Tune-up for Canada's welcome wagon

Studying the country's immigration services to develop ways to help new arrivals find their footing

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By D'Arcy Jenish

Every year, more than 250,000 people leave distant homelands and immigrate to Canada. For many of them — particularly those who come from the top three countries of origin, the Philippines, India and China — Canada can be a baffling and bewildering place. "Immigrants very often don't get enough information or adequate services to help them settle effectively," says Victoria Esses, a psychologist and the director of the Centre for Research on Migration and Ethnic Relations at Western University in London, Ont. "If we can improve the information and the services available to immigrants, we will go a long way toward helping them settle and integrate."

To take a closer look at settlement and integration issues, Esses and her research partners have founded the Pathways to Prosperity project in partnership with the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and are assembling a 1,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art laboratory. When complete, it will house equipment that will allow them to conduct and record interviews with immigrants and service providers across the country and to analyze their confidential data. It will also include a professional video and image production suite for making high-quality videos that will help them determine how immigrants respond to different types of messaging.

Esses and her team will create videos containing information and messaging similar to those which government agencies and settlement services provide to help immigrants adjust to life in Canada. The videos will differ in only one aspect of their content —how information is worded or conveyed (e.g. through text versus images). By taking these videos into the community and presenting them to groups of immigrants from different cultural backgrounds, they will be able to assess the effectiveness of the videos.

"The equipment is really essential for a project like this," says Esses. "We're not just testing a theory. We're testing very practical processes that will have huge implications in the real world."

Esses has been working on immigration issues for over two decades. She began by exploring the attitudes of Canadians toward newcomers and eventually shifted her focus to

more applied research to determine what could be done to facilitate settlement and integration in Canada.

The success of this is important to the country as a whole, says Esses, and to many Canadian communities in particular. "We need immigrants to meet our labour-market demands and to renew the population in various centres, especially smaller ones that have difficulty attracting people. Retention is very important. You have to provide services that are going to make people feel integrated."

When it comes to immigration and settlement, Esses and her team are recognized as leaders in determining what works and what doesn't, and governments across the country are drawing on their findings to evaluate existing programs and design better ones. The centre recently produced a report for Citizenship and Immigration Canada on the characteristics of a welcoming community, which has been used by the federal government and many provincial immigration agencies.

"Governments spend a lot of money on settlement services, and there are all kinds of different ones," says Esses. "Until now, there hasn't been a mechanism for analyzing these services to see what the essential ingredients of successful ones are."

The centre's new laboratory will go some distance toward answering these questions, which is important for the government, since Canada competes with countries like Australia and New Zealand to attract immigrants. "We need to find out what we can do better," says Esses. "New Zealand and Australia have very detailed websites to assist their immigrants, and research shows that immigrants are quite proficient at using the internet. We will be analyzing the websites of the Canadian provinces and the federal government to find out what they are doing to provide information to immigrants."

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