer Survey

An interview with the CAFCE-NS president-elect indicated that co-op programs are taking steps to improve their linkages with small and medium-sized companies. Co-op placements are leaning towards a more even coverage of various sized firms.

Close to 90 percent of those employers who have “never” hired students before participating in *NS Links* have less than five employees, according to our survey results. Employers who hire on a “frequent” or “always” basis are mainly larger employers, as shown in the following chart. The larger the company, the more likely it is to hire students. Small companies represent an important area in which to market *NS Links*.

We believe that NS Links will increase its effectiveness and long-term results if it concentrates on smaller companies that have not been, or can not afford to be, committed to student development through the internship experience of NS Links.

This focus should encourage small business employers to hire post-secondary students for the first time. It would enhance the learning experience for students and lend support to *NS Links* entrepreneurship objectives.



Source: *NS Links* Evaluation Employer Survey

5.2.3 Shift in Focus from Emerging Economy to Community-Based

This issue is related to the responsiveness of *NS Links* to both the present and projected skill requirements of the economy and growth sectors, and the extent to which the program reaches the intended target group. It is a difficult and complex issue.

The difficulty arises in relation to the issues discussed in Chapter 2 concerning the *Strategic Initiatives Program*, the aims and objectives of *NS Links* and how *NS Links* is meant to be not just a student summer employment program, but a more focused long-term human resource development program. The program means to provide students with career-related experience that will enhance their long-term employability.

The program aims to support employers and provide internships to post-secondary students throughout Nova Scotia, but many jobs in the emerging economy — the development focus of *NS Links* — are located within the Halifax area. Occupational data from the Student survey indicate that *NS Links* has been successful in obtaining a good geographic distribution of placements outside Halifax in computer science, engineering and environmental science, for example.

The *NS Links* proposal and the co-operation agreement refer to growing and expanding sectors and occupations of the Nova Scotia economy. These emerging growth sectors have not been defined for the program. Current public discussion on the “emerging economy” focuses on computer-based development, engineering, technology, health

and medical services, environmental industries, services to business and other industries within the service sector. Occupations in high demand within these industries are often knowledge-based and include engineering, computer science, business management and various health sciences although recreation and personal-service occupations are also in demand.

NS Links wishes to support initiatives related to community-based development throughout the province. The focus group with the Regional Working Group and the Provincial Steering Committee in the fall of 1995 made it clear to us that local, career-related jobs for local students are an important consideration. The longer-term growth potential of the job is perhaps less of a concern than local students actually obtaining a placement. In some cases, this means career-related internships in growing industries; in others, the program may support career-related jobs but in “traditional” industries. However, the actual impact from this community-development emphasis is not apparent from the occupational data of the student survey.

The point is not that jobs in traditional industries are not good jobs. The challenge, as the Senate report cited earlier noted, is that supporting student internships in traditional industries has the possibility of training post-secondary students for jobs or occupations that may not exist in several years. Consequently, the anticipated program impact related to reduced student dependency on income support may not occur. Supporting “growth” occupations that have a multi-industry level of demand is a good strategy to avoid this issue.

5.3 Organizational Structure and the Role of Community-Based Advisors

This section describes the organizational structure established for *NS Links* that was in place during the autumn months of 1995. The research, interviews and focus groups were undertaken at this time when the program was undergoing significant structural revisions. Although these are not reflected in the findings presented here, it is our understanding that the changes were designed to address issues related to the effectiveness and composition of the Provincial Steering Committee and Regional Working Groups.

NS Links has four levels consisting of a Joint Management Committee, an Operational Management Team, a Provincial Steering Committee and a number of Regional Working Groups:

- The *Joint Management Committee* consists of senior representatives from HRDC and the NS Department of Education and Culture. The Committee's role lies in policy development, program design and review. Evaluation of *NS Links* comes under its responsibility.
- The *Operational Management Team* oversees and co-ordinates the day-to-day implementation of *NS Links*. It is comprised of the Program Coordinator, Assistant Coordinator, representatives of HRDC and members of the Partnership Secretariat.
- The *Provincial Steering Committee* is the third administrative level for *NS Links*. Its primary role is to provide advice and guidance regarding the development and implementation of *NS Links*.
- The *Regional Working Groups* are to be established across the province and consist of 10 to 25 representatives from local business and industry, labour unions, educational institutions, economic development organizations, relevant government departments, community organizations and student organizations. Their role is to develop and administer *NS Links* within their specific region, including the marketing of *NS Links* to prospective partners in the business community, and overseeing the application process, including the selection of employers for internships. Input to the policy development process is another role of these Groups.

Under the *NS Links*' original design, the Provincial Steering Committee was comprised of representatives from industry and business, education, student organizations and relevant government departments. Changes have recently been made to include the chairpersons from each of the Regional Working Groups as well as representatives of the funding agencies of *NS Links*. The Provincial Steering Committee is expected to meet at least three times a year to make recommendations for the following semester and the future development of *NS Links*.

Regional Working Groups are based on the principle that communities can and should be responsible for their own destinies and that the means to community development is through participation in initiatives such as *NS Links*.

At the time of the evaluation in December 1995, only two Regional Working Groups had been established: the Yarmouth and Sydney Regional Working Groups. Interviews and focus group discussions with members from these groups indicate they are pleased with the recent decision to include their chairpersons as part of the Provincial Steering Committee.

The Regional Working Groups in Yarmouth and Sydney believed that they were not playing as strong a role as they anticipated in determining the direction of the *NS Links* program, particularly with respect to decisions on the business sectors selected for funding under *NS Links*. In their view, sectors that may be appropriate for the Halifax region may not be appropriate for their regions, yet they felt at the time that these decisions were being made in (and for) Halifax and applied to the entire province. The Yarmouth group indicated that decisions on the appropriateness of businesses and industries for internships should be made in reference to each region's economic and community development plan.

Changes made to the Regional Working Groups subsequent to the focus groups and interviews have made a positive contribution to resolving this issue. The inclusion of key government agencies such as the Regional Development Authorities as part of the Regional Working Groups will also assist in ensuring an appropriate community development response to *NS Links* policy development.

5.4 Reaching the Minority Student

NS Links recognizes that post-secondary students from visible minorities face unique barriers to employment. Research¹² indicates that these barriers are in large measure based on the systemic discrimination that cuts through Nova Scotian society. During the 1995 work terms, no African Nova Scotian or Mi'Kmaq student was hired directly by employers under *NS Links*. The exception is the 24 Mi'Kmaq students placed in employment through the Multicultural Facilitation Program, a multicultural agreement negotiated between *NS Links* staff and the Unama'ki Training and Education Centre (TEC). Special measures are required if *NS Links* is to be accessible to post-secondary students from visible minorities.

The problems visible minority students face in accessing employment is compounded by the *NS Links* agreement which restricts internships to private and non-profit sector employers. While public sector employers have a better track record of hiring minorities due to government equity programs, public sector employers are not eligible to apply to the *NS Links* program for internship positions. *NS Links* needs to work harder to obtain internship placements with private and non-profit sector employers.

NS Links is committed to identifying inclusionary methods to ensure that students from visible minorities can benefit from the *NS Links* program. That commitment is built into the *NS Links* agreement and has been reiterated by members of the Management

¹² See for example, the Marchall Report and the BLAC Report on Education.

Committee for *NS Links*. There is in place a willingness by management and staff to be responsive to the needs of the minority communities and to allow flexibility with respect to program guidelines.

5.4.1 NS Links Multicultural Facilitation Program

NS Links' responsiveness to community needs is reflected in the *NS Links* Multicultural Facilitation Program established as a pilot under *NS Links*. The first component of the pilot entailed negotiation of an agreement between *NS Links* and the Unama'ki Training and Education Centre (TEC) in Eskasoni which allows TEC to administer the program for Mi'Kmaq students in Cape Breton. The strengths of the TEC agreement are twofold:

- it is driven by the needs of the Mi'Kmaq community; and
- it is administered by Mi'Kmaq educators.

The Program Agreement is flexible, permitting internships for 18 to 30 Native students over a one year period. The internship placements range from 8 to 15 weeks in duration, depending on the length of the student's training program. A third strength is that the TEC is provided with a modest administrative fee.

TEC administrators identified quality placements — not make-work placements — that offered a range of career possibilities to students. Over the 1995 summer term, seven legal translators acquired career-related internships through the Multicultural Facilitation Program; 13 students were placed in career related internships in businesses in Eskasoni or nearby Sydney. The *NS Links* requirement limiting internships to the private sector was relaxed in recognition that public sector internships might be more readily available.

TEC administrators see value in using *NS Links* to expand students' career possibilities. For example, 100 of the 110 Mi'Kmaq students enrolled at UCCB are taking Community Studies with the aim of working in band-related positions in Eskasoni; only a few students will be hired by the band. TEC staff use *NS Links* as a tool to encourage students to consider alternate careers. These include:

- four students completed their internship and received training in scientific research and field work at the Eskasoni Fish and Wildlife Services; and

- a Mi'Kmaq student was placed as part of a medical study carried out in Eskasoni by Dalhousie University. His internship on the Dalhousie diabetes study team may result in a medical career. The student is excited about the knowledge he is acquiring through his internship and indicated it offered much more of a challenge than jobs obtained in the past — pumping gas.

5.4.2 Towards an Inclusionary Model

The TEC agreement is the first step towards an inclusionary model for *NS Links*. What remains to be developed however are comprehensive strategies to ensure all visible minority students have an opportunity to benefit from *NS Links*.

The TEC agreement is limited to students of Mi'Kmaq origin in Cape Breton. Other Mi'Kmaq educational organizations could benefit from *NS Links*. The foremost of these is the Halifax-based Kjiptuk Aboriginal College, formerly the Micmac Native Learning Centre, which has recently been established as part of the province's Community College system. Pathways personnel may also be interested in *NS Links* as an additional resource for post-secondary students which they are unable to assist because of Pathways' own diminishing resources.

It is important to note that contact with community-based organizations may require a follow-up visit or contact after an initial information phone call or mailing. Individuals interviewed from the Black and Mi'Kmaq communities indicated they may have "heard about" the program but at the time were so involved with other activities that the information was not adequately processed and they did not follow-up. Individual or group in-person meetings should be arranged with all potential Black and Mi'Kmaq partners by *NS Links* to provide a detailed overview of *NS Links* and the Multicultural Facilitation Program.

Taking responsibility for building the Multicultural Facilitation Program —reaching out to relevant partners and negotiating inclusionary agreements — should be a dedicated function of a *NS Links* staff member. Establishing a committee of partners from the Black and Mi'Kmaq communities may also help build an inclusionary model. The role of this committee would be to work with *NS Links* staff to design appropriate strategies for reaching the minority student.

Key to the success of the Multicultural Facilitation Program will be the extent that *NS Links* continues to be flexible in its negotiations with community-based organizations. The model developed with the Unama'ki Training and Education Centre sets a valuable precedent in terms of administrative flexibility while respecting the integrity of the *NS Links* philosophy and intent.

The *BLAC Report On Education* outlines the history of Black education in the province of Nova Scotia. The report makes the point that Black students—at all levels of education—have been systematically excluded from the education system. Different ways of doing business are required for Black students to obtain the education they require. Two key recommendations emerging from that study deal with community decision-making:

“First, it is imperative that initiatives affecting the education of Black learners be developed in partnership with the stakeholders, the Black community.

Secondly... that initiatives affecting the education of Black learners be controlled by the Black community or that structures be established that are staffed and controlled by members from the Black community.”¹³

The approach adopted by *NS Links* in its negotiations with the Unama’ki Training and Education Centre respects these two principles and should continue as the governing force behind agreements negotiated with other partners in the Mi’Kmaq and African Nova Scotia communities.

5.5 Other Issues

Several additional issues arose during the process evaluation. These are generally related to features of the implementation process or eligibility criteria. Several issues are impact-related and beyond the scope of this evaluation. We raise them here as points of information for the impact evaluation. The issues include:

- Wage Rate Conflicts;
- Overlap and duplication of *NS Links* with other programs;
- Monitoring and Communication issues;
- Marketing the Program by Students; and
- Baseline Data

¹³ BLAC Report on Education; Volume 1, 1994, p. 58.

5.5.1 The Wage Subsidy

The issues concerning the wage subsidy focus on the intended and unintended impacts of the subsidy. While the “impact” issue is best examined in the planned impact evaluation, there are several considerations worth raising now.

Employers find the subsidy useful and helpful, as might be expected. It encourages them to take the risk to hire a student for a placement, and partially compensates them for the time it takes to train students. The subsidy is particularly useful to small and medium sized businesses.

“Funding was very helpful; it was well worth it. I like NS Links because it makes it feasible for new businesses to hire someone and grow.”

“In the spring when the program starts we don’t have any sales yet, so without the subsidy we wouldn’t hire — a definite incentive.”

“Definite incentive. It’s hard to make money. We wouldn’t have hired without it.”

“Subsidy attractive — but even 50% it would still be attractive — we (a large company) can afford it. We do watch out for any subsidy programs. I wish the program was around when I was going through school.”

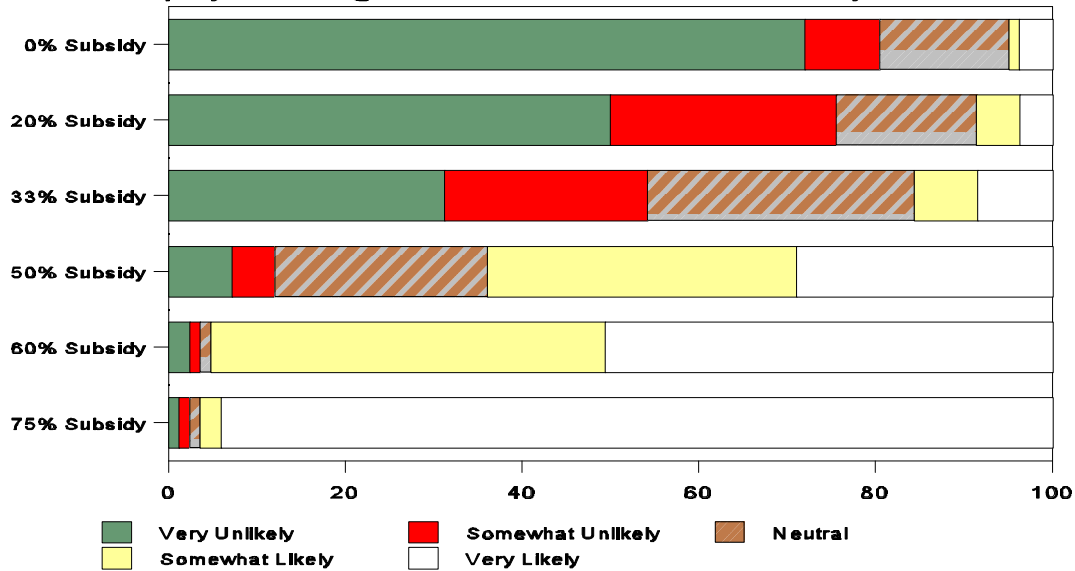
“I’m on salary and if I don’t hire someone, I have to work 60 hours a week. I think if the subsidy decreases the student’s wage should be able to go below \$10.00/hr., some students are only worth that.”

Employers do not see the subsidy as a “bonus”; by itself it is neither necessary or sufficient to encourage employers to hire. The employer must first be open to the idea of student employment as a first step in the process. We found in the evaluation that the subsidy serves to solidify the interest into a commitment. The employer evaluation asked employers about the level of commitment to hiring students based on varying subsidy rates.

As the following chart indicates, support for hiring begins to decline after the rate drops below 50 percent. At this point, employers see that costs of employing a student outweigh the benefits. This situation is more likely true for small companies than large — the employer survey indicates many employers have hired co-op students for years without wage subsidies. Large companies were more likely to “always” hire than small companies.

Figure 3

Employer Willingness to Hire at Various Subsidy Rates



Source: NS Links Employer Project Evaluation Questionnaires

The focus groups and surveys found that the subsidy wage rate itself has an unintended and potentially negative, inflationary impact on some employers. The wage rates of \$8 and \$10 per hour are often as high, or higher in some cases, as those paid to full-time employees in some companies. This is particularly an issue in some small businesses, and in some communities outside Halifax. The result is the rate generates “hassles” for the employer, who must mitigate any conflict with existing employees. The following comments from the employer focus groups and surveys are illustrative of the wage issue:

“...The wage (\$9.00/hr.) for a student was ridiculous; my husband only makes \$10.00/hr.”

“\$10.00/hour really caught my eye. In the end it wasn’t that good a deal. The student was really good, which I wasn’t expecting. I’m up against the big guys. But the wage caused a problem with my other work force.”

“It was difficult to hire a pharmacy student. The wage problem — we had a problem with loyal part-time staff when they heard that the student is making \$2.00 an hour more than they are.”

“Wage did cause problems. Some of our workers get \$5.50/hr. and the students come in at \$10.00/hr.”

This problem may resolve itself to some extent when the subsidy declines, if wages paid to the students decline. However, it is clear that it poses some problems for companies taking part in *NS Links* if employers continue to be bound by the \$8 to \$10 an hour wage rate.

We recognize that the wage rate has several components. It is not only meant to ensure that the student gets a fair wage, but it also is designed to include some level of savings — an education premium to offset the cost of post-secondary students' education. The wages paid help students afford their education, one of the *NS Links* objectives.

The difficulty with a uniform wage rate is that it ignores both local labour market conditions — wages for the same job in Canso may be less than for Halifax — as well as wage differentials for different skills, experience and job requirements. As a result, a student working as a “bookkeeper” will be paid the same as an engineering student designing software for an R&D company. The wage rate difference amongst staff with varying skills and experience is illustrated in the examples above.

There are several possible approaches to dealing with this wage rate issue. It might be feasible, for example, to subsidize wages on a percentage basis up to a maximum, but this cuts out any education subsidy. Another approach is to split the total wages paid into two parts. The first part would be the salary, based on the market wage rate for an occupation. The second part would be paid to the student in the form of an educational voucher. The maximum amount paid by *NS Links* would not change nor would the gross amount received by the student. Employers would still pay the students on a subsidized basis, but the maximum would be set so that an employer's share would remain the same as under the current scheme.

5.5.2 Overlap and Duplication

The issue of overlap with co-op programming has previously been described. The discussion here is designed to elaborate on the findings of the interviews and focus groups. Comments by employers often indicated little awareness of the difference between a “co-op” program and *NS Links*. These descriptions were often used interchangeably. Employers referred to their “co-op” student, rather than *NS Links* student. Employers did point out the need to define the niche for *NS Links*:

“A worthwhile program — either differentiate or integrate it more with co-op programs.”

There is also some confusion amongst some employers concerning *NS Links* and other internship or placement programs, as well as summer employment programs.

The Communications Strategy and other program marketing efforts should be designed to differentiate *NS Links* in the work-experience marketplace.

5.5.3 Monitoring

One of the aims of *NS Links* is to monitor students and meet with employers at their placement. We received mixed feedback on monitoring from both students and employers. This suggests that the level of monitoring has a regional or officer-related component.

The majority of student recommendations to improve *NS Links* from the Student Survey for this evaluation focused on tightening the monitoring process of *NS Links* employers. Some 10 percent of written student evaluations from the 1995 summer term commented on the need to tighten the monitoring of the companies receiving internships through *NS Links*. To deal with this situation, students recommend that the program should:

- ensure funding is granted only to companies with a reputation of giving students a useful experience — a job description in writing is sometimes not provided to the student;
- ensure guidelines are followed by employers. Students, employers and *NS Links* staff should meet to clarify pay and job descriptions; and,
- ensure each employer provides a training schedule.

Other comments on the program include:

“Students should be paid the rate which is outlined in the contract. Companies should not gain special permission to reduce the minimum rate because they feel it is too high in relation to the job you have been assigned and your status as a student.” (Student)

“The NS Links staff should have drop-in visits at the workplace to monitor the work being done.” (Student)

“I thought it was a good program. The student followed the guidelines carefully, but NS Links did not keep contact. The student missed the first module.” (Employer)

“It’s great that the objectives are monitored by the NS Links staff.” (Employer)

“NS Links is good with follow-up on the student.” (Employer)

“Better than most funding programs - they follow-up...” (Employer)

It is clear from the comments that monitoring is important and appreciated by both employers and students. The few negative comments we received concerning the contacts between the placement and *NS Links* were all related to perceptions of insufficient monitoring. The comments on monitoring, as noted above, suggest a regional or officer-related basis to the variations as well as “growing pains” during the start-up phase of the program.

5.5.4 NS Links Communication

There are two components to this issue: communicating about the program, and communicating to program clients — students and employers. The first topic is a marketing and awareness issue. We recognize that some of the points raised by those we interviewed will be resolved with the implementation of the Communications Strategy. However, the comments may provide some early feedback.

Some employers were very pleased with the marketing of the program. A number of these found out about *NS Links* through the efforts of university co-op coordinators in Halifax. A few others felt that it was difficult to find out about the status of the program, or its activities:

“NS Links should notify past employers about upcoming programs, deadlines, and so on, instead of making us search for it in the newspaper. Co-op programs do that. Students are missing opportunities because employers don’t know about the program.” (Employer)

“It’s a good program, but they should keep us more informed about any changes.” (Employer)

“To improve the system the program should be marketed to the institutions.” (Employer)

“Tell student advisors at the Community Colleges about program.” (Student)

At this stage in the *NS Links* program, it appears marketing efforts have been most successful in the Halifax area, for reasons related to the networking strength and marketing depth of the co-op programs at Dalhousie University and TUNS, as noted previously.

The delay in getting the Communications Strategy underway likely had an impact on the communications and awareness issues raised by employers during the course of the evaluation. It will be very important to ensure that the Strategy is up and running before the next round of placements. The Strategy will also support awareness of the importance and benefits of student placements.

5.5.5 Self-Marketing by Students

We understand that *NS Links* is considering the idea of having potential student participants market the program to employers. We pursued this idea with both students and employers. Their responses were generally positive towards this approach. Some of these comments follow:

“The student that calls always gets the attention.” (Employer)

“Students will graduate and not know how to find a job unless they learn to market themselves.” (Employer)

“Students should be doing that anyway; a problem with co-ops is that students think that the co-op is only there to get them jobs. People think that the only jobs are posted at the co-op office.” (Employer)

“Students need to learn and practice networking” (Student)

“Employers might not take students seriously.” (Student)

There were several points raised that should be considered in developing this approach. These include:

- the level of student communication skills — employers frequently commented about the inadequacy of student communication skills;
- the inherent level of competition for placements by other programs, such as co-op, that have resources focused on marketing students and finding placements;

- the important role of networking, the lack of which may be a disadvantage to some students; and
- the high level of competition in the job market means students looking for jobs need to differentiate themselves in the marketplace, emphasizing their own special skills, expertise and other characteristics; unless a student can use these factors to obtain an interview with an employer — and marketing the funding element of the program is not a guarantee of an interview — the *NS Links* student will just be another applicant.

These suggestions point out the need to provide some hand-holding and strategic direction to students who may not have the skills and network to find an employer in their career area. *NS Links* should be involved with the process in partnership with the student and employer. This partnership would result from the marketing of the program by *NS Links* officers. This is not to suggest that *NS Links* officers directly work on placing students, but serve as an extra resource for students.

5.5.6 Baseline Data

NS Links has done a good job in setting up a system to collect student baseline data for the evaluations. The program has captured good, useful information from both students and employers from project evaluations and reports.

The two areas where improvements could be made relate to further maximizing the usefulness of the information: computerizing the data, and linking evaluation results. At present, the data are only available on paper format; *NS Links* has neither the human resources nor the technology to computerize the data. This is absolutely critical to the success of the impact evaluation, both to simplify future analysis, and to permit the linking of employer and student evaluation. It makes little sense to devise methods for a control group when basic information on program participants cannot be maintained.

During this process evaluation, we found that it was difficult, if not impossible, to match student evaluations with demographic information, academic information and employer results.

More attention needs to be paid to the completeness of the Baseline Survey; follow-up information on how to get in touch with the student was often not available. Some consideration should be given to designing an annual post-card update that *NS Links* students would be given at the end of their internship. These cards, with updated addresses and perhaps other information, would be mailed once a year to *NS Links* by

6.0 Results from 1995 Program Activities

6.1 Introduction

We surveyed a random sample of 100 student and 36 employer clients from the set of 1995 *NS Links* placements. The student survey focused on students' experiences with the components of the program and the preliminary results of their participation. The employer survey was designed to obtain employers' views and experiences with the post-secondary education system in Nova Scotia, as well as preliminary results from the internship. Both surveys were designed to complement the evaluations completed by students and employers at the end of the internships. The student survey is also linked to the Student Baseline Survey, completed by each participant at the time they begin the program. The information presented here also incorporates the findings from the student and employer focus groups.

The "results" presented in this chapter are the first-level outcomes and preliminary impacts of *NS Links*, based on activity to date.

6.2 The Student Perspective

6.2.1 Overall Value

Students see the value of *NS Links* and make the connection between their internship and future employment. Students in the focus groups noted:

"NS Links was long overdue";

"Companies need the incentive to hire students";

"... jobs are scarce";

"Without experience, students find it hard to find permanent employment."

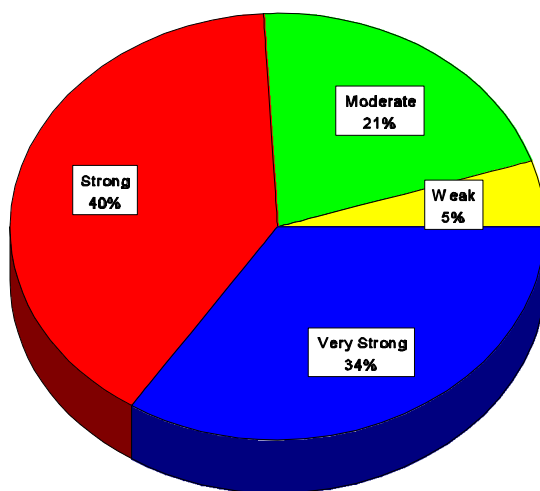
Student participants identified a number of factors that made their internship a positive experience. The internship:

- strengthens career goals by providing real skills and experience;
- applies theory in the workplace;
- teaches team skills;
- permits independent work with appropriate supervision;
- enhances personal growth and responsibility; and
- exposes interns to the business world.

6.2.2 NS Links Career Goals and Objectives to a Real Job

Students agreed that the internship with *NS Links* is a valuable addition to their knowledge base. One student commented that the internship was “*the most valuable three months of my life!*” The opportunity to practice skills learned in class while working alongside experienced colleagues was cited in the evaluation reports as perhaps the single most important benefit of the internship.

Figure 4
Student Rating of Link Between Career Goals & Links Skills/Experience, (n=100)



The linkage between the student’s career goals and the skills and experience developed at the internship was rated positively by the vast majority of students. The following chart indicates that about one third of the 100 student respondents rated the linkage as “very strong”. This result did not differ by whether the student was in a post-secondary co-operative program or not, nor by type of post-secondary institution.

Source: *NS Links* Evaluation Student Survey

Virtually all of the students completed their internships; the completion rate was 94 percent. Three of the six students that left before completion left as a result of “getting a job”.

Sixty percent of students reported that the internship changed their perception of their career goals. When asked to elaborate, a number of reasons were noted; many commented that the internship reaffirmed their career goals. The top three reasons, in order of frequency, are shown in the following table:

Table 14
Main Reasons that Internship Changed Perceptions of Career Goals

Topic	No.
Re-affirmed my goals	13
Clarified my goals	11
Entrepreneurship seemed more appealing to me as a result	9

Source: *NS Links Evaluation Student Survey*

Some 93 percent of the student evaluation forms from the 1995 summer internship noted that student individual learning objectives had been met and in most cases far exceeded what students had initially set out to acquire through the internship.

Students interviewed in the survey were not quite as positive. Twelve percent of those we surveyed reported that they did not set any learning objectives for their internship. Of those that set objectives, 33 percent met all of their objectives. The following table compares “objectives achievement” rates including and excluding those that stated they did not set any objectives.

Table 15
Learning Objective Achievement Rates

Category	% Including “No Objectives Set” (n=40)	% Excluding “No Objectives Set” (n=59)
Did not set any	12.1	-
None of them	1.0	1.1
Some of them	15.2	17.3
Most of them	42.4	48.3
All of them	29.3	33.3
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: *NS Links* Evaluation Student Survey

Comments on this topic give some indication that the expression “learning objectives” may not be clearly understood by the students.

6.2.3 Applies Theory in the Workplace

The internship provides a valuable opportunity for students to apply the theory learned in class to the work place.

“Without question, the highlight of my internship was the chance to see how an actual engineering firm operates. This type of operation could never be taught in a classroom and must be personally experienced to be understood... Everyone is expected to act as a professional and no time is lost procrastinating.”

“It allowed me to apply the theory of my education to that of a real company.”

“The internships provide a hands-on knowledge of what you’re studying.”

Students responding to the survey questionnaire confirmed the importance of this practical linkage between their studies and internship. About 91 percent of those responding to the question stated that their internship had strengthened their understanding of the link between their academic training and the workplace. The

strength of the linkage was slightly, but not significantly, stronger in co-op than in non co-op students.

6.2.4 Teaches Team Skills

Students noted the value derived from working as part of a team and in particular the knowledge which came from working with the other more experienced members of the team.

“The supervisor and every team member made an extra effort to make me part of their team. The level of supervision and feedback was adequate and the expertise and knowledge that surrounded me was nothing short of amazing.”

“It was a tremendous experience to be thrown right into the job of PR. It forced me to work with my co-workers.”

“The internship provided experience in working with people to solve problems — the interaction with other engineers.”

6.2.5 Independent Work with Appropriate Supervision

Many students saw the opportunity to work independently and with minimum supervision as one of the primary benefits of their internship. Students commented on the value of supervisors allowing them the freedom to make mistakes while at the same time being appreciative of the time supervisors took in providing constructive feedback on their progress.

“My supervisor let me attempt to solve problems rather than do it himself — I learned a lot more that way.”

“I ... received in-depth feedback on any questions or problems I encountered.”

“I was lucky enough to work closely with a professional industrial engineer who acted as a mentor on a variety of subjects and was able to guide a number of my decisions without outright directing me.”

6.2.6 Enhances Personal Growth and Responsibility

Students commented on having attained a great sense of accomplishment through their internship. For many it was the first time that they experienced the feeling of personal responsibility in a work setting.

"I was trusted with important topics and was able to gain confidence and responsibility essential to my experiencing the every-day demands of a challenging work environment."

"While on site I worked with limited supervision which developed responsibility and good decision making habits. ... when problems arose on the site that were beyond my authority to solve, the supervisor would be notified. The supervisor would visit with me once or twice a week on site, and provide feedback and pointers"

"Knowing my work was for real and not an exercise! Feeling of accomplishment and responsibility!"

"Built confidence in skills I knew I possessed"

"Everyday was a challenge. I was given a great deal of responsibility and was NEVER sitting around wondering what I would do next."

6.2.7 Exposes Interns to the Business World

Students also cited other benefits of their internship:

"The interaction with clients that can't be taught in class"

"...making important contacts in the world of science, business., biology and environmental consulting. I have also been able to acquire a good sense of what direction my field is taking, what skills are required and what openings are becoming available."

"An incredible opportunity to learn science as well as the intricacies of running a business."

6.2.8 Labour Force Status After NS Links

The *NS Links* program is aimed at both students returning to school and those who had finished their studies. We asked students to tell us about their labour force status after completing their internship. Because of the high proportion of co-op students who were on internships, the following table¹⁴ shows separate results for both co-op and non co-op students.

Table 16
Labour Force Status After Placement by Student Program (%)

Category	Co-op Student (n=40)	Non Co-op Student (n=60)
Returned to School	95.0	51.7
Got a career-related job	5.0	36.7
Got a job not related to my career plans	0.0	6.7
Unemployed	0.0	5.0
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: *NS Links* Evaluation Student Survey

While 95 percent of co-op students returned to school, only half of the students not in a co-op program returned to school. Baseline data indicate more than two thirds of the non co-op students had completed university or community college, so it may be likely that these students had completed their studies.

Two thirds of the 34 students who found a job after their placement were hired by their *NS Links* employer; 77 percent of these “hired” students were working full-time when interviewed. Half of the co-op students are working full-time, but 83 percent of the non co-op students have full-time jobs. Close to nine out of 10 of the *NS Links* students who are working have career-related jobs.

¹⁴ Multiple responses were permitted for this question; 8 students that returned to school also reported finding a career-related job. Overall rates for “got a career-related job” are 17.5% and 43% for co-op and non co-op students, respectively.

6.2.9 Successful Job Search Techniques

Co-op students mainly relied on their co-op co-ordinator to find their internship placement; two thirds of students used this method while another 23 percent of co-op students contacted employers directly. This contact was either student or employer initiated; the questionnaire did not specify the initiator.

Non co-op students employed a wide variety of job-search techniques. Some form of employer contact led to 58 percent of the successful jobs. Advertisements were successful for 17 percent of this student group.

In addition to the focus group discussion reported earlier, we surveyed students on their opinions on having students approach employers directly as a way to market *NS Links*. There was strong support for this approach by students — 91 percent supported the concept — although only 18 percent used this method to find their job, with more non co-op than co-op students using a direct approach. This finding seems to imply that the “contact employer” response to the “how did you find your job” was employer rather than student initiated.

The three most common insights in support of this offered by students, along with the frequency of the comments, are shown below:

Table 17
Benefits of Students Marketing NS Links

Topic	No.
Will spread the word about [<i>NS Links</i>]	19
Students learn and practice networking	15
Employers will see students have interest and drive	9
Students should approach with the help and support of <i>NS Links</i>	9

Source: *NS Links* Evaluation Student Survey

There were few concerns expressed about this approach by students. Six students felt that students may not effectively present programs. Five students noted that it will be important that employers receive promotional information before students approach them. One student noted that co-op students are not permitted to market to employers directly.

6.2.10 Influencing Change in Education

Students were asked if their *NS Links* experience had raised their awareness of changes required to their courses, in order to better suit their needs.

We explored the responses to this question using several explanatory variables such as type of institution and co-op program participation and found no statistically significant differences in response. There was a common belief that changes are required; 60 percent of students responded that changes are required while 23 percent said they would not like to see changes. Another 17 percent felt that changes were not needed.

Most students feel that they cannot influence change at their post-secondary institution. The following table indicates the distribution of responses by the students.

Table 18
Likelihood of Influencing Change to Courses After NS Links

Category	Percent (n=100)
Very Unlikely	28.2
Somewhat unlikely	21.1
Neutral/About the Same	16.9
Somewhat more likely	23.9
Much more likely	9.9
Total	100.0

Source: *NS Links* Evaluation Employer Survey

This finding has implications for the *SNS 2000 Communications Strategy* and the idea of linking students, employers and academic institutions.

6.3 The Employer Perspective

6.3.1 Awareness of NS Links

The *NS Links* Employer Questionnaire from the 1995 Summer Term asked employers who participated in the program to identify the channels through which they became aware of *NS Links*. This question is designed to determine the network employers use to obtain information, to improve the promotion of the program in the future. The Questionnaire did not contain economic profile variables on employers, so we are not

able to categorize responses other than by whether the *NS Links* student was enrolled in a co-op program.

Table 19
Employers' Most Common Information Sources
Concerning NS Links (%)

Sources of Information on <i>NS Links</i>	Hired Co-op Student (n=40)	Hired Non Co-op Student (n=39)	Average (n=79)
<i>NS Links</i> brochure	10.0	12.8	11.2
Newspaper/Periodical ad	17.5	25.6	22.5
Approached by student	12.5	12.8	12.5
Contacted by <i>NS Links</i> Officer	5.0	5.1	5.0
Other employers or business contact	17.5	17.9	17.5
Other	37.5	26.5	31.2

Source: *NS Links* Employer Project Evaluation Questionnaires

The interviews and focus groups, as well as “written-in” comments indicate that the “other” category primarily consists of co-op officers at post-secondary institutions who marketed the program to employers. Employers who did not hire a co-op student relied a great deal on ads to find out about the program. The third most important source was through the network of business associates — nearly one in five employers cited this method.

Various forms of networking, including personal marketing, were very important in the student recruitment process. Fully 25 percent of employers reported “personal contact (already knew the student)” as the most common recruitment method. One third of all non co-op employers already knew the student they hired. This suggests that the incremental employment generated by *NS Links* was not as strong as reported — these students may have worked with the employer in the past and continued to do so with a *NS Links* wage subsidy. As the results in Chapter 5 indicate, many employers see work terms as a trial period to determine the suitability of students as full time employees after graduation.

Co-op employers were more reliant on institutional marketing of *NS Links* as a source for students. Some 22 percent of employers were approached directly by educational

institutions; 29 percent relied on “other” sources, primarily co-op officers at these institutions.

6.3.2 Reason for Hiring

Two questions on the Employer questionnaire explored the rationale for hiring students. The first, shown in the following table, simply asked employers to check-off various reasons for hiring. Data in the table indicate the proportion of employers who cited each reason, by frequency. The second question determined the important features of *NS Links* in comparison to other programs.

Table 20
Employer Reasons for Hiring Students (%)

Reason	Percent (n=84)
Short term need	51.2
Wage bill subsidy	42.9
Need for specific skills	40.5
Wanted to help student get a job	27.4
Company policy to hire students	23.8
Wanted to increase productivity	23.8
Other	11.9

Source: *NS Links* Employer Project Evaluation Questionnaires

Companies that hired co-op students are statistically more likely to have a company policy to hire students, possibly because of their size, market and other characteristics; 27 percent of co-op employers indicated that their policy was to hire students compared to 20 percent of companies that did not hire a co-op student during the summer work term.

The responses to the “other” category varied, but these responses focused on the desire of employers to help students get relevant work experience in their areas of study.

To employers, the wage subsidy is the single most important feature of *NS Links*, compared to other internship programs. Fifty-five percent of the 80 employers who

responded to this question noted the wage subsidy as the reason they decided to participate in *NS Links* versus another internship or co-op program. The ease of the application process and the reputation of the program accounted for 19 and 12 percent of the reasons for participation, respectively.

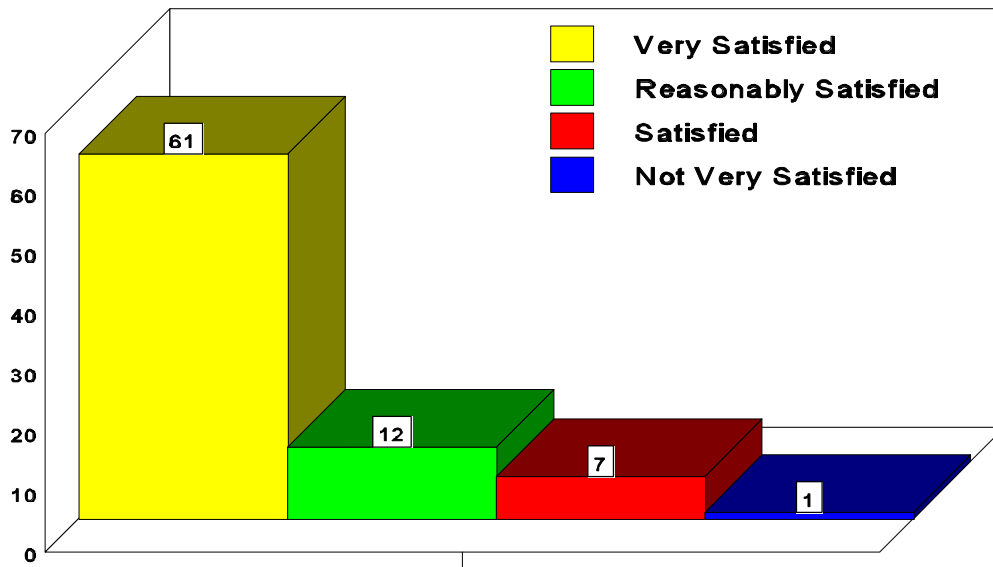
6.3.3 Satisfaction Levels

Employers in the summer work term were asked several questions to determine their satisfaction with the program. Overall, the responses were very positive, in terms of the process, the student and the benefits of the program on their organization.

As the previous chart indicates, the placement process was well received by employers. Three out of four employers reported that they were “very satisfied” with the *NS Links* placement process.

Figure 5

Employer Satisfaction with Links Placement Process



Percent distribution, based on 81 employers responding

Source: *NS Links* Employer Project Evaluation Questionnaires

Some 93 percent of employers reported that the students were able to meet their learning objectives developed for their work term. This question was open-ended and asked whether “all” the learning objectives were achieved. The open-ended nature of the question makes it difficult to assess the degree of success from the responses.

Virtually all 84 employer respondents from the summer work term — 94 percent — indicated that “the skills and knowledge acquired by the student through their education [was] valuable in performing their assigned duties”.

Responses from the Employer Survey used in this evaluation and the focus group results were marginally less generous in their assessment of the educational skills of their students. About 53 percent of employers in the Survey indicated that students had “most” of the skills and academic background necessary to meet their requirements; 44 percent reported that students only had “some” of the skills and background. However, 89 percent of employers were “generally pleased” with the level of skills and expertise of the students they hired. Those that reported they were “generally displeased” typically criticised the level of non-academic or life skills attained by post-secondary students. The following comments are characteristic of these responses:

“A university degree doesn’t guarantee that they’ll know everything, but it teaches them how to learn.”

“There is not enough of a work ethic amongst students.”

“I’m displeased with the level of responsibility a student is willing to take.”

Employers cited a number of benefits to hiring students. The strong results for the summer work term, based on the Employer Project Evaluation questionnaires, reflect the need of employers to fill vacant positions while regular employees were on vacation. Overall results are shown in the following table, sorted by the frequency of response.

Table 21
Organizational Benefits from Student Internship Placement

Benefits	Percent (n=84)
Balancing workload	71.1
Subsidized wages	55.4
Increased productivity	54.8
New ideas	39.8
Other	12.0

Source: *NS Links* Employer Project Evaluation Questionnaires

About 88 percent of employers from the summer work-term that completed the Project Evaluations reported they would hire their student for a full-time job if one were available.

One of the objectives of *NS Links* is to change the opinions of employers about hiring students and learning. Employer respondents to the Project Evaluations felt they were already generally committed to hiring students; 82 percent of the 83 employers reported that their participation in *NS Links* did not change their opinion about hiring students

Employers interviewed for the evaluation by telephone were more positive about the program and changes to their views on “learning organizations”, as the following table indicates.

Table 22
Changes in Company Attitudes Towards...

Degree of change	Student Employment (n=36)	Learning Organization (n=35)
Yes, attitude changed in a positive way	47.2	31.4
No, attitude did not change	2.8	11.4
No, company was already committed to ...	50.0	51.4
Not sure	0.0	5.7
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: *NS Links* Evaluation Student Survey Results

Results indicating changes in company attitudes towards learning, measured in the above table, do not indicate strong attitudinal change. Some 51 percent of employers indicated they were already committed to “learning”; 55 percent of employer respondents reported they were already involved with the post-secondary education system in Nova Scotia. Some 61 percent reported that their *NS Links* experience will not cause them to increase their involvement with the post-secondary system, while 36 percent reported they will increase their involvement.

6.3.4 Employer Suggestions for Improving NS Links

Employers were asked to provide general comments on the program as part of the Project Evaluations. These included the best and least attractive features of the program as well as ways to improve *NS Links*. The following table lists the three most common strengths of the program from the employers' perspective.

Table 23
Best Employer-cited Features of NS Links

Features	Employers (no.)
Subsidized wages	30
Benefits both parties	11
Ease of access	9

Source: *NS Links* Employer Project Evaluation Questionnaires

Almost half of those responding agreed that the wage subsidy was the best part of *NS Links*. This comment is consistent with those describing the benefits of *NS Links* as well as those responses from the Employer Survey and the employer focus groups.

“The subsidy is the most important thing. It takes a great deal of time to work with these students. Based on profit margins of today, this would not be feasible without the subsidy.”

“The high rate of subsidy was a big help to a small business.”

“Program offers quality candidates for training at an affordable cost.”

“As a small business it is difficult to predict a four month cash flow as required for a non-essential person. The subsidy allows me to hire a student without the fear of a work shortage layoff.”

Some 11 employers noted that the best part of the program was that it helped both the employer and the student.

“I believe offering funding to employers enables us to hire co-op students and therefore benefit from their technical knowledge and in turn they benefit from the work experience.”

“[It’s a] two-way learning experience — the student is exposed to a busy work environment and learns how an office operates, its culture and norms and is asked not to only “fit in” but perform as a professional. The student brings expertise in some computer programs that we may not be familiar with, or as familiar with, as he is.”

“The student brings new ideas into the company and allows the students to gain real world experience.”

The focus group findings, in support of the above, suggest that computer skills are the most common skills that a student brings to a company. Employers in the focus groups were hard-pressed to identify other skills or expertise that their student brought to their organization. Linkages between the latest research or methodology in a given area, an objective of *NS Links*, was not mentioned.

The third most common response regarding the “best feature” was ease of access.

“I liked the way the NS Links program operated — not a lot of paperwork — but what was required was well thought out.”

“The simplicity of the administrative forms was a pleasant change from most programs.”

“Since this was our first venture with a student program. I found the information was straightforward, the phone service was excellent and the program was implemented without any delays or mix-ups, etc.”

Several employers mentioned that *NS Links* allowed them to test out a potential employee for several months without having to commit to hiring them full time. This benefit was raised as well by several small business employers during the focus groups.

“The program is excellent and allows potential employers and employees an opportunity to screen staff and companies for future long term employment. The subsidy allows employers to train employees without a significant loss of capital.”

Employers were less likely to point out the negative aspects of the program. The “fault” most mentioned was the modules. However, objections were not overly strenuous, for example:

“The three days off-site of training required by NS Links [was the worst aspect]. We did not object, but as an employer we saw very little value.”

Employers also noted that the program did not approve funding early enough, and this caused problems because employers were not given sufficient time to screen potential employees.

Employers responding to the Project Evaluation questionnaire gave several suggestions to improve the program. The majority of suggestions were to continue the program as is. Another suggestion was to approve funding earlier.

“Processing applicants earlier in the spring would leave the employer more time to select an appropriate student with the right skills.”

“I feel that sometimes funding is not approved early enough to allow employers to interview students for available positions. In our case we can’t always take on a student without the funding and must wait for approval from NS Links.”

Employers suggested that longer sessions be available if needed.

“Make it possible to employ a student for an eight month period instead of a four month period. In a technical job it often takes 4-6 weeks to fully train a student. In a four month term, this amounts to half the employment time. Students prove to be more productive and useful in eight month terms.”

This response speaks more perhaps to employer needs than student needs and the purpose of the program.

7. 0 Addressing the Issues

7.1 Recommendations

NS Links is doing a good job helping Nova Scotia students to obtain career-related work experience. Employers are generally pleased with the program and support its goals of student development. The program has encouraged some employers to hire students where they would not have done so in the past. *NS Links* is particularly helpful to small businesses in the province.

There is no doubt that the anticipated immediate results — career-related placements for students — are being attained. Our recommendations focus on the way the program delivery should be adjusted in order to produce the anticipated *longer term impacts* in a cost-effective and accountable manner. To do so will require some adjustments to focus the program to best meet the needs of its clients — students and employers — and its stakeholders.

It is always easiest to keep the criteria for any development program such as *NS Links* as broad as possible, rather than limiting access. In this way, the program's efforts are directed towards immediate outcomes — career-related placements. However, a focused approach is necessary to achieve the objectives of the program and bring about the desired long term change in employer attitudes towards learning. The recommendations are designed to support these longer term objectives as well as strengthen the linkage between the program and HRDC's *Strategic Initiatives Program*.

Recommendation 1: Focus the Program on Non Co-op Students

The analysis points out that co-op students already have the benefits of many of the career-related development activities that *NS Links* aspires to obtain for students. The post-secondary co-op programs administered by CAFCE members in the province have a proven track record for its student and employer clients. CAFCE members in Nova Scotia are continually challenged to find placements for their co-op students, regardless of their field of study.

Perhaps the main shortcomings of post-secondary co-op programs are its availability only in areas of study such as business and science-related, and its under-developed training for its student participants. On the other hand, co-op programs exist in these areas of study in response to employer demand by post-secondary institutions.

Students in the co-op programs did not indicate inadequacies in their training and remarked that the *NS Links* training was repetitive for them.

HRDC funding cutbacks will restrict the number of new post-secondary co-op programs in the province. The decrease in opportunities for career-related placements is an important issue in Nova Scotia where post-secondary co-op programs have had a very low penetration rate. *NS Links* is well positioned to compensate for this decline through its internship approach.

NS Links should not duplicate the work being done by the co-op programs in the province but work to support other students not in post-secondary co-op programs. If *NS Links* serves mainly co-op students, cannot differentiate itself from post-secondary co-op programming, or is mainly a financial incentive to help co-op students find jobs, there does not appear to be a real need for the broader *NS Links* program. In this case, *NS Links* would be more effective if its funding dollars were applied to expand the post-secondary co-op program in the province.

The difficulty, as pointed out in Chapter 5, is that post-secondary co-op programs often serve the same needs of students and business as *NS Links*. Moreover, co-op programs generally focus on programs of study that develop the skills for the emerging economy.

We believe there is a need for *NS Links*. There is also a need for co-operation with the CAFCE post-secondary co-op programs in the province; we recognize that this linkage does exist and is being strengthened. Co-op students do benefit from *NS Links* participation.

The *NS Links* Proposal to the *Strategic Initiatives Program* stresses the benefits of internship programs compared to co-op programs. To realize these benefits, *NS Links* must be more of an internship than a co-op program.

There are several options to address these issues:

- limit *NS Links* to post-secondary students not enrolled in a co-op programs;
- allocate a proportion of the positions for co-op students for each work-term; this rate would remain constant as the subsidy declines in order to safeguard co-op placements amongst committed, long term co-op employers; and,
- focus program marketing efforts on “new” employers that have not hired students in the past, with no limitation on whether or not the placed student is enrolled in a co-op program, and focus marketing on non co-op students.

In the short term, restricting or diminishing *NS Links* subsidy funding to employers who have hired co-op students in the past may reduce the number of co-op placements as employers would likely choose to hire subsidized *NS Links* students, other things being equal. A decline in co-op placements amongst employers is certainly an unintended program impact. In the longer term as the subsidy rate declines, this will be less of an issue as well as less of an impact on co-op students. Moreover, completely eliminating eligibility for *NS Links* funding for co-op students may result in some short-term decreased availability of the skills that employers require, if students choose to register in non co-op programs to get the *NS Links* wage subsidy.

The third option is more in keeping with *NS Links* objectives. It broadens the base of employers that are committed to hiring students and illustrates the benefits of hiring students to these employers. At the same time, this approach is not biased against co-op students, and would broaden the base of the post-secondary co-op program as well.

We recommend the third option, with careful consideration to monitoring the level of co-op participation in the program. The level of co-op students participating in *NS Links* in 1995 was 40 percent. This level should act as a ceiling against which to gauge future levels of co-op student participation. Moreover, given that at least 75 percent of Nova Scotia post-secondary students are not enrolled in post-secondary co-op programs and these were the target clients for the program, it seems reasonable to set 40 percent as the maximum level of co-op student participation in *NS Links* in the future.

Recommendation 2: Continue to Encourage Participation by Small Business

The evaluation found that *NS Links* was effective in encouraging small business to hire students for career-related experience. The wage subsidy appears to have more of an impact on these small firms than on larger firms, based on results from interviews, focus group and the two sets of questionnaires. Larger firms, often involved with the co-op program, are more likely to hire students without the financial incentives of *NS Links*.

Students and employers alike reported that the work experience for students in small businesses was varied and gave students an understanding of entrepreneurship, a major objective of the *NS Links* program. The experience often developed multiple skills in the students. More particularly, students employed in small firms often had to learn communication and customer service skills to a higher degree than those in larger organizations.

Appendix B in the *NS Links* funding proposal to the *Strategic Initiatives Program* reinforces the benefits of concentrating on small business when it states that:

“... an internship program would be able to target growth areas and small business opportunities in the province to create career-oriented work

experience. The internship could be tailored to build on to initiatives in the area of economic development, reducing the need to rely on “big business” industries to support co-operative education.”

The evaluation supports this emphasis on small business. We recommend that the program place greater emphasis on encouraging small businesses to participate in *NS Links*. It should do this by marketing the program to small business and using the subsidy as a mechanism to lever small business participation in the program.

We are not recommending the elimination of support for larger business. If the program is to realize the longer term outcomes of increased employer recognition of the importance of internships and an increased commitment to the adoption of a learning culture, it must find ways of increasing small business participation, since small businesses tend to be less likely to actively embrace these principles now.

Recommendation 3: Improve the Marketing of the Program

Comments from various clients of *NS Links* indicate that the program is not as widely known as might be expected after one year of operation. This situation will improve as more of the Regional Working Groups are established and begin to market the program. The implementation of the Communications Strategy will strengthen this recommendation as well. This should be undertaken as soon as possible.

The recommendation is linked to the two previous recommendations to address the clients of the program. In undertaking efforts to improve the marketing of the program, it will be important to include all clients of the program — students and employers as well as the post-secondary education system in the province. It will also be important to follow-up contacts with employers, educators and minority groups.

On the employer side, emphasis should be on employers not traditionally active in student employment, particularly small business.

Recommendation 4: Continue to Develop an Inclusionary Student Model

NS Links has made a good start in developing an inclusionary delivery model for minority students within the community. This has required some adjustments to the program eligibility criteria to open placements in the public sector for equity groups and resulted in positive results for Mi’Kmaq students.

NS Links should continue to develop this model in the province, in consultation with the Mi’Kmaq and African Nova Scotian communities.

Recommendation 5: Examine the Wage Rate Subsidy

The hourly wage rate paid to students by *NS Links* is having an unintended impact on some employers, who sometimes find themselves paying wages that are as high, or higher in some cases, as those paid to full-time or other non *NS Links* student employees. This issue arose during the employer focus groups and is a concern to some employers operating small businesses, and in some communities outside Halifax. Some employers have worked around this problem by changing the way in which they treat *NS Links* students for payroll purposes. More analysis is required to determine the extent of the problem.

While *NS Links* wage rates based on the subsidy may be “too high” from an employer perspective, the wages paid also incorporate an “educational” subsidy to allow students to continue their education and minimize debt. This second component is not apparent to those outside the administration of the program.

To deal with the two part nature of the wage rate, we recommend consideration of an approach that splits the subsidy into wage and education components. The wage rate would be negotiated with employers, based on market rates. The education component could be paid as a subsidy to the student to offset educational costs.

Recommendation 6: Establish a Database for Effective Program Management

NS Links has developed several good evaluation instruments for monitoring and evaluating the program. These include the application forms, the Student Baseline Survey, the Student Evaluations for the internship and the training modules, and the placement-focussed Employer [Project] Evaluation survey. Properly administered and monitored for completeness, these have the potential to provide very useful information for the final evaluation of *NS Links*.

At the present time, this information exists only in paper format; there is no computerized database of the information. Perhaps more importantly, it is very difficult — and impossible in some cases — to link data from the various instruments. For example, the Employer Evaluation survey is anonymous so it is not possible to link responses to the characteristics of a particular employer or student for subsequent analysis.

A computerized database is essential for the effective linking of information, and for the success of the final evaluation. We recommend that this database be established as soon as possible to maximize the usefulness of the information collected now and to minimize additional work that will be required later in the evaluation.

Recommendation 7: Establish a Mechanism for Student Follow-up

This recommendation is associated with the previous recommendation, and arises from our experience in implementing the Student Questionnaire. The current system will not be effective in tracking *NS Links* student participants over the life of the program. Students move and extra names are infrequently provided.

Without the strong capability of contacting student participants, it will be difficult to assess the impact of *NS Links*.

We recommend that *NS Links* consider the implementation of a tracking mechanism for student participants. This mechanism would include a financial incentive for students to keep in touch with the program, for purposes of subsequent follow-up. An annual postcard, provided to the student at the end of their internship, would be a straightforward way to accomplish this.

7.2 The Next Steps

Work to implement several of these recommendations is already underway and should continue. The recommendations related to the database and student follow-up require both a management and a resource commitment.

The more challenging recommendations, dealing with the focusing of the program, are the most important to the longer term success of *NS Links*. The program must implement these recommendations in order to meet its objectives and support the *Strategic Initiatives Program*.