

Fostering research partnerships for improved labour market integration and employment of skilled immigrants and refugees in Edmonton, Calgary, and Fort McMurray

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INTRODUCTION

- The integration and utilization of immigrants' skills in the labour market has emerged as a significant issue for Canadian immigration policies.
- The recent economic downturn due to low oil prices and the 2016 Alberta wildfires in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo affect the results of the study.
- The Horse River Wildfire was a disaster that resulted in the mandatory evacuation of 88,000 people in the region, and the destruction of nearly 2,000 structures. The recovery effort is an ongoing process that aims to enhance community resiliency.
- Data collection began in 2015, and was postponed in Fort McMurray due to the wildfire. It was possible to initiate data collection in Fort McMurray in late summer 2017.

It is widely recognized that to fully utilize and engage the skills of immigrants in Alberta, it is necessary to have suitable integration services (Alberta Chamber of Commerce Resolution, 2011).

With an increasing number of immigrants arriving in Alberta to live and work, there is a need to better understand how social service and immigrant sector agencies contribute to enhancing the labour market integration of recent skilled immigrants and refugees.

Many newcomers face significant challenges, such as a lack of recognition of their foreign education and work credentials, which impacts labour market integration.

Building upon a knowledge synthesis project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) in 2013-14 on the role of employers in bridging immigrants in the labour market (Drolet, Sampson, Burstein, Smith, Gredling, & Pasca, 2014), this exploratory project engaged key social service and immigrant sector agencies to better understand how labour market integration and employment outcomes can be improved for skilled immigrants and refugees in Alberta.

Specifically, the project consulted with immigrant serving agencies and other social service sectors in Edmonton, Calgary, and Fort McMurray. This study aims to identify the capacities of, and gaps in, current programs and services that provide employment services to immigrants and refugees and seek to integrate them into the labour market.

OBJECTIVES

- The purpose of the study is to engage key social service and immigrant sector agencies to better understand how labour market integration and employment outcomes can be improved for skilled immigrants and refugees in Alberta.
- The study aims to identify current programs and services that provide employment services to immigrants and refugees that seek to integrate them into the labour market.
- The study further aims to strengthen and develop research partnerships for a larger study in the future.



RESULTS

The recent economic downturn and the 2016 Alberta wildfires have contributed to a significant slow down in the economy. Interview respondents suggest that newcomers experience a number of challenges in finding stable and long term employment. Key findings are summarized below:

- Role of language as a barrier to employment and labour market integration with respect to 'refugees' as permanent residents
- Labour market catchment area is perceived as beyond the local community given secondary migration to Alberta, and includes mental health, skill development, provision of information, and pre-employment services
- Recovery context in Alberta is leading to new conversations emerging around employment and labour market integration with a focus on career development, skill development and upgrading
- Language barriers are present with changing profile of job seekers and full-time LINC classes are not available (e.g. Fort McMurray)
- Need for upgrading courses, post-secondary education and training in some contexts
- Need for employment services to refer newcomers directly to employers
- Reported gaps in legal aid and accessing information about services
- Housing challenges and tenancy issues emerged as a compounding factor with economic downturn
- Mismatch of newcomers' skills and education experience with available jobs
- Importance of volunteer opportunities for newcomers to gain Canadian work experience, learn about workplace culture, gain life skills, access training, build capacity, and build networking opportunities.
- Mentorship programs facilitate networking
- Immigrant serving agencies facilitate workshops on job and interview preparation, use of social media, skill-building, and confidence in the job search process
- Use of 'false postings' by employers contribute to perceptions of an inflated labour market
- Lack of newcomer mental health services in some contexts present as an intersecting barrier that affects work readiness
- Secondary migrants often lack pre-arrival information on the realities of the labour market
- Express Entry presented a shift with an employer-driven model; implications for employers still need to be investigated
- Client success is different for each individual
- Employer requirements for entry-level jobs appear to have increased (driver's license)
- Increase in short-term employment with fewer permanent or long-term positions due to economic downturn and wildfire recovery processes
- Employers are perceived to be engaged and understand their role in supporting newcomers' labour market integration and employment
- The wildfires exacerbated economic challenges resulting in increased unemployment for some workers
- High cost of childcare presents as an employment challenge (particularly women)

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

The guiding research questions for the study are the following:

- What employment support programs and services exist to assist skilled immigrants and refugees achieve better labour market integration?
- What are the demographic shifts and labour market trends?
- How can immigrant sector agencies work better with employers?
- What employer engagement strategies are effective?
- How is skilled immigrant and refugee integration understood and conceptualized by immigrant serving agencies in Alberta?

This qualitative research project conduct interviews (n=25) with key informants who are from different immigrant sector agencies, social services, and community organizations that assist immigrants and refugees in need of settlement and employment services. The research methods allow for the depth and breadth of information necessary to meet the objectives of the study. The interviews were audio-recorded. Semi-structured interview questions focused on the following areas:

- (a) the state of local services supporting skilled immigrant and refugee communities and the roles they play in the integration of immigrants;
- (b) the challenges skilled immigrants and refugees face in integrating in the labour market;
- (c) the strategies used by social service and immigrant settlement agencies to address these barriers;
- (d) advice on promoting employment engagement and how immigrant sector agencies can work better with employers;
- (e) advice on how integration into the labour market by skilled immigrants and refugees is understood and conceptualized by immigrant sector agencies; and
- (f) advice on policy recommendations and promising practices for improved integration of skilled immigrants and refugees into the labour market.

CONCLUSIONS

There is a need for more attention to the level of inclusion particularly for newcomers in employment. Examples include better orientation on culture in workplaces, workplace safety issues, employer sponsored language classes, childcare accessibility and affordability, mentorship programs, bridging programs, and upgrading.

Policies tend to be aligned at the local level with collaborating working relationships between service providers who share information.

Interview participants reported a perceived need for the province to better understand the contextual conditions to better support employees in the labour market.

Pre-employment and skill building programs that support refugee labour market integration need to connect with social and mental health and well-being programs and services.

Employment connections serve to drive many employment and labour market integration initiatives (mentorship, networking, etc.)

Cultural competency training and intercultural capacity training aims to build relationships between diverse stakeholders.

Networking is successful by 'word of mouth' often in the absence of promotional budgets (e.g., marketing, limited social media).

Family reunification issues are perceived to affect employee retention in the long-term.

Increased interaction with others in working toward newcomers' labour market integration is perceived as an organizational benefit.

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