Better Employment Outcomes for Immigrants in Calgary: Research Summary

ISCC
IMMIGRANT SECTOR COUNCIL OF CALGARY
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INTRODUCTION

The Immigrant Sector Council of Calgary (ISCC) is comprised of leaders representing health, education, government, settlement agencies, multicultural associations, and funding bodies. This breadth of expertise gives ISCC an unparalleled ability to recognize the intersections between policy, systems, and programs and services.

ISCC has a significant history of working collaboratively to achieve better employment outcomes for immigrants in Calgary. For example, in 2005 ISCC joined the Calgary Coalition for Meaningful Employment of Skilled Immigrants Committee to help develop a process for more seamless economic integration and utilization of skilled immigrants into the Alberta workforce. In 2008, ISCC worked with The City of Calgary on the Immigrant Employment Partnership Project to spearhead a number of activities geared towards hiring and retaining immigrants.

Throughout the years, ISCC has facilitated a committee focused on improving employment outcomes for immigrants. In 2014, ISCC received funding from the Government of Alberta to identify areas of need, strengths, and capacity in services for immigrants’ labour market integration in Calgary. Specifically, the purpose of the project was to understand:

1. What services currently exist in Calgary that strive to help immigrants achieve labour market integration?
2. What are the needs for service provision particularly with consideration of the changing immigrant demographics, labour market contexts, and policies in Calgary?
3. What collaborative efforts towards labour market integration can lead to better labour market integration for newcomers?

With these questions in mind, ISCC staff, committee members, and researchers at the University of Calgary, Mount Royal University, and the University of Western Ontario, set out to understand:

- The current state of, and demand for labour market integration programs and services for immigrants in Calgary;
- The practices leading to better outcomes for immigrants;
- Policies impacting immigrants’ labour market integration, employers’ labour needs, and the service-providers working to bridge the gap between immigrants’ employment, employers, and policy.

This summary document includes research highlights and considerations for action, discussion, and further investigation. A separate services inventory that identifies initiatives focused on immigrants’ labour market integration is available as a separate document. Please visit http://www.isccalgary.ca/research or contact ISCC at info@isccalgary.ca for a copy.
OVERVIEW OF STUDY METHODOLOGY

The research utilized a progressive, multi-method approach that included a document analysis, literature review, policy analysis, program inventory, interviews, and consultations with immigrant and other labour market sectors in Calgary. Focus groups were conducted with employers and skilled immigrants. In addition to a broad system level understanding of social service organizations, researchers conducted targeted analyses of labour market integration programs and services for immigrants in Calgary as follows:

- A comprehensive stocktaking of agencies providing labour market programs and services to immigrants (drawing on existing web resources as well as new information) was completed providing a baseline understanding of gaps in services.
- Assessed current policies, labour market trends, and shifting demographics and their impact (both supporting and restraining) on the social services sector and labour market integration of immigrants.
- Assembled and integrated the above content into a comprehensive mapping of influence along with actionable recommendations for key stakeholders.
- Identified strategies and guided priority setting for collaborative action among agencies providing services to immigrants based on the opportunities for influence and strategic engagement with municipal, provincial, and federal governments.
- Made concrete recommendations on how to build on available strengths for system level improvements.

Document Analysis and Literature Review

The research team first conducted in-depth analyses of key documents available from ISCC and other organizations. This focused on documenting and comparing the scope, mandates, and activities of the agencies providing labour market programs and services to immigrants. A literature review of academic peer-reviewed articles and grey literature including government and stakeholder reports was also conducted. These analyses provided a background for in-depth interviews and contributed to the recommendations of this report.

Interviews

The research team conducted interviews with 24 participants that include five sets of key actors:

- Leads and staff of targeted members of ISCC;
- Representatives of social service organizations, and organizations with strong labour market programs and services for immigrants;
- Municipal and provincial government officers responsible for labour market integration; and
- Representatives of employers from different industries and sectors.

Interviews with staff of ISCC members and social service organizations specifically probed the baseline understanding of program theories of change and assessed current policies, labour market trends, the shifting demographics, and their impact on the social services sector and labour market integration of immigrants. Also, potential promising practices were included in this regard. The interviews also discussed key components of organizational mandates, and the nature of their interactions with key constituencies, including municipalities, employers, and educational institutions. In addition, the interviews also probed potential challenges they have faced as well as recommendations and priorities for collaborative action.

Interviews with municipal and provincial officers responsible for labour market integration were focused on perceptions of current policies, labour market trends, and shifting demographics, together with the impact of these on the social services sector and immigrants’ labour market integration.

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1 This study was granted research ethics approval by the University of Calgary’s Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. Prior to participation, prospective respondents were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could terminate the interview and audio-recording at any time. Consent to participate and to be audio-recorded was then obtained prior to commencing the interview by all research participants.
Interviews with representatives of employers from different industries and sectors provided information on employers’ perception of their role in the labour market integration of immigrants, organizational practices of immigrant recruitment, support and retention, and existing and potential collaboration between employers and immigrant-serving agencies.

**Focus groups**

Focus groups were conducted with two sets of stakeholders:

- Human resource managers/directors of companies who employ immigrants
- Immigrants who are skilled workers/professionals

Focus group discussion sessions with employers were conducted around their practices of employment and retention of immigrants. During the immigrant focus group the issues of labour market integration services and supports on pre-arrival and post arrival periods were discussed. The focus groups contributed to overall understanding of accessibility and effectiveness of different immigrant-serving programs.

**Program Inventory**

A program inventory was developed drawing on web resources as well as new information. The inventory is an overview of the agencies providing labour market programs and services to immigrants and gives a baseline understanding of scope and focus of existing labour market integration services available in Calgary. Gaps and capacities of current services were also identified. Members of the ISCC Labour Market Sector Committee reviewed the program inventory, and a research assistant fact checked details by contacting each agency listed to verify the information prior to publication.

**RESEARCH FINDINGS**

**Data Collected from interviews**

**Employment Services**

In Calgary there are many programs and services available to facilitate employment and labour market integration of immigrants. Some examples include:

- Pre-arrival services (information, orientation, online career planning/employment services)
- Pre-employment programs that focus on the development of skills and preparation
- Bridging programs
- Internships and work placements
- Mentoring and coaching programs
- Connection programs with employers (hiring fairs, networking events, matching websites)
- Business communication programs
- Job search training and workshops
- Workplace expectations
- Transferable skills initiatives
- Work experience initiatives
- Integrated work programs and placements
- Immigrant micro loans

Service providers recognize that it is critical to be knowledgeable regarding the array of employment-related services and programs available in Calgary, especially in the case of referrals, but they reported a lack of time and resources to search online for resources. Many agencies specialize in specific program areas, and are unable to individually provide the full continuum of services. It is thus necessary to partner with others.

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2 For a complete copy of the inventory please visit http://www.isccalgary.ca/research or contact ISCC at info@isccalgary.ca.
Interview respondents spoke of the need to strengthen and extend programs that prepare immigrants for the labour market. More funding is needed to place immigrants with employers (e.g., subsidized wages) and there is a need to encourage employers to hire newcomers. Making better connections between employers and immigrant talent in Calgary is also key as is providing good information about how to be successful in the labour market. Many immigrants bring entrepreneurial experience, and there is a need to support entrepreneurship as an alternative (possibly through micro-lending activities).

In general, respondents reinforced the importance of settlement and integration programs and services for immigrants and newcomers to Calgary, especially with respect to employment and labour market integration. Many recent immigrants, and especially families with children, experience difficulties with career development and require advice. This is particularly problematic when recent immigrants must work in survival jobs in order to meet basic needs.

The relationship between language, credential recognition, and employment was highlighted by respondents. There is a need to better share information about the labour market context in Calgary and to address misunderstandings with respect to the regulatory and licensing requirements. Immigration-serving agencies spoke of the importance of pre-arrival services to better inform immigrants about the labour market context before arriving in Calgary. For example, it was suggested that the accreditation process could begin before arrival in Calgary. Pre-arrival information was also identified as necessary for those arriving from other regions across Canada who bring unrealistic expectations of the Alberta labour market.

Emerging Policy, Labour Market Trends, and Demographics

New immigration policies and the shifting immigrant landscape present challenges for immigrant-sector agencies, post-secondary institutions, and social service organizations. Respondents recognized that immigration policy changes are consistently ongoing but were unclear of the potential impacts of the new immigration policies (e.g., Express Entry). Participants reported a lack of clarity on how this might impact the labour market. Employers are unsure how to access talent with Express Entry, and there uncertainty as to how employers will view new hires they have not met compared to skilled immigrants already in Canada. Express Entry will likely result in a need for new and innovative ways to deliver services, for example pre-arrival and online delivery. Will Express Entry shift some of the costs of settlement to employers? Are employers willing to take this on? Regardless, many service providers agreed that even after the introduction of the Express Entry system, dependents and family members will continue to need settlement services and programs.

According to interview respondents, the lack of consultation from government results in misaligned policies with respect to labour market integration. Respondents indicated that provincial policies are better aligned than federal policies, which often do not consider the uniqueness of each province. Overall, the municipal context is not adequately reflected.

This misalignment leads to issues between program and services offered, and the immigrants arriving in Calgary under federal policy. International students and temporary foreign workers (TFWs) are categories of immigration that warrant special concern. The Canadian Experience Class has attracted international students to Calgary resulting in post-secondary institutions requesting assistance to facilitate their integration into the workforce. One possible way to manage this growth in demand is through alliances with service providers.

A few respondents argued that the model used by immigrant-sector agencies is outdated and disempowering for younger immigrants (ages 25-35 years). Those interviewed also expressed concern that, now there are more temporary foreign workers in Calgary, there is increased demand for language classes, supports, and information on permanent residency for this group. Respondents identified that the needs of highly skilled immigrants and other immigrant and refugee groups differ in significant ways, from pre-employment to work placement opportunities. There is also internal or secondary migration from other regions of Canada (particularly Ontario and Quebec) seeking new opportunities and employment. The diversity of newcomers presents service delivery challenges where new arrivals bring high expectations for employment and lack information.
In recent years many of the source countries of immigrants arriving to Calgary have remained the same: the UK, Middle East, Eastern Europe, Philippines, India, China, Nigeria, and Pakistan. The occupational targets needed in Calgary have also remained the same (e.g., engineers, pharmacists, nurses, doctors). Many of the immigrants arriving in Calgary are younger, more educated and skilled, and this tech-savvy group present different needs and transitions for service providers, particularly those with work permits and student visas.

**Employer Engagement**

Employers are currently engaged in the labour market integration of immigrants in a number of ways:

- Guest speakers and keynotes at workshops and events
- Involvement in the selection of participants for employer-sponsored training initiatives
- Mentorship programs
- Work placement initiatives
- Networking events (e.g., breakfast meetings)

Employers also share job vacancies and postings, rely on immigrant-sector agencies to pre-screen potential candidates, and participate in in-person and virtual career fairs. Websites also connect employers with job seekers in Calgary. Respondents identified these activities as useful and effective.

Successful labour market integration programs are tied to outcomes and are sustained and enhanced by meeting the needs of the business community. According to some respondents, the business sector is increasingly recognizing the pool of talent with internationally trained professionals, and employers are interested in tapping into this vast experience and skill sets. However that must be balanced with meeting immediate labour needs. According to interviewees, many employers want workers who are “ready to hit the ground running” with the right mix of skills to fit the workplace. Employers prefer to hire trained employees. Many respondents reported that employers do not feel it is their responsibility to provide training for their employees, and that some small and medium-sized businesses lack capacity for training new employees. However, there are examples of employer involvement in training initiatives in specific sectors and industries.

The context of the labour market often goes beyond the geographic scope of Calgary itself. It was reported that many immigrants are willing to relocate to a small city (e.g., Fort McMurray) for employment, and will later return to corporate offices in Calgary. This finding is significant because it suggests that broader collaborative approaches at a regional or provincial level may be warranted.

One of the challenges is to bring employers together with service providers to open the doors for skilled immigrant professionals. Employers wish to hire the 'best person' from their perspective, and a business case for hiring immigrants needs to be made. There is a need to raise awareness among employers to consider diversity in labour strategies to hire recent immigrants. It was noted that this varies by the size of the employer, with large employers often requiring Canadian experience and medium-sized employers hiring graduates from training and workplace programs. In addition, many job postings require specific skills-sets, and immigrants require assistance identifying transferable skills for the position.

While there is strong evidence of a number of immigrant-sector agencies and social service agencies engaging with employers, there are a number of organizations that are not currently engaged with employers yet expressed an interest in learning how to engage employers. This lack of engagement with employers was explained by limited resources.

In addition to the expectations and needs of employers, discussion also revolved around how immigrants are integrating within the workplace. Many immigrants face challenges in the workplace with acculturation, and there is an ongoing need for intercultural conflict resolution and intercultural training for both employers and immigrants in the workplace. Further, immigrants may not be familiar with Canadian cultural practices in multicultural environments where colleagues of many different cultural and racial profiles are working together. It is important to recognize that not everyone is comfortable with diversity—there is a need to identify best practices and share them. Immigrant-sector agencies can assist employers with diversity and welcoming workforce initiatives.
Linking immigrants to services is an area for further work. It was noted that employers lack time to provide support and knowledge of resources in the community. Immigrant-sector agencies can do more to promote their services and educate employers about the programs available. In addition, immigrant-sector agencies reported that they can assist with ‘soft skills’ (e.g., employability skills, essential skills, interviewing skills, communication skills) by pre-screening candidates.

Interestingly, some training programs are preparing immigrants for employment, yet these agencies are not engaged with employers. It was also identified that there are cultural differences between immigrant-serving agencies and employers. This leads some agencies to report a lack of specialized knowledge to connect immigrants with the labour force and needing more experience relating to employers. On the other hand, some employers felt they were being asked to do social services. While immigrants bring skills and talents, there are sectors of the community that view immigrants as needing special assistance.

Challenges in preparing immigrants to enter the labour market remain. Some immigrants successfully complete programs and remain unemployed. Work placement programs offer the benefit of acquiring Canadian experience, but skilled immigrants are often unpaid, and it is a form of free labour. It is difficult at present to track immigrant retention rates of those who remain employed. Service providers report learning about retention based on client feedback and in-person communication. Employers too encountered a number of barriers to integrating immigrants to the workplace, including recruitment. While employers stated a strong appreciation for the work of agencies in Calgary there was a lack of awareness regarding government provided activities and programs available in Calgary. Interestingly, employers would like to learn what other employers are doing and to increase collaboration, but they stressed that information shared by ‘word of mouth’ may be a limiting factor in mobilizing collaboration. There was also a strong interest expressed for employers to have a voice at the table with immigrant-sector agencies.

Mobilizing Collaborations

Many of the interviewees agreed that there is a great opportunity and potential in Calgary for more effective and stronger collaborations. While initiatives already exist, collaboration and coordination could improve. For example, some respondents spoke of the need for coordination in Calgary with respect to employment and labour market integration. At the same time, collaboration is ‘needs-driven’ and there has to be a clearly defined need to bring organizations together. Immigrant-sector agencies already part of the Immigrant Sector Council of Calgary are collaborating and could become more effective and efficient. An ‘anchor’ group is needed to maintain and mobilize these collaborations—capitalizing on opportunities to mobilize collaborations between service organizations, between service organizations and employers, and between service organizations and mainstream organizations.

Key areas that respondents identified as necessary for successful collaboration:

- Developing pragmatic and realistic partnerships with employers and organizations in Calgary.
- Collaborating with non-traditional (mainstream) partners to enlarge the circle of partners.
  According to social service agencies there is a need for immigrant-sector agencies to find partners who are willing to work together. Employers are very willing to partner if it is relevant. It was explained that collaboration can promote the shared responsibility for accomplishing employment-related outcomes.
• Developing a united voice among members to influence policy and make binding decisions among the members. An area of common work, which may have considerable client impact, is the proposed federal policy changes. For example, it was suggested that immigrant-sector agencies and employers should align themselves to influence immigration policies (‘the big issues’) on selection and ‘qualified candidates’.

• Making employer connections. Specifically, it was recommended that hiring managers are key decision-makers. Given the diverse contexts of employment, immigrant-sector organizations must engage with them in meaningful ways. Respondents agreed it is important to bring employers into ‘our’ perspectives and to develop a framework for collaborating and engaging with employers.

• The need for ‘quality’ collaboration, where alignment is based on reciprocal agreement and linked to funding models. Respondents expressed that mobilizing collaboration can be difficult within the immigrant sector due to funding and funding models. Instead, new funding models that promote collaboration and partnership in the design of programs and initiatives should be prompted. At the same time, collaboration needs to be meaningful and driven by a shared purpose.

An ‘anchor’ group could identify clear goals and objectives, and work to address challenges and foster innovation by learning from failures and best practices. Accountability would be drawn from shared responsibility rather than organizational mandate. Specific recommendations to achieve this include:

• Identifying a local council or provincial association (such as ISCC or AAISA) to raise awareness and mobilize collaboration with multiple partners and service providers (government, educational institutions, sector councils, employers, academia, social services).

• Developing a coordinated and collaborative strategy to raise awareness on intercultural competency and welcoming workplaces.

• Strengthening partnerships between post-secondary institutions and service providers for training-related and educational purposes.

• Meeting with employers on an individual basis to gain feedback on effective strategies in different sectors and canvass their service needs.

• Organizing employer forums to learn from one another and share best practices.

• Working with media (mainstream and ethnic media) to engage in public outreach.

• Fostering engaging dialogue and learning, exchange of ideas, and strategy development to impact policy and program design.

• Focusing on what works for internationally trained professionals and employers (classic win-win).

Innovations and Promising Practices

A number of innovations and promising practices were identified by the respondents as suggestions for consideration:

• Integrated approach to service delivery in Calgary; no program can exist in isolation. It is not possible for standalone programs to meet the complex and diverse needs of clientele. This reality calls for the establishment of a network of programs that, when offered in various combinations, can holistically address the complex needs of each client.

• Government consultation is needed before policies are approved. Many respondents expressed frustration with the lack of government consultation with service providers and employers on federal immigration policies. They suggested government host meetings every six months or annually to discuss labour market information, to provide updates on services and programs, and to support a coordinating role for the sharing and exchange of information. Immigrant-serving agencies and groups are reaching out to employers but it is unclear how municipal and provincial governments are engaging employers.

• Engaging employers at the table; it needs to be orchestrated by a representative group or association of immigrant-sector agencies and service providers.

• There is a need to innovate and to leverage technology as an enabler with multimedia platforms.
• One of the lessons learned is the need to focus on what works rather than create new initiatives. Several good practices were cited, such as expanded work experience programs for immigrants to gain Canadian experience, mentorship, and e-mentoring pre-arrival (due to shifts with Express Entry), as well as other pre-arrival services, and finally strong onboarding of new hires.
• Despite preferences for Canadian work experience, “If there is a need, labour market integration occurs” (e.g., Temporary Foreign Worker Program).
• Consider a Pan-Alberta solution building upon what organizations and structures that already exist.

Data collected from the focus groups with employers

A focus group discussion was held with employers on November 7, 2014. A total of eight middle to senior/executive-level managers and senior human resources advisors were recruited to participate in the focus group. All participants indicated that they were actively involved in their organization’s hiring practices, and with one exception, everyone was directly responsible for hiring new employees at their organization.

Perception of roles/responsibility in the labour market integration of immigrants

For the most part, employers do not see it as their responsibility to help newcomers with housing, enrolling their children in school, and other broader settlement issues. The exception to this sentiment is among employers who hire temporary foreign workers in rural areas that lack settlement services.

Employers are keen to work with the settlement sector to foster labour market integration of newcomers. Employers strongly support the settlement sector and the labour market programs that they offer, and are open to collaborating with settlement agencies to assist newcomers with settlement needs. Employers expressed openness to providing newcomers with business language training which they see as an essential competency. That said, several employers expressed frustration with the résumés and networking skills they see from immigrants who have attended labour market programs in the sector. Employers feel that many of the résumés they see are not appropriate for the Calgary market but they do not have the time to help individuals tailor their résumés.

Hiring and integrating immigrants into the workforce

Employers use a variety of strategies to hire immigrants. Many of them partner with the settlement sector (either formally or informally), and attend career fairs and formal networking events. Many employers feel that the government does not provide enough information to help them connect with immigrants who are looking for jobs. They expressed frustration by what appears to be an oversupply of un- and underemployed immigrants, but did not know how to access those talent pools. They suggested a web-based list of immigrants and their transferable skills. Such a system would allow them to connect directly with immigrants looking for employment.

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3 Six individuals represented organizations in the private sector, while two individuals represented organizations in the public sector. Organizations represented a variety of industries, including agriculture, manufacturing, natural resources, and service/retail. The size of the organizations varied, ranging from 85 employees to 120,000 (globally). With one exception, all organizations employed over 500 employees. Therefore, small to medium sized enterprises were underrepresented in the sample.

Six employers indicated that they recruit and hire both skilled and unskilled immigrants, while two employers indicated that they recruit and hire only skilled immigrants. When asked to estimate the percentage of immigrants in their organizations’ workforces, all participants provided numbers at or above 15%. Two participants indicated that over 50% of their workforces comprised immigrants. For some participants, few jobs at their organization require a provincial certificate/license, while for others the vast majority of jobs are filled by individuals with a provincial certificate/license.

It is important to note that as one focus group participant explained, the employers were a very informed group who are actively involved in the hiring of new immigrants. Thus, they are not representative of employers broadly.
Several participants acknowledged they likely have biases against immigrant job applicants who they perceive as overqualified, in part because they assess job applicants for retention. These employers felt that overqualified immigrants would use a job at their organization as a stepping stone and retention would be an issue. At the same time, employers feel that many immigrants’ English language skills are inadequate. In addition to broader language difficulties, employers emphasized the need for immigrants to learn business language and information about the culture in Canadian workplaces.

Many employers noted that as their organizations became increasingly diverse, there was a need to conduct diversity/cross-cultural training with the majority of their staff. Extensive training across the board (from entry-level new hires to experienced upper-level managers) was needed.

Knowledge of immigrant policies, programs, and services

Generally speaking, employer focus group participants were frustrated with recent/upcoming policy changes and feel that the government does not consider the needs of employers—or even consult with employers—when making major changes to the immigration system. Several participants anticipate that the new Express Entry program will hurt employers who need immigrants to fill lower-skill-level jobs. Employers feel like the government already places too much emphasis on highly educated and skilled immigrants, when in reality Alberta also needs individuals to work in lower-skill occupations. Employers also expressed deep disappointment in the changes to the temporary foreign worker program and indicated that many employers in Alberta need temporary foreign workers and cannot stay in business without them. Relatedly, employers feel that the Canada Job Grant has limited use because it cannot be used for individuals working in the trades. In general, employers feel there is a lack of labour market information available from the government and the available information is outdated and difficult to access.

There were also issues expressed about how immigrant-serving agencies approach employers and are perceived to compete with one another. Several participants feel bombarded with phone calls from different agencies who seem to be running the same programs lending to the appearance that services are duplicated. Employers expressed a desire for the agencies to have a single voice. They also believe that some agencies do not have a good grasp of what employers are looking for and therefore the labour market training programs are not very effective. Employers also expressed frustration with newcomers who repeatedly approach them with emails and phone calls in order to apply for numerous job openings. They are hopeful that the settlement sector can assist newcomers with understanding how to better approach their job search.

With regards to good practices of services providers, employer focus group participants expressed the need for immigrant-serving agencies to hire individuals with recent, relevant job experience to guide their labour market programs. Employers felt that these individuals would be well-suited to help immigrants prepare for their job search. They also emphasized the urgent need for the sector to help immigrants highlight transferable skills rather than focusing on education and credentials. The sector can also help immigrants set realistic expectations for employment prospects.

Collaboration

A number of suggestions were made that would foster more collaboration with government, increase access to immigrant talent, and support newcomers more effectively.

- There was consensus that employers would like more involvement with government policymakers and that possibly more control should be passed along to the province. They attributed recent changes to the TFW program as evidence of poor federal decision making.
- Employers expressed a strong desire for a system that links employers to immigrants looking for jobs. The closest available system is the Canada Job Bank, which several employers did not feel was adequate. Employers would like to see a system in which employers can find and contact un- and underemployed immigrants. They described the desired system as similar to the Mobius client tracking system used by Service Canada and the settlement sector but designed for employers.
• Employers also expressed an interest in connecting with refugees, who they believe are an untapped talent pool for employers. They feel that there is a need to do a better job of connecting employers and refugees but they are not entirely sure how to foster these connections.

• Employers noted that the labour market would benefit from increased collaboration between the government, post-secondary educational institutions, and the professional bodies responsible for provincial certificates/licenses. They believe that the system needs to facilitate immigrants’ ability to receive their provincial licenses. Otherwise, if immigrants continue working in jobs for which they are overqualified, valuable skills are wasted.

Data collected from the focus groups with immigrants

A focus group session was held with eight immigrants on November 15, 2014. The majority of participants immigrated to Canada as skilled workers/professionals. Participants were highly educated (6 had an undergraduate degree, 2 had a graduate degree) and were well integrated in Calgary’s labour market. Seven individuals had full-time jobs and one was self-employed. Half of the participants were working in project management/coordinator roles. Six participants work in the energy sector, one in the financial sector, and one in construction. It is important to note that engineers who work in the energy sector, as project managers were overrepresented in our focus group.

Pre-arrival

Participants expressed a lot of frustration with Canada’s immigration system. Notably, they felt they had been accepted to immigrate to Canada based on their education and work experience but these factors were not recognized by Calgary employers. One individual explained that s/he felt Canada is looking for highly skilled immigrants to fill low-skilled jobs. People also felt angered by the long wait times experienced during the immigration process and indicated that they would have liked to receive some correspondence from Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) during this time as well as help connecting with professional associations.

Two participants had access to a Canadian Immigrant Integration Program (CIIP) in their country of origin. Both felt that the pre-departure orientation they received was excellent and served to prepare them for life in Canada. They indicated that CIIP did a great job of setting realistic expectations about settlement challenges they were likely to experience upon arrival. When the other focus group members heard about CIIP, they indicated it would have been beneficial to access this program in their countries of origin. The majority of participants tried to find settlement information via CIC websites and did not find the available information sufficient. They expressed frustration with the inability to speak to a representative over the phone.

Settlement challenges in Calgary

Several participants expressed difficulty in initially learning about settlement services in Calgary (e.g., up to 7 months before learning about settlement agencies). Participants used diverse settlement programs (e.g., career coaching, networking, ESL classes, engineering upgrading program, and employment communication workshop).

Participants felt extremely frustrated with APEGA (the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Alberta, the professional body that regulates engineering and geoscience in Alberta). Participants found APEGA to be inefficient and full of unnecessary hoops and there was consensus that APEGA has to adjust its practices.

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4 Participants were eight individuals (3 women, 5 men) recruited with the help of ISCC’s Labour Market Integration Committee. Most participants had used settlement services in Calgary. The average age of participants was 36 years, and they had spent an average of 26 months in Alberta. With the exception of one participant, all individuals arrived directly in Calgary upon immigrating to Canada. Six participants were married, and three had one child at home. Participants had diverse ethnicities (50% were White) and countries of birth. Seven participants were Christian (6 individuals identified as Catholic) and one participant was Muslim.
Finding employment in Calgary

One recurring theme in the focus group was the “Catch-22” regarding Canadian experience. Immigrants feel they need Canadian experience in order to find gainful employment in Calgary, yet they need a job in Canada in order to acquire Canadian experience. In the context of this dilemma, participants expressed gratitude to the settlement sector in Calgary. They felt that settlement services they accessed were tremendously helpful during the settlement process. In particular, several participants completed a technical upgrading program available through an immigrant-serving agency. In addition to program components, which they felt were helpful, the three months of work experience was really valued. This initial “foot in the door” helped them to overcome the hurdle of having no Canadian experience. Participants did note programs like these are highly competitive and ideally should be expanded.

With the help of the settlement sector, several participants were able to take their resume and translate many projects and skills into Canadian terms. They felt that this helped them in their job search.

Utilization of skills in present job

The majority of participants felt that their current jobs use about 80% of their skills. For the most part they are satisfied and motivated in their positions. When initially searching for a job, some participants believed employers perceived them as overqualified for entry-level positions but underqualified for middle management positions because they did not have Canadian experience.

Participants also talked about transferable skills. Although some are working in a different sector than pre-migration, there are many transferable skills. The difficulty they encountered was proving this to employers. Participants felt if they only had a foot in the door, they could quickly prove themselves.

Vision for the future

Participants expressed that they have a lot of education and work experience that has resulted in transferable skills. They hope that employers can start to see this and give immigrants an opportunity to prove themselves without Canadian experience. They felt that increased collaboration between employers and the settlement sector could result in more opportunities for immigrants to prove themselves in local companies and gain valuable Canadian experience.

Participants suggested that CIC should provide immigrants with a list of settlement agencies and programs in their intended city of residence. This would allow immigrants to reach out to the settlement sector immediately upon arrival in Canada and could ultimately reduce the amount of time finding suitable employment.

In the future, it would be ideal for the settlement sector to offer more upgrading programs, facilitate internships in local organizations, and increase opportunities find a mentor and to network.

DISCUSSION

Overview of Existing Immigrant Labour Market Integration Programs and Services in Calgary

With the recent changes to Canada’s immigration system, the delivery of settlement and integration programs and services for a growing number of immigrants will continue to be necessary for labour market integration. Pre-arrival services are expected to facilitate faster and more efficient economic and social integration of newcomers to Canada by addressing their needs earlier in the integration continuum (CIC, 2014c). However, principal applicants and accompanying family members (e.g., spouses, youth) will continue to need settlement services in Calgary. The settlement needs of international students are also becoming an increasingly important public policy issue (Belkhodja, 2013).
Services of particular importance to immigrants include language training, settlement services, and educational, credential, and skills recognition (Government of Alberta, 2014). Most regulated occupations and trades require fluency in English and a strong knowledge of all work-related language (CIC, 2014b). Immigrant settlement services are designed to address the needs of newcomers in order to become fully integrated members of society. Employment services seek to provide immigrants with opportunities to contribute to Canada’s economic and social growth by reaching their full employment potential (CCIS, n.d.). Mainstream social service agencies would like to collaborate more with immigrant-sector agencies for greater influence.

In Calgary there are many programs available to facilitate employment and labour market integration. With the broad array of employment-related services and programs available in Calgary, service providers would benefit from knowing about other services and the changes that are sought through the programming.

As Canadian employers are being called upon to play a greater and more direct role in economic immigration, the study found that employers are generally not equipped to assist immigrants with broader settlement issues but are open to collaborating with settlement agencies that can assist newcomers with their settlement needs. A number of immigrant-serving agencies have created strategic partnerships with employers that have allowed immigrants to build social capital and experience in the labour market in Calgary. Employers use many strategies to hire immigrants, and partner with the settlement sector by attending networking events, providing keynotes, and participating in training, mentorship, and work placements. These formal and informal opportunities facilitate connections between immigrants and employers to gain relevant and meaningful employment-related experience.

**Needs for Services**

While there are many employment and settlement services for immigrants in Calgary, there is consensus that more needs to be done to engage employers about the issue of immigrant labour market integration. Employers are hopeful that the immigrant settlement sector can assist newcomers with understanding how to better approach their job search with more collaborative approaches.

The study found that there is a need to build awareness about the agencies and resources that can provide assistance to employers and to skilled immigrants. According to employers, greater awareness about the services available and what programs can be accessed to improve hiring, training, and development would be beneficial.

Many employers expressed the need for the immigrant sector to coordinate their approaches. Employers would also like to learn what other employers are doing to facilitate the labour market integration of immigrants and share information and best practices. They spoke of business language training as an essential competency that is often lacking. Furthermore, employers would like more accessible and current labour market information.

Services to prepare immigrants for the labour market and connect them with meaningful employment are essential. Employers and service providers see value in linking language and job training programs, and providing more bridging programs for immigrants with different levels of English and French. There is also interest in developing more networking opportunities where successful immigrants can share their experience with newcomers. Also, the research shows there is a need to provide temporary foreign workers with government-funded language classes, supports, and information on permanent residency.

Support for employers is also important. Employers would like assistance with diversity and cross-cultural training in the workplace. Immigrant settlement agencies play an important role in establishing links between employers and immigrants. There is a need for further collaboration between immigrant-serving agencies and private companies in job search skills, volunteer opportunities, and networking.
Suggestions and possible actions:

- Develop strategies to educate employers about the benefits of hiring immigrants.
- Employ strategies that better connect immigrant talent with employers, private companies, and the business community in Calgary. Speak to employers who do not hire immigrants in order to gain their perspective on these issues.
- Provide relevant information to immigrants on how to be successful in the labour market. A possible consideration for further work is to provide ongoing professional development for career counsellors to update their information and develop qualifications.
- Contribute to the provision of diversity and intercultural training in workplaces.
- Expand programs that prepare immigrants for the labour market (e.g. work placements, internships, mentorships, networking) and explore untapped opportunities for immigrants such as services on entrepreneurship.
- Coordinated efforts among immigrant sector agencies to promote settlement services and to educate employers about programs available in Calgary. A place to start is to compile a list of services and programs available to employers.
- Create alliances to facilitate the integration of international students into the labour market.
- Explore measures of success among employment-related programs and services using different monitoring and evaluation measures.

Improving Labour Market Integration Using Collaboration to Address Systems Issues

The research findings reveal the importance of defining collaboration and an approach to this work specific to service providers, employers, and immigrants’ experiences. There is a need to create a hub in Calgary to raise awareness and mobilize collaboration with multiple partners and different types of stakeholders for improved labour market integration of immigrants.

Inter-Agency Collaboration

Immigrant-serving agencies share mutual strategic interests. It’s worthwhile defining inter-agency collaboration in order to better understand how immigrant settlement agencies collaborate with each other to create positive and meaningful changes, and how they reach out and work with post-secondary institutions, educators, government, and employers.

System-wide Collaboration

Immigrant-serving agencies and employers share mutual concerns and strategic interests. Defining what is meant by system-wide collaboration and identifying strategies to move forward is important to collaboratively resolve issues challenging immigrants’ labour market integration. Areas of work could include how stakeholders and networks share information, exchange promising practices and innovations, participate in common activities, and engage in other forms of collaboration.

Information and communication technology (ICT) presents new opportunities for innovation in the settlement sector (Qayyum & Burstein, 2014). Immigrant sector agencies and service providers are using social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn), mobile phone functions (e.g. texting and apps), blogs, videoconferencing and webinar tools (e.g. WebEx, Collaborate), Learning Management Systems (e.g. Desire to Learn, Canvas), file sharing programs (e.g. Dropbox, Google Drive), videosharing (e.g. YouTube, Vimeo), and group collaboration (e.g. Google Docs) to deliver employment-related and other services (Qayyum & Burstein, 2014). Respondents indicated an interest in leveraging ICT as an enabler for collaboration with multimedia platforms.

Suggestions and possible actions:

- Hold a learning event or meeting for planning, priority setting, and stakeholder engagement.
- Consider new information and communication technology for partnership development.
- Use social capital among immigrant-serving agencies to promote the development of partnerships with employers and influence the broader community.
- Develop plans for joint activities and interactions.
• Improve awareness of programs and services among employers.
• Hold a workshop for developing strategies for engaging employers.
• Create opportunities for systems level feedback into immigrant settlement agencies.

Important questions to be addressed about collaboration

• How do we connect immigrant-serving agencies with employers?
• Should an individual organization or council be responsible for mobilizing collaboration within and beyond the immigrant-serving sector?
• What forms of collaboration are needed between immigrant settlement agencies and private companies to address job search training, volunteer opportunities, and networking?
• What opportunities exist or could be created for collaboration and mutual assistance?

Policies

Are government policies, service providers, and the labour market in alignment in terms of goals and activities? Where do they diverge? According to the interview and focus group respondents, there is a lack of consultation by government that results in misaligned federal policies with respect to labour market integration. Employers reported frustration with recent policy changes that do not consider the needs of employers when making changes to the immigration system. Recruitment is a challenge especially with lower-skilled occupations. It was suggested that immigrant-sector agencies and employers should align themselves to influence immigration policies. Employers would like more involvement with government policymakers, and believe the federal government needs to give the provinces more control. Employers also expressed an interest in connecting with refugees, who they believe are an untapped talent pool for employers.

The study found collective agreement and understanding of the main issues impacting the immigrant settlement sector and employers. Many respondents indicated that they were unsure of the potential impacts of the new immigration policies (e.g., Express Entry) and reported confusion on how this might impact the labour market.

Employers feel that the government already places too much emphasis on education and skilled immigrants, when in reality Alberta also needs individuals to work in lower-skill occupations. Employers also expressed deep disappointment in the changes to the temporary foreign worker program and indicated that many employers in Alberta need TFWs and cannot stay in business without them. Relatedly, employers feel that the Canada Job Grant will not be useful because it cannot be used for individuals working in the trades.

Suggestions and possible actions:

• Build awareness of the policy environment among the sectors impacted.
• Work together to identify gaps in policy that hinder equitable, fair, and non-discriminatory hiring practices.
• Identify strategies and coordinate strategic objectives to impact policymakers and program design. This is about ensuring objectives are targeted to the right level of government and will have the impact desired at the program implementation level.
  ▪ Present and share information on the local context in Calgary to inform policy development.
• Improve communication between government and the immigrant sector, post-secondary institutions, service providers, and employers about new immigration policies and their potential impacts.
CONCLUSION

Recognizing the need to improve collaboration in Calgary for better employment outcomes for immigrants, ISCC is well-positioned to develop a framework for addressing the labour market integration needs of immigrants and employers locally. This framework should include a focused set of strategic directions that will include a combination of initiatives aimed at transforming systems and relationships with the objective of producing better employment outcomes for immigrants. In doing so, it is necessary to aim to develop broad coalitions that resolve the challenges immigrants face settling in Calgary and share a common language and vision for the future.

Additional discussions are needed to clarify roles, address complex priority issues in a coordinated way, and identify the best ways to monitor and evaluate progress made towards outcomes.


Appendix A: Literature Review Findings: Program, Policy and Collaboration Recommendations

Recommendations to improve the labour market and economic outcomes of newcomers are proposed for different groups of immigrants, industry areas, levels of government, and the whole immigrant-serving sector (Avni, 2012; Bhandari, Horvath, & To, 2006; Derwing, & Krahn, 2008; George, & Chaze, 2014; Krahn, Derwing, Mulder, & Wilkinson, 2000; McCoy, & Masuch, 2007; Nunes, & Arthur, 2013). These recommendations are summarized in three categories: program recommendations, policy recommendations, and recommendations for collaboration between different stakeholders.

Program recommendations

- Prospective immigrants should have all the necessary information about the Canadian labour market and difficulties they might encounter there before they come to Canada – the policy of “full disclosure” (Avni 2012, p. 325).

- The process of foreign credential assessment and recognition should start before a person arrives to Canada (Avni, 2012; Bhandari, Horvath & To, 2006), which is the case for skilled worker principal applicants.

- Orientation sessions and workshops on the job market, community development and integration to Canadian society should be provided (Avni, 2012; Bhandari, Horvath & To, 2006). Sometimes long-term programs are better than one-day workshops (McCoy & Masuch, 2007).

- Specific attention should be paid to different categories of immigrants that have specific needs, for example for immigrants with non-regulated professional backgrounds (McCoy & Masuch, 2007).

- Greater emphasis should be placed on linking language and job training (Krahn, Derwing, Mulder, & Wilkinson, 2000). Bridging programs for immigrants with different level of English and French are important (McCoy, & Masuch, 2007).

- Some incentives for employers should be implemented such as paid apprenticeship (Avni, 2012; McCoy, & Masuch, 2007) or volunteer opportunities for immigrants (Bhandari, Horvath, & To, 2006). Municipalities also should create internship programs (Derwing & Krahn, 2008).

- Mentorship programs help newcomers obtain references required for employment (George & Chaze, 2014).

- More efforts are needed to establish higher-level mentoring or placement opportunities for newcomers instead of placing them in any available – often low-income – position (McCoy & Masuch, 2007).

- Networks where successful immigrants can share their experience with newcomers are needed (Bhandari, Horvath, & To, 2006).

- It is necessary for career counsellors to update their information and have appropriate qualification (Bhandari, Horvath, & To, 2006).
Policy recommendations

- Policies have to ensure that hiring practices are equitable, fair, and non-discriminatory (Avni, 2012; George, & Chaze, 2014; Nunes, & Arthur, 2013). It is suggested that municipalities should work on antiracism campaigns (Derwing, & Krahn, 2008).

- Policies that address credential recognition should be implemented. Derwing and Krahn (2008) stated that municipalities “should lobby the province whose responsibility it is to work with professional bodies, unions, postsecondary institutions, and employers to remove credential recognition barriers for immigrants” (p. 199). To some extent, these are already in place.

Recommendations regarding collaboration between different stakeholders

- Collaboration between immigrant serving agencies and private companies in job search training, volunteer opportunities and networking is vital for successful labour market integration of immigrants (Bhandari, Horvath, & To, 2006; Reitz, 2001).

- Collaboration between the immigrant serving sector, government, professional organizations and private companies is needed (Bhandari, Horvath, & To, 2006). This collaboration should be led by government (Krahn, Derwing, Mulder, & Wilkinson, 2000) or municipalities (Derwing and Krahn, 2008).

- “More research is needed to identify successful hiring, mentoring, and promotional practices that enable employers and immigrants to make use of skilled immigrants’ transferable skills in business services and managerial occupations” (McCoy, & Masuch, 2007, p. 203). Specific attention should be given to gender issues (McCoy, & Masuch, 2007).
Appendix B - Questions for Discussion and/or Further Investigation

Q: How do we define meaningful employment for immigrants? Is it finding employment quickly upon arrival or working in a job commensurate with transferable skills and previous work experience?

Q: What is a welcoming workplace? How can employers create welcoming workplaces? (e.g., by offering diversity training or by collaborating with the settlement sector).

Q: How do immigrants qualify success? Does it mean finding employment? Does it mean finding employment in one’s field or a related field? Does it mean matching one’s skills with the job? Finding work that is satisfying? Is it about knowing what one can do next to reach one’s goals?

Q: How can immigrants’ perspectives inform the changes that are required? There is a need to be more responsive to direct feedback and the changing context.

Q: How do we define collaboration? What forms of collaboration are needed between immigrant settlement agencies and employers to address job search training, volunteer opportunities, and networking?

Q: What opportunities exist or could be created for collaboration and mutual assistance?

Q: How might community consultations in other sectors inform immigrant-serving agencies?

Q: How can collaborations be mobilized to engage in a proactive fashion to better address future challenges? There is a need to consider how programs and services can be tailored to an evolving workplace.

Q: Should an individual organization or council be responsible for mobilizing collaboration within and beyond the immigrant serving sector?

Q: What are the priorities for immigrant settlement agencies and where are the greatest areas of need for immigrants?

Q: How can the immigrant-serving sector best support and contribute in resolving the concerns faced by employers?

Q: Who do we include in collaborative action? How broad is our reach? There is a need to consider the catchment area of service providers outside of Calgary and across Canada (given secondary migration).
Solving issues facing immigrants and refugees – together.