

strategic development group



Independent Review of the SPARK Training and Employment Program

Review Report

28 February 2022

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Acknowledgements

The review team are grateful to the SPARK team for support and guidance throughout this assignment, and for their patient assistance during numerous interactions with the review team. We also thank all those informants in who kindly made time to talk with us and provide information and insights.

Disclaimer

The opinions expressed are those of the review team, and do not necessarily reflect those of SPARK personnel. Responsibility for the opinions expressed in this report rests solely with the authors.

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Executive Summary

'I have never seen any organisation do what Riverview does – 50 years in the industry and worked in Canberra all my life' – Industry / community respondent

- S1. This is the report of the **Independent Review of the SPARK Training and Employment Program** (SPARK). This review is commissioned by Riverview Projects (ACT) Pty Ltd and has been assigned to the Strategic Development Group. The review covers the period from 12 March 2019 to 31 March 2021.
- S2. SPARK is a program developed by Ginninderry. Ginninderry is a large cross-border property development owned by the West Belconnen Joint Venture - an unincorporated joint venture between the Australian Capital Territory (managed by the Suburban Land Agency) and Riverview Developments – that is committed to building a socially inclusive, environmentally sustainable community
- S3. SPARK received a \$920,000 grant to deliver training and employment projects in the north and south of Canberra between March 2019 and March 2021. The Deed of Grant does not specify any program objectives, but rather stipulates Program Requirements which are output based. This determined the scope of information reported to Skills Canberra. SPARK has collected a rich dataset however as it was not required to be reported to Skills Canberra under the Deed of Grant much of it has not been collated into a usable format. The evaluation team was not aware of this data's existence until late in the evaluation process and given that it remained uncollated was unable to be considered by the team.
- S4. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, using key informant interviews and focus group discussions, supported by a review of extensive program documentation, and the analysis of survey data from participants, registered training organisations, and industry and community partners. Due to COVID restrictions, all interviews and focus group discussions were conducted remotely.
- S5. The **headline findings** of this evaluation include:
- The need and value of SPARK has been validated, by the consistency of survey and interview responses from different stakeholders; the evaluation found extremely high levels of satisfaction with SPARK across the board.
 - A key reason for SPARK's success is its distinctive model which includes its unique wrap-around services, the SPARK team's support and guidance, and their professionalism, and the high levels of engagement and commitment from the key stakeholders with the program.
 - SPARK is also making a difference in terms of delivering a range of engagement, training, and employment initiatives for key disadvantaged groups who have previously been disconnected from the labour market.
 - Key informants strongly believe SPARK is meeting its objectives (such as supporting participants along different pathways and preparing them for employment opportunities and/or work experience placements).
 - SPARK has influenced systemic changes across different sectors that go beyond improving outcomes for individual participants (examples include RTOs restructuring courses to emulate the SPARK approach, and SPARK contributing to noticeable shifts in the workplace with regards to creating more equitable, fairer and better workplaces for women).



- Our assessment of the return on investment indicates positive financial and economic returns for the individual and for the Territory and surrounding areas. Whilst further research, over a longer time period is needed, we nevertheless found quantifiable positive returns on the level invested in delivering the program as participants move from welfare to waged employment in the short term. We calculate that:

Every \$1 invested by the program (government and Riverview) returns \$5.52 to government through reduced benefits payments and increased tax revenue.

- The following table illustrates the proportion of participants that need to find a full-time job after the program for it to be cost neutral for the government:

	1 year employed	2 years employed	3 years employed
Total net positive benefit per person	\$24,709	\$48,698	\$71,999
% of people with a full-time job after SPARK	22.7%	11.5%	7.8%

- Our market sounding analysis found no direct comparison to the SPARK program in the greater Canberra region. We believe that it is unlikely that any RTO would be able to replicate SPARK on their own. The program targets difficult to reach populations which require more intensive support of the kind that SPARK is uniquely placed to provide. The commercial imperative and current funding models make it difficult for RTOs to provide the level of support provided by SPARK without significant additional, discretionary funding. The ability of SPARK to be responsive to individual needs as short notice – such as money for petrol, IT equipment or food – is not replicable without a source of highly flexible, accessible funding like that received from Riverview. The approach is not consistent with government-based funding models.
- Our overall conclusion is that SPARK is well regarded, and the program implementation model should not be changed.

S6. Considering the findings of this evaluation, the independent review makes 6 recommendations.

- i. SPARK undertake – either in-house or contract in expertise - detailed modelling to determine the most appropriate organisational and governance structure for SPARK
- ii. Ensure all recruitment processes for new SPARK employees allow for a wide range of applicants, from a variety of backgrounds with strong interpersonal skills
- iii. There is a need for a more robust data management system that tracks participant goals at the start of the course, halfway through and at the end of the course and is able to differentiate between different types of post-program training and employment outcomes
- iv. Instituting an annual stakeholder event, across all programs, for industry, community and RTO partners to share experiences in an informal setting and allow the program an opportunity to articulate its vision, objectives and being transparent about how it identifies partners to work with. This would help foster ongoing engagement for continued support and help promote and grow the initiative alongside the growth of a community of socially minded organisations
- v. Skills Canberra should consider investing in extracting all valuable data collected by SPARK, that was not required for reporting purposes, and collating it in a useable form
- vi. Skills Canberra should consider the merits of a tracer study of SPARK participants to establish the long-term impact of the initiative and help inform the best ways to support people to ensure they remain engaged with the workforce



Introduction

Background

1. The SPARK Employment and Training initiative is a program developed by the Ginninderry development. Ginninderry is a large cross-border development owned by the West Belconnen Joint Venture – an unincorporated joint venture between the Australian Capital Territory (managed by the Suburban Land Agency) and Riverview Developments – that is committed to building a socially inclusive, environmentally sustainable community.
2. As part of the wider Ginninderry commitment to social inclusion, the SPARK Training and employment initiative aims to contribute to helping people become more prosperous, socially connected, and attain new skills.
3. SPARK supports Canberrans and people from communities in surrounding areas from marginalised backgrounds to access training and employment opportunities across a range of industry areas, including Civil Construction, Home and Building Construction, Horticulture, Conservation Land Management, Aged Care, Home and Community Care, Disability Services, Childcare, Retail and Hospitality. This range of sectors, and that SPARK operates a cross-border initiative, are unique features of the program.
4. SPARK received a \$920,000 grant to deliver training and employment projects in the north and south of Canberra, as well as surrounding communities in NSW, between March 2019 and March 2021.

The Deed of Grant does not specify any program objectives, but rather stipulates Program Requirements. These are summarised as follows:

- Up to an additional (maximum of) five training programs delivered in the southern suburbs of the Territory in 2019
- Up to an additional (maximum of) 10 training programs delivered in the southern suburbs of the Territory in 2020
- Up to an additional (minimum of) one training program delivered in the surrounding regions of the Territory (for example Yass, Queanbeyan, Goulburn and Cooma) in 2019
- Up to an additional (minimum of) two training programs delivered in the surrounding regions of the Territory (for example Yass, Queanbeyan, Goulburn and Cooma) in 2020
- The commencements in SPARK programs accessing Publicly Funded Training Initiatives which involve a work placement component (including pre-apprenticeship activity) increasing by 50% over the term
- Reporting on the programs commenced, partner organisations, participant commencements and status (DSP, A&TSI, and/or CALD) and participant outcomes on a six-monthly basis

The Program Requirements are all output based, with reporting on participants' outcomes required but no targets set in the Deed of Grant. This limitation in the Deed of Grant has determined the scope of data used in reporting. SPARK has collected a rich dataset however as it was not required to be reported to Skills Canberra under the Deed of Grant much of it has not been collated into a usable format. The evaluation team was not aware of this data's existence until late in the evaluation process and given that it remained uncollated was unable to be considered by the team.



Evaluation features

The Task

5. To conduct an evaluation of SPARK for the period of the Funded Program under the Deed Agreement with the ACT Government through Skills Canberra from 12 March 2019 to 31 March 2021, to:
 - **Determine the Funded Program's outcomes**, including those delivered in the broader Capital region;
 - **Assess the effectiveness** of the Funded Program's outcomes against the Funded Program's objectives;
 - **Consider the value** of the Funded Program to participants, with a focus on the achievement/impact of foundation skills;
 - **Consider any additional outcomes** achieved by the Funded Program (in addition to the objectives, deliverables and requirements specified in the Funding Deed), particularly for disadvantaged cohorts; and
 - **Include a market sounding** to determine if there are other organisations in the Capital region that deliver programs similar to that delivered by SPARK, and if there are, then detail what delivery model / entity structure those other organisations employ.

Our approach

6. The review team conducted a mixed-methods approach (largely remotely), using key informant interviews (KIIs), supported by a review of extensive program documentation, and the analysis of survey data (a list of the organisations we interviewed can be found in **Annex 1**).
7. Surveys developed and administered remotely to three distinct groups:
 - **Participants in SPARK** – of whom 46 answered all questions and a further 16 chose to respond to most of the questions
 - **Registered training organisations (RTOs)** – 19 respondents from the different RTOs who have supported the program
 - **Community and Industry partners** – 29 respondents from a wide range of partners who have supported the program
8. Consultative qualitative process (also done remotely) which included key informant interviews (20 were conducted, involving a total of 26 informants), two focus groups (a total of 11 participants). In addition, we reviewed all relevant program documentation and analysed relevant program data provided by SPARK.
9. A breakdown of key informants (see **Annex 1 for more detail**) includes:
 - ACT Government
 - Skills Canberra (including current and former staff)
 - Office for Women
 - Suburban Land Agency
 - Community and industry partners - 9
 - RTOs – 2 institutions; 8 trainers / heads of departments
 - SPARK participants - 8
 - SPARK team members - 3



10. As part of the process the review team also prepared a presentation to test emerging findings with program management (shared on 21 February 2022).
11. Two short case studies that illustrate the specific benefits for SPARK industry partners in a not-for-profit early education and childcare centre, and a private construction business in the ACT are shared in **Annex 2**.

Limitations

12. Limitations faced during the review were primarily related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented conducting any planned face-to-face interviews and focus group meetings. This meant that interviews and group work was done remotely, and this contributed to fewer discussions with participants than initially had been expected and planned. There is evidence that the use of online engagement created barriers for some participants who were unable or less willing to speak in either a group or in an online facilitated forum. One-on-one interviews with participants were conducted where possible, but evaluation timelines limited the number of interviews that were possible.
13. Nevertheless, there was good representation from women and by people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) participants in the focus group discussions. Moreover, the remote nature of the review was mitigated by using multiple approaches to gathering evidence (typically respondents had the opportunity complete a survey, take part in small group discussions, and availability permitting a one-on-one interview). SPARK have produced a range of written and video interviews and case studies with program participants that were accessed by the review team, although as these are primarily for marketing purposes, they are of limited value for independent evaluation purposes. The evaluation has produced two independent case studies which are included at Annex 2.
14. Whilst the data the evaluation team were presented with allowed the team to provide a broad overview of the achievements of the program and satisfied the reporting requirements as set out in the Deed of Grant, the data as presented to the evaluation team had two significant limitations.

The first limitation is around completeness. As noted earlier, a much richer dataset is collected by the SPARK team but remains uncollated and not in a readily usable format. This limitation is due to reporting requirements set out in the Deed of Grant. For example, pre-SPARK employment status is collected as part of the application process, but as this has never been required to measure change in participants status before and after the program, it has never been entered into the system and remains unprocessed on individual application forms. The same is true of gender information, which is collected, but no reports require gender disaggregated data, so it has never been analysed. Skills Canberra should consider investing in collating this data for future use if it deems it valuable to do so.

The second limitation is around the level of disaggregation of individual outcomes achieved as a result of the program. For example, in the current system it is unclear whether a category such as 'further training' meant that someone completed an additional one-day course or went on to do a higher Certificate level training in a related or other subject area. More targeted data collection would facilitate more nuanced disaggregation and improve clarity.



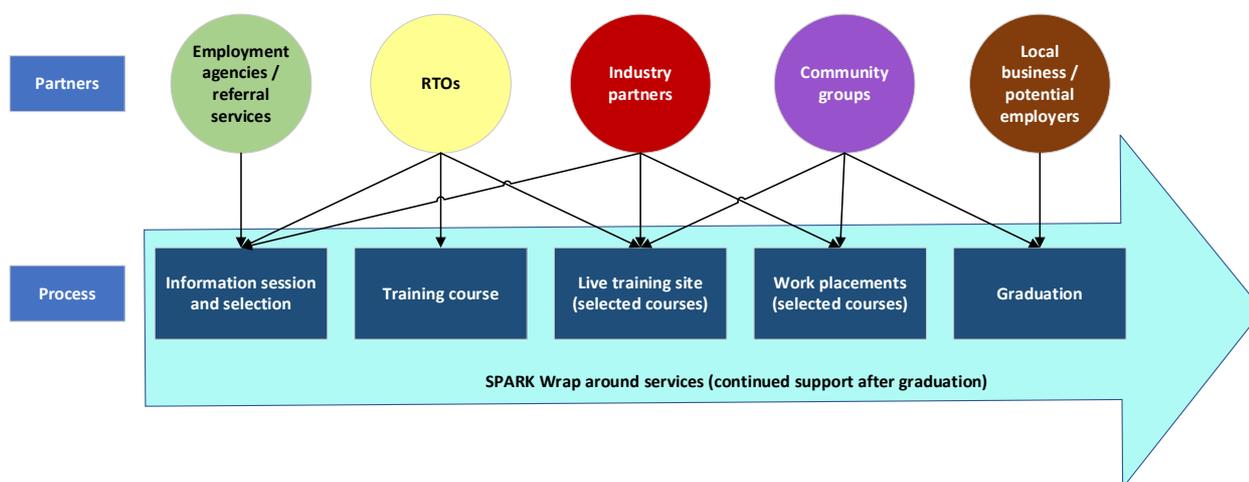
The detailed, largely qualitative data, that is collected could be better directed to monitoring questions that are most relevant to measure progress and change, and trigger learning that will help serve the basis for real time adaptation and enhancement at both an individual and program level.

Subject being reviewed

15. Riverview Projects (ACT) Pty Ltd undertakes a training and employment initiative known as SPARK. In March 2019, the ACT Government (the Territory, represented by Skills Canberra) allocated funding to expand the SPARK training and employment initiative
16. A Program Funding Deed was executed between the Territory and Riverview Projects (ACT) Pty Ltd on 12 March 2019. Funding of \$920,000 was paid to Riverview for the delivery of the Funded Program over two years, until 31 March 2021. A variation was subsequently executed to extend the Program Funding Deed until 31 December 2022 to enable unacquitted Program funds to be applied for the delivery through SPARK of an additional southside training program and this program evaluation.

Program features

Figure 1: SPARK Model



17. The SPARK model is depicted in Figure 1 above. Notable distinctive features include:

- Involvement of **industry partners** and **RTOs** in the selection process for the course. A selection process which was described by one RTO respondent as 'thorough'. Although the process is seen by partners as time consuming and expensive, it is viewed as essential to making the program work well and for attaining the good results that are achieved.

"Honest conversations between the SPARK, RTO and industry partners at the outset is important for setting expectations and determining the capacity and capabilities to provide support needed by individual participants to maximise their chance of success" - Partner interviewee



- Large number of **touch points for different stakeholders** across the program, which ensures that progress of participants is being constantly monitored and that any issue that arises can be dealt with swiftly.
- **Wrap around services** are provided from the very start of the process and for at least 3 months after graduation, which ensures a holistic approach to supporting the participant throughout.

“I wish I had that level of case management for our students – I wish we had the SPARK level for all of our students” - RTO trainer interviewee

- SPARK participants are treated as a **discrete cohort within the RTO**, and along with the smaller class size, allows for targeted support; and builds comradery and a support network for participants.

“The group worked really well together, helping each other out, there was real comradeship. The guys in the group were really good and gracious and became like brothers” - Female participant interview (the only woman in her training cohort)

Key Findings

18. The review findings and the evidence to substantiate them are presented below. We begin by examining the achievements of the program, and the factors for this success. We then provide our analysis of SROI of the SPARK program, and the findings of the Market Sounding exercise.

Outcomes: Achievements and Factors for Success

High level results

19. SPARK achieved all Program Requirements as set out in the Deed of Grant. Specifically:

- SPARK conducted an additional four training programs delivered in the southern suburbs of the Territory in 2019
- SPARK conducted an additional two training programs delivered in the southern suburbs of the Territory in 2020
- SPARK conducted an additional one training program delivered in the surrounding regions of the Territory (for example Yass, Queanbeyan, Goulburn and Cooma) in 2019
- SPARK conducted an additional two training programs delivered in the surrounding regions of the Territory (for example Yass, Queanbeyan, Goulburn and Cooma) in 2020
- The commencements in SPARK programs accessing Publicly Funded Training Initiatives which involve a work placement component (including pre-apprenticeship activity) increased by 50% over the term
- Reporting on the programs, including partner organisations, participant commencements and status (DSP, A&TSI, and/or CALD) and participant outcomes were reported to Skills Canberra in the timeframes required



20. As noted earlier, the data provided has limitations including the inability to distinguish between full and part time jobs. The table below includes all people who have found a job post the SPARK program. It is not possible to determine a full-time equivalent count. Notwithstanding this limitation, SPARK achieved the following high-level results:

Table 1: High-level results, 2019 - 2020 (Source: SPARK)

	AGE 18-25 yrs	CALD	Aboriginal / Torres Strait Island	Person with Disability	Other ¹	Total ²
2019 (participants)	85	54	16	26	67	220
% found jobs	47%	59%	38%	46%	49%	54%
% more training	9%	39%	13%	8%	16%	20%
2020 (participants)	77	73	16	31	66	231
% found jobs	55%	52%	63%	48%	36%	54%
% more training	18%	26%	0%	0%	19%	20%
Total Number ³	175	127	36	60	135	466
% found jobs	53%	55%	53%	50%	43%	50%
% more training	13%	31%	6%	3%	18%	20%

'I got a job and for the first time in my life, feel like I'm moving forward' – Participant respondent

21. From table 1 it can be seen there is little variation between different groups in terms of finding employment after participating in SPARK. If anything, people who did not identify with any marginalised group found employment at a slightly lower rate than those aged 18 to 25 years, from a CALD background, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background, or people who identified as having a disability. In terms of people going on to further training post-SPARK, those from a CALD background were more than twice as likely to do so than other marginalised groups. The lack of gender disaggregated data means comparison of results for women and men cannot be made.

Survey and interview data from the RTOs

'What I have seen is that young, troubled women are given skills far greater than employment they are shown respect, purpose, and responsibility' – RTO respondent

22. As noted above, 19 respondents representing four different RTOs completed the survey. Key observations from the graphs depicted below include:

- **High levels of satisfaction with the program across the board**, with all respondents rated their experience of working with SPARK as either High or Very High

'We are TAFE – we need to focus on social outcomes' – RTO respondent

¹ People who do not identify with any of the groups shown.

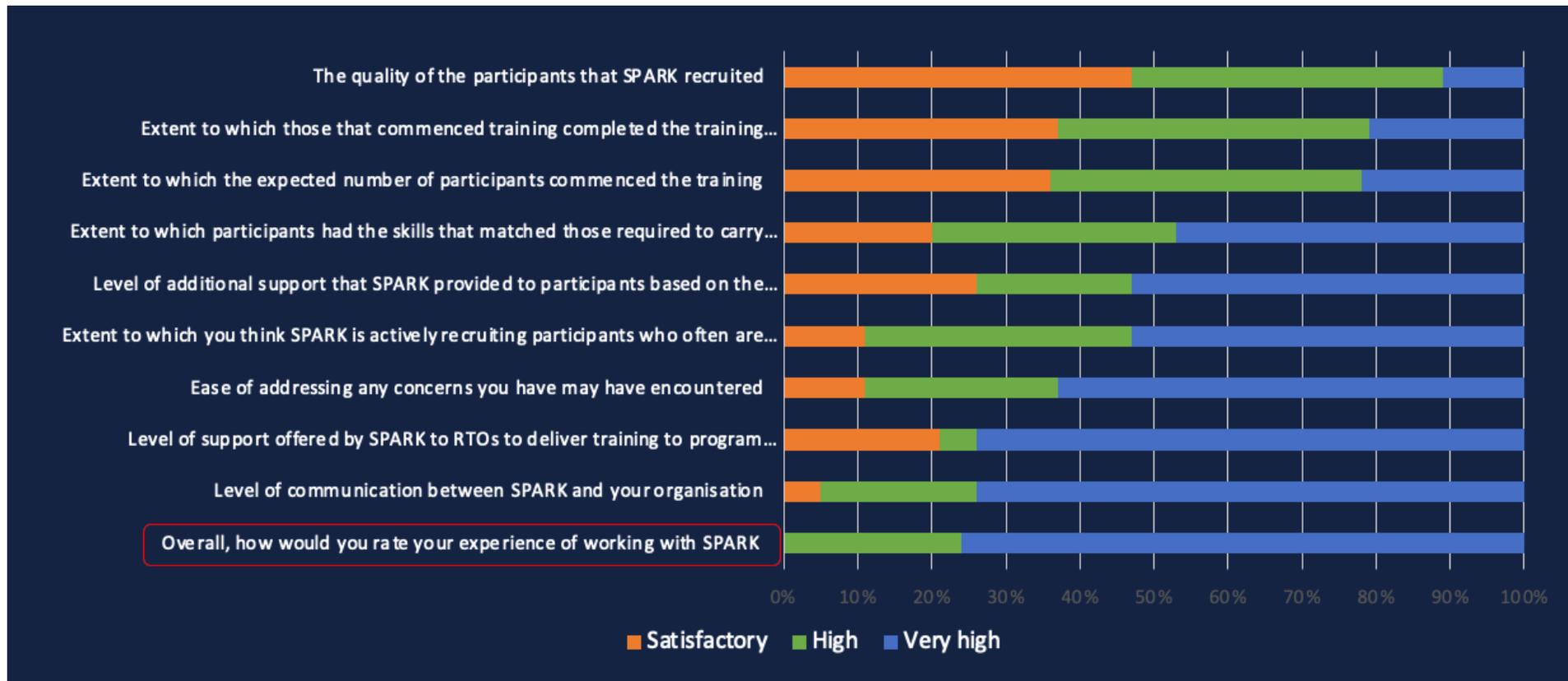
² People may identify with more than one group – Total reflects number of number of individuals and may not add across.

³ Total includes 2021 QBN construction but is too small a cohort for individual year statistics to be meaningful.



- **Satisfaction levels with the quality of participants recruited** was relatively low with only 53% of respondents highly satisfied and 47% satisfied. Consistent with this finding is that 89% of respondents believe SPARK is actively recruiting participants who are often excluded from equivalent opportunities
 - **Overall satisfaction with student completion rates** were reported - 63% of respondents were Highly or Very Highly satisfied with the number of students successfully completing the course
23. **No RTO stakeholder reported being dissatisfied** with any aspect of their engagement with SPARK (the lowest rating received on any question from any respondent was Satisfied).

Figure 2: RTO levels of satisfaction with SPARK (Source: RTO survey)



'It's a very complex work environment and the friendly support of SPARK's staff helps smooth the process' – RTO respondent



24. Figure 3. below illustrates that RTOs strongly believe SPARK is meeting its objectives (such as supporting participants along different pathways and preparing them for employment opportunities and/or work experience placements).

Figure 3: RTOs rate SPARK highly in terms of meeting specific objectives (Source: RTO survey)



'They [the participants] feel like someone cares about them... it helps them view themselves differently, better' - RTO respondent

Survey and interview data from Industry and Community Partners

'Ginninderry is a development with a social backbone; SPARK is a reflection of that'
- Industry / community respondent

25. Industry and Community partners also reported high levels of satisfaction with SPARK, both in terms of SPARK's ability to deliver, and also in meeting its objectives. As figures 4 and 5 below illustrate, Industry and Community Partners expressed Very High levels of satisfaction with the program across the board. All respondents rated their experience of working with SPARK as either High or Very High. The only area of minor concern was in respect to the relevance of the unpaid work component to the rest of the training course.

'SPARK's community objectives are more developed than ours at this point. Their objectives are something for us to aspire to' – Industry / community respondent

Figure 4: High levels of satisfaction reported by Industry and Community Partners (Source: Industry and Community Partner Survey)



'They [the SPARK program] have changed people coming into the industry and they have changed employers' perception of what women can contribute to the construction industry' – Industry / community respondent

25. **81% of respondents were Very Satisfied** with the level of additional support SPARK provides to participants based on their individual needs, and many respondents spoke very highly of the value of the wrap around services.



Figure 5: Industry and Community Partners rate SPARK highly in terms of SPARK meeting its objectives (Source: Industry and Community Partner Survey)



‘The retention rate, and success in employment or return to study post-course is the highest I have ever known’ – Industry / community respondent

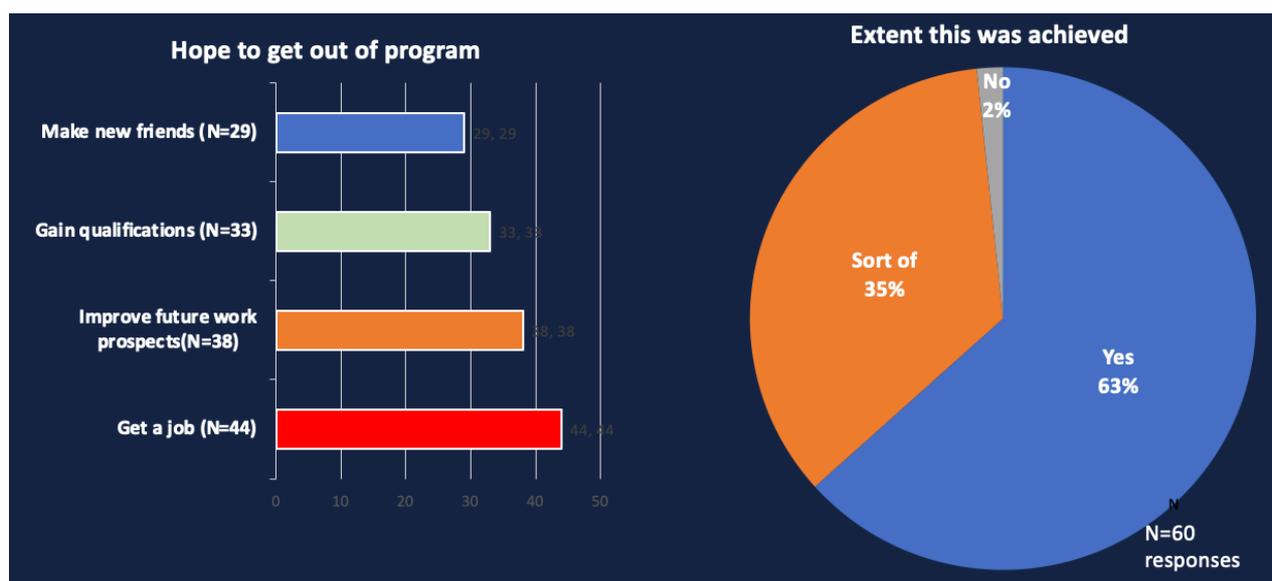
Survey and interview data from Participants

‘SPARK program was a turning point of my life’ – Participant respondent

26. The profile of the participants who completed the survey equates with the demographic profile of the total number of participants who have engaged with SPARK over the previous two years:
- 67% were women,
 - 9% were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders,
 - 61% were born outside Australia,
 - 35% do not speak English as the main language at home, and
 - 7% identify as a person with disability.
 - **Key finding from the survey is that many respondents reported they met their expectations for the program** (63% reported that they got what they expected from SPARK), with getting a job as the main priority for participants as the following illustrates.



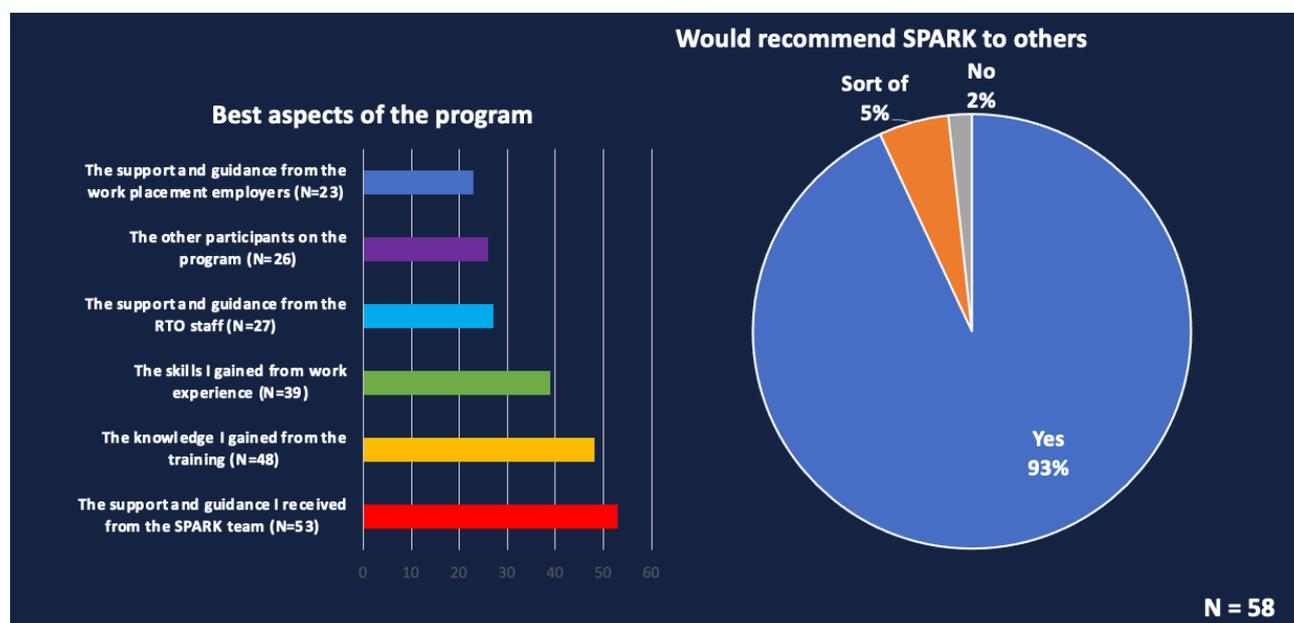
Figure 6: Participants rating of the extent their expectations were met (Source: Participant Survey)



'I got my first full time job and have been loving it ever since! I feel confident with the knowledge I have learner (sic) through the course and felt safe to accept the job as the centre was recommended by the SPARK staff' – participant respondent

27. Participants were also strongly of the opinion they would recommend the program to others (93% said Yes they would), rating the wrap-around support provided by SPARK as the best aspect of the program.

Figure 7: Participants rating of the best aspects of the program (Source: Participant Survey)



'Can't rave about it [SPARK] enough' – participant respondent

28. In discussions with participants (either through interviews or the group conversations) we found:



- For **most participants the key focus was on getting a job and future work prospects**. Nevertheless, gaining qualifications and making new friends also was important. Of participants interviewed only one person noted that they did not get employment and that was because they did not complete the qualification training.

'Feel like I have a second family here' – Participant respondent

- The **SPARK team's support and guidance was consistently noted as a highlight**, with the best aspects of the program including knowledge gained from training, skills from work experience, and the guidance from RTO staff, work placement employer.

'Like wow – I am worth something and am not just a random somebody who is going to live off Centrelink' – Participant respondent

Factors contributing to success

29. Factors contributing to the success of SPARK speak to both the **quality of the SPARK team**, and the **high levels of engagement and commitment from the key stakeholders** with the program.
30. **SPARK staff are rated Very Highly by all partners as professional and effective**. Respondents spoke of the outstanding relationship management by all SPARK staff. Across the board all key informants in the evaluation process highly valued the SPARK staff.
31. **Wrap around services** are highly valued by participants and industry. Caring for the whole person, recognising that personal issues are intertwined with professional issues. One community / industry respondent noted the need to ensure support does not become dependence – not a problem currently but noted that knowing when to 'unwrap' participants when they are ready is critical for them to flourish without the support of the program in the medium – long term. Another respondent commented that the consistent and ongoing support when done enables development of self-confidence and self-reliance and resilience of the individual participants.
32. **Committed partners** who are prepared to invest time and effort into the program, was also seen to be a key factor in the program's success. Partners also acknowledge that there are benefits to being fully engaged in the program. Multiple benefits include SPARK being a potential source of employees, it allows partners to meet corporate social responsibility aspects, and it ensure that partners are fulfilling their community service mission.
33. **Engagement of stakeholders in the selection and recruitment process** improves commitment and ownership of the program across stakeholders. People feel committed to SPARK, they feel a part of it because it includes them, and so the sense of ownership is very high.



SPARK as a catalyst for systemic change - examples

34. During consultations, a number of respondents noted that SPARK has **influenced systemic changes** across different sectors that go beyond improving outcomes for individual participants. For instance, an RTO trainer interviewed noted that they were restructuring their regular course to match the structure of the SPARK program course as it had proven more effective in balancing class work and practical work placements. The trainer noted further that they would not have had the flexibility to do that without SPARK proving the concept independently.
35. Another key informant from industry stated that SPARK had changed the construction industry by proving that women can contribute. This is evidenced by the increasing number of industry partners interested in the Women in Construction program. Undoubtedly helped by the current demand in a very tight labour market, but still it does demonstrate a newfound willingness to take on women (for further examples of SPARK as a catalyst for change see the two case studies annexed to this report).

Areas for Improvement

36. With the vast number of key informants highly satisfied with the program, there were very few respondents who made any suggestions for improvement in the future. Nevertheless, for the record, we list areas for improvement that were shared with the evaluation team, in the words of the respondents:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>The only advice I would give is to run the program more often</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Improved linkages between SPARK and student support services at CIT</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Not to get too big and become the answer to everything!</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Need to continue communicating with participants to ensure they know what is expected in the construction industry and the childcare workplace</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Need time and commitment for open and honest conversation between all partners (RTO and industry) and participants at the outset to ensure mutual understanding of expectation is achieved and appropriate support are put in place to deliver good results</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>The level of commitment of industry partners in selection and support of participants needs to be rewarded by recruitment of suitable employees at the end of program, otherwise the additional investment of time is not worthwhile</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>I would suggest that SPARK keeps working on their positive relationships with teachers. Teachers at RTOs are under a lot of pressure with shrinking funds and expanding compliance requirements their teaching hours are getting squeezed. Positive relationships with teachers will support them to get the best outcomes for these students.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Continue to provide one on one support for students and help them transition into study by being there to talk with them, listen to them and walk them through processes. continue to take the time to talk with RTOs even though at times their context may seem baffling. RTOs have burdensome requirements that it's hard for others to fathom. It's a very complex work environment and the friendly support of SPARK's staff helps smooth the process</i>



Value: Social Return on Investment (SROI)

37. **Social Return on Investment (SROI)** is an internationally recognised approach to understand, measure and value the impact of a program or organisation. It is a form of cost-benefit analysis that examines the social, economic, and environmental outcomes created and the costs of creating them. It helps to tell the story of how change is created and places an indicative monetary value against it compared to the costs incurred to achieve the results⁴.
38. SROI was included as one part of the review methodology. The scope of the assessment able to be conducted and the findings presented in this section of the report are constrained due to the level of disaggregated data for the SPARK program available
39. Our assessment of SPARK is based on a series of assumptions as outlined below. Two values are calculated; the return on investment for government funding only and the return when additional investment from Riverview is considered.
40. The very important aspects of personal wellbeing (confidence, positive outlook on life) and social inclusive outcomes (connectedness, friendship, and networks) that are real and vitally important positive changes described elsewhere in the report have not been “valued”. Industry partners and RTOs during interviews were unable to identify costs / value of the additional inputs made and the gains (return) achieved from being part of SPARK. Further, due to the timing of the review there is a lack of ongoing tracking data (post training – i.e. over years) that would capture impact and any enhancement or depletion of returns over time.

Measurement

41. The **key inputs specific to the SPARK model** that have been costed for the purpose of this assessment are:

Table 2: Input Costs

Input	Skills Canberra	Riverview	Total program
Staff including mentoring and support by United Care Kippax	598,000		598,000
Program costs –management, administration legal and financial and marketing by Riverview	112,000		112,00
Program Support provided to participants	100,000	100,000	200,000
Program Marketing	110,000	100,000	210,000
Total cost	920,00	200,000	1,120,000
Program cost per participant (n=466)	1,974	429	2,403
Average course fees per participant⁵	3,640		
Average total cost per participant	5,614	429	6,043

⁴ [Social Ventures Australia](#) accessed 24.2.22

⁵ Paid directly by Skills Canberra to RTO. Based on information provided by SPARK program staff. Median cost of Cert 2 Construction; Cert 3 Early Childhood Education and Care; Cert 2 Business and Administration; Cert 2 Horticulture; Cert 2 Hospitality; Women in Construction



Key assumptions:

42. Pre-course (based on estimates provided by SPARK management)

- 90% of participants not employed
 - **Assumption:** all unemployed people were on single person JobSeeker payment of \$16,367 per annum (\$629.50 / fortnight⁶)
 - Some may not have been receiving any government benefits, some may have been receiving additional payments
- 10% of participants were in 'insecure' employment – casual work; no participants in full time work
 - **Assumption:** minimum wage⁷ of \$23.01 per hour and working 6 days (48 hours a fortnight), providing gross earnings of \$25,372 per annum (\$975.85 / fortnight).
 - The tax⁸ paid on this gross income is \$1744.

43. Post-course (based on results detailed previously Table 1)

- **50% of people have found full-time work and are earning above award wages**
 - **Assumption:** drawn from the proportion of those previously unemployed and those in insecure work (45% previously unemployed; 5% insecure)
 - **Assumption:** Industry award rate averaged across the sectors of \$55,000 gross salary per annum⁹
 - Tax paid on this income is \$8,342
 - **Assumption:** people will remain in full time employment and at this wage for three years
- **20% of people undertaking additional training**
 - **Assumption:** all were previously unemployed
 - **Assumption:** all are receiving benefits equivalent to Job Seeker - \$16,367 per annum
- **25% of people remain unemployed**
 - **Assumption:** all remain on Job Seeker - \$16,367 per annum
- **5% of people remain in insecure work**
 - **Assumption:** same income and tax is paid as previously

44. Summary of change in individual financial position based on the above assumptions is shown below:

Table 3: Changes in government financial position based on participants pre and post SPARK status

	Pre-training	Post-training	Movement
Unemployed to full time work	(16,367)	8,342	24,709
Insecure work to full time work	1,744	8,342	6,598
Unemployed to further training	(16,367)	(16,367)	0
Remain unemployed	(16,367)	(16,367)	0
Remain in insecure work	1,744	1,744	0

- **Discount rate** used to calculate benefit over three years - 3% per annum

⁶ <https://guides.dss.gov.au/social-security-guide/5/1/8/20> accessed 24.2.22

⁷ <https://www.fairwork.gov.au/pay-and-wages/minimum-wages> accessed 24.2.22

⁸ <https://au.talent.com> accessed 24.2.22

⁹ Ibid



Return on investment calculation:

Table 4: Return on Investment

Return on Investment (ROI) calculation	\$
Positive contribution from new full-time employees (233) – 3 years	15,096,077
Positive contribution from insecure to full-time (23) – 3 years	447,898
No change in other groups	
Total positive contribution from program over 3 years	15,543,957
Total cost of program to government (\$5,614 x 466)	2,616,240
Return on investment – for every GOVERNMENT ONLY dollar spent	\$5.94
Total cost of program to government and Riverview (\$5,614 x 466)	2,816,240
Return on investment – every GOVERNMENT and RIVERVIEW dollar spent	\$5.52

Breakeven analysis:

45. Based on the above, it is possible to determine the **number of full-time jobs that need to be created for the SPARK program to generate as much value for GOVERNMENT as it costs to run the program.**
46. **Assumption:** for the purposes of this calculation, it is assumed all people moving into full-time employment were unemployed prior to SPARK (no people gaining employment were in insecure jobs prior to starting SPARK). All other assumptions remain as above.
47. **The proportion of participants that need to find a full-time job after the program for it to be cost neutral for the government is:**

Table 5: Portion of participants required for cost-neutrality.

	1 year employed	2 years employed	3 years employed
Total net positive benefit per person	\$24,709	\$48,698	\$71,999
% of people with a full time job after SPARK	22.7%	11.5%	7.8%



Market Sounding

48. There is no direct comparison to the SPARK program in the greater Canberra region. The ACT's peak construction training body, Construction Industry Training Council (CITC), made this point strongly during consultations noting that SPARK is the only program that specifically targets disengaged, difficult to reach groups and reconnects them to the labour market through their programs. CITC noted that RTOs, including CIT and the Master Builders Association (MBA), provide excellent training and qualifications for apprentices who are already tied to an employer, but that this was a completely different service to that offered by SPARK.
49. CITC also highlighted the different motives driving training organisations and programs. They noted that RTOs are generally limited by funding from government; they have a strong commercial imperative. This point was made by a number of the RTO respondents – from across a range of disciplines in which SPARK offers courses - who noted that involvement in SPARK programs usually required winning a debate with course administrators due to the additional costs involved. One course instructor stated that is the role of TAFE to engage with communities and as such 'we have an obligation to provide this and to do so we have to invest'. They noted that this was an annual debate within their organisation and that investment on an ongoing basis is reliant on the strength of relationships between SPARK, course instructors and decision makers at the RTOs.
50. Despite asking all interviewees whether there were similar programs to SPARK, only one respondent suggested one possibility, a program targeting Aboriginal youth run by Snowy Mountain Hydro in September 2021. Anecdotally, it was not successful, with low completion rates. Suggested possible reasons for this lack of success include a lack of support for participants, the course structure, and the adverse impacts of COVID. Successfully implementing a program like SPARK is difficult, takes commitment and is more expensive than a regular RTO course.
51. Table 6 below compares different RTO's programs using the defining features that have led to the success of SPARK as noted earlier.

Table 6: Market comparators against key features of SPARK

	Industry engagement in selection	Proactive 'wrap around services'	Small class size	Discrete cohort	Consistency of teachers	Target excluded & disengaged
SPARK	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
CIT	✓	X	x	X	x	x
TAFE NSW	✓	X	x	X	x	x
Quality Training in Construction	X	X	✓	✓	✓	✓
ACT Adult Community Education Grants (ACE)	x	?	✓	✓	?	✓



52. Explanatory notes for ratings in Table 6:

- ACE grants and Quality Training in Construction (QTIC) most closely resemble SPARK although there are some key differences, and both are considerably smaller
 - QTIC only provides courses in a limited range of trades and cannot match SPARK for the breadth of courses offered
 - QTIC does not offer comprehensive wrap around support services for students, nor is industry heavily engaged in the recruitment of students
 - ACE grants are smaller and offered to a range of organisations which may lead to inconsistency in quality across the portfolio of grants
 - In 2020-21 ACE grants totalling approximately \$190,000 were given to five organisations (range of grants: \$14,450 - \$50,000; 2019 one grant of \$50,000 was given)
 - No information is publicly available about numbers of participants in the ACE program
- A key element of SPARK is industry engagement in selection processes. SPARK as a potential source of new staff is a key reason for participation for some partners.
 - As noted, CIT and TAFE NSW courses are often aligned with apprenticeship programs – industry is bringing participants to them for training purposes in these cases (per CITC this is by far the most common construction training undertaken by TAFEs)
- Whilst CIT / TAFE do provide student support services, they are reactive and respond to demand when accessed by the student rather than being central to the approach and proactively provided as they are with SPARK.
 - As noted in an earlier quote from an RTO staff member, the quality of wrap around services provided by SPARK, and its proactive nature, far exceeds the quality provided by CIT / TAFE
- One respondent from CIT noted that the average class size in their course for SPARK started at about 20 people compared with the size for a general public course of approximately 60 people
 - QTIC is a smaller RTO with fewer trainers
- SPARK programs at CIT and TAFE NSW are undertaken as a discrete cohort. One RTO respondent noted that in one instance where SPARK and general course participants had been mixed late in the program for logistical reasons.
 - It is not usual practice for CIT or TAFE to run discrete cohorts
- It is common practice for CIT and TAFE NSW to use multiple teachers over the duration of courses. As relationships are so important to the success of SPARK, they have been providing the same teacher for courses as much as possible, and usually more senior teachers in recognition of the different group that SPARK brings
 - This is not usual practice for CIT or TAFE
 - QTIC is operated by a couple who are also the lead teachers

53. It is highly unlikely that any RTO would be able to replicate SPARK on their own. The program targets difficult to reach populations which require a proactive approach to help potential



applicants gain information and help to apply. One participant interviewee commented she had tried but given up on her earlier applications to CIT as it was too difficult for her to access the information and complete the process alone. SPARK is uniquely placed to provide more intensive support of the kind that is needed to help participants at all stages of the process.

54. Existing RTO models, heavily reliant on government funding to be viable, are not suited to lead this kind of program. SPARK's strong social focus, combined with its access to highly flexible, responsive funding from a private source allow it provide types of support that are required to deliver truly inclusive training programs. QTIC which is perhaps most socially driven of comparison organisations is small and focused solely on selected trades such as brick laying and concreting. It is unlikely that it would be able to manage courses in sectors other than construction.

Considerations for the future

55. The program is a victim of its own success – there is demand for more courses in more locations. A wide range of new possible courses delivered anywhere from Wollongong to the far south coast were mentioned during interviews. Conversely, some respondents noted that as the program is tied to the Ginninderry development it should focus on trades in West Belconnen.
56. The quality of candidates was raised by industry partners as a concern. While realising and endorsing the focus of SPARK on recruiting participants that are typically disengaged and often coming from challenging situations and circumstances, industry partners need to have confidence in business as well as social benefits from their investment of time and effort in SPARK. They need to feel confidence that there will be returns in terms of recruitment of future quality employees at the end of the process. The importance of ensuring a robust and thorough selection process that honestly shares information both about the training and the requirements and expectations in the potential future workplace so that all parties (participants and partners) are clear about the commitment and contributions needed to achieve success. If the returns are not consistently there, industry partners have indicated that they may not continue to be part of the program.

What does SPARK look like going forward?

57. The delivery model of the program is well regarded and should not be changed. The corporate structure, governance and management systems need to be reconsidered regardless of whether the program remains at its current size or continues to grow to meet demand. It is beyond the scope of the evaluation to produce detailed models and financial projections for different possible structures, nevertheless the following table provides a high-level overview of four options considered.

Table 7: Potential options for SPARK going forward

	Current model	Social enterprise	Not for profit	Franchise	Co-operative
Ownership	Ginninderry JV	Independent company	Registered charity / not for profit	Franchisees, with central licensing arrangement	Members
Governance	Project steering committee	Board of Directors	Board / Trustees	Individual franchise arrangements; franchise agreements	Board of Members
Footprint	Canberra region	National / Global	National / Global	National	National
Revenue sources	Private sector / grant funding	Fee for service, grant funding	Grant funding	Fee for service, grant funding (?); franchisee fees for central services	Membership fees, fees for service, grant funding

Table 8: Pros and Cons of the different models considered

	Pros	Cons
Current model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Existing structure working well - Part of a larger organisation; industry connections, liquidity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tied to single development (ACT / NSW) - Difficult to scale and replicate beyond immediate area
Social enterprise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Maintains strong social mission - Allows for new revenue streams / responsive to market changes / needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Always difficult balancing the commercial imperative with social mission - Potential for mission drift



Not for profit	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Ensures accessibility to wide range of grant funding- Easier CSR sell for new partners?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Can limit trading / fee for service options- Outdated delivery mode / less consistent with SPARK's industry / jobs focus
Franchise	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Ability to scale / replicate quickly,- Central viability depends on number of franchises	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Quality control / reputation risk- Less direct delivery engagement from core SPARK team; more management
Co-operative	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Diversify ownership structure risk through wider membership base- Opportunity for members to join from across the country	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Relies on sufficient members committed to mission; potential for mission drift

Conclusions, lessons learned and recommendations

58. Based on the findings presented in the previous section, an overall assessment of SPARK is provided below, key lessons for the next phase of the program are listed followed by recommendations of how SPARK can take action to build on the review findings and the lessons learned.

Overall conclusions

59. **The development need and value of SPARK have been validated.** Engagement with key partners remains strong, there is clear evidence of how SPARK is successfully delivering a critical need in the Canberra region, and there is growing demand and appetite for a program of this nature in the region.
60. A key reason for SPARK's success is its **distinctive model** which includes not only its unique wrap-around services, but also it involves that industry partners and RTOs in the selection process, ensures touch points for stakeholders throughout the implementation of the model, and enables SPARK participants to be a discrete cohort within the RTOs.
61. Our interaction with key informants (through interviews, focus groups, and surveys) found **high levels of satisfaction across the board**. SPARK is meeting its objectives to support participants along different pathways and preparing participants for employment opportunities and/or work experience placements. SPARK is also making a difference in terms of **delivering a range of engagement, training, and employment initiatives for key disadvantaged groups who have previously been disconnected from the labour market**.
62. The **SPARK team's support and guidance, and their professionalism**, was consistently noted by key informants as a critical factor for the success of the program. Other factors for success include the high levels of engagement and commitment from key stakeholders with the program. The fact that partners are committed to invest time and effort into the program was also seen to be important. Relationships and partnerships have been shown to be critical to the long-term success of SPARK, and there are many instances where existing relationships have been leveraged to ensure further value of this program
63. It is important to recognise that SPARK has **influenced systemic changes** across different sectors that go beyond improving outcomes for individual participants. RTOs noted they had restructured their regular courses to match the structure of the SPARK program as it proven to be more effective in ensuring a balance between class work and practical work placements. SPARK has contributed to noticeable shifts in the workplace with regards to creating more equitable, fairer, and better workplaces for women.



64. **Our assessment of the return on investment indicates positive financial and economic returns** for the individual and for the Territory and surrounding region. The assessment focused on quantifiable positive returns for the level of investment made to deliver the program, with at least half progressing from welfare to waged employment in the short term. Wider social impact undoubtedly has occurred. This has been reported anecdotally and for the purposes of this review not quantified. Further assessment with a broader scope of personal and social outcome indicators, and over a longer time frame is likely to validate this initial positive finding on return.
65. Our market sounding analysis found **no direct comparison to the SPARK program in the greater Canberra region**, particularly the provision of comprehensive wrap around support services for students across the breadth of programs offered. We believe that it is unlikely that any RTO would be able to replicate SPARK on their own. The program targets difficult to reach populations which require more intensive support of the kind that SPARK is uniquely placed to provide. Existing RTO models, heavily reliant on government funding to be viable, are not suited to lead this kind of program.
66. Our overall conclusion is that **SPARK is well regarded, and that the implementing model should not be changed**. Nevertheless, corporate structure, governance and management systems need to be reconsidered regardless of whether the program remains at its current size or continues to grow to meet demand. Moreover, there is a need for a more robust data management system that tracks participant goals at the start of the course, halfway through and at the end.

Key Lessons for the future

67. A finding running through this review is that SPARK is nearly universally respected and valued by stakeholders and participants. However, there are three key lessons which the review team identified in conducting this evaluation.
68. Firstly, the relationships and partnerships between SPARK and its partners have been shown to be critical to the long-term success of SPARK. The level of commitment by partners, ideally driven by a mix of social values around inclusion and fairness, preparedness to personally commit time, energy and thought into how to make the model work has been key to the success of the program. As has been the recognition amongst industry partners of the value in balancing positive social and positive business outcomes.
69. Secondly, a **more robust data system would assist tracking outcomes**. A significant amount of data was provided by SPARK for this review, however, the detail and quality made it difficult to use as evidence to measure achievement of objectives. Small tweaks, as noted in the Limitations section - to the system and method of recording could be implemented that wouldn't add to the team's workload, but would provide an incredibly rich data source
70. **Finally, the recognition that getting relevant work in small towns can be difficult** for participants. For example, there are only so many construction jobs in Goulburn. There needs to be consideration of courses offered and frequency of training in small markets (i.e. Yass).



The absorptive capacity of local businesses for graduates needs to match job expectations of participants.

Recommendations

71. Considering the findings of this review, and the lessons learned, we make the following recommendations.

Strategic

72. The sustainability of the current model is heavily reliant on the support of Riverview via the Ginninderry project. Whilst there is no indication that this will cease in the short-term, it is prudent to consider different ways of structuring the ownership and governance of the model so it can be sustainably replicated if desired. We therefore recommend:
- a. SPARK undertake – either in-house or contract in expertise - detailed modelling to determine the most appropriate structure for SPARK. This will require defining a vision for SPARK over the medium to long term in terms of footprint, financial independence, and other key issues

Operational

73. The success of the model depends on the quality of staff – at all levels. This is as much about attitude and commitment to the participants. The cultural fit of staff is at least as important as formal qualifications. We therefore recommend:
- a. Ensure all staff recruitment processes allow for a wide range of applicants, from a variety of backgrounds with strong interpersonal skills
74. There is a need for a more robust data management system that tracks participant goals at the start of the course, halfway through and at the end. We therefore recommend developing an improved database that can:
- a. Track changes in participant attitudes / growth in confidence as measured through change in participant goals during the program
 - b. Use individual student goals at end of program to track whether the participant successfully achieved that goal in the three-months after completing the program, or as long as SPARK is tracking progress of former participants
 - c. Split 'job' and 'training' outcomes to be more specific in terms of length / quality of training pursued and whether job was in desired sector (if specified) by participant, and type of contract (eg: permanent, full-time, casual)
75. Many participants spoke of the need to foster experience sharing between organisations and to help build a wider sense of a 'SPARK community'. We therefore recommend:
- a. Instituting an annual stakeholder event, across all programs, for industry, community, and RTO partners to share experiences in an informal setting and allow the program an opportunity to articulate its vision, objectives and being transparent about how it identifies partners to work with.



For partners

76. SPARK has collected a wealth of data that has not been processed or analysed as it was not required under the reporting requirements of the Deed of Grant. The information is potentially very valuable to better determine the outcomes of the program including the return on investment.
 - a. Skills Canberra should consider making a small investment to process the data SPARK has collected but has not processed into its system so that it can better quantify the impact of SPARK. Information such as employment status at the beginning of the program and gender details would add great value to the data
77. It can take time for the full impact of programs such as SPARK to become apparent. Skills Canberra should consider the merits of a tracer study of SPARK participants to establish the long-term impact of the initiative and help inform the best ways to support people to ensure they remain engaged with the workforce.



Annex 1: List of Key Organisations Consulted

Program Management / implementation
SPARK Ginninderry
Skills Canberra – current staff and staff involved with establishing program
Uniting Care Kippax
ACT Suburban Land Agency
Office for Women
RTOs
Canberra Institute of Technology – representatives from five courses
TAFE NSW
Community and Industry Partners
ACT Regional Building and Construction Industry Training Council
Canberra City Care
Canberra Regional Community Services (formerly Belconnen Community Services)
DCJ
Ginninderry Conservation Trust
Guideline ACT Pty Ltd
Huon Contractors Pty Ltd
Masters Builders Association
MBC Employment
NSW Department of Communities and Justice



Annex 2: Case Studies

Case study 1 - Flynn Early Childhood Education Centre partnership with SPARK

Background

Flynn Early Childhood Education Centre (FECEC) is in North Belconnen. It is one of two community focused social entities providing early childhood education and care that are managed by the North Belconnen Community Association. The other being Coinda Cottage.

Both Flynn and Coinda aim to give access to quality education and early childhood care for residents in North Belconnen, particularly focusing on children from more vulnerable, disadvantaged and socially isolated at-risk families in the West Belconnen community. Both centres are partners in the SPARK program since 2017. The centres offer placements for students undertaking the Certificate 3 in Early Childhood Education and Care at CIT. Flynn has been associated with SPARK since 2017, and Coinda Cottage coming on board in 2019.

The information in this case study is based on an interview with Natasha Bunter, the Director of Flynn.

Positive Outcomes

The partnership with SPARK has enabled FECEC to gain and retain good quality staff. Since 2017 when the partnership began and up until 2020 six SPARK graduates with Certificate 3 qualifications in Early Childhood Education and Care who completed their work experience placement have been recruited as staff at the FECEC. Of these staff, five continue to be employed.

The partnership helps to deliver the social purpose of the North Belconnen Community Association that manages the FECEC.

The staff are valued members of the FECEC. They are proficient quality educators who bring additional personal lived experiences including that gained from being mothers and grandmothers and the cultural and language diversity that is instrumental to the position and adds value to the Flynn team.

The SPARK graduates show increase in confidence and ability that develops over the period of the work placement and continues to grow once employed as staff at FECEC. Examples shared are more confidence to engage with families; improved written and documentation skills, noting for several staff English is not their first language; and families and children clearly trusting and respecting the quality of education and care provided by the individual staff.

Factors Contributing to these positive outcomes

The investment of time by FECEC in the information and selection process for potential SPARK course participants. When this is done well, this helps to establish from the outset the expectations and realities about doing the course and the level of commitment of participants in terms of work hours that is needed to gain employment at the FECEC. This initial engagement with potential participants



also makes it clear to the FECEC and the CIT and SPARK, the level and type of commitment and support that is likely to be needed to help ensure the participants ultimately succeed.

The high level of commitment and quality of support provided both by the SPARK team and the staff at CIT that is flexible and responsive to the individual needs of the participants. The combined effort provides the participants with two points of support and for FECEC two referral points if assistance or guidance is required for the participants.

The sense of family and caring that is generated by SPARK between participants and with the SPARK team – “the feeling, often for the first time that there are people that really care about them and their well-being”. Strong and trusted enduring relationships between the participants and SPARK staff are formed and continue beyond the training program.

The purpose FECEC that focuses on social outcomes and provides to all staff a supportive and positive work environment that offers mentoring and collegial support in the workplace and allows staff to focus and draw on their strengths. There is a high quality and well qualified staff that have “an honest and strong focus on mentoring of staff”, ensuring where there are gaps in knowledge and skills there is support provided. The approach used focuses on harnessing the strengths of each team member. This helps SPARK graduates to further develop confidence and enhance their interest and skills and to become a valued team member. It was observed that in a safe and positive workplace “---they really come out of their shell”. Two of the 2020 graduates were not confident in their English language skills and initially would not speak with the family members, but over time they have gained confidence and gained a voice speaking with families and within their team and are also more confident to prepare written documents in the workplace.

The business model of FECEC that offers staff above award wages and increased staff numbers are more than the minimum required. This helps with providing mentoring and support on the job and gives flexibility regarding recruitment processes.

Two of the six SPARK graduates and FECEC employees have gone on to undertake further qualifications, one (after 3 to 4 years) has nearly finished her diploma qualification in early childhood education and care, and the another is studying but in another industry.

Lessons Learned

- **“It is important that all stakeholders and participants are honest and upfront”**. The importance of the initial information and selection process and the need to be honest and upfront in discussions about the time and commitment needed by both participants (number and type of hours and shifts that support the operational needs of the centre) and the industry partners to achieve successful outcomes. **Honest conversations between the SPARK, RTO and industry partners** are important when setting expectations about the process and determining if there is capacity and capabilities to provide support that meets the needs of the individual participants to maximise their chance of success.
- **Providing “wrap around” support throughout** by SPARK with the RTO (CIT) and then by FECEC in a positive and supportive workplace is an ongoing commitment that if done effectively will support development of self-confidence and self-reliance and resilience of the individual participants.
- **Locally based participants and employees** are more likely to succeed in the workplace as it reduces the challenges of time and cost of travel



Case study 2 – Guideline ACT partnership with SPARK

Background

Guideline ACT is a mid-tier civil engineering contractor based in the Canberra region specialising in technically challenging projects such as Roadworks, Bridgeworks (including strengthening to existing structures and foundations), Potable and Recycled Water, and Sewerage Infrastructure, major Underground Services, Dam Construction and Remediation, major Concrete Structures, and major city centre rejuvenation projects.

Guideline ACT believes people are its greatest asset and employs a broad range of skilled personnel. Guideline ACT is committed to its workforce and provides opportunities for both training and career progression.

Guideline ACT own, operate and maintain an extensive range of plant, including earth moving machinery, specialised plant and construction equipment.

Guideline ACT is committed to the highest professional standards of quality, care and conduct in all dealings with clients, consultants, subcontractors, employees, suppliers, Government representatives and the community at large.

Guideline ACT have been involved with the Women in Construction project since it first commenced in 2018.

Positive Outcomes

The partnership with SPARK has enabled Guideline to recruit and retain good quality staff.

Guideline have recruited four women through the program over the past three years, all performing roles that would traditionally be considered 'male roles'. Guideline currently have a staff of 50 people; 8% of its workforce consists of SPARK participants.

Factors Contributing to these positive outcomes

Guideline ACT is as committed to diversity in its workforce as SPARK is in giving more women an opportunity to explore different career options. Guideline ACT has an expressed desire to see real engagement of women in the civil engineering industry. There is a both a social driver and commercial driver to this; a tight labour market means accessing an alternative source of workers is an attractive proposition for the company. Guideline ACT recognises that only recruiting from half the population is a real business problem when labour is in short supply.

'I can't understand why 50% of the population can't have as much fun as we're having'
- Nick Zardo, Managing Director

Guideline ACT would like to be able to recruit 1-2 women from the SPARK program every year. They are concerned that as the program's reputation grows so does the number of other companies engaging with the program, reducing the number of graduates available to them each year.

Guideline ACT has worked hard to build a strong, inclusive culture, even before the SPARK Women in Construction program. They have a long-held objective to become one of the region's most respected



civil contractors. Guideline has built a strong culture of respect for each other among their staff and as such the systems and norms were in place when the SPARK graduates joined. The company's annual staff survey shows that 76% of people think women have made a positive change to Guideline ACT. This is a good result in a traditionally male dominated sector. A supportive work environment, coupled with additional early support from SPARK (see below) has helped Guideline ACT achieve one of the highest SPARK retention rates in the sector.

The high level of commitment and quality of support provided by the SPARK team is critical during the first three months of work placements. Guideline ACT are a mid-size firm, but do not have capacity to provide the additional support that may be required by SPARK graduates. Having ongoing support provided by the SPARK team is invaluable in helping the new starters to settle in, help them address any personal issues that may have arisen during the period and generally provide a familiar face to answer questions and help them deal with any transition issues. This additional support has helped them achieve one of the highest retention rates among industry partners involved in the program.

Lessons Learned

- **Support from SPARK during job placements is critical, particularly for smaller employers who may not have the resources to do it themselves.** Providing this service is of great value to smaller companies and most likely increases retention rates for them.
- **The culture and commitment of the industry partner plays a significant role in the success of the program,** particularly around retention rates. A tight labour market helps increase industry participation as companies look for new ways to reach untapped segments of the market, but for SPARK, ensuring the company is a supportive workplace for graduates is important in the medium-term.
- **Flexibility in working conditions and hours is difficult in construction** – this has a greater impact on women in an industry where work starts at 7am and workers are often in small teams and relay on everyone being there. This is particularly problematic for people with child caring responsibilities and school drop-offs. Guideline ACT is looking at its work arrangements, considering options like job sharing, in an effort to address this.
- **SPARK can't change the culture of an industry in a few short years, but it can make an impression.** Guideline noted that while they had a strong culture, they thought that more women across the industry was a positive thing and would change it for the better over time.