Examining Youth Sector Stakeholders' Experiences in an Online Program Evaluation Certificate

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Abstract: *Evaluation is a critical skill for practitioners, yet many youth workers lack sufficient training. The current study examined youth sector stakeholders' experiences in an online program evaluation certificate. A total of 233 participants from six cohorts (i.e., three years) completed pre- and post-certificate surveys measuring their satisfaction and learnings from the certificate. Results revealed that participants were generally satisfied with the certificate and reported significant improvements in their perceived knowledge after participation* ($p < .001$). *Findings point to the utility of online certificates for enhancing evaluation capacity in the Canadian youth work sphere and inform future directions for research and practice.*

Keywords: *online learning, education, capacity building, quantitative*

Résumé : *L'évaluation est une pratique organisationnelle essentielle, mais plusieurs travailleurs du secteur des services à la jeunesse ne sont pas suffisamment formés en la matière. L'étude actuelle examine l'expérience d'intervenants dans le secteur des services à la jeunesse en ce qui concerne un programme de certificat en évaluation en ligne. Un total de 233 personnes participantes de six cohortes (c'est-à-dire pendant trois ans) ont répondu aux questions d'un sondage avant et après le certificat, mesurant leur niveau de satisfaction et les apprentissages tirés du certificat. Les résultats révèlent que les personnes participantes étaient généralement satisfaites du certificat et ont rapporté d'importantes améliorations dans leurs connaissances perçues après participation* ($p < .001$). *Les résultats confirment l'utilité de certificat pour améliorer la capacité d'évaluation dans le secteur canadien des services à la jeunesse et orienter les recherches et la pratique à l'avenir.*

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Mots clés : *apprentissage en ligne*, *éducation*, *amélioration de la capacité*, quantitatif

INTRODUCTION

Program evaluation is a critical part of youth programs, with valuable implications for understanding implementation, quality, and effectiveness (Arnold et al., 2016). Further, evaluation is recognized as an essential skill for practitioners in a variety of fields (e.g., education, youth work, public health; Davis, 2006) due to its broad and multi-faceted approach that differs from one context to another (Patton, 2018). Within the youth-serving sector (i.e., organizations that provide programming or supports to young people under 30 years old), program evaluation is a systematic method for collecting, analyzing, and using information to answer basic questions about a youth program regarding its audience, processes, or its impacts to best serve individuals in intended ways (Metz, 2007). Evaluation can be beneficial for (a) assessing program outcomes and demonstrating success to stakeholders (e.g., funders), (b) understanding program processes to see whether programs are being delivered as planned and identifying areas for improvement, (c) gaining insights into links between program processes and outcomes to understand how the program is working and for whom, and (d) identifying if unintended outcomes may arise from programming (Arnold et al., 2016; Shaikh et al., 2020). The use of evaluation approaches is intended to support action in organizations, including decision-making that informs improved services and contributes to youth well-being (Lee & Nowell, 2015). Because of this, evaluation has become increasingly valued as an essential organizational practice in the youth sector; however, despite its usefulness, many youth sector stakeholders do not receive sufficient training nor have the capacity to engage in ongoing evaluative work (Lovell et al., 2016).

The importance of evaluation capacity building (ECB) efforts is gaining recognition across multiple sectors (Beere, 2005; McDonald et al., 2003) due to increased expectations placed on organizations by funders and communities for proving program effectiveness and investment payoff (Naccarella et al., 2007). Yet to date, few capacity-building opportunities (i.e., free or fee-based) exist in the area of evaluation for the youth-serving sector, with even less research conducted in this area. As such, there is a need to explore and assess different avenues for building evaluation capacity in the youth-serving sector.

Evaluation Capacity in the Youth Sector

As the climate and culture of the youth sector have shifted over the past decade, highlighting an increased demand for accountability and evidence-based practices, many organizations still lack the resources to conduct evaluations (e.g., staff, funding, time; Carman & Fredericks, 2010). Such limited resources concern a broader lack of organizational capacity, which is defined as "the ability of an organization to draw on various assets and resources to achieve its mandate and

objectives" (Doherty et al., 2014, pp. 125). Organizational capacity frameworks in the non-profit sector (e.g., Hall, 2003) are multidimensional and involve various organizational assets and resources that are critical to organizational performance and goal achievement. While organizations have different capacity needs depending on their mission, operating environment, and strengths and weaknesses (Horton et al., 2003), organizational capacity ultimately affects an organization's ability to evolve (Cairns et al., 2005). Specifically, organizational capacity can be influenced by several factors, including leadership (e.g., support of evaluation from decision-makers), resource allocation (e.g., time, funding), skill and knowledge development (e.g., training staff in conducting evaluation methods), and external supports (e.g., training opportunities from community agencies; Bourgeois et al., 2016). As a result, building an organization's capacity to conduct evaluation has become a topic of great interest to many youth sector stakeholders (Sarti et al., 2017).

Indeed, conducting effective evaluation depends on an organization's ability to build capacity for evaluation. ECB refers to an individual and/or organization's capacity to do and use evaluation (Bourgeois et al., 2016). Specifically, ECB is the intentional teaching of new knowledge, skills, and attitudes for evaluation, sustainability of rigorous evaluative practices, and resource allocation to promote ongoing engagement in evaluative work (Preskill & Boyle, 2008). ECB training efforts can be viewed in light of Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick's (2023) Comprehensive Evaluation Model. The model evaluates training programs at four levels of program effects: (a) Level I—Reactions, (b) Level II—Learning, (c) Level III—Behaviour, and (d) Level IV—Results. The evaluation of Level I focuses on participants' reactions and the extent to which they liked and were satisfied with the training. The evaluation of Level II goes beyond participant reactions (satisfaction) to measure changes in attitudes, knowledge, and skills. Levels III focuses on the transfer of learning and behaviour change, while Level IV is focused on broader organizational impact. Thus, building ECB is critical at multiple levels within an organization, from increasing individual staff knowledge to changing and maintaining behaviours at an organizational level.

Evaluation knowledge is critical as it is linked to other elements of organizational capacity (e.g., human resources, planning and development), whereby an organization fosters a learning culture that values evaluation and is committed to internalizing evaluation processes, systems, policies, and procedures (Brown et al., 2016; Sarti et al., 2017). However, the capacity of organizations to carry out evaluation cannot be considered in isolation from the capacities of staff working in these organizations, who often report "a lack of resources and internal expertise as primary challenges to implementing sustainable evaluation practices" (Bakken et al., 2014, p. 2). Such lack of internal expertise is often listed as a primary tension facing organizations and their funders when it concerns evaluation (Cole et al., 2014). Specifically, funders can mandate that their grantees hire external evaluation consultants as they assume the grantees' lack of evaluation

capacity affects their abilities to set realistic and measurable goals. However, grantees possess intimate knowledge regarding the programs they run and, thus, are better positioned to use evaluation to detect issues early on, communicate decisions, and act on evaluation findings (Cole et al., 2014). Therefore, individual staff engagement in ECB opportunities can help build internal evaluation expertise.

Horton (2002) posited that ECB is needed at all levels of organizations, from individual staff within small-scale organizations to organizations at national levels. All organizations, and the individual staff members within said organizations, start at different points when it comes to engagement with ECB opportunities (e.g., training and resources; Stockdill et al., 2002). Human resources are often identified as the most important capacity dimension for the achievement of organizational goals (e.g., Misener & Doherty, 2009; Wicker & Breuer, 2011), as skilled staff and shared values were identified as critical to operating quality programming and organizations (Sharpe, 2006). Thus, ECB is a key facilitator for organizational learning and requires promoting evaluative thinking internally within organizations and involving stakeholders in the evaluation process (Carman, 2007).

Evaluations have the best chance of being useful and improving program practices when stakeholders are actively engaged in the process (Amo & Cousins, 2007). Making evaluation a routine part of an organization is predicted to positively impact the extent to which ECB is sustainable (Preskill & Boyle, 2008). Additionally, if evaluation is engrained into everyday organizational practices, it is more likely to be integrated into routine operations and associated findings used to inform decision-making and program improvement (Liket et al., 2014). Unfortunately, few accessible opportunities exist for youth sector stakeholders to build their evaluation capacity. In one of the few studies that focused specifically on building evaluation capacity in a grassroots youth organization, McDuff (2001) found that a lack of organizational capacity to contribute meaningfully to evaluation processes meant that most evaluations were funder-driven, thereby diminishing the overall usefulness and impact of the conducted evaluations. As such, McDuff (2001) stressed the need for ECB strategies that adapt methods to local contexts (e.g., program populations or program type). While previous research has placed the onus on organizations to take charge of their ECB, external actors (e.g., community partners) can offer supports, resources, and training for community stakeholders in this area.

Bridging the Gap: Youth Research and Evaluation EXchange's Online Program Evaluation Certificate

One external actor that provides these evaluation supports to youth sector stakeholders is the Youth Research and Evaluation eXchange (YouthREX). Initiated in 2014, YouthREX works to make research evidence and evaluation accessible and relevant within the youth sector of Ontario through capacity-building

opportunities. Such opportunities aim to increase the capacity of youth-serving organizations to conduct their own program evaluations and improve services based on evidence. By building the capacity of organizations to conduct their own evaluations, YouthREX aims to create conditions for ongoing systematic organizational learning, practice refinement, and programmatic modifications in the service of improving service delivery and increasing impact, all of which ultimately benefit youth participants. In response to a province-wide exploration to understand the experiences of youth-serving agencies with evaluation (Lovell et al., 2016), coupled with calls for greater academic attention toward evaluation education (Baker et al., 2010), YouthREX developed a free 10-week online program evaluation certificate for stakeholders across Ontario's youth sector. The certificate aims to address accessibility barriers to ECB opportunities by being both free to all registrants and offered via a virtual platform. The certificate is comprised of 10 self-paced lessons and covers evaluation concepts, approaches, and practices relevant to conducting evaluation within the youth sector. The certificate is evidence-informed, interactive, and utilizes different forms of media. As learning is optimized when the concepts being explored can be personalized and directly apply to their youth work evaluation practices, participants are provided with the option of completing assignments that involves creating their own evaluation plan, including developing a logic model, identifying evaluation questions and associated methods, and creating a plan to share evaluation findings (see Table 1). Participants who choose to complete the assignments also receive detailed feedback from a certificate facilitator who has applied and academic expertise in evaluation.

Table 1. Certificate overview

Module	Lesson
Module 01: The Evaluation Context	01: The Ontario Youth Sector 02: What, Why & How: The Fundamentals of Program Evaluation
Module 02: The Discovery Phase of Evaluation	03: Pre-Evaluation Check Up 04: Understanding your Program Theory Using Logic Models
Module 03: The Action Phase of Evaluation	05: Focusing and Planning Your Evaluation 06: Collecting Evidence—Process Evaluation
	07: Collecting Evidence—Outcome Evaluation
	08: Analyzing and Interpreting Quantitative Data
	09: Analyzing and Interpreting Qualitative Data
Module 04: The Legacy Phase of Evaluation	10: Learning from Evidence: Internal and External Communication

The Present Study

Although much research has been conducted to understand best practices associated with building evaluation capacity (e.g., Bourgeois et al., 2016; Sarti et al., 2017), limited research has assessed participants' satisfaction of and learnings from online ECB opportunities. Further, prior to this study, no formal evaluation of the certificate had been conducted despite it being the only free evaluation certificate offered to the youth sector in Canada, to our knowledge. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to evaluate participants' satisfaction with and learnings from the province-wide online certificate that aimed to support capacity building within the youth sector. Two research questions were posed: (a) What were participants' reactions (i.e., satisfaction) to the certificate and what factors influenced their satisfaction?, and (b) How did participants' perceived learnings change from pre-to-post certificate, and what factors influenced their learning? Understanding these factors will help to better understand youth sector stakeholders' experiences in the certificate and develop strategies to foster a well-received and effective learning experience for those enrolled.

METHODS

Context and Participants

The data for this study are based on participants from six certificate cohorts run between 2016 and 2019. Each certificate cohort ran over the course of 11 weeks (i.e., one lesson per week for 10 weeks, one make-up week for final certificate wrap-up). Certificate content across the six cohorts was identical; however, minor modifications (i.e., the inclusion of a new resource, providing slide handouts available for download) did occur throughout the cohorts based on participant feedback. Throughout the six cohorts, 1,669 individuals applied for the certificate ($M_{\text{applicants/cohort}} = 277.4$). Applicants were reviewed for each cohort and considered eligible for participation based on (a) whether they were engaged in the Ontario youth sector, (b) their role in the youth sector, and (c) their interest in learning about program evaluation in this context. The certificate had an overall acceptance rate of 62% ($n = 1{,}043$) across the six cohorts ($M_{\text{participants}}$ per cohort = 174). Among all participants who were accepted into the certificate, 9% registered in multiple certificate cohorts ($n = 91$). Throughout the certificate cohorts, 19% of participants formally withdrew from the certificate. Twenty-four percent of participants attained a certificate ($n = 252$), while 15% partially completed the certificate ($n = 154$; i.e., one or more modules). Finally, 42% of those who were accepted did not formally withdraw from the certificate, yet did not complete a full module, thus, did not attain a certificate.

While 1,043 participants were accepted for the certificate across the six cohorts, only participants who completed surveys at both pre- and post-certificate ($n = 233$) were included in the subsequent analyses of this study. The majority of participants self-identified as White (62%) and women (79%) between 25–34

years of age (41%). Half of the participants (50%) indicated they had worked in the youth sector for more than five years. Most participants worked in youth-focused organizations (46%) as a frontline youth worker (34.5%), followed by multiservice organizations that offered youth programming and government or funding organizations (both 11%).

Measures

Once participants were accepted for the certificate, they were invited to complete a pre-certificate survey prior to the beginning of the first module via an online survey platform (i.e., SurveyMonkey™). This survey included demographic questions, including age, gender, ethnicity, highest level of education, regional location of practice, number of years of working in youth sector, current organizational role, and the type of organization in which they were associated with. This pre-survey also assessed four experiential factors, including whether they have been previously involved in program evaluation (yes, no), whether they have any previous experience with online learning (yes, no), their rate of comfort with online technology (1: very uncomfortable; 5: very comfortable), and whether they have uncertainties or fears about the certificate (yes, no). Further, nine questions were included in the pre-survey to examine participants' self-assessed proficiency in the certificate's primary objectives. These nine questions were repeated in an online post-questionnaire distributed at certificate end, in which all participants were encouraged to fill out regardless of their certificate completion status. Two scales were developed to assess (a) participants' satisfaction post-certificate and (b) changes in learning from pre-to-post-certificate. The following sections describe how each scale was created and what it measured.

Satisfaction scale

Eighteen items on the post-survey were developed to gauge participants' satisfaction with the certificate, including their level of agreement with the quality of the resources and facilitators (e.g., "the certificate was relevant and valuable to my work with youth"), the ease of platform use (e.g., "using an online platform to run this certificate was useful"), and whether they would recommend the certificate to others (e.g., "I would recommend this certificate to others"). An overall satisfaction scale was created by calculating a mean overall score, in which total scores ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) with higher scores representing greater overall satisfaction. An overall scale mean was used in the analyses and showed high internal consistency ($\alpha = .93$).

Knowledge scale

Nine items were included on both the pre- and post-surveys that were used to assess participants' knowledge and understanding of various components of program evaluation and evaluative processes that directly aligned with the certificate objectives (e.g., "I am knowledgeable about evaluation processes within the youth sector"). Likert-type items measured participant agreement with statements about their perceived knowledge using a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*)

to 5 (*strongly agree*) with higher scores representing greater knowledge and understanding. Overall scale means were used in the analyses and demonstrated strong internal consistency for both pre- and post-knowledge scales ($\alpha = .84$ and $\alpha = .84$, respectively).

Data analyses

Data analysis was guided by Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick's (2016) Comprehensive Evaluation Model. This model has been successfully used to evaluate online training programs in other contexts (e.g., Ahmady et al., 2017); thus, we felt it was an appropriate model to evaluate this online evaluation certificate. Specifically, this paper focuses on the first two levels of the model (i.e., Level I—Reactions, Level II—Learning). As noted, a pre-post approach was used to measure the amount of learning that took place over the course of the certificate. The results are presented by levels of the Comprehensive Evaluation Model (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Correlational, independent samples *t*-tests and multiple regression analyses were used to explore the participant reactions (i.e., satisfaction) to the certificate, while correlational, paired samples *t*-tests and hierarchical multiple regression analyses were used to explore participant learnings from pre-to-post certificate.

RESULTS

Level I: Participant Reactions

The mean for the overall satisfaction scale was 4.14 ($SD = .56$), indicating that participants were generally satisfied with the certificate. The correlational analyses (Table 2) revealed that overall satisfaction was not significantly related to participants' knowledge scores on the pre-survey ($r = .13$, $p = .058$) or comfort with online technology ($r = .02$, $p = .762$). The certificate workload ($r = -.18$, $p = .003$), the number of lessons completed ($r = .20$, $p = .002$), and post-knowledge scores ($r = .33$, $p < .001$) were significantly related to overall satisfaction. Although the association was small, those who reported the workload was less than they had expected, those who completed a greater number of lessons, and those with higher knowledge scores on the post-survey reported greater satisfaction with the certificate.

To explore whether differences existed across participants' reported level of satisfaction based on previous experiences or certificate completion, independent samples *t*-tests were conducted. Those with previous involvement in evaluation reported significantly higher satisfaction scores than those without previous experience with evaluation ($p = .02$; Table 3). No differences were found in overall satisfaction scores between those with previous experience in online learning and those without this experience ($p = .16$), nor were there differences in satisfaction scores for those who completed the entire certificate and those who did not ($p = .24$).

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and correlations for overall satisfaction, participant experience, certificate variables, and knowledge

		Correlations					
Variables (*n*)	***M* (*SD*)**	**Comfort**	**Pre-K**	**Workload**	**Hrs**	**Lessons**	**Post-K**
Overall satisfaction (218)	4.14 (.56)	.02	.13	−.18**	.11	.20**	.33***
Comfort with online technology (212)	3.95 (1.15)	-	−.01	−.10	−.02	−.01	.05
Knowledge at pre-survey (212)	3.32 (.58)		-	−.08	−.06	.17*	.30***
Course workload (218)	3.71 (.84)			-	.22**	.06	−.11
M hours/week spent on certificate (206)	4.31 (3.74)				-	.17*	.06
Lessons completed (213)	8.34 (2.90)					-	.39***
Knowledge at post-survey (227)	4.12 (.53)						-

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$

Table 3. T-test results comparing overall satisfaction and post-knowledge scores for participants' previous experiences and certificate completion

	Overall Satisfaction				
	Yes		**No**		
	M	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***t***
Previous Evaluation Experience	4.20	.55	4.03	.56	−2.1*
Previous Online Learning Experience	4.13	.56	4.23	.52	1.0
Certificate Completion	4.16	.53	4.06	.60	−1.2
	Post-Knowledge				
Previous Evaluation Experience	4.20	.48	3.96	.57	−3.3**
Previous Online Learning Experience	4.11	.52	4.09	.55	−.20
Certificate Completion	4.24	.40	3.89	.60	−4.9**

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Lastly, to explore which variables predicted satisfaction with the certificate, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted. To account for knowledge and experiences participants brought with them into the certificate, knowledge at the time of the pre-survey and previous experience with evaluation were entered into the first step. Certificate components that were correlated to overall satisfaction included the amount of workload self-reported by participants (in hours) and the number of lessons completed (as measured directly through survey platform metrics) were entered into the second step (Table 4). The first step was not significant (F Change$_{(2,\ 201)} = 2.97$, $p = .054$), and neither prior knowledge or previous evaluation experience significantly predicted overall satisfaction with the certificate. However, the second step was significant (F Change$_{(2,\ 199)} = 8.27$, $p < .001$), but the variables only accounted for 10% of the variance in satisfaction scores. Certificate workload and the number of lessons completed were significant predictors of overall satisfaction but only accounted for 3.3% and 4.4% of unique variance in satisfaction scores, respectively.

Level II: Participant Learnings

To determine whether knowledge scores improved from pre- to post-surveys, a paired samples t-test was conducted. Results were significant ($t_{(220)} = 17.7$, $p < .001$), indicating that participants perceived they had significantly more knowledge and understanding about evaluation at the end of the certificate ($M = 4.1$, $SD = .04$) than they had before the certificate ($M = 3.3$, $SD = .03$). Correlational analyses (see Table 2) revealed that post-certificate knowledge was significantly associated with overall satisfaction ($r = .33$, $p < .001$), lessons completed ($r = .40$, $p < .001$), and pre-knowledge scores ($r = .30$, $p < .001$). In other words, greater knowledge and understanding after the certificate was related to greater levels of satisfaction, more lessons completed, and more knowledge before starting the

Table 4. Summary of hierarchical multiple regression analysis predicting overall certificate satisfaction

	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	***SE***	***β***	***B***	***SE***	***B***
Previous evaluation experience	.14	.09	.12	.13	.08	.12
Knowledge at pre-survey	.08	.07	.08	.04	.07	.04
Course workload				–.12	.04	–.19**
Lessons completed				.04	.01	.21**
R^2		.03			.10	
F for Change in R^2		2.97			8.27***	

Note. *B* = unstandardized regression coefficients; Beta = standardized regression coefficients
**$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$

certificate. Interestingly, the average hours spent per week on the certificate were not significantly associated with post-certificate knowledge and understanding.

Independent *t*-test analyses were used to examine whether there were differences in post-knowledge scores based on previous experiences and certificate completion. As seen in Table 3, participants who had previous evaluation experience had significantly higher post-knowledge scores when compared to those who did not have previous evaluation experience ($p < .001$). Those who reported completing all 10 lessons of the certificate also had significantly higher post-knowledge scores than those who did not complete all 10 lessons ($p < .001$). Post-knowledge scores were not significantly different for those who had previous online learning experience and those who did not ($p = .42$).

To explore which variables predicted post-knowledge scores, a hierarchical multiple regression was conducted. To account for knowledge and experiences participants brought with them into the certificate, pre-knowledge scores and previous experience with evaluation were entered in the first step. Components of the certificate that were correlated to post-certificate knowledge, that is, overall satisfaction and certificate completion, were entered into the model in the second step (Table 5). The first model was significant (F Change$_{(2, 201)} = 11.09$, $p < .001$) and accounted for 10% of the variance in post-knowledge scores. Pre-knowledge scores significantly predicted post-certificate knowledge scores, accounting for 6.4% of the variance, but previous experience with evaluation was not a significant predictor. With the addition of the variables in the second step, the model remained significant (F Change$_{(2, 199)} = 27.20$, $p < .001$), and the total variance explained by the model increased to 29%. Both the number of lessons completed and overall satisfaction were significant predictors of post-knowledge scores. The number of lessons completed accounted for 11% of unique variance in post-knowledge, while overall satisfaction accounted for 5%.

Table 5. Summary of hierarchical multiple regression analysis for predictors of perceived learning

	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	***SE***	***β***	***B***	***SE***	***β***
Knowledge at Pre-Survey	.23	.06	.26***	.17	.06	.20**
Prior Evaluation Experience	.11	.07	.11	.04	.07	.04
Overall Satisfaction				.21	.06	.23***
Lessons Completed				.1	.01	.34***
R^2		.10			.29	
F for Change in R^2		11.09***			27.17***	

Note. *B* = unstandardized regression coefficients; β = standardized regression coefficients
**$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$

In the final model, pre-knowledge remained significant but only accounted for 3.5% unique variance.

DISCUSSION

Professional development training opportunities can strengthen evaluation capacity (Preskill & Boyle, 2008), yet limited research has examined the uptake or impact of such trainings (Horton, 2002). The purpose of this study was to examine participants' satisfaction with and learnings from one of the only online program evaluation certificates within the Ontario youth sector. Participants who completed both pre- and post-evaluation measures (n = 233) reported high levels of satisfaction with the certificate and increases in their overall knowledge of evaluation post-certificate. Study findings are discussed in relation to Kirkpatrick's Comprehensive Evaluation Model (1979) and the broader literature. Implications are provided for ECB opportunities moving forward.

Participant Reactions to the Certificate

According to McRoberts and Leitch (1998), examining participants' reactions to programming is especially important when participants engage voluntarily, such as in this certificate. Overall, findings from this study demonstrated that participants reported high satisfaction with the certificate. Factors that were significantly correlated with certificate satisfaction included certificate workload and the number of lessons completed, which are supported by Bangert (2006) who found that the amount of time spent on a task and active engagement with certificate material are two out of the four primary factors that influenced student satisfaction in online courses. Past literature also proposed that individuals participating in online learning opportunities were most satisfied when the courses were structured (Ke & Xie, 2009), relevant (i.e., hold practical significance; Park & Choi, 2009), and instructor-facilitated (i.e., involve feedback and interactions from the facilitators; Ruey, 2010). Furthermore, Shearer (2003) emphasized how online courses that offered topics relevant to a field allowed learners to connect to their professional experience and practice, which then increased learners' investment, engagement, and satisfaction in online courses. This finding is further supported by Muirhead (2004), who listed relevant and engaging lessons, paired with flexibility within the course schedule, as one of the top strategies for promoting learner interaction in online courses. Ultimately, the more structured and relevant a learning opportunity is, the more likely learners will be satisfied with it (Eom et al., 2006). The high levels of satisfaction with the certificate, regardless of experience with online learning, are likely linked to these elements as the certificate is highly structured and includes content relevant to evaluation work in the youth sector. Naccarella et al. (2007) found that providing a series of training workshops that correspond to the program implementation and evaluation phases was one of the five effective approaches to ECB. The certificate is structured based on YouthREX's framework for evaluating youth well-being,

which illustrates the key program development and evaluation phases for youth sector stakeholders. Additionally, the certificate involves ample interaction opportunities between the certificate facilitator and the participants via weekly email check-ins, discussion boards, and feedback on assignments. Specifically, the email check-ins were used to help participants stay on track throughout the self-guided learning opportunity and provide participants with timely assignment feedback. Through participant-facilitator interactions, participants are encouraged to offer commentary during the process, which consequently boosts learner motivation and creates an online community of practice (Song et al., 2004).

Participant Learnings From the Certificate

Labin and colleagues' (2012) integrative ECB model demonstrates that individual-level outcomes associated with ECB concern improvements in attitudes, knowledge, and skills for evaluation. Our findings mirror the work by Labin et al. (2012) that found training for evaluation was associated with a high rate of individual knowledge (i.e., learning) outcomes. Participants reported significant improvements in their evaluation knowledge post-certificate when compared to pre-certificate ($p < .001$). Interestingly, previous experience with evaluation was not a significant predictor of participants' knowledge scores post-certificate, indicating that participants who possessed higher levels of experience pre-certificate still reported increases in learning after participation. Existing literature exploring ECB contends that an organization's existing characteristics (e.g., level of internal evaluation expertise) affects the utility of ECB initiatives (Owen, 2003). However, this study demonstrates that participants, regardless of level of evaluation expertise pre-certificate, still reported significant increases in evaluation knowledge and learning post-certificate. Findings present a unique contribution to the literature by pointing toward the usefulness of ECB opportunities, such as this certificate, for increasing youth sector stakeholders' knowledge of evaluation practices regardless of previous experience with evaluation.

Previous studies have found comparable levels of effectiveness in relation to learning outcomes with online instruction and learning environments (e.g., Forgey & Ortega-Williams, 2016). Specifically, Kuh and Hu (2001) highlighted how students' increased engagement in online learning environments corresponded with students' self-reported increases in knowledge. Participants in the present study overwhelmingly affirmed the certificate's effectiveness for deepening their knowledge and understanding of the theoretical and practical importance of evaluation within the youth-serving sector. These findings may link to participants' high levels of satisfaction with the certificate as Kirkpatrick's (1979) model posited that individuals who like a training program are more likely to pay attention and learn. Further, the inclusion of objectives and expectations of a learning opportunity are viewed as critical elements for influencing students' perceived learnings from a course (Moore, 1991). The certificate provided youth sector stakeholders with clearly defined goals and objectives at the beginning of

the certificate and for each lesson with a recommended timeline for optimal advancement and engagement with the certificate material. The certificate offered participants relevant evaluation case examples and tools that were contextualized to the youth sector, which reflects the wider trend that adults pursuing continuing education are more motivated to learn when the curriculum (i.e., knowledge and tools of value) is relevant and transferrable to their workplace (Broad & Evans, 2006). Finally, participants' ability to be reflective is considered a key attribute of successful self-directed and self-regulated online learning (Dabbagh, 2007). The use of assignments and reflection-prompting activities promotes engagement with an understanding of course materials (Means, 2010). Additionally, the constructive feedback on assignments given by the certificate facilitator affirmed the knowledge gained by participants while simultaneously lending recommendations on how to improve their understanding moving forward (Muirhead, 2004).

Implications for Evaluation Practices

Findings from this research have informed future online certificate offerings within this organization, working to ensure that youth workers are supported and have quality experiences and engagement with online offerings. Online learning is a popular avenue for delivering information and training (Quinney et al., 2008), changing the landscape of education and professional development that allows convenience, flexibility, autonomy, and self-paced learning (Allen & Seaman, 2007). Using such a platform helps to address many challenges that youth workers face in accessing professional development supports (e.g., competing demands for time, limited travel resources, inflexibility of available opportunities) and have been used by other organizations to help build capacity within the youth sector (e.g., Sundar et al., 2011). Thus, findings will be shared with other capacity building organizations in the non-profit sector that are exploring virtual evaluation professional development offerings. For instance, study findings have been put into practice to inform access and adoption of other professional development and capacity-building opportunities geared towards the Ontario youth sector. This research will inform recruitment processes, ongoing support and engagement strategies, as well as certificate structure and delivery that will help better prepare and support youth workers build evaluation into their everyday practice and develop systems, processes, policies, and plans that help embed evaluation work into their organizational culture.

Lastly, study findings did not show a significant relationship between comfort with online technology and participants' satisfaction or post-knowledge scores, highlighting a potential high level of comfort with online learning present even pre-COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, Becerra et al. (2021) emphasized the value in asynchronous learning opportunities due to the greater potential for participants' engagement with learning materials pre- and post-opportunity. However, they also proposed exploring different learning design models (e.g., hybridized) to understand best delivery practices for program participants

(Becerra et al., 2021). Ager and colleagues (2005) stressed the importance of integrating the voice of stakeholders in non-hierarchical ways, particularly when offering online courses. Moving forward, the piloting of different formats of the certificate should be considered to gather feedback on the preferred delivery method of the certificate and to better understand how to increase access, minimize barriers, and work to empower people who might not have the capacity to engage in online professional development opportunities (Parsons & Hick, 2008).

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this research presented certain strengths, limitations must be addressed. Firstly, a limitation with the development of the certificate must be acknowledged. There is value in creating opportunities for meaningful engagement and participation for youth and leveraging their voice within evaluation from conceptualization to dissemination (e.g., Powers & Tiffany, 2018), including the development of this online certificate. Despite youth piloting the evaluation certificate prior to launch and including a youth-engaged evaluation lesson within the certificate, youth were not formally involved in the development of the certificate. Secondly, despite participants reporting they were generally satisfied with the certificate, there was ample variance not explained by the model for satisfaction. As such, there is the possibility that extraneous factors not accounted for in the analyses (e.g., level of experience with evaluation) contributed to the higher satisfaction ratings by participants. Moreover, limited perspectives were gathered from those who did not complete the certificate despite strategies in place to attempt to gain their feedback. Alternative strategies to gain feedback from those who partially engaged or withdrew from the certificate are warranted to better understand why participants are not finishing the certificate and to use this feedback to adapt and inform future offerings. Further, long-term follow-up was not attained to understand how participants are applying what they learned. Specifically, this study did not examine other levels and associated factors of the Kirkpatrick (1979) model (i.e., transfer of learning and organization impact of the program). Horton (2002) noted that it is often assumed that developing individual capacities will automatically improve meso- and macrolevel capacities for evaluation (e.g., organization and sector levels), when this is not entirely true. Future research should employ a longitudinal design to explore the embedment of the certificate material to better understand how participants are transferring and applying their learnings in practice over time, and how such an application contributes to larger structural changes. Finally, future research is needed to understand the barriers and facilitators to engaging Ontario's youth sector in accessible online professional development offerings that build their capacity to effectively support youth. Moving forward, qualitative research (i.e., interviews or focus groups) should be conducted to explore how to best support youth workers throughout this process to increase their chances of accessing and completing this online program evaluation

certificate. While some qualitative data (e.g., open-ended survey responses) did support the key learnings (Bean et al., 2020), future research on the certificate should continue to use a multi-method approach to enable quality, in-depth participant feedback.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, ECB is a complex phenomenon involving issues of individual learning, program processes and outcomes, organizational change, and sustained change (Labin et al., 2012). It is important to look at all these areas and build on existing knowledge to understand how to continue building the youth-serving sector's capacity to conduct evaluation as ECB is still a relatively new area of research (Cousins et al., 2004). As highlighted by Labin et al. (2012), "the activities of ECB efforts include not only strategies but also *evaluation* of those efforts" (pp. 311). Horton (2002) noted a significant gap in the systematic evaluation of ECB efforts, one of which remains a gap to this day. Thus, this study answers the calls placed by Horton (2002) and Bourgeois et al. (2008) to further identify and evaluate the outcomes of ECB initiatives and provides empirical data using quantitative measures (i.e., pre- and post-certificate surveys) on the effectiveness of an ECB offering, as past ECB research has predominately used interviews. Findings point to the usefulness of an online ECB opportunity and can be used to inform other online offerings that the partnering organization of this research project (and other capacity building organizations) will develop for Ontario's youth sector and beyond. By offering accessible evaluation certification opportunities and encouraging sustainable research and evaluation practices in Ontario's youth sector, youth organizations will be better positioned to measure if their programs are being delivered as intended and achieving their intended outcomes. Equally important, these programs will be able to understand how they can be improved for the future.

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APPENDIX A: INDIVIDUAL SURVEY SCALE ITEMS

Table A.1. Summary of the individual satisfaction scale items

Satisfaction Scale Items	*n*	*M* (*SD*)	Range
The certificate was relevant and valuable to my work with youth.	218	4.40 (.67)	2–5
The content matched the stated goals of the certificate.	217	4.43 (.66)	2–5
The material was presented in a way that was interesting and engaging.	217	3.80 (.96)	1–5
The certificate was well-organized and planned.	218	4.18 (.82)	1–5
The content was presented in a clear manner.	216	4.16 (.82)	1–5
Resources provided throughout the course were helpful.	217	4.33 (.75)	2–5
I will refer back to the course material or other YouthREX resources in the future.	216	4.50 (.72)	2–5
This online certificate was better compared to other courses I've taken.	213	3.62 (.97)	1–5
I would recommend this certificate to others.	218	4.32 (.80)	1–5
YouthREX was available when I had questions.	215	4.24 (.77)	2–5
YouthREX responded in a timely manner to my questions and/or concerns.	214	4.26 (.77)	2–5
The instructor conveyed the program material well.	217	4.09 (.72)	2–5
YouthREX provided useful feedback on assignments.	207	3.61 (.97)	1–5
Using an online platform to run this certificate was useful.	218	4.21 (.83)	1–5
The amount of material covered in this certificate was appropriate.	215	3.94 (.91)	1–5
The instructor's apparent knowledge of the content was good.	215	4.30 (.62)	2–5
The instructor's sensitivity to participants' difficulties was good.	215	3.99 (.79)	2–5
The instructor's overall teaching abilities was good.	216	4.06 (.69)	2–5

Table A.2. Summary of the individual knowledge scale items (pre- and post-survey)

Knowledge Scale Items	*n*	*M* (*SD*)	Range
I am knowledgeable about evaluation processes within the youth sector.			
Pre	221	2.91 (.86)	1–5
Post	221	3.89 (.69)	1–5
I am aware of the appropriate uses of different types of program evaluation.			
Pre	221	2.98 (.94)	1–5
Post	221	4.02 (.71)	1–5
I am aware of tools and resources for the evaluation of youth programs.			
Pre	220	2.74 (.93)	1–5
Post	220	3.96 (.78)	1–5
I understand the ethical issues relevant to conducting evaluation with youth.			
Pre	217	3.47 (1.00)	1–5
Post	217	4.33 (.65)	1–5
I understand how research and evaluation are connected to youth program design, delivery, and practice.			
Pre	219	3.88 (.88)	1–5
Post	219	4.26 (.65)	1–5
I am aware of how the Positive Youth Development framework can be applied to a program design, delivery, and practice.			
Pre	219	2.73 (1.04)	1–5
Post	219	4.00 (.76)	1–5
I understand how an evaluation of a youth program must reflect the cultural identities/realities of the youth involved.			
Pre	220	3.90 (.90)	1–5
Post	220	3.91 (.89)	1–5
I can create a program logic model or theory of change for a program that I am familiar with.			
Pre	219	2.88 (1.12)	1–5
Post	219	3.91 (.89)	1–5
I feel that I can play an important role in my organization's plan for evaluating our work with youth.			
Pre	220	4.27 (.83)	1–5
Post	220	4.29 (.69)	1–5