



**Nichols**  
APPLIED MANAGEMENT INC.

## Next Generation Retention Project: Youth 18 to 25 Focus Groups

Submitted to:

Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo Economic  
Development and Tourism

Submitted by:

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	i
1. Introduction .....	1
2. Methodology .....	2
2.1 Focus Group Logistics .....	2
2.2 Profile of Participants .....	2
2.3 Limitations .....	4
3. Focus Group Responses .....	5
3.1 Education .....	5
3.2 Career and Oil Sands Sector .....	8
3.3 Local Experiences .....	11
4. Analysis .....	14
4.1 Themes .....	14
4.2 Comparison to High School Focus Groups .....	16
4.3 Additional Considerations for Moving Forward .....	17

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2-1 Participant Demographics – Age .....	3
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## LIST OF TABLES

Table 2-1 Participant Demographics – RMWB Residency .....	3
Table 2-2 Participant Demographics – Occupation or Program .....	4
Table 3-1 Future Education Plans .....	5
Table 3-2 Studying Elsewhere .....	6
Table 3-3 Studying Locally .....	7
Table 3-4 Careers .....	8
Table 3-5 Oil Sands Sector .....	9
Table 3-6 Large Event .....	11
Table 3-7 Recurring Activities .....	12
Table 3-8 Accommodations and Services .....	13
Table 4-1 Themes Breakdown .....	14

## APPENDICES

Appendix A: Moderators' Guide .....	18
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## Acknowledgements

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- Athabasca Tribal Council
- CAREERS
- Fort McMurray Catholic Schools
- Fort McMurray Public Schools
- Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo Economic Development & Tourism
- Keyano College
- Pathways alliance
- Wood Buffalo Integrated Youth Network

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## 1. Introduction

Recent labour market research has indicated that a substantial portion of youth in Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo are considering leaving the region to pursue their education and/or build a career. This has serious implications for the region's ability to capitalize on future economic opportunities and support long-term growth.

In an effort to address this issue, multiple community stakeholders have come together to gain a better understanding of youth in the region (their career goals, motivations, interests, perceptions, etc.). This collaborative initiative, named the *Next Generation Retention Project*, has two components:

- **The Next Generation Employment Survey.** A survey of youth (aged 15-25) in Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo to gain a better understanding of their career goals, motivations, perceptions, and interests.
- **Targeted Retention Initiative.** This will be a youth engagement initiative that aims to build awareness of available employment opportunities, dispel misconceptions about the oil and gas industry, and strengthen connections between youth, employers, and the region.

Nichols Applied Management Inc. (Nichols), a management consulting firm with over five decades of experience working in Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo, supported the design, fielding, and analysis of the Next Generation Employment Survey. This work was largely completed in 2022.

In the spring of 2023, Nichols was approached by Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo Economic Development and Tourism (FMWBEDT) to carry out additional engagement with youth in the region. FMWBEDT is interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the survey results, centred around three key topics:

- future education plans;
- future career plans and work in the oil sands sector; and
- local events and experiences.

To that end, Nichols proposed to carry out in-person focus groups with two different sets of youths. Specifically:

- **Youths Aged 15 to 17 (i.e., high school students).** This engagement took place in June 2023, with in-person focus group sessions held in-person with youths in selected schools from both the Fort McMurray Public School District and the Fort McMurray Catholic School District.
- **Youths Aged 18 to 25.** This engagement is proposed to take place in fall 2023. A detailed approach for engaging youth in this age category will be determined over the summer, based on input from Keyano College and drawing on lessons learned during engagement with high-school aged youths.

The following report provides a summary of information collected from focus groups with youths aged 18 to 25.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Focus Group Logistics

The Nichols study team worked with representatives of FMWBEDT, CAREERS, and Keyano College to recruit focus group participants. In order to capture a diverse demographic of youths, focus group participants were recruited from both Keyano College and from the local workforce. Specifically:

- The participants classified as students are youths who are actively taking classes at Keyano College at the time the focus groups were conducted. These students may or may not be working part-time during their studies.
- The youths identified as working youths are either currently employed, recently employed, or seeking work. Based on the participants' responses, most respondents are also enrolled at Keyano College and currently working in industry as coop students. While these participants could also be identified as students, they provided the distinctive perspective of working youths and were identified as such.

In total, four focus groups were conducted. All four focus groups were held at Keyano College on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023, with three of the four focus group sessions comprised of students and one comprised of working youth. Nearly 30 individuals (28) participated in these focus groups. Specifically, the count for each focus group is as follows:

- Keyano College Students (4)
- Keyano College Students (6)
- Keyano College Students (10)
- Working Youth (8)

Each focus group session was conducted by a member of the Nichols study team and an audio recording was made of the session to facilitate the synthesis of focus group findings. In some instances, a representative of FMWBEDT was present during the session and a moderator's guide was prepared and shared with FMWBEDT representatives in advance of the sessions. There were two moderator's guides prepared, one for the student focus groups and one for the working youth focus groups. The only distinction is with regards to the framing of questions around education. Otherwise, the content and structure of the moderator's guide are effectively the same. Copies of the moderator's guides are provided in Appendix A.

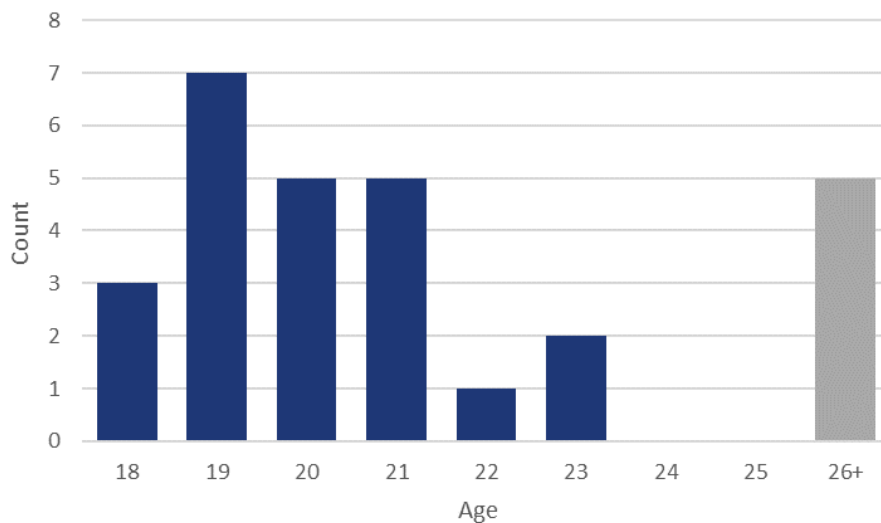
It should be noted that focus groups are a form of qualitative research; the intention of the engagement was not to achieve a level of statistical validity with respect to whether responses are reflective of the opinions of youths in the region overall. For a more quantitative analysis of the views and opinions of youth regarding education and employment in the region, please refer to the Next Generation Employment Survey results.

### 2.2 Profile of Participants

The majority of students surveyed were between the ages of 18 and 21. A breakdown by age is shown below in Figure 2-1. On the day the focus groups were conducted, there was some concern that there would be a low turnout among invited participants. To address this, staff from Keyano College assisted in recruiting additional students who were physically present at Keyano College on the day of the focus groups. As a result of the short notice and reduced screening process, students above the age of 25 were inadvertently included in some of the

focus groups. These students have been identified as “26+” in Figure 2-1. When possible, the responses of these students above the age of 25 were not included in future sections of the report.

**Figure 2-1 Participant Demographics – Age**



Additional demographic information is provided in the tables below as further context for focus group responses in Section 3.

A large proportion of student youths identified themselves as international students. Information was collected on youth’s tenure in the RMWB, and more than half of the students have been in the region for less than a year. In contrast, all working youth have resided in the RMWB for over two years. As a result, the individual focus groups contained less diversity with regards to lifetime interactions and exposure to the region.

**Table 2-1 Participant Demographics – RMWB Residency**

Residing in RMWB	Student Count	Working Youth Count
Less than a year	12	-
One to two years	3	-
More than two years	1	8
Undisclosed	4	-

Youths were also asked to disclose their program of study (students) or area/type of work (working youth). Responses can be categorized amongst the broader categories of business (e.g., business administration and accounting), education (e.g., early learning and childcare, educational assistant), nursing, trades (e.g., heavy equipment technician, electrician), and other (e.g., human resources, environmental technology).

Table 2-2 Participant Demographics – Occupation or Program

Occupation or Program	Student Count	Working Youth Count
Business	7	-
Education	6	-
Nursing	4	-
Trades	1	8
Other	2	-

## 2.3 Limitations

As outlined in Section 2.2, the 18- to 25-year-old focus group participants were Keyano students and coop students (i.e., working youth), with a larger portion of Keyano students identifying themselves as international students. The degree to which these participants are representative of all youth aged 18 to 25 in the region is uncertain. The small sample size combined with the similarities in focus group participant profiles means that opinions and perceptions of focus group participants might not be indicative of all youth aged 18 to 25 in the region.

### 3. Focus Group Responses

Focus group discussions centered around three key topics:

- education plans;
- career plans and work in the oil sands sector; and
- local events and experiences.

Feedback on each of these topics is provided in the following sub-sections.

#### 3.1 Education

The first series of questions was focused on education plans. Students and working youth were asked about their current and future education plans and if they intend to pursue any additional studies. A summary of responses is split across the following subjects:

- future education plans (Table 3-1);
- studying elsewhere (Table 3-2); and
- studying locally (Table 3-3).

**Table 3-1 Future Education Plans**

Topic	Responses
Intention to pursue future education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nearly all students indicated that they intend to finish their current studies (diploma, degree, or certificate) at Keyano College.</li> <li>• A moderate number of students conveyed an interest in pursuing additional studies at some point following completion of their current studies. Specifically: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The majority of students expressed a desire to work for some period of time before continuing with further education. A few of these students said that their future job would dictate if they went back to school (i.e., if they could afford further education and whether it still aligned with their career plans.)</li> <li>○ A few students have immediate plans to continue their education.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• All participating working youths plan to continue (or pursue) studies in the trades. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Most working youth in attendance are already existing students at Keyano College.</li> <li>○ A few of the other working youths are planning to start their studies at Keyano College in the next year.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Some of the working youths are intending to pursue further education in addition to the schooling outlined above.</li> </ul>



Topic	Responses
Intention to stay in the region for further education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Programs include business (e.g., Blue Seal program) and further trade specializations (e.g., power systems electrical).</li> <li>• Of the youths who intend on pursuing further education, there was a mix of responses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ A small majority of youths indicated that they are not considering continuing their studies at Keyano. Most of these students pointed to a lack of program offerings as a barrier (see Table 3-2).</li> <li>○ The other youths are open to continuing their education at Keyano by taking additional courses or pursuing higher education (e.g., degree).</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Further field of study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Of the youths who intend on pursuing further education: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The most common response was a degree in business, with a few students aspiring to obtain a Chartered Professional Accountant (CPA) designation, and one working youth intending on obtaining his Blue Seal.</li> <li>○ Other programs include medical school and law school.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Table 3-2 Studying Elsewhere

Topic	Responses
Reasons for wanting to pursue further education elsewhere	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The primary reason for youths wanting to continue their education elsewhere is a lack of program offerings in the region. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Most examples pertain to a desire for higher education (e.g., master's or doctorate), but also include program specializations such as power systems electrical.</li> <li>○ Some students indicated a willingness to stay in the region if their program was offered.</li> <li>○ Likewise, some students indicated a willingness to return to the region after their studies.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• A small fraction of students intends on studying elsewhere in order to be closer to family. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Most of these students had not initially intended on starting their studies in the region but chose Keyano College due to the accessibility of the program (e.g., entry requirements, education costs).</li> <li>○ The most common answers for relocation were Edmonton and Toronto.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Topic	Responses
Perception of Keyano College	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Despite wanting to study elsewhere, some students noted that they have a positive opinion about the quality of education at Keyano College.</li> </ul>

Table 3-3 Studying Locally

Topic	Responses
Initial reasons for selecting Keyano College	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The initial decision of youths to attend Keyano College is largely split between accessibility and program availability. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most students, notably international students, stated that accessibility (e.g., access to admission, program entry requirements, education costs) was a driving factor behind their decision to study at Keyano College. Most of the youths who have lived in the region for several years also indicated a closeness to home, affordability, and good quality education as deciding factors.</li> <li>Most working youths chose (or are choosing) to pursue their schooling at Keyano College due to program availability in the trades and proximity to jobs in the oil sands.</li> <li>International students indicated that they only recently decided to pursue their studies at Keyano College.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Reasons for wanting to stay in the region for (further) education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The primary reasons why surveyed youths want to remain in the region for their education are work related. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Either their studies align with the oil sands industry, there is a perceived high demand for their line of work (e.g., nursing), or they hope that they will be able to find a well-paying job related to their field of study in the region.</li> <li>A small number of students indicated that their decision on further education will depend on their future financial situation. They noted that if they find a job locally that can provide them with sufficient income to support their studies, then they would be interested in continuing their schooling in the region.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Many of the youths stated they like the small-town environment in the community.</li> <li>A small number of participating students are wanting to transition from a diploma to a degree.</li> </ul>

Topic	Responses
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ A few students cited their decision to pursue a diploma as a first step on their education journey and would like to stay locally should they continue their education.</li> </ul>

### 3.2 Career and Oil Sands Sector

The following series of questions were focused on the participants' career perspectives. There was also a series of questions pertaining to the oil sands, starting with the participants' general perception of the sector and then the participants' openness or desire to work in the sector. A summary of responses related to these two main topics are split across the following tables:

- careers (Table 3-4); and
- oil sands sector (Table 3-5).

**Table 3-4 Careers**

Topic	Responses
Career goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most youths indicated that they believe they can pursue their career in the region.</li> <li>• The career goals of youth were closely tied to their existing or prospective studies, with many of their answers to career related questions being reflective of the responses provided in section 3.1. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The surveyed working youths are envisioning a career in trades while students were primarily split between business, education, and healthcare.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Pursuing career elsewhere	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A minority of youths intend on pursuing their career outside the region.</li> <li>• Job placements or lack of demand for specific jobs (notably outside of the oil sands industry) was listed as one of the main reasons for youth looking elsewhere. (e.g., RCMP, Early Learning and Childcare (ELCC)). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ A number of youths responded with concerns about the community and region not supporting nor favoring jobs outside the oil sands.</li> <li>○ A common response amongst international students was that it has been difficult for them to find jobs as students. Based on their experiences and perspective, these students are concerned that the difficulty in finding work might translate to difficulty finding professional jobs when they're completed their studies, leading them to look elsewhere for work.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Topic	Responses
Pursuing career locally	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A few students intend on leaving the region to move closer to their families.</li> <li>• Some youths also shared that their friends had mixed views on this subject: some friends intend on staying in the region, some friends intend on going elsewhere, and some friends are uncertain.</li> <li>• The majority of youths stated that they plan on staying in the region if (or because they believe) they can find good employment that is in their field and/or that pays well. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Youth pursuing careers in occupations closely tied to the oil sands expressed interest and optimism towards having many job opportunities.</li> <li>○ Youths following career paths towards jobs in high demand (e.g., nursing) also expressed interest and optimism in finding a job in the region.</li> <li>○ Most other youths are willing and/or wanting to stay if they can find suitable employment.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Family was also a contributing reason for youth wanting to stay in the region. Either because their family is already in the region or because they perceive the region as being a good place to raise a family.</li> <li>• Many youths expressed an appreciation for the region. They enjoy the small-town community and the nature/environmental aesthetics around the region.</li> </ul>

Table 3-5 Oil Sands Sector

Topic	Responses
Opinion of oil sands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The majority of youths had positive overarching opinions of the oil sands.</li> <li>• A minority of youths had negative opinions of the oil sands and shared that the oil sands harmful impacts towards the environment could be improved upon.</li> <li>• Some key words used to describe the industry included the following: money, employment, economy, opportunity, stability, job security, benefits, pay, profitable, environmental impacts, far, uncertainty, safety measures, shift rotations, gender inequality, engineering, trades, hard work, complacency, comfort, lifestyle, intense schedule, and intense shifts. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Money was the most common word mentioned.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Topic	Responses
Source of information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The main sources of information for focus group youths are family and friends. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ This includes family and friends that work in the oil sands industry as well as family and friends that live outside the region.</li> <li>○ The youth mainly attributed their opinions to word of mouth rather than traditional media or social media. Some also said they conducted their own research about the industry.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• All international students were aware of the oil sands industry and their prevalence as the top local employer before moving to the region.</li> </ul>
Willingness to work in the oil sand sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All respondents indicated that they could consider working in the oil sands sector. This includes those who shared negative opinions.</li> <li>• Many of the working youths in attendance are currently working in the oil sand sector. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Some youths are working in camps, some are commuting.</li> <li>○ Most of these youths attributed lifestyle and work schedules as main reasons why some youths do not want to work in the oil sands. They shared that even though they were aware of these detractors before their employment that it was a tough adjustment. They said that the intense schedule and lengthy shifts can be challenging.</li> <li>○ Most of these youths had been planning to work in the oil sands industry since high school.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Awareness of jobs and initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most youths responded that they thought the oil sands industries mainly had opportunities for trades jobs, with limited opportunities in other fields. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The majority of youth expressed some awareness towards different types of jobs in the oil sands industry (outside of trades).</li> <li>○ Some youths argued that while trade jobs are more well known, other jobs are also available. These other jobs might just not be as well known, for one reason or another, or are not the opportunities in which people are interested.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Many students in non-trades studies were unsure if oil sands companies hired students.</li> <li>• Almost none of the youths are aware of Pathways Alliance and other environmental initiatives being undertaken by the industry.</li> </ul>

Topic	Responses
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This includes the working youth who hold/held positions with large oil sands companies in the region.</li> </ul>

### 3.3 Local Experiences

The final questions were regarding local experiences. As defined in the Moderators' Guide (Appendix A), "experiences" were defined as activities or events that would support youth engagement in the community and have a meaningful impact on youth participants.

Overall, two of the main types of experiences that were consistently identified by focus group participants were large events and recurring activities. The responses are split across the following two tables:

- large event (Table 3-6); and
- recurring activities (Table 3-7).

In addition, there were a number of responses pertaining to accommodations and services. For some focus groups, these responses eclipsed any mention of activities or events. As such, a third table has been included that covers accommodations and services (Table 3-8).

Table 3-6 Large Event

Topic	Responses
Requested events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Youths stated that if they could envision one event to draw in the community it would be a large concert or festival. Examples of key terms used to define the event are as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Big concert, city event and function, trade show, cultural event, festival, amusement park with rides, something like Kdays or Stampede, carnival or fair in the summer.</li> </ul> </li> <li>A few of the youths commented on rib fest being an existing event that they enjoyed attending.</li> <li>According to a few students, the student board at Keyano College has also successfully organized engaging events in the past.</li> </ul>
Characteristics of experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most youths shared that they wanted a 'big stand-out' event, that can bring people together. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many youths commented on the importance of either meeting people or bringing together friends and family. An example given was to connect people through either food, or music, or culture.</li> <li>Many youths also indicated a desire to promote small businesses. Some of these youths see this large event as an opportunity to</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Topic	Responses
	<p>learn what is in the region, support local businesses, and showcase different cultures and different vendors.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is important for many youths that the event be inclusive. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Specific examples mentioned were that rib fest was not appealing to non-meat eaters and that not everyone likes country music.</li> <li>Some youths are also interested in there being more diversity and cultural aspects to the event (e.g., food, music). These youths pointed to their community leaders as a good source of knowledge for stakeholders interested in incorporating more diverse cultural aspects to events.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Most youths voiced that they were content with a large event being held only once per year.</li> </ul>

Table 3-7 Recurring Activities

Topic	Responses
Requested activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many youths requested more outdoor related activities. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parks, sports (e.g., football, golf), recreation centres, sledding, paintball, and dirt biking were some of the answers provided by the focus group participants.</li> <li>One student made a comment that Macdonald Island Park felt more like a business place or space for exercise rather than a “fun” place for youth.</li> <li>The vista ridge ski hill was mentioned by some students as an existing activity they enjoy.</li> </ul> </li> <li>More shops and stores is the next most popular answer from the youths in attendance. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Numerous youths indicated wanting a big mall with different retail stores, a variety of restaurants, and a movie theater.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Characteristics of experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Much like large events, the most desired characteristic is to be able to partake in these activities with friends.</li> <li>Some youths were advocating for small and regular activities over large events.</li> <li>A few youths made explicit note that they would like something fun to do outside in the winter.</li> </ul>

Table 3-8 Accommodations and Services

Topic	Responses
Requested accommodations and services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accommodations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ A large number of students shared that they wished for lower rent and more affordable housing options.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Jobs for students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Many students said they are not looking as much for activities, but rather are prioritizing finding work. Most of these students expressed a difficulty in finding student employment, citing reasons such as low supply of jobs for students and a difficulty for international students to meet the qualification requirements (e.g., sufficient job experience, having a driver's license). One student also specified there being more barriers for non-minimum wage jobs.</li> <li>○ In terms of events, some students said they are interested in a job fair, although another student stated that Keyano College holds two job fairs every year.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Transportation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Some youths commented on there being limited bus routes and that taking the bus was expensive and not always consistent.</li> <li>○ One person mentioned they saw a recent Facebook post about a new bus route being added and credited the municipality for listening to the community.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Place of worship <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Many youths, particularly international students, communicated a desire for a place of worship in the region.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Variety of stores <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Some youths are hoping for a wider variety of stores, including specialty food stores (e.g., bakery, cultural foods) and variety of restaurants (e.g., different cuisines).</li> <li>○ Some youths indicated that they would be interested in an artisan square..</li> <li>○ There was also a feeling amongst the youths that a variety of stores might lead to a wider variety of job opportunities.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>



## 4. Analysis

Building on the focus group responses provided in Section 3 and the professional experience of the study team, the following section is intended to support the development of future youth-focused retention campaigns, supports, and services by:

- identifying three common themes amongst youths aged 18 to 25;
- comparing and contrasting response from youths aged 18 to 25 to youths aged 15 to 17 (high school youths); and
- offering additional considerations for moving forward.

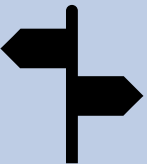
### 4.1 Themes

There are many commonalities amongst the youth's responses across all topics. For many questions, youths touched on similar themes in their responses, though the weight and importance applied to certain aspects did differ. Drawing on this, responses have been grouped into the following dominant themes:

- choosing to be in the region;
- being career driven; and
- seeking more enriching experiences.

A complete description of each theme is provided below in Table 4-1.

Table 4-1 Themes Breakdown

Archetype	Characteristics
Choosing to be in the region 	<p>Whether due to school or work, the majority of youths in the focus groups made a choice to either move to or remain in the region. For example, some local youths are working in industry and studying trades, while other international students are studying at Keyano College in the hopes of joining the local workforce. There is only a small subset of youths who are planning to leave the region after school, mostly for further education or to move closer to family.</p> <p>Most youths indicated an interest in being a part of the local workforce. The majority of working youth are already working for industry, and most plan on continuing to work in the region after their schooling. Likewise, most of the students indicated a desire to or interest in working in the region, not only after their studies but during them as well. In fact, many youths indicated that they are actively seeking jobs and are wanting to pursue opportunities locally. Some youths also expressed having already engaged with the community through events, while others have expressed interest in further participating in community events.</p> <p>The feedback gathered from the surveyed youth appeared more focused on identifying ways in which the region can <u>help</u> them stay, rather than ways the region can <u>convince</u> them to stay. These youths are in the region now and showed some form of agency in deciding to be in the region, albeit some with short term intentions. In the education topic,</p>

Archetype	Characteristics
<p>Being career driven</p> 	<p>youths provided many reasons for choosing to study in the region. In the careers section, many youths indicated their career goals of working in the region. And in the local experiences' topic, many youths were prioritizing discussions around accommodations and services rather than events and activities.</p> <p>Work was the most common theme conveyed by youths across all three topics as a key factor in their decision making. Whether it's obtaining a diploma or degree in order to find desirable work, finding part-time work as a student, or the fact that they're currently working, youths are indicating that they view employment and building a career as a top priority. Even some youths with negative opinions of the oil sands are willing to work in the industry, if it means they will have a good job. For some students, job fairs were brought up before concerts. Some students are wanting to hold off on their future education in order to start working. And most notably, there were many mentions of work being the primary reason for staying in the region.</p> <p>Also, when asked about local experiences many youths chose instead to focus on local accommodations and services. Some students emphasized they'd like to see changes with respect to rent, local transit, or other day-to-day activities as opposed to entertainment. Some students placed an increased emphasis on more 'mature' priorities and focus on careers.</p>
<p>Seeking more enriching experiences</p> 	<p>Most youths indicated a desire for, what can be interpreted as, more enriching experiences. The desire to promote small businesses at local events, and the desire for specialty food stores like bakeries and culturally diverse restaurants are examples. A few discussions around concerts quickly transformed into discussions around fairs and festivals, with some students adding more layers around trade shows or artisan fairs, ultimately leading to a multi-faceted event and experience. The conversation shifted from a big city experience to a rich locally driven experience.</p> <p>For many youths, there was an emphasis on community and family. For some youths, community was a key element brought forward, indicating their appreciation of the small-town community in the region, and emphasizing local experiences and events that bring people together or having a place of worship to go to. Certain youths emphasized family as a reason to stay or leave the region after their studies, and family as their source of knowledge for the oil sands industry. Community and family seem to be influential factors for the youths in attendance.</p> <p>The youths also conveyed foresight in their responses, with some indicating that the region would be a nice place to settle-in for the long term. These comments are indicative of youths planning and looking ahead.</p>

The themes noted above are all contributing factors that influence the youth's likeliness to stay in the region. These key determinants influence youth to different extents, with some factors having more weight than others. For certain youths, work will be a greater priority than having a sense of community. For other youths who are more driven by family (i.e., more enriching experiences), they may leave the region regardless of employment opportunities that may be presented to them. Regardless, these were the resounding themes driving discussions

and responses. Understanding that most youths already made the choice to be in the region helps frame retention from *appealing* to youth to *supporting* youth, be it careers or education or even local experiences. From the information gathered in the focus groups, it would seem that the youths most likely to stay in the region are those who will be able to find work and have more enriching experiences in the region.

## 4.2 Comparison to High School Focus Groups

This section provides a few observations regarding the similarities and differences between the feedback received during focus groups with youth aged 15 to 17 and those aged 18 to 25. Specifically:

- **Some high school student archetypes have changed or are no longer valid for those aged 18 to 25:** five archetypes had been identified and used to classify the groups of students in the focus groups for youths aged 15 to 17. These high school students had diverse opinions with regards to staying in the region and had different motivations. Based on the responses provided by the youths aged 18 to 25, it appears that some of these archetypes might be transferable to this older age group as well – albeit under a different viewpoint since these youths have aged and are no longer in high school – and that some other archetypes are no longer valid. Specifically:
  - The local trades and oil sands workers still appear to be present in the region. This archetype still forms a large grouping of youths, especially with regards to the working youths in attendance.
  - The external career driven youths are less represented but still captured by the mix of youths outside of the trades who are planning on staying for further schooling, staying to work in the region, or leaving the region to pursue different career paths. As before, some youths plan on staying while others plan on leaving the region. This group has been narrowed down by the programs offered at Keyano College.
  - The big city experience seekers archetype is no longer an applicable representation of the remaining youths in the region, aged 18 to 25, based on the youths in attendance.
  - There are temporary out of towners still present, however the archetype is now better defined from the perspective of international students, who moved to the region to study at Keyano College.
  - Finally, there are less students who appear to be uncertain about their future.
- **There was a higher degree of commonality among responses from youths aged 18 to 25:** Conversations among focus groups participants aged 18 to 25 were reflective of the common themes noted in Section 4.1, with the majority of students focused on how they can *stay* in the region rather than *why* they should stay in the region. The focus group discussions reinforced that these youths have begun making their post-high school decisions regarding careers and studies and that some youths had likely already followed paths described in the high-school archetype analysis.
- **Youth aged 18 to 25 have transitioned from simply planning for their future studies and careers to actually executing those plans:** All youths aged 18-25 participating in focus groups were either currently studying at Keyano College or working locally. While some youths have the intention to pursue further education, other youths have indicated that they have taken their final step in their education journey. The next step for some of these youths is now work rather than school, and this was reflected in the focus group discussions, as finding a job was a more prevalent topic as opposed to applying for post-secondary education. Also, youths aged 18 to 25 have seemingly gained perspective from their current experiences as compared to youths 15 to 17. Students seem to already know about program availability and have their own

opinions about Keyano College as an educational institution. Working youths also have opinions about the local labor force and most of the working youths in attendance have had exposure to the oil sands industry.

- **Youth aged 18 to 25 are seeking more enriching experiences:** there was a considerable difference in themes as compared to certain groupings in the high school focus groups. The youths aged 18 to 25 generally spent more time discussing community, accommodations and services, and inclusivity when expanding on local experiences, rather than big city experiences. For youths aged 18 to 25, the depth or quality of the experience was more important than the breadth of opportunities or experiences to a relatively larger proportion of participants as compared to youths aged 15 to 17.
- **Youth aged 18 to 25 are more willing to work in the oil sands:** Overall, there were very similar opinions amongst focus groups with regards to the oil sand industry. The majority of youths had a positive perspective of the oil sands, with a small number of youths having environmental concerns about the industry. The main difference between youths aged 15 to 17 and youths aged 18 to 25 was in the willingness to work in the industry. All the youths aged 18 to 25 in attendance would be willing to work in the oil sands industry. However, this could be due to the small sample size.

### 4.3 Additional Considerations for Moving Forward

Based on the focus group feedback and associated themes outlined above, we offer the following additional considerations for moving forward include:

- **Focusing on employment opportunities.** Whether it's student jobs or permanent employment, youths are indicating a desire to work. The retention of youths will largely be tied to their ability to find a job in the region. Youths in certain studies such as trades have indicated an optimism in finding employment, whereas youths in other areas with less direct ties to the oil sands sector have conveyed less optimism.
- **Expanding and/or enhancing accommodations and services.** Youths have shared their responses about rent, transportation, and other local amenities. This young adult demographic is turning its attention to more 'mature' considerations.
- **Promoting diversity and inclusivity.** Some students indicated a desire for more diverse representation in events, tying back to more enriching experiences and community.
- **Expanding and/or enhancing local experiences.** Youths provided many recommendations as to how to improve their local experience. There is demand for a large event, such as a concert or festival that would bring people together. There is an opportunity to gather and promote local businesses, by advertising local goods and services as well as showcasing diverse local employment. There were also many recommendations for outdoor activities as well as shops and stores.
- **Recognizing that the oil sands industry is largely perceived positively.** The responses gathered from youths seem to suggest that retaining youth does not center around changing their perception of practices within the oil sands industry or its impact on the physical environment (e.g., 'dirty oil'). Nearly all the youths had a positive opinion of the industry, except for a few youths having negative opinions pertaining to the environmental impacts. Yet, those youths still indicated a willingness to work for oil sands companies.

## Appendix A: Moderators' Guide



**Nichols**  
APPLIED MANAGEMENT INC.

Moderator's Guide

## Next Generation Retention Project: Youths Ages 18 to 25 (Students)

**Nichols Applied Management Inc.**

Management and Economic Consultants

Suite 302, 11523 – 100 Avenue NW

Edmonton, Alberta T5K 0J8

September 30, 2023

## Table of Contents

Table of Contents .....	1
1. Introductions (5 minutes) .....	2
2. Guiding Questions .....	3
2.1 Education (12 minutes).....	3
2.2 Careers and the Oil Sands Sector (20 minutes) .....	5
2.3 Local Experiences (12 minutes) .....	7
3. Closing (1 minutes).....	8



## 1. Introductions (5 minutes)

**Note:** As attendees come into the room, we'll greet them, ask them to sign in, and direct them to the pizza and/or snacks provided.

- Welcome! I would like to thank you all for participating in today's discussion.
- My name is David Schaaf. I am with a company called Nichols Applied Management. We're working with local organizations such as *Keyano College, Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo Economic Development and Tourism, CAREERS, the Athabasca Tribal Council, and Pathways Alliance*, to gain a better understanding of education and career goals, motivations, interests, and perceptions of youth (18-25) in the region.
- We invited you here today to hear a bit more from you about your education and career plans, as well as local events and amenities that you'd like to see. We'll discuss three general topics:
  - your current and future education plans;
  - your future career plans and potential to work in the oil sands sector; and
  - your opinion of local events and amenities.
- The purpose of this work is to build a brighter future for Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo. And in order to do that, we want to develop resources and supports that help local youth stay in the region. **Your feedback today will help us do that!**
- I know it's a busy time for you and there are likely many other things you'd rather be doing on a Saturday afternoon. So, thank you for doing this!! As a sign of our appreciation we have some free items (sweaters, hats, mugs) to give you at the end of our session.
- Before we begin our discussion, just a couple of ground rules:
  - Please speak one at a time, we want to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to give their views.
  - Respect the opinions of others - everyone's views are valid.
  - There are no right or wrong answers – we just want to know what you think.
  - I'd like to make an audio recording of our discussion but everything that is said will be kept confidential – no names will be put against comments. I am the only one who will listen to the recording and it will be deleted following the completion of our work. **Does anyone have any objection to me making an audio recording?**
  - If anyone has any specific questions that do not relate to the discussion, there will be an opportunity at the end of the meeting.
- Are there any questions before we begin?
- **First, just a quick roundtable of introductions** – name, age, and current education/employment status (if student, what do you study and where).



## 2. Guiding Questions

### 2.1 Education (12 minutes)

Guiding Question	Method	Probes/Follow-up	Est. Time (mins)
What are your future education plans?	Roundtable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is the highest level of education you hope to achieve?</li> <li>Are you planning to stay in Fort McMurray to complete your studies?</li> <li>Have your plans changed over time?</li> </ul>	3 mins
<p><i>For those looking to study elsewhere:</i></p> <p><b>Why</b> are you looking to study elsewhere?</p>	Open discussion	<p><i>Probe whether it's one reason or several. Which reason(s) are most important?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is it because your field of study or specialization isn't offered in Fort McMurray? Do you <b>know</b> it isn't offered? If it was offered, would you stay?</li> <li>Is it because you perceive the quality of education to be better elsewhere? What, <b>specifically</b>, is better?</li> <li>Does the reason you want to study elsewhere have nothing to do with education offerings/institutions? e.g., adventure, change of scenery, family/friends live elsewhere.</li> </ul>	6 mins
<p><i>For those looking to study elsewhere:</i></p> <p>What <b>specifically</b> would need to change for you to want to stay and study in Fort McMurray?</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Education-related (e.g. education offerings, extra-curricular activities/'student life')?</li> <li>Non-education related (e.g. amenities, services, housing, cost-of-living)?</li> <li>Would you be willing to consider returning to the region after/during your education (e.g. internship, co-op)?</li> </ul>	

Guiding Question	Method	Probes/Follow-up	Est. Time (mins)
<p><i>For those looking to study in Fort McMurray:</i></p> <p>Why are you looking to stay in Fort McMurray?</p>	Open discussion	<p><i>Probe whether it's one reason or several. Which reason(s) are most important?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is it because you perceive the quality of education to be better here than elsewhere? What, <b>specifically</b>, is better?</li> <li>Is it because it's cheaper to stay in Fort Mc Murray?</li> <li>Is it because it's easier to stay in Fort McMurray? In what way is it easier (e.g., family/friends live here, support network)?</li> <li>Is it because there are more future job opportunities in your chosen field in Fort McMurray?</li> </ul>	3 mins

## 2.2 Careers and the Oil Sands Sector (20 minutes)

Guiding Question	Method	Probes/Follow-up Questions	Est. Time (mins)
How many of you feel you can pursue your career in Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo?	Show of hands		5 mins
<p><i>For those who feel they cannot pursue their career in Fort McMurray:</i></p> <p>Why do you feel you can't pursue your career here?</p>	Roundtable	<p><i>Confirm the career they're pursuing based on their earlier responses.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to appropriate education and/or training.</li> <li>• Lack of employment opportunities / opportunities for career advancement in chosen field.</li> <li>• Lack of financial or family supports in region.</li> </ul>	
<p><i>For those who feel there are no jobs in their field or little opportunity for career advancement:</i></p> <p>Can you please explain.</p>		<p>Are you aware that there are over 39,000 people employed in the region in numerous occupations across virtually all sectors?</p>	
What are your perceptions of the oil sands sector?	Open discussion	<p><i>Ask them to provide key words to describe the sector.</i></p>	4 mins
What sources of information do you rely on when it comes to learning about the oil sands sector?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family/friends?</li> <li>• School/teachers?</li> <li>• Mainstream media (which outlets)?</li> <li>• Social media (which websites, influencers, organizations)?</li> <li>• Other (industry, environmental groups)?</li> </ul>	
Are you open to working in the oil sands sector?	Show of hands		4 mins
<p><i>For those who are not open to working in the oil sands sector?</i></p> <p>Why not?</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Environmental considerations?</li> <li>• Working conditions?</li> <li>• Other?</li> </ul>	

Guiding Question	Method	Probes/Follow-up Questions	Est. Time (mins)
<p>Are you aware of ....</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the various occupations that are possible in the industry?</li> <li>the Pathways Alliance initiative which has the largest oil sands producers working together to address climate change?</li> <li>the resources being committed to reclamation? For example, between 2009 and 2018, 26 million trees were planted as part of land reclamation efforts.</li> <li>the level of Indigenous participation in the industry and partnerships? Roughly 10% of the industry's workforce is Indigenous and billions have been procured from Indigenous-owned companies over the years.</li> </ul> <p>Does knowing this information change your opinion about working in the sector? Why or why not?</p>		<p><i>The level of emphasis to be placed on each of these items will depend on the responses to the preceding question.</i></p> <p>Notes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Occupations include: lawyers, engineers, IT professionals, HR professionals, environmental specialists, accountants, nurses</li> </ul>	5 mins
Have your perceptions of, and/or willingness to work in, the oil sands sector changed since you were in high school?		If so, how and why?	2 mins

## 2.3 Local Experiences (12 minutes)

Guiding Question	Method	Probes/Follow-up Questions	Est. Time (mins)
<p><i>The Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo Region has some incredible local features and amenities that already support sports, entertainment, and recreational activities and experiences, both in and outdoors. However, perhaps there is more that can be done to improve the experiences that youth in our community are looking for.</i></p> <p><i>When we say “experiences”, we’re looking for different types of activities or events that would support your engagement with others in the community and have a meaningful impact on you.</i></p>			1 mins
<p>What kinds of local experiences are you and your friends looking for during your spare time?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sports-related experiences</li> <li>• Entertainment-related experiences</li> <li>• Winter-related experiences</li> <li>• Outdoor-related experiences</li> <li>• Arts-related experiences</li> <li>• Other (e.g. hobbies or other shared interests).</li> </ul>	Open Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you describe some of the characteristics of the experiences you’re seeking (e.g. small/large gathering, bringing together people with similar/varied experiences, one-time/ongoing, physically/mentally engaging)?</li> <li>• How do you see yourself contributing to these experiences (e.g. passive participant, active participant, support planning)?</li> <li>• Are there any recent or current experiences that have had a meaningful impact on you?</li> </ul>	6 mins
<p>If you could envision one event that would draw you out into the community and engaging with others, what would that be?</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could be single or ongoing event.</li> <li>• Is it small or large scale? Is it easy or hard to organize?</li> <li>• How many people could it reach? Is it meant for just youth or everyone?</li> </ul>	5 mins

### 3. Closing (1 minutes)

- I just wanted to thank you all again for taking the time to share your thoughts and opinions today.
- As mentioned at the beginning, your feedback today is important to developing resources and supports that help local youth stay in the region.
- Are there any final questions or observation before we end?
- Before you go:
  - As a sign of our appreciation we have some free items (sweaters, hats, mugs) for you.
  - *If there is food left:* Please take more pizza and/or snacks with you as you leave.



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**MANAGEMENT & ECONOMIC CONSULTANTS**



**Nichols**  
APPLIED MANAGEMENT INC.

Moderator's Guide

## Next Generation Retention Project: Youths Ages 18 to 25 (Working / Seeking Work)

Nichols Applied Management Inc.

Management and Economic Consultants

Suite 302, 11523 – 100 Avenue NW

Edmonton, Alberta T5K 0J8

September 30, 2023



## Table of Contents

Table of Contents .....	1
1. Introductions (5 minutes) .....	2
2. Guiding Questions .....	3
2.1 Education (12 minutes).....	3
2.2 Careers and the Oil Sands Sector (20 minutes) .....	5
2.3 Local Experiences (12 minutes) .....	7
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- My name is David Schaaf. I am with a company called Nichols Applied Management. We're working with local organizations such as *Keyano College, Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo Economic Development and Tourism, CAREERS, the Athabasca Tribal Council, and Pathways Alliance*, to gain a better understanding of education and career goals, motivations, interests, and perceptions of youth (18-25) in the region.
- We invited you here today to hear a bit more from you about your potential education and/or career plans, as well as local events and amenities that you'd like to see. We'll discuss three general topics:
  - any future education plans you might have;
  - your future career plans and potential to work in the oil sands sector; and
  - your opinion of local events and amenities.
- The purpose of this work is to build a brighter future for Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo. And in order to do that, we want to develop resources and supports that help local youth stay in the region. **Your feedback today will help us do that!**
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  - Respect the opinions of others - everyone's views are valid.
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  - I'd like to make an audio recording of our discussion but everything that is said will be kept confidential – no names will be put against comments. I am the only one who will listen to the recording and it will be deleted following the completion of our work. **Does anyone have any objection to me making an audio recording?**
  - If anyone has any specific questions that do not relate to the discussion, there will be an opportunity at the end of the meeting.
- Are there any questions before we begin?
- **First, just a quick roundtable of introductions** – name, age, and education/employment status (if working, what is your occupation, and if student, what do you study and where).

## 2. Guiding Questions

### 2.1 Education (12 minutes)

Guiding Question	Method	Probes/Follow-up	Est. Time (mins)
Do you have any future education plans?	Roundtable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What are you looking to study?</li> <li>What is the highest level of education you hope to achieve?</li> <li>Have your plans changed over time?</li> </ul>	3 mins
Are you planning to stay in Fort McMurray for your future studies?	Show of hands		1 mins
<p><i>For those looking to study elsewhere:</i></p> <p><b>Why</b> are you looking to study elsewhere?</p>	Open discussion	<p><i>Probe whether it's one reason or several. Which reason(s) are most important?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is it because your field of study or specialization isn't offered in Fort McMurray? Do you <b>know</b> it isn't offered? If it was offered, would you stay?</li> <li>Is it because you perceive the quality of education to be better elsewhere? What, <b>specifically</b>, is better?</li> <li>Does the reason you want to study elsewhere have nothing to do with education offerings/institutions? e.g., adventure, change of scenery, family/friends live elsewhere.</li> </ul>	5 mins
<p><i>For those looking to study elsewhere:</i></p> <p>What <b>specifically</b> would need to change for you to want to stay and study in Fort McMurray?</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Education-related (e.g. education offerings, extra-curricular activities/'student life')?</li> <li>Non-education related (e.g. amenities, services, housing, cost-of-living)?</li> <li>Would you be willing to consider returning to the region after/during your education (e.g. internship, co-op)?</li> </ul>	

Guiding Question	Method	Probes/Follow-up	Est. Time (mins)
<p><i>For those looking to study in Fort McMurray:</i></p> <p>Why are you looking to stay in Fort McMurray?</p>	Open discussion	<p><i>Probe whether it's one reason or several. Which reason(s) are most important?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is it because you perceive the quality of education to be better here than elsewhere? What, <b>specifically</b>, is better?</li> <li>Is it because it's cheaper to stay in Fort Mc Murray?</li> <li>Is it because it's easier to stay in Fort McMurray? In what way is it easier (e.g., family/friends live here, support network)?</li> <li>Is it because there are more future job opportunities in your chosen field in Fort McMurray?</li> </ul>	3 mins

## 2.2 Careers and the Oil Sands Sector (20 minutes)

Guiding Question	Method	Probes/Follow-up Questions	Est. Time (mins)
How many of you feel you can pursue your career in Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo?	Show of hands		5 mins
<p><i>For those who feel they cannot pursue their career in Fort McMurray:</i></p> <p>Why do you feel you can't pursue your career here?</p>	Roundtable	<p><i>Confirm the career they're pursuing based on their earlier responses.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to appropriate education and/or training.</li> <li>• Lack of employment opportunities / opportunities for career advancement in chosen field.</li> <li>• Lack of financial or family supports in region.</li> </ul>	
<p><i>For those who feel there are no jobs in their field or little opportunity for career advancement:</i></p> <p>Can you please explain.</p>		<p>Are you aware that there are over 39,000 people employed in the region in numerous occupations across virtually all sectors?</p>	
What are your perceptions of the oil sands sector?	Open discussion	<p><i>Ask them to provide key words to describe the sector.</i></p>	4 mins
What sources of information do you rely on when it comes to learning about the oil sands sector?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family/friends?</li> <li>• School/teachers?</li> <li>• Mainstream media (which outlets)?</li> <li>• Social media (which websites, influencers, organizations)?</li> <li>• Other (industry, environmental groups)?</li> </ul>	
Are you open to working in the oil sands sector?	Show of hands		4 mins
<p><i>For those who are not open to working in the oil sands sector?</i></p> <p>Why not?</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Environmental considerations?</li> <li>• Working conditions?</li> <li>• Other?</li> </ul>	

Guiding Question	Method	Probes/Follow-up Questions	Est. Time (mins)
<p>Are you aware of ....</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the various occupations that are possible in the industry?</li> <li>the Pathways Alliance initiative which has the largest oil sands producers working together to address climate change?</li> <li>the resources being committed to reclamation? For example, between 2009 and 2018, 26 million trees were planted as part of land reclamation efforts.</li> <li>the level of Indigenous participation in the industry and partnerships? Roughly 10% of the industry's workforce is Indigenous and billions have been procured from Indigenous-owned companies over the years.</li> </ul> <p>Does knowing this information change your opinion about working in the sector? Why or why not?</p>		<p><i>The level of emphasis to be placed on each of these items will depend on the responses to the preceding question.</i></p> <p>Notes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Occupations include: lawyers, engineers, IT professionals, HR professionals, environmental specialists, accountants, nurses</li> </ul>	5 mins
Have your perceptions of, and/or willingness to work in, the oil sands sector changed since you were in high school?		If so, how and why?	2 mins

## 2.3 Local Experiences (12 minutes)

Guiding Question	Method	Probes/Follow-up Questions	Est. Time (mins)
<p><i>The Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo Region has some incredible local features and amenities that already support sports, entertainment, and recreational activities and experiences, both in and outdoors. However, perhaps there is more that can be done to improve the experiences that youth in our community are looking for.</i></p> <p><i>When we say “experiences”, we’re looking for different types of activities or events that would support your engagement with others in the community and have a meaningful impact on you.</i></p>			1 mins
<p>What kinds of local experiences are you and your friends looking for during your spare time?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sports-related experiences</li> <li>• Entertainment-related experiences</li> <li>• Winter-related experiences</li> <li>• Outdoor-related experiences</li> <li>• Arts-related experiences</li> <li>• Other (e.g. hobbies or other shared interests).</li> </ul>	Open Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you describe some of the characteristics of the experiences you’re seeking (e.g. small/large gathering, bringing together people with similar/varied experiences, one-time/ongoing, physically/mentally engaging)?</li> <li>• How do you see yourself contributing to these experiences (e.g. passive participant, active participant, support planning)?</li> <li>• Are there any recent or current experiences that have had a meaningful impact on you?</li> </ul>	6 mins
<p>If you could envision one event that would draw you out into the community and engaging with others, what would that be?</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could be single or ongoing event.</li> <li>• Is it small or large scale? Is it easy or hard to organize?</li> <li>• How many people could it reach? Is it meant for just youth or everyone?</li> </ul>	5 mins

### 3. Closing (1 minutes)

- I just wanted to thank you all again for taking the time to share your thoughts and opinions today.
- As mentioned at the beginning, your feedback today is important to developing resources and supports that help local youth stay in the region.
- Are there any final questions or observation before we end?
- Before you go:
  - As a sign of our appreciation we have some free items (sweaters, hats, mugs) for you.
  - *If there is food left:* Please take more pizza and/or snacks with you as you leave.





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