

# • C A N A D I A N • DIVERSITY

 A PUBLICATION OF THE METROPOLIS INSTITUTE



## Newcomer Pathways to Employment





This special edition of *Canadian Diversity* is published in partnership with the Diversity Institute at Toronto Metropolitan University's Ted Rogers School of Management. The Diversity Institute is the research lead for the Future Skills Centre. The Future Skills Centre – Centre des Compétences Futures is funded by the Government of Canada.



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## LETTERS

Comments on this edition of *Canadian Diversity*?

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# FOREWORD

**PEDRO BARATA**, is Executive Director of the Future Skills Centre, a forward-thinking hub dedicated to researching, testing, evaluating and building innovative skills solutions to help job seekers and employers in Canada navigate labour market changes. Pedro's work and extensive volunteer activities in the non-profit sector span two decades, focused on impact strategies, public policy, community building and communications. His career path has traveled through United Way Greater Toronto, the Atkinson Foundation, Family Service Toronto, Social Planning Toronto and the City of Toronto. Pedro holds a Bachelor of Arts from York University and a Masters of Social Work from the University of Toronto.

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In 2022, the Diversity Institute at Toronto Metropolitan University's Ted Rogers School of Management and research lead by the Future Skills Centre, partnered with *Canadian Diversity* in the writing of a special issue focusing on key factors influencing Canada's excellent record supporting newcomers from around the globe. In it, contributors discuss important debates around language acquisition and the ways trauma impacts learning and skills development. It focuses on employer-centered support strategies and proposes entrepreneurship as a pathway for integration while considering the lessons learned by Canadian nationals through the private sponsorship of refugees.

The current issue continues this partnership with the Diversity Institute in a move to further develop our understanding of the experiences of newcomers in Canada. In it, we outline the important role immigration plays in economic growth and in addressing skills and labour shortages. At the same time, we examine Canada's role in developing innovative approaches to address global humanitarian crises, including the private sponsorship of refugees and its impacts on both newcomers as well as sponsors. Next, we consider some of the barriers that newcomers face, including the assessment of international credentials in critical healthcare professions. We also consider the ways in which competency

assessments can help address the mismatch between skills and employment but also the questions of how we define and assess competencies and ways we can do it better while acknowledging the challenges of bias. We also consider the ways in which training and wrap-around supports must consider newcomer needs and trauma-informed approaches. We close this edition of *Canadian Diversity* with a pair of articles that reflect on the experience of Syrian refugees. These pieces paint a picture of resilience and determination and speak of success as it is understood alongside trauma and loss.

As a series, the two volumes of *Canadian Diversity* provide an entry point into some of the Diversity Institute's work in support of the Future Skills Centre. They exemplify our commitment to research, exploring innovative, evidence-based solutions and connecting ideas to strengthen our inclusive skills and employment ecosystem.

Once again, the research shows that while there are opportunities to provide better support for the development of skills or newcomers, we need always to consider the ways to address bias and barriers in their pathways to employment. Newcomers are key to Canada's future prosperity, and we need to do better.

# IMMIGRATION AS AN ENGINE FOR GROWTH AND INNOVATION

**SENATOR RATNA OMIDVAR** is an internationally recognized voice on migration, diversity and inclusion. In 2016, Ms. Omidvar was appointed to the Senate of Canada as an independent Senator representing Ontario. Senator Omidvar is the Chair of the Senate's Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology and was the Deputy Chair of the Senate's Special Committee on the Charitable Sector. Previously at Toronto Metropolitan University, Senator Omidvar was a Distinguished Visiting Professor and founded the Global Diversity Exchange. Senator Omidvar was appointed to the Order of Ontario in 2005 and became a Member of the Order of Canada in 2011.

**WENDY CUKIER** is a professor of Entrepreneurship and Strategy at the Ted Rogers School of Management, Founder and Academic Director of the Diversity Institute at Toronto Metropolitan University, Academic Director of the Women's Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (WEKH) and Research Lead of the Future Skills Centre. She co-authored the bestseller "Innovation Nation: Canadian Leadership From Java to Jurassic Park"; and is a leader in disruptive technologies and innovation. She is the former vice-president of Research and Innovation at Toronto Metropolitan University and has authored more than 200 articles on diversity, inclusion and innovation. She holds a PhD in Information Systems, an MBA, an MA, and honorary doctorates from Laval and Concordia. She received Canada's Meritorious Service Cross, one of Canada's highest civilian honours.

Canada has long enjoyed a reputation of being a welcoming and tolerant country for immigrants. With almost one in four Canadians born outside of Canada, it leads the G7 countries in terms of percentage of the population who are immigrants and permanent residents. In some of Canada's largest cities, this percentage is much higher: in 2021, almost half (46.6 percent) of the population living in Toronto were immigrants as well as 41.8% in Vancouver. The majority of the population in these two cities is born outside the country.<sup>1</sup> Across Canada, record high numbers of immigrants are leading to a growing and dynamic constellation of communities and identities. While Canadians benefit from our country's multicultural

verve and the cachet of a favorable international reputation, immigration is also an essential solution to a looming labour crisis that stands to seriously impact the economy.

This labour shortage is no surprise; the demographic shifts behind it have been evident for more than 20 years. Current evidence of the mismatch between supply and demand abounds. Recent Statistics Canada data suggests that 36 percent of Canadian businesses are reporting labour shortages and that 61 percent of those reporting recruitment/retention challenges state that obstacles are worse than they were 12 months ago.<sup>2</sup> According to one report from RBC, 25 percent

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1 Statistics Canada, "Immigrants Make Up the Largest Share of the Population in Over 150 Years and Continue to Shape Who We are as Canadians," *The Daily*, October 26, 2022, [www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026a-eng.htm](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026a-eng.htm)

2 Statistics Canada, "Business or Organization Obstacles Over the Next Three Months, Fourth Quarter of 2022," released November 25, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.25318/3310060301-eng>

of Canada's four million tradespeople will need to upgrade their skills within five years amid significant digital disruption.<sup>3</sup> The acute labour and skills shortages present significant challenges across sectors; for example, gaps in labour supply and demand persist even in high-demand STEM occupations. However, in Canada, over half of immigrants with STEM degrees work in non-STEM occupations. Further, among those who did not find a STEM job, only 20 percent found a job requiring a university degree (compared to 41 percent of STEM-educated, Canadian-born individuals who found jobs in a STEM-related field). Only 20 percent of those who do not work in STEM-related occupations work in occupations requiring a degree.<sup>4</sup> Worse, in Canada, even for STEM-educated immigrants working in STEM-related occupations, this group earned 17 percent less than their Canadian-born counterparts.<sup>5</sup>

At the crux of the issue are the many labour market barriers newcomers to Canada face. Among them, the devaluation of their international experience and credentials (Bauder, 2003),<sup>6</sup> and unfamiliarity with official languages.<sup>7</sup> The complexity of the Canadian immigration process also creates challenges, including the cost and length of the process, the complexity of existing pathways, and the need for better pathways to permanent residence and employment. Some employers recognize that newcomers are more likely to have the growth mindset, adaptability, resilience, and skills that the World Economic Forum claims are among those skills most in demand.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, newcomers to Canada tend to be better educated and punch well above their weight when it comes to innovation and entrepreneurship. Furthermore, according to the Business Development Bank of Canada, immigrants

are more than twice as likely as their Canadian-born peers to engage in entrepreneurial activity.<sup>9</sup> Statistics Canada data indicate that immigrant-owned businesses are also more likely to implement innovative business practices.<sup>10</sup>

Yet in spite of decades of research and hand-wringing, immigrants to Canada continue to be more likely to be underemployed, underpaid and in precarious survival jobs that are not commensurate with their experience. In spite of human rights obligations, many employers still code racism in the shrouds of "lack of Canadian experience" and screen out applicants with "foreign sounding last names".<sup>11</sup>

Others, while well-intentioned, lack the knowledge and skills to attract, develop and retain newcomers. Many businesses are aware and have been stressing the importance of integrating immigrant populations, but it is challenging for those businesses, especially Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), to keep up. Capacity challenges are a key factor for this type of enterprise; it is very difficult for SMEs to engage with the large number of settlement agencies in their search for talent. Another challenge for employers is the concentration of settlement agencies in urban areas, making it difficult to attract workers to rural communities. In the context of a global war for talent, with the US once again an attractive destination, many newcomers are voting with their feet: a recent national survey found 30 percent of 18-34-year-old new Canadians say they do not intend to stay in Canada.<sup>12</sup>

With the unemployment to job vacancy rate reaching historical lows, we desperately need workers across occupations ranging from highly skilled engineers, tradespeople, as well

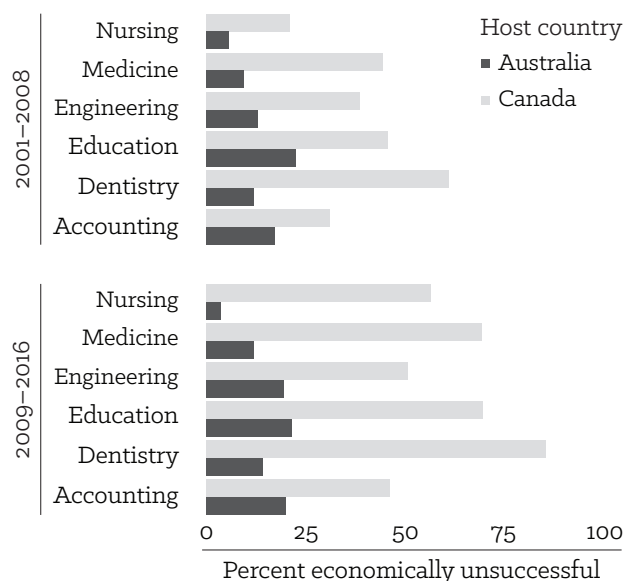
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- 3 Naomi Powell and Ben Richardson, *Powering Up: Preparing Canada's Skilled Trades for a Post-pandemic Economy* (Toronto: Royal Bank of Canada (RBC), 2021), <https://thoughtleadership.rbc.com/powering-up-preparing-canadas-skilled-trades-for-a-post-pandemic-economy>
  - 4 Garnett Picot and Feng Hou, *Skill Utilization and Earnings of STEM-Educated Immigrants in Canada: Differences by Degree Level and Field of Study* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, December 2019), [www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2019023-eng.htm](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2019023-eng.htm)
  - 5 Garnett Picot and Feng Hou, *A Canada-US Comparison of the Economic Outcomes of STEM Immigrants* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, September 2020), [www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2020016-eng.htm](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2020016-eng.htm)
  - 6 Wendy Cukier et al., *Immigrant Entrepreneurship: Barriers and Facilitators to Growth* (Toronto: Diversity Institute, 2017), [www.torontomu.ca/diversity/reports/immigrant\\_entrepreneurship](http://www.torontomu.ca/diversity/reports/immigrant_entrepreneurship)
  - 7 World Economic Forum, *The Future of Jobs Report* (Cologny: World Economic Forum, October 2020), [www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_Future\\_of\\_Jobs\\_2020.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_2020.pdf)
  - 8 Isabelle Bouchard and Pierre-Olivier Bédard-Maltais, *A Nation of Entrepreneurs: The Changing Face of Canadian Entrepreneurship* (Barrie: Business Development Bank of Canada, October 2019), [www.bdc.ca/en/documents/analysis\\_research/bdc-etude-sbw-nation-entrepreneurs.pdf?utm\\_campaign=Changing-faces-Study-2019--EN](http://www.bdc.ca/en/documents/analysis_research/bdc-etude-sbw-nation-entrepreneurs.pdf?utm_campaign=Changing-faces-Study-2019--EN)
  - 9 Yuri Ostrovsky and Garnett Picot, *Innovation in Immigrant-owned Firms* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, June 2020), [www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2020009-eng.htm](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2020009-eng.htm)
  - 10 Rupaleem Bhuyan et al., "Branding 'Canadian Experience' in Immigration Policy: Nation Building in a Neoliberal Era," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 18 (2017): 47-62, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-015-0467-4>
  - 11 Sylvie Albert et al., "Building a Self-Directed Process for the Development of Internationally Trained Professional Profiles in Canada," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 14 (2013): 671-688, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-012-0256-2>; Institute for Canadian Citizenship, "Immigrants to Canada Facing Crisis of Confidence," Press release, March 23, 2022, <http://inclusion.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Immigrants-to-Canada-Facing-Crisis-of-Confidence-media-release.pdf>
  - 12 Statistics Canada, *Labour Shortage Trends in Canada* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2022), [www.statcan.gc.ca/en/subjects-start/labour/labour-shortage-trends-canada](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/subjects-start/labour/labour-shortage-trends-canada)

as manual labourers.<sup>13</sup> Shortages of healthcare workers have also reached crisis proportions. Meanwhile, a recent report by Statistics Canada indicates that low-skilled Temporary Foreign Workers (TFW) are more likely to become permanent residents than highly skilled TFWs, challenging our assumptions about the value of skills. More recently, COVID created massive backlogs, which Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) is promising to address with its new digital strategy.<sup>14</sup>

These employment outcomes, and the impact on the socio-economic position of newcomers, are concerning for Canada, especially when compared with other countries. A recent study by Harrap et al. comparing Canada and Australia throws the critical gaps in Canada's system into high relief. While both Australia and Canada depend on immigrants (and foreign students) for economic growth, and both have points systems that attempt to align skills with employment, the similarities end there.<sup>15</sup> More than 75 percent of immigrants to Australia earn 90 percent of the sector's average wages. In Canada it is only 50 percent. In other words, immigrants in Australia are significantly more likely to be successful from an economic standpoint. In Canada, immigrants who arrived between 2001-2008 were still lagging significantly behind the median income in their fields by 2016; more recent arrivals were faring even worse. Indeed, in the regulated professions for virtually every source country, Canadian immigrants have poorer employment outcomes (see Figure 1).

Australia has never enjoyed Canada's reputation for tolerance and inclusion and yet Australia has leapfrogged Canada in terms of policy innovation. Australians have been innovative in using research to improve selection methods and in working closely with employers. Australia has also continuously worked to ease the recognition of international credentials and provides occupation-specific bridging courses combined with industry internships. In addition, Australia has introduced an expedited-entry system for highly skilled immigrants and, in cooperation with key stakeholders, regularly updates its list of skilled occupations and the skills required as well as its methods of skills assessments.<sup>16</sup>

FIGURE 1. PERCENT OF SKILLED MIGRANTS EARNING BELOW 50 PERCENT OF THEIR FIELD'S MEDIAN INCOME BY FIELD OF QUALIFICATION AND PERIOD OF ARRIVAL



Source: Harrap et al., "Australia's Superior Skilled Migration Outcomes Compared with Canada's," 99.

Certainly, Canada has also invested heavily in official languages programs, in occupational training and wrap-around supports, and massively in settlement agencies. However, the payoff for these investments is uneven. For example, the Auditor General of Ontario has shown gaps in language training outcomes: less than half of all learners are showing progress in learning English or French.<sup>17</sup> There is also a relatively slow uptake of innovative approaches – using technology, adapting learning and employer-centered approaches.

Research has also shown that fragmentation of funding, lack of connections to employers and lack of accountability has led to what can only be described as predatory practices in training organizations which are preparing people for imaginary jobs.<sup>18</sup> Since many newcomers come as TFWs or international students, they are often excluded from the bridging programs

13 Yasmine Hassan, "Health-care Workers Call for Government Help as Burnout Worsens and Staff Shortages Increase," *CBC News*, June 18, 2022, [www.cbc.ca/news/politics/healthcare-workers-burnout-1.6492889](https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/healthcare-workers-burnout-1.6492889)

14 Victoria Esses et al., "Supporting Canada's COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery through Robust Immigration Policy and Programs," *FACETS* 6 (2023): 686-759, <https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2021-0014>; Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), 2022-23 *Departmental Plan* (Ottawa: IRCC, 2022), [www.canada.ca/content/dam/ircc/documents/pdf/english/pub/dp-pm-2022-2023-eng.pdf](https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/ircc/documents/pdf/english/pub/dp-pm-2022-2023-eng.pdf)

15 Benjamin Harrap et al., "Australia's Superior Skilled Migration Outcomes Compared with Canada's," *International Migration* 60, no. 5 (2022): 91-107, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/imig.12940>

16 Benjamin Harrap et al., "Australia's Superior Skilled Migration Outcomes Compared with Canada's," *International Migration* 60, no. 5 (2022): 91-107, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/imig.12940>

17 Office of the Auditor General, *Settlement and Integration Services for Newcomers* (Ottawa: Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2017), chap. 3, section 3.13, [www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/arreports/en17/v1\\_313en17.pdf](https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/arreports/en17/v1_313en17.pdf)

18 Eddy Ng and Suzzane Gagnon, *Employment Gaps and Underemployment for Racialized Groups and Immigrants in Canada: Current Findings and Future Directions* (Toronto: Public Policy Forum, 2020), <https://fsc-ccf.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/EmploymentGaps-Immigrants-PPF-JAN2020-EN.pdf>



and the work-integrated learning opportunities most likely to produce good employment. This is particularly true in health care, where 47 percent of immigrants who received their health care education in other countries are underutilized, with the actual underutilization rate likely higher, because immigrants in health occupations often work far below the skill levels for which they have been trained.<sup>19</sup> In the private sector, where most employment is with SMEs, there are fewer supports for employers in hiring immigrants and less support for immigrant entrepreneurial ventures than the evidence would suggest is needed. Most settlement agencies regard entrepreneurship or self-employment as a failure in settlement even though research shows it is often a pathway that newcomers would prefer.<sup>20</sup> While increasingly wrap around supports – particularly career supports – are recognized as valuable, these services are also hard to navigate and access.

## HOW TO FIX IT: RECOMMENDATIONS

### IMPLEMENT A SYSTEMS APPROACH

There is a need for integration and cross-sector collaboration. Currently, different levels of government and stakeholders work in silos and miss opportunities to share and scale best practices. The current fragmented structure will continue to further restrict the capacity of businesses, like SMEs, to increase inclusivity and the diversity of their workplaces by hiring immigrants and leveraging their skills. Innovative and inclusive solutions need to build on collaboration among different stakeholders, including employers, civil society, postsecondary education institutions and government.

### URGENTLY MODERNIZE POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Harness technology and influence to clear the backlog in a timely fashion. Involve employers in defining skills and occupations in demand and streamline processes for them. Provide pre-arrival assessments and supports to manage expectations and enable newcomers to hit the ground running. As Bergen and Hyder have noted, enhancing the Global Talent Stream

would enable employers to have efficient access to the skills they need to grow their business and reduce the red tape they face and complexities in the system.<sup>21</sup> Canada needs to immediately expand access to this program by broadening the list of eligible occupations such as computer networking technicians, software engineers and mathematicians and continuing to update the list over time. Skilled trades are not adequately prioritized, nor are new emerging and in demand technology roles. Address the outdated aspects of policy like dual intent, which require international students to promise to return to their home country – nonsensical for applicants from countries like Afghanistan. Make it easier for International Students and TFW to access support and become permanent residents.

### FOCUS ON SUPPORTING EMPLOYERS, ESPECIALLY SMES, WITH BEST PRACTICES TO SOURCE, HIRE AND DEVELOP NEWCOMERS AND IN TURN EXPORT MORE FROM EMPLOYERS

It is important to emphasize that almost 90 percent of private sector employment in Canada comes from SMEs.<sup>22</sup> Employers can do better, and many want to do better, but it is also important to recognize the different realities of different businesses. SMEs need particular supports and tools to get around their capacity challenges and limited resources. Potential solutions to explore could involve collaborating with diverse stakeholders, including postsecondary education institutions and settlement agencies, focusing on system-level change. What is needed is a supply management system to assess talent and skill, using technology and databases, to allow SMEs a line of sight to the talent in the system. In general, economies of scale are needed to help support this sector, and some efforts are underway to create a critical mass of SMEs. Additionally, intentional efforts are needed to address systemic discrimination and promote the agency of employers in order to leverage their critical role.

### TACKLE FOREIGN CREDENTIAL RECOGNITION ONCE AND FOR ALL

More than 40 percent of internationally educated male engineers are underemployed.<sup>23</sup> Settlement agencies are retraining doctors as personal support workers. In both cases, qualified applicants who navigated the process and passed

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- 19 Feng Hou and Christoph Schimmele, *Adults with a Health Education but Not Working in Health Occupations* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, April 2020), [www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00004-eng.htm](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00004-eng.htm); Naomi Alboim et al., *Globally Trained Local Talent: Opening Pathways for Internationally Educated Professionals to Strengthen Ontario's Health Care System* (Toronto: Canada Excellence Research Chairs (CERC), March 2022), [www.torontomu.ca/cerc-migration/Policy/CERCMigration\\_PolicyBrief07\\_MAR\\_2022.pdf](http://www.torontomu.ca/cerc-migration/Policy/CERCMigration_PolicyBrief07_MAR_2022.pdf)
  - 20 Wendy Cukier et al., *Immigrant Entrepreneurship: Barriers and Facilitators to Growth* (Toronto: Diversity Institute, 2017), [www.torontomu.ca/diversity/reports/immigrant\\_entrepreneurship](http://www.torontomu.ca/diversity/reports/immigrant_entrepreneurship)
  - 21 Benjamin Bergen and Goldy Hyder, "Canada Can Do More to Attract the World's Brightest Science and Tech Minds," *Toronto Star*, March 28, 2022, [www.thestar.com/business/opinion/2022/03/28/canada-can-do-more-to-attract-the-worlds-brightest-science-and-tech-minds.html](http://www.thestar.com/business/opinion/2022/03/28/canada-can-do-more-to-attract-the-worlds-brightest-science-and-tech-minds.html)
  - 22 Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, "Key Small Business Statistics," last modified November 29, 2022, <https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/sme-research-statistics/en/key-small-business-statistics/key-small-business-statistics-2022#s2.2>
  - 23 Ontario Society of Professional Engineers (OSPE), *Diversity and Inclusion in the Engineering Profession: Fact Sheet* (Toronto: OSPE, November 2020), [https://ospe.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/DiversityandInclusion\\_FactSheet\\_Nov2020.pdf](https://ospe.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/DiversityandInclusion_FactSheet_Nov2020.pdf)

their examinations are denied access to the internships and experience they need for professional practice. These kinds of obstacles need to be addressed. Professional accreditation agencies also use archaic methods – for example assessing internationally educated nurses' education on an individual basis (e.g. Ontario) rather than focusing on articulation agreements with institutions and equivalency assessments. In Ontario, internationally trained nurses have to pass exams as well, so the barriers to credit transfers are largely unnecessary and waste valuable time. This situation has given rise to situations where it is faster for some immigrant physicians to get certified through the US and then apply for reciprocity in Canada than to wait years for residencies here. These needless delays need to be tackled. There is no evidence that countries with higher proportions of internationally educated doctors have poorer outcomes.

#### **BUILD HUMAN CAPITAL - TRAINING AND SUPPORT PROGRAMS THAT WORK**

Invest in innovative programs that produce results sharing, replicating, and scaling success. Harness innovative practices and technologies. Build capacity, but also accountability frameworks so investments are producing returns. Provide wraparound supports, recognizing that these investments pay off. Learn and incorporate strategies from the successes of refugee private sponsorship. Develop and adopt existing innovative models to help newcomers build social capital, and find mentors and sponsors with the knowledge and connections to help them navigate systems.

#### **RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF ENTREPRENEURS (BEYOND THE ENTREPRENEURIAL CLASS) AND PROVIDE SUPPORTS FOR NEWCOMER ENTREPRENEURS**

Tailor existing support programs or create new ones to address newcomers' unique financial and technical needs. Immigrants continue to experience barriers when it comes to starting businesses, raising capital and navigating government rules and programs. What's more, organizations that help entrepreneurs are not always equipped to handle needs that are specific to immigrants.

## **CONCLUSION**

While Canada is among the most attractive destinations for foreign talent, its reputation has suffered in recent years. In a global race for workers, Canada cannot afford complacency.

We must continuously strive to create and sustain the conditions that can attract and retain top talent. It also means ensuring that our immigration system is as client-focused as possible by simplifying administrative requirements and reducing processing times. Most of all it means building awareness of the economic imperative and urgency of attracting and retaining talent from around the world and challenging, at every opportunity, ignorance, xenophobia and hate. Immigrants can help companies grow, creating more jobs for local workers and benefitting the Canadian economy for everyone. Canada is a land of opportunity and has one of the highest rates of social mobility in the world.<sup>24</sup> Hundreds of thousands of immigrants choose to make this country their new home every year. But barriers to unlocking the full potential of this enterprising population remain. Recently, however, we are witnessing a softening of support for immigration. Recent moves by the Canadian government to extend a work-permit program initiated in July 2023 to attract 10000 US-based, non-citizen tech workers have been received with mixed emotions. On the one hand, the program that seeks to lure elite visa holders with permanent residency in Canada has been criticized for taking advantage of the widely understood precarity that characterizes immigrants worldwide. On the other hand, the initiative has been applauded with requests for its extension by the domestic tech industry as an innovative measure to address critical gaps in the Canadian labour force.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, skepticism from across the political spectrum was raised regarding recent proposals made by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to increase immigration from 400 000 to 500 000 permanent residents by 2025. In this context, criticism around immigration can be understood as being more directly connected to the current housing shortage and to recent difficulties associated with resettlement. For example, the difficult, costly and time-consuming processes required in the transfer of credentials of recently landed skilled immigrants (see the related chapter in this volume for a detailed look into the case of Internationally Educated Nurses), or, the Toronto Shelter Crisis of August 2023, when asylum seekers and refugees overwhelmed local intake services and were forced to camp in the streets, providing evidence that questions our country's readiness to welcome newcomers in a just and responsible way.<sup>26</sup> We must take care so that Immigration avoids becoming a scapegoat for long standing neglect by all levels of government in dealing with building adequate housing on the one hand and the shortage of skilled professionals on the other.

Immigration is a solution, not the problem. It therefore

24 World Economic Forum, *Global Social Mobility Index 2020: Why Economies Benefit from Fixing Inequality* (Cologny: World Economic Forum, January 2020), [www.weforum.org/reports/global-social-mobility-index-2020-why-economies-benefit-from-fixing-inequality](http://www.weforum.org/reports/global-social-mobility-index-2020-why-economies-benefit-from-fixing-inequality)

25 David Olive, "How Canada Poached 10 000 Tech Workers from the US—In just 48 hours," *Toronto Star*, August 15, 2023, [www.thestar.com/business/how-canada-poached-10-000-tech-workers-from-the-u-s-in-just-48-hours/article\\_c159c7cc-6163-5414-8453-0db70899df90.html](http://www.thestar.com/business/how-canada-poached-10-000-tech-workers-from-the-u-s-in-just-48-hours/article_c159c7cc-6163-5414-8453-0db70899df90.html)

26 Claire Porte Robbins, "Is Canada Really So Immigrant Friendly?," *Foreign Policy*, August 28, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/28/canada-immigration-trudeau-policy-multiculturalism-backlash>

becomes imperative to accelerate the rate and pace of integration through sensible proposals that ensure the continued prosperity of Canadians. By working together to remove these obstacles, we can position Canada for a strong economic recovery by unleashing immigrants' extraordinary energy,

skills, and ideas. Canada's commitment to welcoming newcomers to its shores has long provided the country with an advantage but we cannot be complacent. We need a renewed commitment and urgent action.

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# THE HUMANITARIAN AND ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS FOR CANADIAN SUPPORT OF IMMIGRATION

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Over 100 million people worldwide are currently displaced due to conflict or persecution, according to the United Nations' Refugee Agency – a number which has grown significantly in recent years.<sup>1</sup> With ongoing wars and escalating climate change, more and more people can be expected to seek refuge. In this context, it is important for countries such as Canada to remain open to welcoming refugees. Fortunately, there is evidence that, among Canadians themselves at least, that openness is on the rise.

Canadians have been recognized as generally having a positive attitude towards immigration. International studies find attitudes more welcoming in Canada than in most other countries. In 2020, for instance, Gallup reported that

Canada scored the highest out of 145 countries on its Migrant Acceptance Index.<sup>2</sup> Canadians have also become more open to immigration over the past few years, despite the pressures and uncertainties unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the same week that Statistics Canada reported that immigrants now form a greater share of the country's population than ever before (23 percent), the Environics Institute reported that more Canadians than ever before disagree with the proposition that the country is accepting too many immigrants.<sup>3</sup>

This openness towards immigration is explained in part by Canada's ability to select highly skilled immigrants with the potential to contribute to the country's economic growth and prosperity. Since the early 2000s, large majorities of

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1 Homepage, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), accessed August 23, 2023, [www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org); "Refugee Data Finder," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), accessed August 23, 2023, [www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics](http://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics)

2 Neli Espipova et al., "Canada is No. 1 for Migrants, US in Sixth Place," Gallup, September 23, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/320669/canada-migrants-sixth-place.aspx>

3 Statistics Canada, "Immigrants Make Up the Largest Share of the Population in Over 150 years and Continue to Shape Who We Are as Canadians," *The Daily*, October 26, 2022, [www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026a-eng.htm](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026a-eng.htm); "Homepage," Environics Institute, accessed August 23, 2023, [www.environicsinstitute.org/home](http://www.environicsinstitute.org/home); Keith Neuman, Canadian Public Opinion about Immigration and Refugees – Fall 2022 (Toronto: Environics Institute, 2022), [www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/canadian-public-opinion-about-immigration-and-refugees---fall-2022](http://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/canadian-public-opinion-about-immigration-and-refugees---fall-2022)

Canadians have agreed that immigration has an overall positive impact on the economy of Canada (in 2022, the proportion agreeing reached 85 percent).<sup>4</sup> In 2020, in the wake of new restrictions on immigration adopted in the United States, seven in ten Canadians said the country should try to encourage skilled immigrants who are denied entry into the United States to choose to come to Canada instead.<sup>5</sup>

Support for immigration in Canada, however, is not solely driven by considerations of economic gain. Many Canadians who are supportive of immigration have other motivations. In the case of those who think immigration makes Canada a better place, for instance, the most common justification is that immigrants contribute to the country's diversity or multicultural character. About one in two pro-immigration Canadians explain their support in these terms, compared to one in three who give a reason related to immigrants' contribution to the country's economy.<sup>6</sup> No less importantly, a growing proportion of Canadians are supportive of immigration for humanitarian reasons in addition to economic ones. In 2022, three in four agreed that Canada should accept more immigrants from parts of the world that are experiencing major conflicts.<sup>7</sup> This proportion in agreement was the highest since the question was first asked in 1993, and roughly double the proportion that agreed twenty years ago (in 2001). At the same time, public skepticism about refugee claimants has fallen steadily over the past 35 years. In 1987, 79 percent of Canadians agreed that most people claiming to be refugees were not real refugees. By 2022, the proportion agreeing had fallen to 36 percent; a greater proportion of Canadians (46 percent) now disagree with this claim.<sup>8</sup>

Some question whether this commitment to accepting refugees is somewhat thin, because it is more likely to be expressed in the case of European refugees – such as those displaced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine – than of refugees fleeing Asia or Africa.<sup>9</sup> This may be true in terms of the policies and processes in place that determine how many refugees Canada accepts, and from where. But in terms of the Canadian public, there is, in fact, solid support for refugees no matter where they come from.

In its 2022 *Focus Canada* study, the Environics Institute tested whether there is more support for refugees fleeing conflict from a European country compared to those escaping

from a predominantly Muslim one. We did this by randomly varying the wording of one survey question. The experiment found that the origin of refugees does matter for some Canadians, but not many: eight in ten Canadians agree with accepting more immigrants escaping conflicts in countries “such as Ukraine,” compared to just over seven in ten who hold the same view when the question mentions countries “such as Afghanistan.” The actual difference in the level of support was only eight percentage points. Fewer than one in four disagree with accepting more of either group of refugees.

Perhaps a better indication of how welcoming Canadians are to refugees – regardless of where they come from – is the views of refugees themselves. This is now possible, thanks to a new report on the experiences of Syrian refugees who came to Canada in 2015 and 2016.<sup>10</sup> The study is based on interviews with 305 Syrian refugees who arrived in Canada between 2015 and 2016, focusing on their lived experiences and their situation today, seven years later. It documents the difficulties faced by those arriving under such circumstances, especially in terms of language barriers, difficulties finding both employment commensurate with their skills, and suitable housing. But at the same time, it finds that 96 percent of the Syrian refugees surveyed say they felt generally welcomed by their local community in Canada, 75 percent feel they are seen positively by other Canadians, and only three percent have plans to eventually leave this country.

Moreover, when asked what they like least about living in Canada, the most common response among Syrian refugees was – not surprisingly – the weather (mentioned by 32 percent), followed by financial and economic difficulties, and the distance from home. Racism in Canada was mentioned, but only by four percent of the refugees interviewed (that said, 48 percent said they had felt discriminated against at some point since their arrival in Canada).

These positive findings should be celebrated, but not used to cover up the problems that remain. For instance, the Survey on Employment and Skills, conducted by the Environics Institute in partnership with the Diversity Institute and the Future Skills Centre, confirms that immigrants are more likely than average to experience discrimination in the workplace based on their ethnicity or race; the proportion experiencing such discrimination is even higher among racialized

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4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Kandice Pardy, “Why are Some Refugees More Welcome in Canada than Others?,” *Policy Options*, February 27, 2023, <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/february-2023/ukrainian-afghan-refugees>

10 Keith Neuman, *Canadian Public Opinion about Immigration and Refugees - Fall 2022* (Toronto: Environics Institute, 2022), [www.enviroinicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/canadian-public-opinion-about-immigration-and-refugees--fall-2022](http://www.enviroinicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/canadian-public-opinion-about-immigration-and-refugees--fall-2022)

immigrants.<sup>11</sup> Another recent Environics Institute study finds that experiences of discrimination in Canada are particularly high among second generation immigrants who are racialized, suggesting that the country is falling short in its efforts to fulfill its promise of extending a better to immigrant families.

Work remains to be done to ensure fair treatment and secure equitable opportunities for newcomer Canadians. In Canada, however, this work can unfold in an environment that continues to be considered one of the most welcoming in the world for migrants from all backgrounds.

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11 "Institute Projects," Environics Institute, accessed August 23, 2023, [www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/listing/-in-tags/type/survey-on-employment-and-skills](http://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/listing/-in-tags/type/survey-on-employment-and-skills)

# SKILLS ASSESSMENT AND NEWCOMER PATHWAYS TO THE LABOUR MARKET

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, attention to skills and competencies has shaped discussions of the "future of work," focusing on global shifts and their implications for employers and job seekers. Nowhere is this more critical than in discussions of pathways to employment for newcomers. While there is some evidence to suggest certain skills (for example literacy) are associated with better employment outcomes, or at least earnings, others have maintained that bias and barriers prevent newcomers from accessing employment where their skills will be fully utilised. The challenge, then, based on the available evidence, is to better understand 1) which skills are linked to obtaining employment 2) how we can assess these skills 3) how we can develop these skills, and 4) how we can ensure that skills people have are fully utilised.

Skills assessment for immigrants to Canada is an area much in need of solid research. Which skills determine labour market success and attachment for immigrants entering Canada? Which skills can be assessed, with validity and reliability, for newcomers? And are those skills the same?

Existing research is somewhat slim, and what does exist is not conclusive about how skills drive immigrant success in and attachment to the Canadian labour market. In particular, skills outside of literacy, numeracy and problem-solving in technology rich environments are often assessed by self-declaration, self-assessment or credential and there is limited evidence of a relationship to labour market outcomes.



## BACKGROUND: WHAT SKILLS ARE LINKED TO EMPLOYMENT?

Debates are common in Canada, and globally, about the types of skills that are most in demand in the labour market and which of those skills are most likely to ensure employment. While educational credentials such as degrees, diplomas and certificates remain strong signalling agents for labour market entry, both for individuals born in Canada and newcomers with a postsecondary education (PSE) credential from elsewhere, the number of people with PSE has increased to a point where it is less valuable as a “sorting” mechanism. Employers are increasingly challenging the reliance on credentials alone, even in applied and professional domains, given the long cycles for curriculum development and the rapid rate of change. A 2014 study revealed that in job ads for non-professional entry-level positions, and follow-up interviews with employers, an emergent theme was that employers used work experience, not a PSE credential, as a proxy for the skills they were looking for.<sup>1</sup> Another recent study shows that the measurement of education during the credential transfer processes for newcomers can be discriminatory and reflect geopolitical bias and other social hierarchies.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, while credentials are clear indicators of some skills (how to code in Java or build a bridge, etc) they are only weakly related to competencies in employability or essential skills. PSE institutions rarely directly assess skills such as critical thinking or literacy, but consider them implicit in teaching and learning processes, and how learning outcomes are achieved. Efforts to apply standardised testing for example, show many PSE graduates demonstrate only average or below-average literacy and numeracy skills, and that skills gain in these areas during the PSE experience is minimal.<sup>3</sup>

One of the basic assumptions, that is embedded at every level of our system, is that facility in one of the official languages is foundational in terms of employment. There is some research that suggests that language scores are linked to employment outcomes overall,<sup>4</sup> and some of this research has focused on the effect of language proficiency of newcomers on labour market outcomes,<sup>5</sup> demonstrating, in particular, a positive effect between language proficiency and earnings. While the studies that point in this direction are numerous, most of this body of research has used self-assessment or self-declaration of language proficiency. Additionally, most of this research has relied on subjective measures of language proficiency across a single domain: oral proficiency.

At the same time, other research suggests that when we control for education and look at principal applicants in the economic class of immigrants, there is limited connection between scores on standardised tests and employment,<sup>6</sup> although there is a link between scores and income over time. This calls into question some of the assumptions about skills and employment and the primacy of language skills.

Some research has found that among populations whose mother tongue is either English or French, oral proficiency is not highly correlated with skills in other domains, such as document and prose literacy, and numeracy and has relatively no impact on employment,<sup>7</sup> written communication skills and prose literacy however are found to impact annual earnings for this population. When focussed on populations expected to have low oral proficiency skills, for instance, immigrants who have different mother tongues, oral proficiency does impact economic stability and growth. Other research suggests that there are inadequacies in current assessment methods that favour native speakers of English and French,<sup>8</sup> and negatively impact newcomers with lower language proficiency in Canada’s official languages.<sup>9</sup>

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9 Sivakumar, V. (2023, February 19). “Canadian immigrants’ efforts to find employment complicated by perceived skills mismatch,” *CIC News*. [www.cicnews.com/2023/02/canadian-immigrants-efforts-to-find-employment-complicated-by-perceived-skills-mismatch-0232695.html#gs.6mowbg](http://www.cicnews.com/2023/02/canadian-immigrants-efforts-to-find-employment-complicated-by-perceived-skills-mismatch-0232695.html#gs.6mowbg)

A recent Statistics Canada study used the language testing<sup>10</sup> results for newcomers going through the Express Entry program to Canada between 2015 and 2018. On top of using an objective measure of language proficiency, this study also looked at test-based scores in four domain areas, as opposed to one (oral proficiency): listening, speaking, reading and writing – and used self-assessment of language proficiency as an additional comparator.

The study found that in the first years after immigration, both test-based results across all four domains, as well as self-assessment results, had little impact on employment. However, the study also showed that test-based scores had a stronger effect on earnings than education level and age, and had as strong an effect on earnings as pre-immigration work experience.<sup>11</sup>

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) *Programme for the International Assessments of Adult Competencies* (PIAAC) is considered to be the gold standard for assessing fundamental skill areas, namely literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving in technology-rich environments as well as providing global standards for comparison.<sup>12</sup>

Using PIAAC domains shows that the skills gap between Canadian-born individuals and immigrants is significant, but it is less significant than in other OECD countries, with the foreign-born population in Canada scoring well above the foreign-born population in other OECD countries.<sup>13</sup> This is likely a result of the use of the point system which places a premium on competency in official languages and education. Furthermore, the gap diminishes with age and education. The 2017 CMEC report on PIAAC results, notes that both immigrants and Canadian-born individuals with higher educational levels perform better than those with lower educational levels, across all three skills.<sup>14</sup> At any given educational level, the Canadian-born perform better than immigrants, but the skills gap for immigrants diminishes

with level of education. Immigrants who landed in Canada at younger ages have higher proficiency scores and the skills gap increases with the age at entry.<sup>15</sup> However, when we control for all other factors, immigrants are three and a half times more likely to be unemployed when compared to equally skilled Canadian-born populations.<sup>16</sup> Skills proficiency, specifically language and literacy, are, therefore, poor predictors of employment. While there is some evidence of a direct connection between literacy and language proficiency and income, even the wage gap is not fully explained by the skills gap.

In fact a 2008 study,<sup>17</sup> using PiACC results for Ontario only, found that literacy skills explained only about two thirds of the wage gap between Canadian educated and foreign educated individuals. A later study in 2017,<sup>18</sup> also using PIAAC for a cross country comparison, found that literacy skills only explained one third of the wage gap between Western and Non-Western educated immigrants in European countries. The implications of this are significant and warrant further exploration.

## WHAT SKILLS SHOULD WE MEASURE?

Using PIAAC has advantages. The skills tested (literacy, numeracy and problem-solving in technology-rich environments) are thought to be associated with success in the labour market and PIAAC is used widely by OECD countries and therefore has a larger base of research than some other tools. However, the empirical research suggests other forces are at play. While language skills are generally important they are perhaps not as important as previously considered. It is possible that PIAAC does not actually measure skills needed for success in the workplace. Or it is possible that PIAAC does measure skills needed for success in the workplace but barriers and discrimination still trump skills. For instance, a 2021 study has shown that immigrants with foreign-sounding last names are less likely to get interviews than their counterparts with the

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10 Xu, L., & Hou, F. (2023, January 25). "Official language proficiency and immigrant labour market outcomes: Evidence from test-based multidimensional measures of language skills," *Economic and Social Reports*. Statistics Canada. [www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/36-28-0001/2023001/article/00002-eng.htm](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/36-28-0001/2023001/article/00002-eng.htm)

11 Ibid.

12 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. (n.d.). *About PIAAC*. [www.oecd.org/skills/piaac](http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac)

13 Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (2017). "Skills Proficiency of Immigrants in Canada: Findings from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)"

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Cukier, W. & Stolarick, K. (2019). "Immigrant Labour Market Outcomes and Skills Differences in Canada," *Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario*, p 14.

17 Ferrer, A., & Riddell, W. C. (2008). "Education, credentials, and immigrant earnings," *Canadian Journal of Economics/Revue canadienne d'économique*, 41(1), 186-216.

18 Lancee, B., & Bol, T. (2017). "The transferability of skills and degrees: Why the place of education affects immigrant earnings," *Social Forces*, 96(2), 691-716.

same credentials.<sup>19</sup> It is also possible that once people overcome the barriers to employment, those with better skills will be more successful and hence earn more.

Another factor to consider is that PIACC may measure some necessary skills for the labour market, but not all. Current federal programming, including the Federal Skilled Worker program, the Federal Skilled Trades program and the Canadian Experience Class, has been criticised for its focus on newcomers' possession of basic or essential skills, such as literacy and language proficiency, as well as the priority it assigns to formal education credentials, life experience and age as opposed to practical, technical skills.<sup>20</sup> Some have argued that these criteria does not easily translate into skill indicators.<sup>21</sup> And while the identification of agreed upon skills that matter in the labour market has been difficult, it is not insurmountable; answering the question of whether or not an individual possesses those skills and at what level, and for what purpose, has been more challenging.

If we look at other skills that are assumed to be needed by the labour market, there are many assertions about the importance of those skills in driving labour market success, in particular for newcomers to Canada, but surprisingly little empirical data. Increasingly industry reports claim that “employability”, “soft” or “socio-emotional” or “transversal” skills such as interpersonal skills, communication, and resiliency, are essential.<sup>22</sup> Typically evidence regarding the importance of these skills is based on surveys of employers. For example, the Business Higher Education Roundtable surveys their members every two years, and finds that while large employers are increasingly pointing to specialised skills needs, they continue to agree that soft and socio-emotional skills are table stakes.<sup>23</sup> There are also concerns that these claims can embed or mask bias as the assessments of these

skills, for example, interviews can be fraught with gender and cultural bias, privileging neurotypical styles of communication without necessarily assessing skills relevant to job performance.

## COMPETENCY AND SKILLS FRAMEWORKS

Global organisations, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO),<sup>24</sup> World Economic Forum (WEF),<sup>25</sup> and World Bank,<sup>26</sup> have proposed frameworks to highlight the skills needed in a globalised world. The ILO's Global Framework on Core Skills for Life and Work in the 21st Century focuses on non-technical skills, such as social and emotional skills, cognitive and metacognitive skills, basic digital skills, and basic skills for green jobs, to ensure that individuals are employable, adaptable to labour market demands, and can contribute to their well-being and their community.<sup>27</sup> The WEF categorises 21st Century Skills as foundational literacies (core skills to everyday tasks), competencies (approaches to complex challenges), and personal qualities (approaches to changing environments).<sup>28</sup> Universities across Canada have also proposed competency frameworks, although they are highly fragmented and inconsistent. For example, the University of Waterloo's Future Ready Talent Framework identifies 12 key competencies in demand for the global workplace but the basis of these is unclear.<sup>29</sup>

Most countries have adopted frameworks to identify and develop essential skills for their citizens to meaningfully participate in the workplace, education, and society, but there is little consistency in terms and definitions. Canada's Skills for Success Model (formerly Essential Skills) identifies nine essential skills for engagement in the workforce,

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- 19 Banerjee, R., Hou, F., Reitz, J. G., & Zhang, T. (2021). “Evaluating foreign skills: Effects of credential assessment on skilled immigrants’ labour market performance in Canada,” *Canadian Public Policy*, 47(3), 358-372.
  - 20 Tobin S., & Barata, P. (2022, December 13). “Work skills must be central to Canadian immigration efforts,” *Policy Options*. <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/december-2022/work-skills-canadian-immigration>
  - 21 Ibid.
  - 22 Business Higher Education Round Table. (2022, March). “Empowering People for Recovery and Growth,” Business Council of Canada. [https://bher.ca/sites/default/files/2022-03/Empowering%20People%20for%20Recovery%20and%20Growth%202022%20Skills%20Survey%20Report\\_3.pdf](https://bher.ca/sites/default/files/2022-03/Empowering%20People%20for%20Recovery%20and%20Growth%202022%20Skills%20Survey%20Report_3.pdf)
  - 23 Ibid.
  - 24 International Labour Organization. (2021). “Global framework on core skills for life and work in the 21st century,” [www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/---emp\\_ent/documents/publication/wcms\\_813222.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_ent/documents/publication/wcms_813222.pdf)
  - 25 World Economic Forum. (2016). “Ten 21st-century skills every student needs,” [www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/03/21st-century-skills-future-jobs-students](http://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/03/21st-century-skills-future-jobs-students)
  - 26 World Bank. (2021, July 21). “Skills development,” [www.worldbank.org/en/topic/skillsdevelopment](http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/skillsdevelopment)
  - 27 International Labour Organization. (2021). “Global framework on core skills for life and work in the 21st century,” [www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/---emp\\_ent/documents/publication/wcms\\_813222.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_ent/documents/publication/wcms_813222.pdf)
  - 28 World Economic Forum. (2016). “Ten 21st-century skills every student needs,” [www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/03/21st-century-skills-future-jobs-students](http://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/03/21st-century-skills-future-jobs-students)
  - 29 University of Waterloo. (n.d.). “Future ready talent framework,” <https://uwaterloo.ca/future-ready-talent-framework>

education, and society: adaptability, creativity and innovation, problem-solving, communication, collaboration, digital, and literacy, including reading, writing, and numeracy.<sup>30</sup> Australia, on the other hand, distinguishes between “Core Skills” for societal participation (i.e., learning, reading, writing, oral communication, and numeracy)<sup>31</sup> and “Core Skills for Work and Development” for success in the workplace (e.g., problem-solving, collaboration, self-management, communication, and information technology skills).<sup>32</sup> Other countries use classification systems or taxonomies that tie skills to occupational codes, such as the United States ONET system<sup>33</sup> and the European Commission’s ESCO classification.<sup>34</sup>

But while there remains limited agreement on how to define these skills, there are some efforts to assess these skills. There is no shortage of skills assessment tools available to connect individuals to the labour market, via in-demand skills. The Skills Council of Canada, alone, lists over 800 pre-prepared assessment tools on its website, along with the ability to customise an assessment tool. For example FutureWorx’s Employment Skills Assessment Tool (ESAT) assesses the development of social and emotional skills like attitude, accountability, confidence, adaptability, creativity, and collaboration. ESAT is generally used in training and educational programs that raise awareness of employability expectations and skills.<sup>35</sup> The European Commission’s free digital skills assessment tool allows individuals to self-assess their digital skills, such as information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, safety, and problem-solving. Results serve as a compass, guiding individuals’ relevant resources and training opportunities.<sup>36</sup> The United Kingdom’s National Career Service’s free online skills health check allows individuals to assess their personal skills, such as interests and motivations, and work-based skills, such as numeracy, verbal reasoning, and problem-solving.<sup>37</sup>

However, skills, such as resiliency, teamwork, and communication are challenging to assess, and often rely on self-assessment.<sup>38,39</sup> Moreover research has suggested that definitions and understandings of skills such as communication can be very divergent particularly where self assessments are used. For example, in one study 90% of university students and graduates surveyed indicated they had excellent communication skills, compared to only 30% of their employers.<sup>40</sup>

Not only do these tools rely quite heavily on self-assessment, there is limited research showing how these are actually related to employment as well as questions about the extent to which these skills assessments embed cultural biases in the questions that can exclude some populations, and lead to replicating the status quo. For instance, there is evidence that informal processes, unspoken rules, and cultural competencies also play a role, but in a hidden and possibly insidious way. Some employer tools build profiles of successful employees and use those characteristics to identify applicants with the same attributes. While this may seem like a rational way to proceed, it has the potential to simply embed bias and encourage hiring more of the same. And while proxy assessments can sometimes be valuable in connecting employers to potential employees, they are not direct assessments of human capital skills. In a recent study using PiACC, the author calls human capital skills, “surprisingly difficult to assess” as most measures are self-reported in some fashion, or credential based.<sup>41</sup>

There is also much attention on the “digital skills gap” and the desperate need for highly trained science, technology, engineering and math graduates as well as an acute shortage of trades and skilled labour. Studies demonstrate that the digital skills gap is a global phenomenon. 80% of businesses need more workers with digital skills, and two-thirds are having

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30 Government of Canada. (2023, June 2). “Learn about skills,” [www.canada.ca/en/services/jobs/training/initiatives/skills-success/understanding-individuals.html](http://www.canada.ca/en/services/jobs/training/initiatives/skills-success/understanding-individuals.html)

31 Australian Government. (2020). “Australian core skills framework,” Department of Employee and Workplace Relations. [www.dewr.gov.au/skills-information-training-providers/australian-core-skills-framework](http://www.dewr.gov.au/skills-information-training-providers/australian-core-skills-framework)

32 Australian Government. (2020). “Core skills for work developmental framework,” Department of Employee and Workplace Relations. [www.dewr.gov.au/skills-information-training-providers/core-skills-work-developmental-framework](http://www.dewr.gov.au/skills-information-training-providers/core-skills-work-developmental-framework)

33 O\*net. (n.d.). “About O\*net,” [www.onetcenter.org/overview.html#data](http://www.onetcenter.org/overview.html#data)

34 European Commission. (n.d.). “The ESCO classification,” <https://esco.ec.europa.eu/en/classification>

35 Futureworx. (n.d.). “Employability skills assessment tool,” <https://futureworx.ca/employability-skills-assessment-tool>

36 Europass. (n.d.). “Test your digital skills!,” <https://europa.eu/europass/digitalskills/screen/home>

37 National Career Services. (n.d.). “Skills health check,” <https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/skills-health-check/home>

38 See for instance, Weingarten, H. P. & Hicks, M. (2018). “On Test: Skills. Summary of Findings from HEQCO’s Skills Assessment Pilot Studies,” Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario; and Kaupp, J., Frank, B., & Chen, A. (2014). “Evaluating Critical Thinking and Problem Solving in Large Classes: Model Eliciting Activities for Critical Thinking Development,” Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

39 Patry, D., & Ford, R. (2016). “Measuring Resilience as an Education Outcome,” Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

40 Cukier, W. (2014). “Understanding Employer Needs and the Skills of Social Science and Humanities Graduates,” Toronto: OCHRIF.

41 Richwine, J. (2022). “Skill deficits among foreign-educated immigrants: Evidence from the US PIAAC,” *Plos one*, 17(8).

trouble finding and hiring the right talent.<sup>42</sup> In Canada, 79% of CEOs indicate that the pandemic has changed how they work and that more employees with IT skills are required.<sup>43</sup>

However, while these skills are in high demand, there is evidence, for instance, that internationally educated engineers have high levels of unemployment. They may have the skills but the lack of international credential recognition. Effective pathways to professional practice, including Canadian “experience”, remain impediments. For some regulated professions, there are also specific skills frameworks for licensure.<sup>44,45</sup> Professional engineering applicants are required to detail their work experience and self-assess their competence level across several domains, such as project and financial management and communication.<sup>46</sup> Nursing in Ontario also uses a similar approach. After the College of Nurses in Ontario has assessed registered practical nurses’ education and practice, they are required to submit a competency assessment supplement, which requires them to submit a reflection that identifies a gap in their entry-to-practices competencies.<sup>47,48</sup> However, other professional occupations, such as teaching and medicine, continue to rely on qualifications for licensure coupled with acceptable work experience. The occupational licensure landscape is fraught and Canada lags behind many other nations. Much of the process is left to professional organisations which may have competing goals - for instance, protectionism and risk management, as opposed to access. Even in professions where there are acute labour shortages, processes are slow and expensive.

Finally, while numerous skills frameworks and assessment

tools exist, few specifically target newcomers. International standards and practices use points systems for skilled immigrants,<sup>49,50,51</sup> and foreign credential recognition.<sup>52,53</sup> However, other countries are leading the way to change this practice. Australia, for instance, assesses both the skills and qualifications of skilled immigrants. Skills assessments are issued through relevant skills authorities – for example, skilled migrants seeking employment in education and child-care would have their knowledge, skills, and competency assessed through their work experience. Skilled immigrants are required to explain their role, skills used, and descriptions of situational examples as they relate to relevant assessment standards.<sup>54</sup> The Australian government currently lists 215 in demand occupations that have skill assessment processes for potential immigrants. Additionally, the Australian National Skills Commission provides advice to the government on labour market and skills needs related to the list.

## CONCLUSION

The skills required for the current and future labour market is a hot topic right now, in Canada but also globally. Governments, employers and other stakeholders and policy-makers are producing a significant amount of documentation trying to define and categorise what those skills should be and how they align with labour market needs. What is less clear from these conversations is how to effectively assess whether or not individuals have these skills, and what the direct impact of these skills are on an individual's success in the

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42 Cukier, W., Zou, C., Jae, K., & Sabat, M. (2023). “Digital skills and the skills gap. Diversity Institute,” [www.torontomu.ca/diversity/reports/digital-skills-and-the-skills-gap](http://www.torontomu.ca/diversity/reports/digital-skills-and-the-skills-gap)

43 Ibid.

44 Engineers Canada. (2018, September 6). “A closer look at the competency-based assessment project,” <https://engineerscanada.ca/news-and-events/news/a-closer-look-at-the-competency-based-assessment-project>

45 Engineers and Geoscientists BC. (2023). “Competency assessment,” <https://competencyassessment.ca/About>

46 Ibid.

47 Colleges of Nurses of Ontario. (2023). “Entry-to-practice competencies for registered practical nurses,” [www.cno.org/globalassets/docs/reg/41042\\_entrypracrpn-2020.pdf](http://www.cno.org/globalassets/docs/reg/41042_entrypracrpn-2020.pdf)

48 College of Nurses Ontario. (2017, October 12). “FAQs: Competency assessment supplement,” [www.cno.org/en/become-a-nurse/registration-requirements/education/faq-competency-assessment-supplement](http://www.cno.org/en/become-a-nurse/registration-requirements/education/faq-competency-assessment-supplement)

49 Government of the United Kingdom. (2020, October 19). “The UK’s points-based immigration system: Information for EU citizens,” [www.gov.uk/guidance/the-uks-points-based-immigration-system-information-for-eu-citizens](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/the-uks-points-based-immigration-system-information-for-eu-citizens)

50 New Zealand Immigration. (2023). “New Zealand skilled residence pathways,” [www.immigration.govt.nz/new-zealand-visas/preparing-a-visa-application/living-in-new-zealand-permanently/new-zealand-skilled-residence-pathways](http://www.immigration.govt.nz/new-zealand-visas/preparing-a-visa-application/living-in-new-zealand-permanently/new-zealand-skilled-residence-pathways)

51 Government of Canada. (2023, August 23). “Comprehensive ranking system (CRS) tool: Skilled immigrants (express entry),” [www.cic.gc.ca/english/immigrate/skilled/crs-tool.asp](http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/immigrate/skilled/crs-tool.asp)

52 Government of Canada. (2023, May 25). “Learn more about foreign credential recognition in Canada,” [www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/foreign-credential-recognition.html](http://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/foreign-credential-recognition.html)

53 European Commission. (n.d.). “Recognition of foreign qualifications,” [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/recognition-foreign-qualifications\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/recognition-foreign-qualifications_en)

54 Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority. (n.d.). “Skills assessment: Pilot 2.,” [www.acecqa.gov.au/qualifications/skills-assessment-pilot-2](http://www.acecqa.gov.au/qualifications/skills-assessment-pilot-2)

labour market. This is even more apparent for newcomers to Canada. Many of the opportunities for assessing newcomer skills are either credential based, which is a very indirect measure of soft or transferable skills, language proficiency-based, which has only a rough impact on labour market outcomes, or self-assessment based, which holds enormous opportunity for embedded bias. Further, the skills assessed are not found sufficiently to be direct indicators of labour market outcomes.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

There is clearly a need to ensure we use evidence-based approaches to assessing skills whether in the selection of immigrants to Canada or in recruiting people for jobs. But in order to do that we need to better understand the ways

in which skills are defined, assessed and, perhaps most importantly, utilised. Current research is contradictory and paradoxical, particularly with respect to immigrants, skills and employment. We need to better understand the alignment of certain skills with labour market outcomes for individuals and to challenge assertions that may reflect assumptions but not evidence. We need to better understand the ways in which our definition of skills and our assessment of skills, for example, aligns to employment realities. We need to continue to explore the ways in which bias is embedded in our assumptions, in our measures and in our processes. We need to explore how processes and practices in the regulated professions might be improved to support the pathways of skilled immigrants to the labour market. We need to consider international policies and practices, for instance the Australian approach, and ways to better align these at the national level but also at the organisational level to address skills mismatches and under-utilisation.

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# INTERNATIONALLY EDUCATED NURSES: THE CHALLENGES FOR RECOGNITION

**OVIE ONAGBEBOMA**, a nationally recognized nurse and business leader, has garnered significant recognition for her outstanding contributions. Ovie's professional journey as a Lean Six Sigma belt-certified nurse leader and Research Associate showcases her dedication to excellence. She supported Health Canada and the Chief Nursing Officer of Canada in co-developing the National Nursing Retention ToolKit. This exemplifies her commitment to addressing critical challenges in the healthcare industry. Ovie took proactive steps to create positive change and established the Canadian Black Nurses Alliance (CBNA) which has significantly impacted Black nurses, nursing students, and critical allies, expanding its reach by establishing chapters in multiple provinces. Ovie's leadership has positioned the CBNA as a leading advocate, amplifying the voices of Black nurses nationwide.

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Job vacancies in Canada's healthcare sector reached a record high of 96,200 in the fourth quarter of 2022, with registered nurses (RNs), registered psychiatric nurses, licensed practical nurses (LPNs), nurse aides, orderlies and patient service associates accounting for 69 percent of total vacancies.<sup>1</sup> RN and LPN job postings have increased by 21-22 percent year over year,<sup>2</sup> representing an increase of 220 percent over the past five years.<sup>3</sup>

As a result of acute labour shortages, excessive workloads, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and toxic work environments, over half of nurses across Canada indicate they plan to leave their jobs within the next year, with 19 percent planning to exit the profession entirely.<sup>4</sup> Regulated nurses represent half of the healthcare workforce, meaning the consequences of labour shortages are dire.<sup>5</sup> Concurrent with the crisis in nursing is an accelerated demand for healthcare services

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1 Statistics Canada, "Job Vacancies Fourth Quarter 2022," *The Daily*, March 21, 2023. [www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/230321/dq230321b-eng.htm](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/230321/dq230321b-eng.htm)

2 Ibid.

3 Hessem Eddine Ben Ahmed and Ivy Lynn Bourgeault, *Sustaining Nursing in Canada: A Set of Coordinated Evidence-based Solutions Targeted to Support the Nursing Workforce Now and Into the Future* (Ottawa: Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions, 2022). [https://nursesunions.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/CHWN-CFNU-Report\\_-Sustaining-Nursing-in-Canada2022\\_web.pdf](https://nursesunions.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/CHWN-CFNU-Report_-Sustaining-Nursing-in-Canada2022_web.pdf)

4 Ibid.

5 Rafael Harun and Margaret Walton-Roberts, "Assessing the Contribution of Immigrants to Canada's Nursing and Health Care Support Occupations: A Multi-scalar Analysis," *Human Resources for Health* 20, no. 53 (2022): 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12960-022-00748-7>

amidst Canada's aging demographic. According to the 2021 census, the 65+ age category is growing six times faster than the children under 15 years cohort and now accounts for 22 percent of the population.<sup>6</sup> Sustained pressure on Canada's healthcare and home care sectors is anticipated as the 65+ cohort is expected to represent 25 percent of the population by 2051.<sup>7</sup> Demographic shifts must also shape the content and delivery of healthcare. In Canada, 23 percent of the population was born outside Canada, and in Toronto, 47 percent of the population are immigrants.<sup>8</sup> As a public good, health policy and delivery must represent and respond to the diverse needs, interests and expectations of the people it serves.

Canada attracts many highly skilled, internationally educated healthcare professionals, presenting a significant opportunity to address growing workforce needs. Since 2015, the nation has welcomed over 22,000<sup>9</sup> permanent residents intending to work in healthcare, including 8,600 nurses.<sup>10</sup> Newcomers are, in fact, more likely to pursue nursing and health care support occupations than are their Canadian-born peers; however, internationally educated nurses (IENs) face significant barriers to practice and high rates of underemployment.<sup>11</sup> Immigrants represent 22 percent of the nursing and healthcare support workforce, yet only 9 percent of registered nurses<sup>12</sup>; in contrast, 30 percent of those working as nurse aides, orderlies

and patient service associates are immigrants.<sup>13</sup> Among IEN principal applicants who immigrated to Canada through economic pathways, only 48 percent of those intending to work in nursing were employed in their profession; 23 percent were working in a health care support occupations for which they were overqualified, while 29 percent worked in low-skill roles outside the sector.<sup>14</sup> Disparate outcomes were most striking among IENs who completed a bachelor's degree or higher in a nursing program outside Canada. Among IENs who received part of their education in Canada, 78 percent were employed in their profession, whereas 37 percent of IENs who were internationally educated worked in nursing.<sup>15</sup> In research exploring the experiences of IENs, language and communication challenges, integration issues, employment discrimination, credentialing and licensure difficulties were repeatedly cited as barriers.<sup>16</sup>

Inequities are most pronounced at the intersection of gender, immigrant status and racialization, making the discourse of equity, diversity and inclusion prescient. Consistent with the sector overall, immigrants working in nursing and healthcare support occupations are predominantly female (87 percent); 84 percent of newcomers working in these occupations had immigrated from the global south<sup>17</sup>, primarily from the Philippines (30 percent), Africa (15 percent), the Caribbean

6 Statistics Canada, "In the Midst of High Job Vacancies and Historically Low Unemployment, Canada Faces Record Retirements from an Aging Labour Force: Number of Seniors Aged 65 and Older Grows Six Times Faster than Children 0-14," *The Daily*, April 27, 2022. [www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220427/dq220427a-eng.htm](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220427/dq220427a-eng.htm)

7 Ibid.

8 Statistics Canada, "Immigrants Make Up the Largest Share of the Population in Over 150 Years and Continue to Shape Who We are as Canadians," *The Daily*, October 26, 2022. [www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026a-eng.htm](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026a-eng.htm)

9 Includes those who immigrated through economic pathways: Express Entry and Provincial Nominee Program.

10 Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), "Easier Access to Permanent Residence for Physicians in Canada to Help Address Doctor Shortages," *IRCC News release*, September 23, 2022. [www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2022/09/easier-access-to-permanent-residence-for-physicians-in-canada-to-help-address-doctor-shortages.html](http://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2022/09/easier-access-to-permanent-residence-for-physicians-in-canada-to-help-address-doctor-shortages.html)

11 Statistics Canada, *Profile of Immigrants in Nursing and Health Care Support Occupations* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2021). [www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2021001/article/00004-eng.htm](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2021001/article/00004-eng.htm)

12 Ibid; In 2019, IENs represented 9.4% (28,306) of all Registered Nurses (RNs) in Canada, 7.8% (8,656) of Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs), 4.2% (135) of Registered Practical Nurses (RPNs) and 4.5% (273) of Nurse Practitioners (NPs); Overall representation of IENs =  $(28,306 + 8,656 + 135 + 273) / 439,975 = 8.5\%$ ; Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI), *Nursing in Canada 2018: A Lens on Supply and Workforce* (Ottawa: Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2019). [www.cihi.ca/sites/default/files/document/regulated-nurses-2018-report-en-web.pdf](http://www.cihi.ca/sites/default/files/document/regulated-nurses-2018-report-en-web.pdf)

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Rafael Harun and Margaret Walton-Roberts, "Assessing the Contribution of Immigrants to Canada's Nursing and Health Care Support Occupations: A Multi-scalar Analysis," *Human Resources for Health* 20, no. 53 (2022): 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12960-022-00748-7>; L. Lum, P. Dowedoff and K. Englander, "Internationally Educated Nurses' Reflections on Nursing Communication in Canada," *International Nursing Review* 63, no. 3 (2016): 344-351. <https://doi.org/10.1111/inr.12300>; Bukola Salami and Sioban Nelson, "The Downward Occupational Mobility of Internationally Educated Nurses to Domestic Workers," *Nursing Inquiry* 21, no. 2 (2014): 153-161. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nin.12029>

17 Calculated using table 1: (i) Female immigrant nursing and healthcare support (N&HS) workers as a percentage of total immigrant N&HS workers:  $128,010 / 147,705 = 87\%$ . percentage of immigrant N&HS workers from global south: the sum of immigrant N&HS workers who immigrated from global south regions divided by the total:  $123,625 / 147,705 = 84\%$ ; Statistics Canada, *Profile of Immigrants in Nursing and Health Care Support Occupations* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2021). [www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2021001/article/00004-eng.htm](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2021001/article/00004-eng.htm)

(15 percent) and India (8 percent).<sup>18</sup> While most individuals from these regions work as nurse aides, orderlies or patient service associates, only 2 percent of economic immigrants working in these occupations intended to do so upon entering Canada.<sup>19</sup>

The widespread system-imposed underemployment and deskilling of racialized, newcomer women is untenable in a country that prides itself on multiculturalism and inclusion. The current system does not meet the needs of the Canadian healthcare sector or IENs. It increasingly puts Canada in an uncompetitive position in the global race for talent. This is not about the high entry-to-practice standards needed to deliver quality care. Countries with high-quality healthcare sectors outperform Canada. In Australia, for example, less than five percent of IENs arriving in Australia between 2009-2016 earn less than 50 percent of the field's median income.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, in Canada, over 50 percent of IENs earned less than half of the median income of their intended profession.<sup>21</sup> Canada's decentralized professional licensure processes are lengthy and complex and frequently involve repeating one's education. While barriers to inclusion arise across the organizational, individual, sectoral and societal levels, for the nursing profession, macro-level policies, credentialing and licensure systems have the most profound impact on outcomes. These systems warrant investigation.

## IEN LICENSURE IN CANADA

Canada's public health care service is federally funded and regulated by the *Canada Health Act*; however, it is managed, organized and delivered as thirteen distinct provincial and territorial health care systems. This complex, decentralized method of healthcare delivery sets the context for an equally byzantine professional regulatory environment. IENs must

navigate both national and provincial assessments, at times redundant requirements and disparate standards across the provinces. Even the most expedient path wherein an IEN's assessment indicates educational equivalency, language proficiency and practical experience requirements are met without bridging, the licensure timeline can range from 1.5 to 2.5 years. The associated cost ranges from \$1,080<sup>22</sup> in British Columbia (BC), assuming eligibility for the IEN bursary program, which in this scenario allows for a reimbursement of \$3,420 provided the IEN signs a Return of Service Agreement, to up to a maximum of \$6,900<sup>23</sup> in Prince Edward Island (PEI) if bridging is required. This excludes the cost of additional course requirements, travel, or third-party expenditures such as translation.

More striking is the variability in requirements across the provinces. Table 1 details the licensure processes in each province<sup>24</sup> for IENs whose occupation is an RN. Licensure involves the Next Gen NCLEX-RN exam in all provinces (Quebec excepted), but also a Jurisprudence Exam in Ontario and PEI, a Registration Exam in Alberta and a Clinical Competence Assessment Exam in Manitoba. In Quebec, the mandatory Professional Integration Program must be completed; in New Brunswick, a minimum of two to four courses, including Professional Nursing in Canada and Professional Communication, are required, and in Alberta, jurisprudence modules are mandatory training requirements for all IEN Registered Nurse applicants. In other provinces, additional training is needed only where competency gaps are identified. Practical nursing experience requirements vary from active practice within three years of registration in Ontario to 1,125 hours or completion of an approved nursing education program within the past five licensure years in many other provinces. Meeting recent practice requirements can prove challenging in the face of a complex licensure process that imposes obstacles to accessing the profession. Provisional licensure, allowing IENs to work in their field in advance of

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18 Calculated using table 1: percentage of immigrant N&HS workers from the Philippines (44,380/147,705=30%), Africa (22,535/147,705=15%), Caribbean (22,220/147,705=15%), India (12,225/147,705=8%); Statistics Canada, *Profile of Immigrants in Nursing and Health Care Support Occupations* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2021). [www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2021001/article/00004-eng.htm](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2021001/article/00004-eng.htm)

19 Ibid.

20 Benjamin Harrap et al., "Australia's Superior Skilled Migration Outcomes Compared with Canada's," *International Migration* 60, no. 5 (2022): 91-107. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12940>

21 Ibid.

22 The minimum total cost of IEN RN licensure in BC is \$3,000 (NCAS Assessment) + \$120 (Credential Assessment) + \$300 (Language Test) + \$360 (NCLEX-RN exam) + \$600 (Registration) + \$120 (Liability Protection) = \$4,500. In this scenario \$3,420 can be reimbursed if the IEN signs a return of service agreement requiring them to complete 12 months service with a publicly funded health sector employer within BC within 6 months of registration. See [www.bccnm.ca/RN/applications\\_registration/how\\_to\\_apply/InternationalEN/Pages/Default.aspx](http://www.bccnm.ca/RN/applications_registration/how_to_apply/InternationalEN/Pages/Default.aspx) and [www.nursingjobsbc.ca/faq/#return](http://www.nursingjobsbc.ca/faq/#return)

23 \$300 (Language Test) + \$360 (NCLEX-RN exam) + \$600 (Registration) + \$500 (application/processing fee) + \$870 (NNAS assessment) + \$75 jurisprudence exam + \$529 registration + \$4,300 (Bridging including textbooks. <https://learninginstitute.nshealth.ca/programs-and-courses/bridging-re-entry-programs/rn-bridging-re-entry-program>, [www.nnas.ca/application-fe/](http://www.nnas.ca/application-fe/), <https://crnpei.ca>, <https://crnpei.ca/rn-information/internationally-educated-nurses/frequently-asked-questions>

24 See Appendix, Table 1, "IEN Licensure - Provincial Comparison".

their NCLEX-RN/OIIQ<sup>25</sup> exam, is available in most provinces; however, this is not an option in Alberta and in Ontario, an employment offer from an approved nursing employer is a requirement. Even English language requirements vary, with a Registration or NCLEX-RN exam pass acting as a substitute for language proficiency exams in Alberta. In contrast, in Manitoba, completion of a nursing program in Canada or CELBAN/IELTS language tests are required. Notably, the language requirements of provincial RN regulators exceed the language skill levels required of principal applicants under Canada's Express Entry system.<sup>26</sup> Further, the credential assessments and experience that equated to permanent residence status under Canada's economic immigration stream have no bearing on an IEN's ability to practice in their field.

In essence, the IEN RN licensure process should encompass a Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) system or a competency evaluation that delivers on Canadian health-care professional standards while foregrounding efficiency. An effective and efficient system would deliver on Canada's urgent workforce needs and fully leverage the valuable skills and experience of IENs in an equitable and timely manner. The Canadian Association for Prior Learning and Assessment (CAPLA) sets out nine principles for PLAR: accessible, consistent, fair, respectful, valid, flexible, rigorous, professionally supported and transparent.<sup>27</sup> At its best, PLAR can expand occupational access and accelerate the integration of IENs. At its worst, PLAR has been enacted in ways that equate difference with deficit, measuring, surveilling, and ultimately devaluing and only subordinately including newcomer credentials.<sup>28</sup> Despite recent licensure amendments in Nova

Scotia and Alberta, IEN licensure processes in Canada align with the exclusionary version of PLAR. RN regulatory bodies have imposed a system of social and economic exclusion.

In most provinces, the licensure process commences with the National Nursing Assessment Service (NNAS). Through the NNAS, an IEN can apply for licensure in one nursing profession<sup>29</sup> (e.g., RN) in one province for a \$850 fee by submitting an application, photo identification, language exam results (if required), and by arranging original documents (i.e., Nursing Practice/Employment, Nursing Registration and Education transcripts), to be sent directly to the NNAS by the IEN's educational institution, regulator and past employers.<sup>30</sup> The review conducted by NNAS to determine if the IEN meets "Canadian Standards" can take up to one year; however, at times, NNAS has reported backlogs of 2 years, prompting BC's regulator, BCCNM, to move to an alternate supplier.<sup>31</sup> As the process must be sequential, IENs may apply with their provincial regulator following their NNAS outcome; credentials are next assessed relative to "provincial standards."

Delays continue at the provincial level, with a recent report indicating the IEN application backlog in Ontario has grown to 26,000 nurses in the past decade.<sup>32</sup> Timelines are exacerbated by limited bridging program access, additional course requirements and infrequent exam scheduling (e.g., NCLEX-RN is offered one to three times per annum in Canada, depending on location). The excessive delays have real consequences for IENs, who are frequently forced to work as personal support workers, nurses' aides or in other low-wage survival jobs as they pursue licensure. IENs report

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25 In Quebec, the OIIQ exam is administered in place of the NCLEX-RN examination.

26 For example in most provinces the English language test score requirements for IENs as per IELTS is reading/writing =6.5, speaking/listening=7, whereas for the Express Entry Federal Skilled Worker Program and Canadian Experience Class, the requirement is CLB 7 which is met by a IELTS score of 6 on each of reading/writing/speaking/listening. "Language Requirements – Skilled Immigrants (Express Entry)", Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), last modified January 11, 2021, [www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/immigrate-canada/express-entry/documents/language-requirements.html](http://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/immigrate-canada/express-entry/documents/language-requirements.html), [www.canadim.com/guides/canadian-language-benchmark](http://www.canadim.com/guides/canadian-language-benchmark); [www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/operational-bulletins-manuals/standard-requirements/language-requirements/test-equivalency-charts.html](http://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/operational-bulletins-manuals/standard-requirements/language-requirements/test-equivalency-charts.html)

27 "RPL Quality Assurance Manual: Introduction," Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA), accessed August 22, 2023. <https://capla.ca/rpl-qa-manual>

28 Per Anderson and Shibao Guo, "Governing through Non/Recognition: The Missing 'R' in the PLAR for Immigrant Professionals in Canada and Sweden," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 28, no. 4 (2009): 432-437, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370903031264>

29 IENs may submit applications for an additional nursing profession for an incremental USD 230 each and/or for additional provinces for USD 55 each. The standard fee for one profession, one province, is USD 650; "Starting Internationally Educated Nurses on their Journey to Nursing Practice in Canada," National Nursing Assessment Service (NNAS), accessed August 21, 2023. [www.nnas.ca](http://www.nnas.ca)

30 Ibid.

31 BC initially introduced NCAS in place of NNAS. Subsequently, in January 2023, New Brunswick, Alberta and BC have implemented pilots to bypass NNAS and assess credentials only at the provincial level; this is expected to streamline the process, reduce barriers and remove months or years of delays; "Coming in 2023: New Registration Process will Remove Delays and Lower Costs for Internationally Trained Nurses," British Columbia College of Nurses and Midwives (BCCNM), accessed July 15, 2023. [www.bccnm.ca/BCCNM/Announcements/Pages/Announcement.aspx?AnnouncementID=396](http://www.bccnm.ca/BCCNM/Announcements/Pages/Announcement.aspx?AnnouncementID=396)

32 Canadian Broadcast Corporation (CBC), "As Ontario ERs buckle, Nurses' Groups want International Applicants' Licences Expedited," *CBC News*, July 28, 2022. [www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/ont-international-nurses-1.6535290](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/ont-international-nurses-1.6535290)

mental health and financial challenges as they navigate the complex licensure process, work outside their profession and incur duplicate application and exam expenditures due to regulator delays (e.g., IENs report having to take multiple language tests when their previous exam results expire).<sup>33</sup> IENs have noted “the perception by Canadians that the Canadian medical education is ‘elite’; systemic racism in healthcare [and the] underrepresentation of people of colour in medical program leadership leading to a lack of cultural understanding of internationally educated health professionals.”<sup>34</sup> The Canadian licensure system is discriminatory, complex, inconsistent, inefficient and appears designed to frustrate an IEN’s ability to practice.

A noted lack of transparency compounds the effects of systemic inequities. The NNAS and provincial regulators’ assessment criteria have not been disclosed. No publicly available statistics indicate the equivalency of nursing education programs or clinical requirements in particular regions, nor are there precedents or even exam pass rates by source country. The evaluation is opaque. In Ontario, for example, assessments are based on a case-by-case analysis rather than employing articulation agreements between universities or a focus on equivalency assessments. Nor does Canada hold bilateral agreements with crucial source countries, such as the Philippines, India or Nigeria, that might facilitate the development of a consistent framework of skills recognition.

The prejudice inherent in the licensure process transitions into employment. The IEN experience has been unfair treatment and discrimination from patients, management physicians and co-workers.<sup>35</sup> In the workplace, IEN’s struggle to receive professional recognition, have been subjected to intense monitoring, longer hours, more difficult shifts and

fewer career opportunities than their Canadian-born peers.<sup>36</sup> A regional study investigating long-term care facilities found employers were less willing to hire IENs and failed to recognize their extensive experience and thus equated their professional acumen to that of new graduates.<sup>37</sup> Jeffries et al. (2019) highlight the deleterious health and safety consequences and community impact of the underrepresentation of racialized nursing professionals in Canada’s healthcare system.<sup>38</sup>

At the time of writing, New Brunswick, Alberta and BC had recently implemented pilots to bypass NNAS and assess credentials only at the provincial level.<sup>39</sup> This will reduce some duplication but in itself is far from transformative. The April/May 2023 licensure amendments in Nova Scotia and Alberta are more promising. In Alberta, applicants from the Philippines, India, the United States, the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, Nigeria, Jamaica, New Zealand and Ireland, representing 94 percent of applicants, no longer require a credential assessment. The College of Registered Nurses of Alberta will only validate, not assess, IEN documents. Passing the Alberta Registration exam will simultaneously fulfill the English language proficiency condition, leaving the NCLEX-RN exam as the main competency requirement. With these amendments, the nursing regulator has registered 1,413 IENs in the first month, more than 2½ times the total IEN registrations in the past four years combined.<sup>40</sup> The Nova Scotia College of Nursing has similarly moved to a credential validation approach for IENs with current licensure in the Philippines, India, Nigeria, USA, UK, Australia or New Zealand, making up 87 percent of IEN applicants. In this case, passing the NCLEX-RN competency exam will fulfill licensure requirements. The regulator notes, “Using an equity lens, the newly developed approach yields consistent

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33 Cat Goodfellow et al., *A Missing Part of Me: A Pan-Canadian Report on the Licensure of Internationally Educated Health Professionals [Final Report]* (Ottawa: National Newcomer Navigation Network, 2023). [www.newcomernavigation.ca/en/about-us/resources/documents/SiteReport-Feb2023.v5.pdf](http://www.newcomernavigation.ca/en/about-us/resources/documents/SiteReport-Feb2023.v5.pdf)

34 Ibid.

35 Elena Neiterman and Ivy Lynn Bourgeault, “The Shield of Professional Status: Comparing Internationally Educated Nurses’ and International Medical Graduates’ Experiences of Discrimination,” *Health* 19, no. 6 (2015): 615-634. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363459314567788>; Shiva Nourpanah, “Maybe We Shouldn’t Laugh So Loud’: The Hostility and Welcome Experienced by Foreign Nurses on Temporary Work Permits in Nova Scotia, Canada,” *Labour/Le Travail* (Spring 2019) 83, 105-120. <https://doi.org/10.1353/llt.2019.0004>; Ruth Lee and Ruthe Wojtziuk, “Transition of Internationally Educated Nurses into Practice: What We Need to Do to Evolve as an Inclusive Profession over the Next Decade,” *Nursing Leadership* 34, no. 4 (2021): 57-64. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35039119>

36 Ibid.

37 Ruth Lee and Ruthe Wojtziuk, “Transition of Internationally Educated Nurses into Practice: What We Need to Do to Evolve as an Inclusive Profession over the Next Decade,” *Nursing Leadership* 34, no. 4 (2021): 57-64. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35039119>

38 Keisha Jefferies et al., “African Nova Scotian Nurses’ Perceptions and Experiences of Leadership: A Qualitative Study Informed by Black Feminist Theory,” *CMAJ* 194, no. 42 (2022): E1437-E1447, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36316018>

39 “Nursing Professionals,” British Columbia College of Nurses and Midwives (BCCNM), accessed July 17, 2023. [www.bccnm.ca/Pages/Default.aspx](http://www.bccnm.ca/Pages/Default.aspx)

40 Greg Mercer, “Thousands of Foreign-trained Nurses can now Practise in Canada as Provinces Change Licensing Rules,” *Globe and Mail*, May 11, 2023. [www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-international-trained-nurses-licenses-canada](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-international-trained-nurses-licenses-canada)

and predictable licensing outcomes.”<sup>41</sup> This equivalency assessment was subsequent to the regulator’s review of 10 years’ worth of data from NNAS reports and NCLEX-RN success rates for IEN applicants from the seven countries.<sup>42</sup> Newfoundland and PEI have recently announced their intent to introduce a similar approach. These amendments are encouraging. They recognize the substantive and comparable experiences of IENs, streamline the process by taking a macro-level view of equivalency and maintain consistency through the NCLEX-RN competency assessment.

## IEN LICENSURE IN OTHER JURISDICTIONS

Unmet demand for healthcare talent is a global phenomenon, with the World Health Organization predicting a global shortage of 5.7 million nurses by 2030.<sup>43</sup> The global migration of healthcare professionals is expected to continue, with practitioners seeking to advance their careers and lifestyles.<sup>44</sup> There exists an ethical and competitive imperative to learn from other jurisdictions and ensure IENs’ skills are commensurately recognized and rewarded.

Australia has been cited for its superior skilled migration outcomes relative to Canada. As previously noted, IENs in Canada are ten times more likely to earn less than 50 percent of the median income of their profession than are IENs in Australia.<sup>45</sup> Further, Australia has been more successful at transitioning IENs into skill-commensurate employment, with IENs representing 29 percent of registered nurses in

Australia versus only 9 percent of the nursing workforce in Canada.<sup>46</sup> Australia’s efforts to attract and recognize the credentials of internationally educated professions commenced in 1989 with the establishment of the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition, mandated to work with regulators and introduce bridging pathways for nine targeted occupations, of which nursing was one.<sup>47</sup> Subsequently, national assessment bodies were established for pre-migration credential assessment. In 2010, Australia moved from a state-level regulatory framework to a national registration process for nurses under the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA), including the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia (NMBA).<sup>48</sup> In Australia, IENs need only meet a single national standard to qualify to practice in every state versus navigating Canada’s complex, decentralized regulatory environment.<sup>49</sup>

As of 2020, Australia has transitioned from RN bridging programs towards an outcomes-based approach. The IEN licensure process will now involve 1) an online self-assessment to determine the relevance and equivalence of the IEN’s credential and assign the applicant to Stream A/B/C; 2) credential validation/assessment; 3) an orientation; 4) if the applicant is Stream B (i.e., credential is relevant but not equivalent), they must pass the NCLEX-RN exam administered by Pearson VUE which may be taken in most countries before entry to Australia; and 5) Stream B applicants must also pass the OSCE exam, offered up to five times per year and administered in Adelaide, Australia.<sup>50</sup> Individuals in Stream C whose education is not equivalent or relevant must upgrade their qualification, while Stream A applicants need

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- 41 “NSCN Announces a First-in-Canada Licensure Process for Nurses Coming to Nova Scotia,” Nova Scotia College of Nursing, accessed July 17, 2023. [www.nscn.ca/explore-nscn/news-and-media/news/2023/nscn-announces-first-canada-licensure-process-nurses-coming-nova-scotia](http://www.nscn.ca/explore-nscn/news-and-media/news/2023/nscn-announces-first-canada-licensure-process-nurses-coming-nova-scotia)
  - 42 “Expedited Licensing Process for Nurses Licensed in Designated Jurisdictions,” Nova Scotia College of Nursing, accessed July 17, 2023. [www.nscn.ca/sites/default/files/documents/Registration/Expedited%20Licensing%20Process%20for%20Nurses%20Licensed%20in%20Designated%20Jurisdictions%20FAQ.pdf](http://www.nscn.ca/sites/default/files/documents/Registration/Expedited%20Licensing%20Process%20for%20Nurses%20Licensed%20in%20Designated%20Jurisdictions%20FAQ.pdf)
  - 43 Chanchal Kurup et al., “Transition of Internationally Qualified Nurses in Australia: Meta-synthesis of Qualitative Studies,” *Collegian* 30, no. 2 (2022): 357–366. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.colegn.2022.10.002>
  - 44 Melissa Cooper et al., “Regulation, Migration and Expectation: Internationally Qualified Health Practitioners in Australia— A Qualitative Study,” *Human Resources for Health* 18, no. 1 (2020): 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12960-020-00514-7>
  - 45 Benjamin Harrap et al., “Australia’s Superior Skilled Migration Outcomes Compared with Canada’s,” *International Migration* 60, no. 5 (2021): 91–107. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12940>
  - 46 Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI), *Nursing in Canada, 2019: A Lens on Supply and Workforce* (Ottawa: Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2019), [www.cihi.ca/sites/default/files/rot/nursing-report-2019-en-web.pdf](http://www.cihi.ca/sites/default/files/rot/nursing-report-2019-en-web.pdf); Chun Tie YIona et al., “Playing the Game: A Grounded Theory of the Integration of International Nurses,” *Collegian* 26, no. 4 (2019): 470–476. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.colegn.2018.12.006>
  - 47 Benjamin Harrap et al., “Australia’s Superior Skilled Migration Outcomes Compared with Canada’s.” *International Migration* 60, no. 5 (2022): 91–107. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12940>
  - 48 Andrew Cashin et al., “Development of the Nurse Practitioner Standards for Practice Australia.” *Policy, Politics, & Nursing Practice* 16, no. 1-2 (2015): 27–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527154415584233>
  - 49 Ibid.
  - 50 “Steps after Self-check (assessment stages),” Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia (NMBA), accessed July 17, 2023. [www.nursingmidwiferyboard.gov.au/Accreditation/IQNM/Self-check-and-Portfolio/Steps-after-Self-check.aspx](http://www.nursingmidwiferyboard.gov.au/Accreditation/IQNM/Self-check-and-Portfolio/Steps-after-Self-check.aspx)

only complete the credential validation and orientation.<sup>51</sup> The regulator notes that IENs from Canada, Hong Kong, Ireland, the U.K., the U.S. and New Zealand will likely meet the Stream A requirements, while IENs from Belgium, Flanders, Chile, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea and Singapore may meet them.<sup>52</sup> While intended to streamline the process, this new option may be less expedient<sup>53</sup> and more costly for Stream B versus the previous 3-month bridging option (i.e., OSCE alone is AUD 4,000, bringing the total cost to AUD 8,500 for Stream B).<sup>54</sup> The question remains about the impact of recent amendments; the increased financial barrier might suppress IEN interest in Australia. Despite this shift, Canada can learn from Australia's simplified national framework, targeted 6-month registration process, and free online self-assessment, wherein applicants are immediately made aware of their stream.

In 2021, it was estimated that 20% of registered nurses in the UK were educated internationally in non-European Union countries and 16% in non-British European Union countries.<sup>55</sup> The UK holds bilateral agreements or memorandums of understanding with the governments of the Philippines, India, Malaysia, Kenya, Nepal and Sri Lanka.<sup>56</sup> These agreements set the conditions for recruiting internationally educated health professionals and for the signatories' joint efforts to collaborate on healthcare workforce planning. A vital aspect of the contracts is the "development of a mutually agreed system of recognition of skills, qualifications, and education and

training credentials."<sup>57</sup> The national IEN licensure process in the U.K. involves 1) Credential validation/assessment; 2) Demonstration of English language abilities through education/work experience or IELTS/OET pass; 3) Completion of a computer-based test (CBT) offered through Pearson VUE; and 4) completion of the OSCE.<sup>58</sup> Here, the application evaluation stage takes up to 14 days, and once the CBT/OSCE and, where required, language test is complete, licensure takes up to 30 days, with a minimum timeline to licensure attainment of five months, including exams.<sup>59</sup> The total cost, including exams, is CAN\$1,975; IENs who are unsuccessful in the credential assessment and wish to withdraw from the process will receive reimbursement.<sup>60</sup> While it was unclear from the regulator's website, the 14-day credential assessment suggests that bilateral agreements and established precedents are driving efficiencies and a more expedient licensure process for IENs.

An examination of Ireland's licensure process reveals some similarities with past and present practices in Australia. While recent nursing data was unavailable, Ireland's success at attracting and integrating international healthcare talent is evidenced by internationally educated physicians representing over 40% of the profession.<sup>61</sup> To commence the IEN licensure process in Ireland, non-EU IENs complete a free self-assessment, assigning applicants to a G1,<sup>62</sup> G2 or G3 pathway.<sup>63</sup> G2 and G3 pathways require a formal credential assessment which will result in one of two outcomes:

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51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Still, in 2023, 3 OSCE exams have already been scheduled by June; therefore, it is possible to complete the registration requirements within 6 months.

54 The Australian regulatory revisions have been criticized for 1) a lack of transparency with respect to the evidence and process employed; 2) the disconnect between an outcome-based approach to IEN assessments (i.e., exam-based), versus the "input-based institutional accreditation for nurses educated in Australia."; Cooper, Melissa, Philippa Rasmussen, and Judy Magarey. 2020; and 3) the change in emphasis with IENs now responsible for their own adjustment to the Australian healthcare system, whereas through bridging, IENs received support and integration was a joint responsibility; Chanchal Kurup et al., "Transition of Internationally Qualified Nurses in Australia: Meta-synthesis of Qualitative Studies," *Collegian* 30, no. 2 (2022): 357-366. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.colegn.2022.10.002>

55 "Adult Social Care Workforce Data," Skills for Care, accessed July 17, 2023. [www.skillsforcare.org.uk/home.aspx](http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/home.aspx)

56 "Government-to-government Agreements on Health and Social Care Workforce Recruitment," Government of the UK, last modified August 22, 2022. [www.gov.uk/government/collections/government-to-government-agreements-on-health-and-social-care-workforce-recruitment](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/government-to-government-agreements-on-health-and-social-care-workforce-recruitment)

57 "Memorandum of Understanding on the Recruitment of Filipino Healthcare Professionals between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland," Government of the UK, accessed July 17, 2023. [www.gov.uk/government/publications/memorandum-of-understanding-between-the-uk-and-the-philippines-on-healthcare-cooperation/memorandum-of-understanding-on-the-recruitment-of-filipino-healthcare-professionals-between-the-government-of-the-republic-of-the-philippines-and-the](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/memorandum-of-understanding-between-the-uk-and-the-philippines-on-healthcare-cooperation/memorandum-of-understanding-on-the-recruitment-of-filipino-healthcare-professionals-between-the-government-of-the-republic-of-the-philippines-and-the)

58 Homepage, Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), accessed August 22, 2023. [www.nmc.org.uk](http://www.nmc.org.uk)

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Gemma Williams et al., "Health Professional Mobility in the WHO European Region and the WHO Global Code of Practice: Data from the Joint OECD/EUROSTAT/WHO-Europe Questionnaire," *European Journal of Public Health* 30, no. supplement 4 (2020): iv5-iv11. <https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckaa124>

62 G1 applicants are primarily those with licensure/practice within an EU country whose credentials are recognized under the recognition of professional qualifications; Directive 2005/36/EC.

63 Homepage, Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland (NMBI), accessed August 22, 2023. [www.nmbi.ie/Home](http://www.nmbi.ie/Home)

1) approval/licensure provided language testing or English practice requirements are met; 2) provisional refusal where there are significant deficits in the theoretical or clinical training; or 3) a compensation measure requirement in the form of an aptitude test (i.e., a multiple choice exam AND an OSCE exam), OR a supervised practice term at an approved healthcare facility lasting 6 to 12 weeks.<sup>64</sup> While the 13-month process in Ireland is lengthier by UK and Australian standards, the ability to advance through the choice of exams or practical compensation measures may appeal to IENs.<sup>65</sup>

The Ireland, U.K., and Australia cases illustrate how greater effectiveness and efficiency can be attained through 1) a streamlined national licensure framework; 2) self-assessments and improved transparency allowing IENs to fully assess the requirements before making an investment; 3) options for an outcomes-based (i.e., examination) or a practical assessment where compensation measures, such as a supervised practice term, may be required; and 4) precedents and bilateral agreements, allowing equivalency to be assessed at a country or institutional level, facilitating a more expedient process.

## CONCLUSION

Canada's licensure process is complex and involves multi-level governance structures, disparate requirements and province-specific pathways. The result has been an ineffective, inequitable and inefficient process that has led to the deskilling of highly proficient internationally educated nurses, who have disrupted their lives to immigrate to Canada on the

promise of full and equitable participation. Despite the severe nursing shortage, PLAR has been operationalized in a manner that devalues and only subordinately includes newcomer skill sets. In contrast, the context demands a mechanism that expands occupational access and accelerates IEN integration.

Canada can learn from the simple, transparent and *national* licensure standards applied in Australia, Ireland and the UK; federal and provincial collaboration to develop such standards is requisite. Canada's regulators can also learn from the application of articulation agreements, bilateral agreements and credential assessment at a global level versus case-by-case reviews. This approach has been applied effectively in similar healthcare contexts and, more recently, in Nova Scotia and Alberta. Further, other markets have demonstrated that an outcomes-based examination mechanism OR a practical evaluation (but not both) are sufficient to facilitate a robust assessment. Lastly, Canada must expedite the licensure process. Timelines over 18 months are uncompetitive and, given requirements for recent practice, lead to the deskilling of qualified IEN candidates.

The systemic obstacles contributing to the underemployment and deskilling of racialized newcomer women is untenable in a country that prides itself on multiculturalism and inclusion. The current framework does not meet the expectations of IENs nor the demands of Canada's healthcare sector. Further, as a public good, health policy and delivery must reflect and respond to the diverse needs, interests and expectations of the population it serves. At this juncture, the barriers, their impact, as well as effective and efficient alternatives are well evidenced. It is time for action.

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64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.



APPENDIX

TABLE 1. IEN LICENSURE - PROVINCIAL COMPARISON

	Ontario	Manitoba
<b>National Application, Education &amp; Credential Assessment</b>	Yes, reviewed by NNAS.	Yes, reviewed by NNAS.
<b>Provincial Regulator Application, Education &amp; Credential Assessment*</b>	College of Nurses of Ontario (CNO) evaluates education/credentials relative to provincial standards.	College of Registered Nurses of Manitoba (CRNM) evaluates education to assess comparability.
<b>Additional Education, Training or Bridging Required</b>	If education/competency gaps are identified, IENs must complete the RN Canadian Competency Assessment Program (RNCCAP). Additional courses and/or a bridging program may be required based on this assessment.	A Clinical Competence Assessment (CCA) or the completion of the Nurse Re-entry Program (NREP) is required. Once CCA results are reviewed, additional courses may be required through the NREP. There is a Prior Learning Assessment Policy (Part I and Part II). Part I is embedded into NNAS and Part II into CCA.
<b>Language Proficiency Requirement</b>	English or French language proficiency demonstrated by 1) practiced nursing in English/French within past 2 years; 2) nursing education in English/French within past 2 years; 3) approved language test score of 8, 9, 8, 7 (CELBAN) or 7, 7, 6.5, 6.5, 7 (IELTS).**	English language proficiency demonstrated by 1) completed approved nursing education program in Canada or NREP completion within past 2 years; 2) approved language test score of 8, 9, 8, 7 (CELBAN) or 7, 7, 6.5, 6.5, 7 (IELTS).**
<b>Examination Requirements</b>	1) RN Jurisprudence Exam; 2) NCLEX-RN Exam.	1) Clinical Competence Assessment (CCA) written over 4 days in Manitoba; 2) NCLEX-RN Exam.
<b>Provisional Registration granting ability to work in field</b>	Yes, if IEN has job offer from an approved Ontario nursing employer.	Yes – once the NCLEX-RN is scheduled, IENs may apply for a Graduate Nurse (GN) registration in the interim.
<b>Practical Experience Requirements</b>	Evidence of Nursing practice within 3 years prior to registration. Or if practiced within 8 years, may be eligible to complete Supervised Practice Experience Partnership to meet practice requirement.	1125 hours of nursing practice in the previous 5 years or 450 hours in the past 2 years.

Notes:

\*In addition to the above, criminal checks, validation that registration is in good standing, employer & regulator attestations, transcripts directly from educational institutions, document translation etc. are standard requirements.

\*\* Language tests scores have been stated as Speaking/Listening/Reading/Writing/Overall

APPENDIX

TABLE 1. IEN LICENSURE - PROVINCIAL COMPARISON

	Saskatchewan	New Brunswick
<b>National Application, Education &amp; Credential Assessment</b>	Yes, reviewed by NNAS.	Yes, reviewed by NNAS .
<b>Provincial Regulator Application, Education &amp; Credential Assessment*</b>	College of Registered Nurses of Saskatchewan (CRNS) reviews; must have education equivalent to provincial requirement. Must have current registration in the country where IEN's nursing education was completed. Substantial Equivalent Competency Assessment (SEC) may be required at Sask. Polytechnic, Regina SK.	Nurses Association of New Brunswick (NANB) review.
<b>Additional Education, Training or Bridging Required</b>	If required based on assessment. May include formal courses and/or Registered Nursing Bridging Program for Internationally Educated Nurses (RNBPIEN), run by Sask. Polytechnic Bridging Program.	Must complete mandatory courses unless education and registration was in USA (Zone 1). IENs must complete 2 courses (for Zone 2, 3), 4 courses (for Zone 4) or a competency assessment and defined coursework (Zone 5), depending on the country where nursing education and registration was obtained.
<b>Language Proficiency Requirement</b>	English proficiency demonstrated by approved language test score of 8, 9, 8, 7 (CELBAN) or 7, 7, 6.5, 6.5, 7 (IELTS)** if English is not IEN's primary language.	Evidence of English or French proficiency required for Zone 5 (i.e., IENs registered in countries other than USA, New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom, Ireland, France, Hong Kong, Belgium, United Arab Emirates, India, Philippines, Morocco, Lebanon, or Switzerland). Test score requirements: 7, 7, 6.5, 6.5 (CELBAN) and 8, 9, 8, 7, 7.5 (IELTS).**
<b>Examination Requirements</b>	1) If SEC required, includes multiple choice exam, Clinical judgement interview/exam & Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCEs); 2) NCLEX-RN.	NCLEX-RN Exam.
<b>Provisional Registration granting ability to work in field</b>	Yes, Graduate Nurse License, prior to NCLEX-RN exam if other requirements are met.	Yes, for Zones 2, 3, 4 only. Temporary Registration Permit (TRP) for up to 1 year is available while additional education is being completed, where required by NANB.
<b>Practical Experience Requirements</b>	1) 1125 hours of nursing practice in past 5 years; or, 2) graduated from an approved nursing education program in past 5 years; or, 3) completed an approved nursing re-entry program in past 5 years; or, 4) passed NCLEX-RN in past 5 years.	1) 1125 practice hours in past 5 licensure years; or 2) Completed approved RN nurse education program in past 5 years. If fewer hours, must complete NANB Adaptation Program. If haven't practiced in past 5 years, competency assessment is required.

Notes:

\*In addition to the above, criminal checks, validation that registration is in good standing, employer & regulator attestations, transcripts directly from educational institutions, document translation etc. are standard requirements.

\*\* Language tests scores have been stated as Speaking/Listening/Reading/Writing/Overall

APPENDIX

TABLE 1. IEN LICENSURE - PROVINCIAL COMPARISON

	British Columbia	Nova Scotia (7 Countries)
<b>National Application, Education &amp; Credential Assessment</b>	Yes, reviewed by NCAS (Provincial Provider) or NNAS if already in progress. Education credential evaluation can be completed by any of the approved agencies. Competency assessment may be required.	NNAS review no longer required for IENs with current RN licensure in good standing in the Philippines, India, Nigeria, USA, UK, Australia, New Zealand (as of May 2023).
<b>Provincial Regulator Application, Education &amp; Credential Assessment*</b>	British Columbia College of Nurses and Midwives (BCCNM) application can occur concurrent with NCAS review. BCCNM assess experience, credential evaluation results etc. relative to provincial requirements and determines if additional education is required.	Nova Scotia College of Nursing (NSCN) validates RN licensure documents and nursing education for IENs educated/registered in the 7 countries above (i.e., assessment is not required).
<b>Additional Education, Training or Bridging Required</b>	If competency gaps are identified by BCCNM, additional education is required.	No additional education or training required for IENs educated/licensed in the 7 countries
<b>Language Proficiency Requirement</b>	English language proficiency demonstrated by 1) practiced nursing in English speaking setting within past 2 years; 2) nursing education in English within past 2 years; 3) approved language test score of 8, 9, 8, 7 (CELBAN) or 7, 7, 6.5, 6.5, 7 (IELTS).**	Language test is not required if nursing education completed in English, or licensure/practice was in English, or both current registration and nursing education program was completed in one of the 7 countries. Otherwise language test pass requirements are of 8, 9, 8, 7 (CELBAN) or 7, 7, 6.5, 6.5, 7 (IELTS).**
<b>Examination Requirements</b>	NCLEX-RN Exam	NCLEX-RN Exam
<b>Provisional Registration granting ability to work in field</b>	Yes, Prior to NCLEX-RN Exam provided other registration requirements have been met.	Yes, applicants are eligible to enter practice with a conditional licence (CL) for up to 12 months while attempting NCLEX-RN exam.
<b>Practical Experience Requirements</b>	IEN professional experience is evaluated; however, specific recency of practice criteria are not stated.	For IENs from 7 countries: If IEN has not practiced in past few years but practiced in past 10 years and passed NCLEX-RN exam they qualify for a license. If IEN has not practiced in the past 10 years and has passed NCLEX-RN exam they may still qualify for a license. Reviewed on a case by case basis.

Notes:

\*In addition to the above, criminal checks, validation that registration is in good standing, employer & regulator attestations, transcripts directly from educational institutions, document translation etc. are standard requirements.

\*\* Language tests scores have been stated as Speaking/Listening/Reading/Writing/Overall

APPENDIX

TABLE 1. IEN LICENSURE - PROVINCIAL COMPARISON

	Prince Edward Island	Alberta
<b>National Application, Education &amp; Credential Assessment</b>	Yes, reviewed by NNAS. Accelerated review times (5-day turnaround) announced by PEI regulator (as of June 2023).	NNAS credential assessment no longer required with NCLEX-RN exam pass OR CRNA Registration exam pass OR registration in the Philippines, India, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Nigeria, Jamaica, New Zealand and Ireland (as of Apr 2023).
<b>Provincial Regulator Application, Education &amp; Credential Assessment*</b>	A College of Registered Nurses and Midwife's of PEI (CRNMPEI) review is required. Completion of RNPDC competency assessment may be required. Accelerated review times of 5 days and streamlined requirements for IENs from the Philippines, India, Nigeria, USA, UK, Australia, New Zealand (announced June 2023 for future implementation).	College of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CRNA) credential assessment can be bypassed with NNAS assessment of education as "substantial equivalence" OR Registration exam pass OR applicant received nursing education and has current RN registration in the Philippines, India, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Nigeria, Jamaica, New Zealand and Ireland. Credential validation is always required.
<b>Additional Education, Training or Bridging Required</b>	Bridging program if required based on RNPDC assessment results. Bridging program delivered jointly with Nova Scotia.	Must fulfill Jurisprudence requirement by completing 2 e-learning modules. If education assessment states "not comparable", must complete assessment and/or nursing bridging program.
<b>Language Proficiency Requirement</b>	If no documentation is provided to prove education in English or demonstration of safe practice in English, a language proficiency test is required. Language test pass requirements are 8, 9, 8, 7 (CELBAN) or 7, 7, 6.5, 6.5, 7 (IELTS).**	1) Completion of 2 or more years nursing education in English; or 2) evidence of practice in past 3 years where primary language was English; or 3) wrote and passed Alberta Registration exam in English; or 4) successful completion of NCLEX-RN exam; or 5) passed English language proficiency exam scoring 8, 9, 8, 7 (CELBAN) or 7, 7, 6.5, 6.5, 7 (IELTS).**
<b>Examination Requirements</b>	1) CRNMPEI Jurisprudence exam; 2) NCLEX-RN Exam. (Note: When new model is launched, only (2) will be required for IENs from the 7 countries).	1) Alberta Registration Exam required for all pathways; 2) NCLEX-RN.
<b>Provisional Registration granting ability to work in field</b>	Yes, provisional license is available for IENs from the 7 countries who require work experience in order to meet currency of practice requirements and/or for those who still need to write NCLEX-RN exam.	NO
<b>Practical Experience Requirements</b>	1,125 hours in the preceding five years or 450 hours in the preceding year.	1) 1125 practice hours in past 5 licensure years OR 2) Completed approved nursing refresher program in past 5 years. May also meet requirement with one of 7 additional criteria met (e.g., NCLEX-RN exam pass within past year, approved bridging program), as assessed by CNRA.

Notes:

\*In addition to the above, criminal checks, validation that registration is in good standing, employer & regulator attestations, transcripts directly from educational institutions, document translation etc. are standard requirements.

\*\* Language tests scores have been stated as Speaking/Listening/Reading/Writing/Overall

APPENDIX

TABLE 1. IEN LICENSURE - PROVINCIAL COMPARISON

	Quebec	Newfoundland (7 Countries)
<b>National Application, Education &amp; Credential Assessment</b>	NNAS review not required.	NNAS review no longer required for IENs with current licensure in the Philippines, India, Nigeria, USA, UK, Australia, New Zealand (as of June 2023).
<b>Provincial Regulator Application, Education &amp; Credential Assessment*</b>	OIIQ's Equivalence Committee must assesses education to be equivalent to nursing education in Quebec. Applicants with nursing degree from France are assumed to have equivalency.	College of Registered Nurses of Newfoundland and Labrador (CRNNL) reviews education credential assessment (ECA) from NNAS or an IRCC approved supplier (for preferred countries). CRNNL reviews information on IEN's past 5 years' practice.
<b>Additional Education, Training or Bridging Required</b>	Must complete Professional Integration Program at an educational institution and additional training as outlined by the Equivalence Committee.	May be required to complete competency assessment or bridging education or supervised assessment.
<b>Language Proficiency Requirement</b>	Must pass OQLF French Language Exam.	1) Completion of nursing education in English; or 2) evidence of practice in past 2 years where primary language was English; or 3) meets English test score requirements of 8, 9, 8, 7 (CELBAN) or 7, 7, 6.5, 6.5, 7 (IELTS).**
<b>Examination Requirements</b>	OIIQ Professional Exam.	NCLEX-RN Exam.
<b>Provisional Registration granting ability to work in field</b>	Yes, once equivalency determined & integration program complete, IEN is issued "candidate for the practice of the nursing profession status" and can work.	Yes, for up to 3 years. Must have met all requirements except completion of NCLEX-RN Exam or met all requirements except professional reference/practice details are outstanding.
<b>Practical Experience Requirements</b>	IEN professional experience is evaluated; however, specific recency of practice criteria are not stated.	IEN professional experience is evaluated and IENs must submit details on their nursing practice within the past 5 years; however, specific recency of practice criteria are not stated.

Notes:

\*In addition to the above, criminal checks, validation that registration is in good standing, employer & regulator attestations, transcripts directly from educational institutions, document translation etc. are standard requirements.

\*\* Language tests scores have been stated as Speaking/Listening/Reading/Writing/Overall

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# SUPPORTING NEWCOMER PATHWAYS INTO THE LABOUR MARKET

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Canada's immigration system places an emphasis on education and professional experience. However, many highly skilled newcomers to Canada often end up working in precarious, low-skilled jobs and have difficulties accessing job opportunities aligned with their competencies (Lauer et al., 2013). Education and training can provide a bridge to commensurate employment, provided that supports are present to help newcomers access, succeed in and exploit the learnings from these programs. ESDC defines wraparound support

as "A set of supports or services provided to an individual, particularly, though not exclusively, from an Indigenous and/or equity-deserving group, that are necessary to mitigate barriers to their participation in the project."<sup>1</sup> Wraparound supports may also be viewed more broadly and in relation to the participant's experience throughout the program access, program completion and employment outcomes phases of skills development interventions.<sup>2</sup> There is a pressing need to learn more about what wraparound supports are, why they

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1 Government of Canada. (2022). *Apply for funding to support workers and employers towards economic recovery - Sectoral Workforce Solutions Program – Closed*. Employment and Social Development Canada. [www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/funding/sectoral-workforce-solutions-economic-recovery.html](http://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/funding/sectoral-workforce-solutions-economic-recovery.html)

2 Wendy Cukier et al., *Wraparound Supports for Skills Development: Designing and Implementing Programs for Indigenous Peoples and Equity-Deserving Groups* (Toronto: Diversity Institute, 2022).

are important and how wraparound supports can be incorporated to help service providers and government agencies advance meaningful and effective programs tailored to the needs of newcomers. In this article, we identify a set of examples according to factors, such as place of service, type of service provider and immigration status of its users, in order to review a cross-section of existing wraparound supports. In doing so, we aim to make recommendations for a more coordinated system level approach.

There are complex reasons why newcomers are not able to access jobs compatible with their education or experience. Some of these reasons relate to the skills, knowledge and social capital newcomers possess, and some relate to systemic barriers and discrimination, including the lack of recognition of credentials, bias in the hiring processes, and challenges with the design and implementation of programs.<sup>3</sup> Canada invests heavily in training to support newcomers, ranging from language training to bridging programs through a variety of mechanisms at the federal, provincial and municipal levels. Additionally, postsecondary institutions, private colleges, and training organizations purport to provide pathways

to employment. While education and training are the backbone of social mobility in Canada, the results are uneven. Many newcomers face barriers to accessing and succeeding in training programs, and recent research suggests that a more nuanced understanding of the career pathing journey for newcomers and inclusive wraparound supports are key to improving outcomes. Figure 1, below, outlines each stage of the career-pathing journey. This framework can be used to assess support requirements throughout the journey, with a direct link to career outcomes.

At each stage of the career pathing journey, some newcomers face challenges. Deciding to pursue training is a daunting proposition in light of many competing priorities.<sup>4</sup> Building self-efficacy, particularly for those who have experienced trauma or bias in dealing with institutions, may require additional psychological support.<sup>5</sup> Navigating systems, supports, unfamiliar job applications and interview processes, and building social capital can overwhelm even experienced and well-resourced professionals.<sup>6</sup> Newcomers may require targeted training and coaching as well as sponsorship and mentoring. Coping with socio-economic barriers including

FIGURE 1. CAREER-PATHING MODEL.



Source: Escobari, M., Seyal, I., & Meaney, M. (2019). *Realism about reskilling: Upgrading the career prospects of America's low-wage workers*. Brookings. [www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Realism-about-Reskilling\\_Brookings\\_Overview-FOR-WEB.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Realism-about-Reskilling_Brookings_Overview-FOR-WEB.pdf)

- 3 Feenan, Katherine & Shamira Madhany. (2021). Skills for the Post-pandemic World: Immigration and the Success of Canada's Post-Pandemic Economy. May 2021. [www.torontomu.ca/diversity/reports/ImmigrationAndCanadasPostpandemicEconomy.pdf](http://www.torontomu.ca/diversity/reports/ImmigrationAndCanadasPostpandemicEconomy.pdf)
- 4 Chen, Wen-Hao and Feng Hou. (2019). Intergenerational Education Mobility and Labour Market Outcomes: Variation Among the Second Generation of Immigrants in Canada. Statistics Canada, Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series. [www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11foo19m/11foo19m2019006-eng.htm](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11foo19m/11foo19m2019006-eng.htm)
- 5 Kopala, Mary and Merle Keital (Eds.). (2003). *Handbook of Counseling Women*. Sage Publications Inc., California USA.
- 6 Escobari, Marcel, Ian Seyal and Michael Meaney. 2019. "About Reskilling Upgrading the career prospects of America's low-wage workers." Workforce of the Future initiative, Brookings Institute. [www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Realism-about-Reskilling\\_Brookings\\_Overview-FOR-WEB.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Realism-about-Reskilling_Brookings_Overview-FOR-WEB.pdf)

finances, access to housing, transportation (particularly in smaller communities), child care, or even a wardrobe needed for the job may be challenging. There are also intersectional considerations such as the additional burden women may face because of gender role expectations and unpaid work (e.g., child care, elder care, and household tasks).<sup>7</sup> Skills programs must meet participants where they are at while recognizing the unique complexities of their lives. Wraparound supports to address human capital barriers (e.g., tuition reimbursement), for example, may fail in the absence of strategies fulfilling logistical (e.g., childcare), well-being and labour market access needs.

As more and more programs require access to technology, the costs of networks, devices and the skills to use them may be a barrier. For example, neighbourhoods with large racialized and immigrant populations are less likely to have access to high speed internet and to devices such as smartphones and laptops.<sup>8</sup> A recent study by Diversity Institute, Future Skills Centre and the Environics Institute identified that the cost of high-speed internet in Toronto was more likely to be a concern among racialized families.<sup>9</sup> While, increasingly there is evidence to suggest that wraparound supports may be as critical to success as the training itself, research on the topic has been limited.<sup>10</sup> This is partly due to the lack of consensus on the definition of wraparound support and partly due to the dearth of evaluations that isolate its impact. In a review of 175 programs targeting newcomers and other underserved communities, only three percent had available evaluations.<sup>11</sup> This review also found the application of wraparound supports to be uneven across sectors and providers. The non-profit sector was most likely to offer supports (117 of the 175 programs; 67 percent), followed by programs delivered by, or in collaboration with private sector organizations (e.g., supports associated with NPower Canada's Junior IT Analyst Program, delivered in partnership with Google) and less commonly, by government. Few support programs were offered in association with formal educational service providers, such as colleges and universities.

## COMMON SERVICE COMBINATIONS

A recent review of wraparound supports for skills training programs showed that while definitions vary and there is considerable fragmentation in services, many organizations have built wraparound supports for newcomers into their programs.<sup>12</sup> A thematic analysis revealed that supports were designed to address three types of newcomer jobseeker needs: 1) human capital needs (e.g., direct financial support for training); 2) logistical needs (e.g., childcare, providing laptops); and, 3) well-being and motivational needs (e.g., counseling and coaching).

Supports to address newcomer jobseekers' human capital needs are common and may include employment placements, subsidies or lump-sum payments at the end of training completion or tuition, textbook and living expense reimbursements. For example, the Government of Quebec's Employment Integration Program for Immigrants and Visible Minorities (PRIIME) provides payments to immigrants in training, job placements and provides other settlement supports. To support newcomers' skill commensurate employment, PRIIME provides a 30-week wage subsidy to employers when newcomers are hired on their own initiative or through the assistance of Services Québec.<sup>13</sup> Manitoba Start's WorkStart work-experience program provides immigrant youth with mentoring support and eight weeks paid work experience in roles aligned with their interests, education and skills.<sup>14</sup> Work integrated learning and mentorship provide two of the most effective ways of improving the labour market outcomes of newcomers. These programs help newcomers acquire work experience within the Canadian context, develop their networks and build their social capital.<sup>15</sup> Further, work integrated learning allows participants to earn while they learn. Alternative financing options are also available through organizations such as Windmill Microlending, a national not-for-profit that offers low interest loans to skilled immigrants and refugees to pay for the costs of recertifying or getting licensed in Canada. As an organization, it collaborates

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- 7 Coogan, Pauline A., & Professor Charles P. Chen (2007) Career development and counselling for women: Connecting theories to practice, *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 20:2, 191-204, DOI: [10.1080/09515070701391171](https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070701391171)
- 8 Andrey, S., Dorkenoo, S., Malli, N., & Masoodi, M. (2021). Mapping Toronto's digital divide. Brookfield Institute. <https://brookfieldinstitute.ca/mapping-torontos-digital-divide>
- 9 Wendy Cukier et al., *Wraparound Supports for Skills Development: Designing and Implementing Programs for Indigenous Peoples and Equity-Deserving Groups* (Toronto: Diversity Institute, 2022).
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Diversity Institute. (2021). Pathways to Innovation and Inclusion. *Canadian Diversity*, Volume 18, NO. 2, 2021. [www.torontomu.ca/content/dam/diversity/reports/642\\_AEC\\_CanDiv\\_vol18no2\\_EN\\_V2\\_LR-2.pdf](http://www.torontomu.ca/content/dam/diversity/reports/642_AEC_CanDiv_vol18no2_EN_V2_LR-2.pdf)
- 13 Government of Quebec. (2023). [www.quebec.ca/en/employment/find-job-internship/employment-assistance-programs/immigrants-visible-minorities/employment-integration](http://www.quebec.ca/en/employment/find-job-internship/employment-assistance-programs/immigrants-visible-minorities/employment-integration)
- 14 Manitoba Start. (2022). *WorkStart Work Experience program*. <https://manitobastart.com/for-newcomers/work-experience-programs>
- 15 Wendy Cukier et al., *Wraparound Supports for Skills Development: Designing and Implementing Programs for Indigenous Peoples and Equity-Deserving Groups* (Toronto: Diversity Institute, 2022).

with skills trainers to help newcomers access loans to finance their skill development.<sup>16</sup>

Many organizations provide logistical supports, such as childcare, transit or digital devices and internet connectivity, to help newcomers access opportunities. The Riverdale Immigrant Women's Centre, Times Change Women's Employment Service Inc., and WoodGreen Community Services, all provide laptop loans and internet services to participants who lack suitable access.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, technology supports appear to be scarce outside of Toronto. St. Stephen's Community House helps newcomers with free English as a Second Language training and provides childcare and transit subsidies to meet logistical needs and enable participation.<sup>18</sup> The Newcomer Entrepreneurship Hub (NEH), created by the Diversity Institute in partnership with SCCC, delivers professional training to newcomers while enabling their achievement through wraparound supports (e.g., translation and settlement support). To date, 37 businesses have been successfully launched by program graduates and individualized business mentors support their journey.<sup>19</sup>

Often human capital and logistical supports are combined with mentoring, counseling, coaching and psycho-social supports. For example, Scadding Court Community Centre's Newcomer Services Program offers counseling, networking, childcare support and cultural-competency training with assistance navigating the employment and settlement services ecosystem.<sup>20</sup> Some programs have strong connections with employers to provide targeted career support. Since 2004,

Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council's (TRIEC) Mentorship Partnership program has matched over 22,000 immigrants with established professionals in their field, resulting in improved labour force outcomes.<sup>21</sup> Other organizations in the Immigrant Employer Network, such as the Immigrant Employment Council of British Columbia (IECBC) offer innovative solutions including pre-arrival training.<sup>22</sup> The TRIEC Mentorship partnership resulted in participants being 2.45 times more likely to have quality employment and other employer centered programs such as Diversity Institute's Advanced Digital and Professional Training (ADaPT) program have demonstrated promising results.<sup>23</sup>

Increasingly there is recognition of the importance of trauma informed approaches. The Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI), has developed a promising set of guidelines for organizations, however, acute shortages in access to tailored mental health supports remain a challenge.<sup>24</sup> Organizations such as the Ismaili Institutions for Canada have identified this as part of their efforts to resettle refugees as have Catholic Crosscultural Services (CCS), particularly in their work with refugees.<sup>25</sup> Organizations such as Green Shield Canada and Inkblot are experimenting with new online culturally appropriate approaches.<sup>26</sup> Community support, networks and social capital are also critical.<sup>27</sup>

The cited examples provide emerging best practices; however, at the system level challenges remain as a result of the fragmentation of training programs and support services in the Canadian ecosystem. This makes it difficult for newcomers

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16 Windmill Microlending. (2023). <https://windmillmicrolending.org/applicants/eligibility>

17 Riverdale Immigrant Women's Centre (n.d.). [www.riwc.ca](http://www.riwc.ca); Times Change Women's Employment Centre (n.d.). [www.timeschange.org](http://www.timeschange.org); WoodGreen programs (n.d.). [www.woodgreen.org](http://www.woodgreen.org)

18 TNG Community Services. (2023). <https://tngcommunityto.org>

19 Wendy Cukier, Wendy, Guang Ying Mo, Bincy Wilson, Stefan Karajovic and Nicholas Renzetti. (2022). *Wraparound Supports for Skills Development: Designing and Implementing Programs for Indigenous Peoples and Equity-Deserving Groups*. Diversity Institute, *Forthcoming*.

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24 OCASI. (2023). OCASI Guidelines on Trauma and Violence Informed Approaches for Agencies Serving Immigrants and Refugees. <https://ocasi.org/sites/default/files/tvia-guide-english-online.pdf>

25 Ismaili Institutions for Canada. (2023). <https://iicanada.org/health-wellness> CCS. 2023. [www.cathcrosscultural.org/newcomer-support-services](http://www.cathcrosscultural.org/newcomer-support-services)

26 Green Shield Canada. (2021). Better Health for All. 2021 Social Impact Report. <https://assets.greenshield.ca/greenshield/2022/blog/pdfs/GSC-2021-Social-Impact-Report-EN-Final-REV-Remediated.pdf>

27 Cukier, W. and S. Jackson. (2017). Welcoming Syrian refugees to Canada technology-enabled social innovation. 2017 IEEE Canada International Humanitarian Technology Conference (IHTC), Toronto, ON, Canada, 2017, pp. 32-36, [doi: 10.1109/IHTC.2017.8058194](https://doi.org/10.1109/IHTC.2017.8058194)

to navigate programs, eligibility requirements and applications, especially if they are working in English as a Second Language. Additionally, as there is little system level organization, quality control or support in navigating programs, many newcomers are vulnerable to poorly designed or even predatory programs, which offer training for jobs that never materialize.

## CONCLUSION: TOWARD INCLUSIVE WRAPAROUND SUPPORTS

While our understanding of the design and impact of wraparound services is evolving, and more research is needed, there is strong evidence to suggest that a more intentional approach will yield better results. Organizing current supports around the needs of newcomer job seekers as they pertain to their human capital needs, logistical needs, and well-being and motivational needs will help to direct relevant policy and the development of future services, as well as the efforts of government agencies, and other service providers. In doing so, however, we must:

- Ensure consistency in the definition, delivery, and evaluation of wraparound services.
- Provide better access to information about these supports, such as an accessible, centralized database of services.
- Reduce fragmentation, promote cooperation and the sharing of innovative and effective practices, perhaps offering shared services to develop economies of scale.
- Increase employer engagement in the career counseling and wraparound supports.

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- Recognize that up front investments (with accountability frameworks) in well designed and effective programs will save money over the longer term and drive economic growth and inclusion not just for newcomers but for the country as a whole.

Ensure all programs have a trauma-informed and intersectional lens applied to them and that trainers and counselors as well as recruiters understand the specific challenges facing newcomers.

Education and training are foundational to social mobility in Canada and wraparound supports can help newcomers access important education and training opportunities. We recommend applying a broad definition of wraparound support that is inclusive of provisions such as childcare, transportation subsidies, food subsidies, technology access, career counseling, mentorship services, networking support, direct financial support, mental health support, and work placement services.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, there is a need for greater coordination between training providers and the community-based organizations and postsecondary institutions providing wraparound. It is also critical that program metrics be identified and operationalized to facilitate robust evaluations, both of employment-training interventions and of the impact of wraparound supports on newcomer success. Finally, a systems approach that prioritizes coordination and alignment between all levels of government, educational institutions, community-based organizations, and employers is requisite. Attention to wraparound supports can facilitate newcomers' participation in employment-training interventions, accelerating the process of social and economic integration and setting the foundation for full and equitable participation.

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# TRAUMA INFORMED CARE: SUPPORTING INTEGRATION INTO CANADA'S LABOUR MARKET FOR REFUGEES

**LOUSIA MAKHTAR** is a Program Manager with the Diversity Institute/Future Skills Center, and works on the Lifeline Afghanistan portfolio that supports the resettlement of refugees and Human Rights Defenders into Canada. Her work also involves promoting and advocating for refugee protection, durable solutions, and international human rights, as well as programming to further aid newcomers with integrating meaningfully into Canada's labor market. Lousia holds a Master's (MA) – Refugee Protection and Forced Migration Studies from the University of London, as well as a Bachelor's of Science - Double Major in Population Health and Mental Health from the University of Toronto. Prior to joining the Diversity Institute, Lousia worked as a counselor providing direct emotional, trauma-informed care, and crisis support to refugees and newcomers.

The experiences of newcomers and refugees are riddled with trauma. Whether it be the precarious conditions that lead to forced displacement, the difficulties associated with international travel in times of crisis, or the anxiety produced by being in unfamiliar surroundings, trauma must be centralized when programming pathways to employment for recent immigrant populations. In the workplace, flashbacks, and other intrusive and distressing thoughts produced by traumatic experiences surrounding resettlement may impede performance, limit self-advocacy and hinder the development of professional relationships. These symptoms negatively impact our sense of self-worth, limit our ability to maintain existing relationships and reduce opportunities that would

otherwise lead to productive and fulfilling work lives.<sup>1</sup> When considered over an extended period of time, trauma effects overall work experiences. But, beyond stunting the growth of our resume, trauma effects how we engage with recruiters, how we interview and how we think about the future of our careers.<sup>2</sup>

The experience of trauma significantly differs within immigrant and refugee communities.<sup>3</sup> For example, the traumatic effects produced by the complex and continuous lived adversity of war, natural disasters, persecution and political conflict, are very different from the consequences stemming from a single exposure to an isolated traumatic event.<sup>4</sup> In fact,

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trauma is not only associated with forced displacement, but also with the nuances of resettlement and the unavoidable contact with new things, people and lifestyles.<sup>5</sup>

We must recognize each individual's experiences of trauma and apply compassion and holistic methods to validate the impact of suffering, while ensuring pathways for post-traumatic growth. Trauma Informed Care (TIC) provides an opportunity to embrace the immigrant and refugee's experience with the world around them and provide support strategies that attempt to mitigate and breakdown distress.<sup>6</sup> TIC empowers individuals to reshape their lives by minimizing and eliminating the barriers that accompany acute or severe traumatic-invoked stress. TIC develops individualized, comprehensive, and holistic strategies that work to acknowledge personal narratives in order to recognize the triggers that exacerbate symptoms. Coping strategies and safe spaces offer, in this context, ways to promote mental health and healing. TIC returns dignity to the sufferer by assigning value to their lived experiences as survivors. This approach provides the autonomy and self-advocacy necessary to seek support and grow as part of the Canadian workforce.<sup>7</sup>

## REFUGEE POPULATIONS AND THE IMPACT OF POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS ON EMPLOYMENT

There are numerous factors that contribute to the challenges of immigration. Language barriers, unfamiliarity with social norms, financial burdens, lack of employment opportunities, unaccredited degrees or certifications, and the sheer geographical distance from loved ones are but a few of the obstacles experienced by newcomers. Of course, not all immigrant experiences are the same. Refugees, for example, are forced to emigrate. Environmental and political catastrophes

push people from their homes and into neighbouring countries where resettlement supports are often uneven and unpredictable.<sup>8</sup> Many refugees find themselves separated from host populations in overcrowded encampments, where inadequate healthcare, housing, education, and employment opportunities reduce both autonomy and dignity. Protracted stays in refugee camps multiply experiences of complex trauma produced through continued exposure to adversity.<sup>9</sup> Afghan refugees, for example, are forced to leave an environment ridden with human rights violations, oppressive regulations on women and young girls, limitations on education, and restrictions on exercising freedom of speech and expression. When arriving in neighbouring Pakistan, Iran and Turkey, however, they encounter precarious refugee supports coupled with the continued threat of persecution.<sup>10</sup>

Seeking employment in a new country represents one of the most important challenges for newcomers during resettlement. The experiences associated with trauma add to the complexities of performing job searches in new places, in new cultures and new languages. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is caused by the lasting effects of traumatic events, and it is often associated with unpredictable changes in mood and behavior, limited sleep, loss of appetite, irritability, avoidance, suicidal ideations, as well as depression and anxiety. In addition to these experiences, sufferers of trauma, in many cases, also experience what is known as "survivors guilt." Catastrophic events and political crises often produce casualties. In this context, survival, like death, is inexplicable and riddled with stress and anxiety.<sup>11</sup>

In many cases, however, treatment and healing are luxuries that are not afforded to refugees. The recent controversy surrounding the lack of available housing in the Greater Toronto Area, in July 2023, forced newcomers from Africa to take refuge in tents throughout the metropolitan area. This just one example of the precarity of resettlement.<sup>12</sup>

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- 5 Oliver Bakewell, "Encampment and Self-settlement," in *Oxford Handbook of Forced Migration Studies*, ed. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 127–138.
  - 6 "What is Trauma-informed Care?," University at Buffalo School of Social Work, accessed October 24, 2022, [https://socialwork.buffalo.edu/social-research/institutes-centers/institute-on-trauma-and-trauma-informed-care/what-is-trauma-informed-care.html#:~:text=Trauma-Informed%20Care%20\(TIC\),individual's%20life-%20including%20service%20staff](https://socialwork.buffalo.edu/social-research/institutes-centers/institute-on-trauma-and-trauma-informed-care/what-is-trauma-informed-care.html#:~:text=Trauma-Informed%20Care%20(TIC),individual's%20life-%20including%20service%20staff)
  - 7 Renee C. Lovell, David Greenfield, George Johnson, Kathy Eljiz and Sue Amanatidis, "Optimising Outcomes for Complex Trauma Survivors: Assessing the Motivators, Barriers and Enablers for Implementing Trauma Informed Practice within a Multidisciplinary Health Setting," *BMC Health Services Research* 22, no. 434 (2022): 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-022-07812-x>
  - 8 Stephen A. Matlin, Anneliese Depoux, Stefanie Schütte, Antoine Flahault and Luciano Saso, "Migrants' and Refugees' Health: Towards an Agenda of Solutions," *Public Health Reviews* 39, no. 27 (2018): 1-55, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40985-018-0104-9>
  - 9 Simon Turner, "What is a Refugee Camp? Explorations of the Limits and Effects of the Camp," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 29, no. 2 (2016): 139-148, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fev024>
  - 10 Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2023: Rights trends in Afghanistan* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2023), [www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/afghanistan](http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/afghanistan)
  - 11 "What is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)," American Psychiatric Association, accessed August 10, 2023. <https://psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd>
  - 12 Patrick Swadden, "Asylum Seekers left Sleeping on Toronto Streets Amid Funding Stalemate between City, Feds," *CBC News*, July 12, 2023, [www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/toronto-asylum-seekers-shelter-stalemate-1.6903827](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/toronto-asylum-seekers-shelter-stalemate-1.6903827)

The lack of access to culturally appropriate, trauma-informed mental health supports represents a significant barrier to the successful settlement of refugees in Canada. Cultural norms and stigma within both the refugee and host communities affect how refugees deal with mental health challenges. In order to have adequate mental health support, front line service workers must be able to demonstrate cultural competency. Despite growing efforts to address mental health as part of disability, accessibility and inclusion strategies, there appears to be a limited understanding within Western cultures around mental health issues, which results in stigma and marginalization. These challenges are amplified when both shame and stigma become associated with mental illness in refugee communities. For example, the Arabic language has a limited vocabulary around depression, anxiety, trauma, or mental health. Those displaying symptoms are labeled crazy, possessed, or weak, which makes seeking professional support a shameful act.<sup>13</sup> In a systematic review on mental health stigma in the Pacific Rim region (e.g., Japan, South Korea, China, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia), we see similar conclusions. Here, negative attitudes surrounding mental illness worsen mental health outcomes.<sup>14</sup> Often associated with psychosis and the supernatural, stigma and the discrimination of mental illness prevent treatment altogether and result in shame and concealment. For example, stigma around mental health is widespread and is associated with black magic and the supernatural in Pakistan.<sup>15</sup> As a result, mental health concerns are discriminated against within educational institutions, health-care systems and personal networks.<sup>16</sup> Cultural competency in this area aids in the creation of holistic settlement plans for refugee populations that are focussed on addressing the trauma associated with the urgent travel in moments of crisis.

Employment is an urgent matter for the refugee and newcomer populations and is essential to improving their quality of life and ensuring that they can successfully resettle. Pathways to employment, however, are riddled with barriers. Negative stereotypes, bias and discrimination, along with

difficulties associated with the transfer of foreign credentials add to the struggles of living with trauma in a new country. Trauma Informed Career Pathing offers an opportunity to support refugees in this process and throughout interviewing, resume building, up-skilling, and language training periods of the job search process.

## TIC AND PATHWAYS TO EMPLOYMENT

TIC can be a powerful tool to help inform how we approach workplace Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives, particularly in relation to refugees, but also other populations. Its practices can be used to support inclusive recruitment efforts, workplace environments, professional development, as well as leadership.<sup>17</sup> Trauma Informed Career Pathing is one technique for how TIC can be used to improve the professional lives and general well-being of trauma sufferers in the workplace.<sup>18</sup> Trauma Informed Career Pathing supports the experiences of diverse populations by acknowledging and prioritizing post-traumatic stress, as well as validating the individual's experiences, past and present. The career pathing journey includes many steps, including: encouraging the creation of flexible and accessible user entryways, building self-efficacy, navigating career options and system nuances, assisting with economic and social barriers, and providing content-specific and culturally competent training and sustainable support frameworks. TIC can be applied to every component of the career pathing journey.

A TIC approach to employment focuses on providing opportunities for these populations to view themselves as survivors and not victims of the various challenges and adversities they have endured. A collaborative approach works to eliminate power dynamics and prioritize respect and dignity to build self-worth and general well-being among trauma sufferers.<sup>19</sup> Trauma Informed Career Pathing offers refugee populations

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- 13 Dana Al Laham, Engy Ali, Krystel Mousally, Nayla Nahas, Abbas Alameddine and Emilie Venables, "Perceptions and Health-Seeking Behaviour for Mental Illness Among Syrian Refugees and Lebanese Community Members in Wadi Khaled, North Lebanon: A Qualitative Study," *Community Ment Health J* 56 (2020), 875–884, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-020-00551-5>
  - 14 Mao-Sheng Ran, Brian J. Hall, Tin Tin Su, Benny Prawira, Matilde Breth-Petersen, Xu-Hong Li and Tian-Ming Zhang, "Stigma of Mental Illness and Cultural Factors in Pacific Rim Region: A Systematic Review," *BMC Psychiatry* 21, no. 8 (2021): 1-16, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-020-02991-5>
  - 15 Ibid.
  - 16 Lee Knifton, Mhairi Gervais, Karen Newbigging, Nuzhat Mirza, Neil Quinn, Neil Wilson and Evette Hunkins-Hutchison, "Community Conversation: Addressing Mental Health Stigma with Ethnic Minority Communities," *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 45, no. 4 (2009): 497–504, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-009-0095-4>
  - 17 "What is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?," American Psychiatric Association, accessed August 10, 2023. <https://psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd>
  - 18 "Trauma Informed Career Pathing," Diversity Institute and Future Skills Centre (*Canadian Diversity - A Publication of the Association of Canadian Studies*, 2021), 17-19.
  - 19 Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs (WCSAP), *Creating Trauma-Informed Services: A Guide for Sexual Assault Programs and their System Partners* (Pasco, WA: Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs, 2018), [www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications/2018-04/Trauma-Informed-Advocacy.pdf](http://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications/2018-04/Trauma-Informed-Advocacy.pdf)

the autonomy to navigate employment prospects, while equipping them with the skills and tools necessary to understand accreditation systems, specific sector opportunities, as well as context specific information to help build knowledge around employment in Canada.

Assisting refugee populations with economic and social barriers, is at the root of TIC. It acknowledges the importance of a holistic approach and identifies the risk factors that may impede career progression. In this context, wrap-around supports help to mitigate the social, economic, cultural, familial, linguistic, and the psychological hardships that refugee populations endure. In sum, career pathing with a TIC lens, works toward building equitable and inclusive workplace environments that not only welcome refugee populations, but provide them with the necessary tools to be self-sufficient and thrive in their personal and professional lives.

The “ Pathways to Employment” initiative at the Diversity Institute and Future Skills Centre provides an example of Trauma Informed Care supports for refugee populations. Here, newcomer job seekers are introduced to a job-matching platform that allows them to create a profile that details all of their skills, experiences, education, and interests. From there, users navigate through existing job opportunities and are matched with existing vacancies that fit their profile. The jobseekers are connected to Canadian organizations that have committed to diversifying their workforces and embracing foreign talent. One critical component of this project is enabling the job seekers to understand their trauma from forced displacement or migration as an asset and not a shortcoming. Employers also benefit as they learn to understand the experiences of refugees as advantageous to the workforce. The resiliency, resourcefulness, willingness to adapt to constantly changing environments, and goal-oriented attitudes of refugees are all shown to be invaluable additions to any workforce. The Pathways to Employment program has worked,

most recently, with Afghan refugees, and has helped individuals to recognize how to translate their personal experiences into skill-sets that are transforming their lives in Canada.

TIC allows refugees to understand and embrace the barriers and hardships they have endured. Similarly, it teaches employers to reframe how they think about skills. For example, instead of seeking out candidates that have work experience in Canada and/or Canadian credentials, TIC encourages employers to consider alternative ways to assess the competencies needed for the job. Candidates who have endured war and conflict, survived forced displacement, successfully resettled in a new country, and have learned another language become examples of resilience and innovation who are capable of working in a fast-paced environment, learning new skills, meeting tight deadlines, and so much more.

Working with both job-seekers and employers from a trauma-informed lens, the Pathways to Employment program empowers job-seekers and employers to value the newcomer talent pool.

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

Trauma Informed Care can significantly enhance efforts to support not only newcomers and refugees, but all equity deserving groups. It offers opportunities to prioritize the dignity and humanity of trauma sufferers and to recognize the skills required to overcome adversity. In this context, victims become survivors as they work to regain control over their lives. When adopted in the workplace, TIC supports inclusion, equity, and for personal and professional growth on all sides. Through Trauma Informed Care we are able to learn to appreciate the experiences of crisis in order to appropriately respond to the emerging needs of these populations.

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# SYRIAN REFUGEE LIVED EXPERIENCE PROJECT: OVERVIEW REPORT

**KEITH NEUMAN**, Ph.D., served as the inaugural Executive Director of the Environics Institute from November 2011 to May 2019, and is now a Senior Associate at the Institute, based in Ottawa. Much of Keith's career has involved senior roles with leading survey research companies in Canada, including Environics Research, Decima Research, and Corporate Research Associates. He has conducted a wide range of public opinion and social research projects for the public, private and non-profit sector. Keith holds a Ph.D. in Social Ecology from the University of California, and in 2019 was elected as a Fellow of the Canadian Research and Insights Council (CRIC), from which he also holds the credential of Certified Analytics and Insights Professional (CAIP).

## INTRODUCTION

Canada has a distinctive history and identity as a country mostly made up of people arriving from elsewhere – and, today more than ever, relies on immigration to build its population and keep communities thriving. This means the stakes are high in ensuring that newcomers can count on a welcoming home, and a successful path to resettlement and full citizenship. Refugees make up a tiny proportion of the immigrants who come to Canada each year, but they face unique challenges because of the circumstances they are fleeing, which include unsustainable and often life-threatening situations in their home countries.

Canada has typically welcomed a small number of refugees per year, in the range of 11,000 to 13,000 people. This changed dramatically in 2015 in response to the ongoing conflict in Syria, one of the worst humanitarian disasters in recent history. Since the conflict erupted in 2011, 5.6 million Syrians fled their country for refuge in neighbouring states, and another 6.6 million have been internally displaced. In 2014, the United Nations Refugee Agency appealed to the international community to help address this humanitarian crisis by accepting Syrian refugees who could no longer be safe in their own country.

Canada answered this call by significantly expanding the intake of Syrian refugees through the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative, an unprecedented national mobilization involving all levels of government, non-governmental organizations, the private sector and Canadian citizens. With uncharacteristic speed and coordination, the effort succeeded in resettling close to 40,000 Syrian refugees by the end of 2016. This was largest single group of refugees accepted into Canada since the Vietnamese sponsorship program in the late 1970s. How have these refugees fared in their new country, and what can be learned from their experience that might benefit future refugees? These questions were addressed through a national research study with Syrian refugees who arrived in the 2015-16 period, conducted by the non-profit Environics Institute for Survey Research.

## SYRIAN REFUGEE LIVED EXPERIENCE PROJECT

The purpose of this study is to document the experience of Syrian refugees several years into their resettlement in Canada to better understand their lives during this crucial period of resettlement. This research is designed to yield valuable insight to guide government policies and programs,

as well as support the ongoing work of settlement agencies, private sponsor groups, refugee groups, and academic researchers across the country who carry much of the load in supporting refugee resettlement. The study is also intended to create a template for further research in collaboration with refugee communities, as well as provide all Canadians with a more accurate portrait of what refugees experience as they create new lives for themselves in this country.

The research consisted of in-depth interviews with a representative sample of 305 Syrian refugees, conducted between September 2020 and March 2021 (see Table 1). The survey sample was national in scope, and designed to reflect this population by admission category, region, age and gender. Interviews were conducted by telephone or webchat, in participants' preferred language (with most choosing Arabic).<sup>1</sup>

The interviews were extensive (averaging 75 minutes in length) and covered many aspects of refugees' experiences in Canada, spanning their pre-arrival circumstances, their initial settlement period, their current lives, and their outlook towards the future. Many of the questions were open-ended so that participants could speak about their experiences in their own words. The project was funded through Contribution Agreements provided by the federal department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). The findings and conclusions are the Environics Institute's, and do not represent the position of the Government of Canada. A detailed final report on this study is publicly available.<sup>2</sup>

## STUDY CONCLUSIONS

The research reveals that this group of Syrian refugees, as a whole, has successfully resettled in Canada in just a few years, following their arrival in the country. Many encountered early challenges – as any group of refugees would – in terms of navigating a foreign language, finding employment, dealing with the practicalities of finding a place to live, arranging schools for children, and making sense of an unfamiliar culture. Most overcame or made significant progress in meeting these and other difficulties, and the overall picture is one of people who have established new lives in a country they now consider their home. They have acquired what is called “social capital,” a term used to describe the vibrancy of social networks, personal connections and social trust. These refugees exhibited levels of community connections, friendships, and a sense of belonging to the country that in many respects are comparable to other Canadians.

This does not mean that everything went well for these refugees as they resettled in Canada, as some have continued to face struggles in such areas as housing, financial security, and underemployment. Creating new lives in an unfamiliar place has taken its toll on their mental health, with three in ten refugees experiencing a considerable amount of daily stress, in some cases due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

What lessons can be gleaned from this research? The positive outcomes reported by refugees notwithstanding, not all

TABLE 1.

Refugee Sample Profile	Number of interviews	% of Sample	% of refugee Population
<b>Region</b>			
Atlantic Canada	29	10%	7%
Quebec/Ontario	168	55%	67%
Manitoba/SK/Alberta	57	19%	18%
British Columbia	51	17%	8%
<b>Admission category</b>			
Gov't assisted Refugees (GAR)	168	55%	54%
Privately-sponsored refugees (PSR)	101	33%	38%
Blended Visa Office Referrals (BVOR)	34	11%	8%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>305</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

1 The original plan was for interviews to be conducted in-person, but was changed due to restrictions on in-person meetings resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

2 Environics Institute for Survey Research. 2022. Syrian Refugee Lived Experience Project - Final Report. Toronto: Environics Institute for Survey Research. [www.environicsinstitute.org/docs/default-source/project-documents/syrian-refugee-lived-experience-project/syrian-refugee-lived-experience-project---final-report.pdf?sfvrsn=fa2b421d\\_2](http://www.environicsinstitute.org/docs/default-source/project-documents/syrian-refugee-lived-experience-project/syrian-refugee-lived-experience-project---final-report.pdf?sfvrsn=fa2b421d_2)

have thrived and many ongoing challenges remain, especially when it comes to under-employment and financial insecurity. The evidence demonstrates that government agencies and settlement organizations need to pay more attention to such areas as employment supports, pre-arrival information, and management of migrant expectations. This positive story of refugee resettlement must also be considered in the context of the unprecedented circumstances in which this particular cohort came to Canada. The timing of the global migration crisis and the political context in 2015 led to the mobilization of political, government and civic leadership that was unprecedented in terms of the number of refugees, the speed with which they were moved, and the scale of resources dedicated to their resettlement. This was a defining factor in the experience of these refugees, which was beyond what was available to refugees in previous times, and other refugees, both during and following this period. This demonstrates what can be accomplished with a concentrated effort, and, perhaps, what is required to ensure effective refugee resettlement and integration on a sustained basis.

## MAIN FINDINGS

### ARRIVAL IN CANADA

Some of the refugees received pre-arrival information about Canada, but this was far from comprehensive or sufficient to prepare them. Some aspects of what they found once they landed were anticipated (notably the friendly welcome provided by other Canadians), but they were more likely to experience something unexpected - notably difficulties in finding employment, the cold weather and culture shock.

Refugees identified various challenges during their early years of resettlement; in particular, having to navigate in an unfamiliar language, as very few arrived with a functional fluency in English or French (see Table 2).

### FROM THE DATA COLLECTED

**In what ways was your experience different from what you expected, once you arrived in Canada?**

“No jobs available for my skills and experience in the area they put us in. Also, there is racism with employing Arabs.”

“The weather mostly. The culture was very different than what we thought. I didn't expect that cities won't have a lot of people hanging around in the streets. The streets are so empty.”

“I was expecting to be put in camps when we arrive to Canada but we were treated nicely and put in hotels.”

TABLE 2. SINGLE BIGGEST CHALLENGE WHEN FIRST ARRIVED IN CANADA

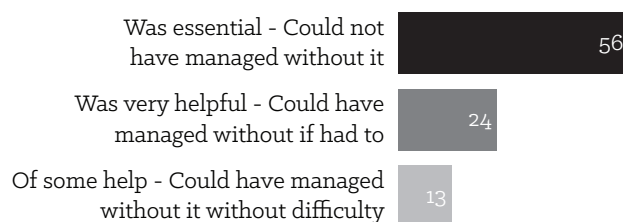
	%
Language barrier	61
<b>Practical Necessities</b>	
Finding employment	15
Finding housing/Accommodation	14
Lack of transportation/vehicle	6
Learning about public transit	5
Arranging for continuing education	4
Dealing with government bureaucracy	3
Communication with private sponsor	3
<b>Adjustment to the Unfamiliar</b>	
Culture shock	11
Challenges with integration	10
Isolation/loneliness	9
Harsh weather	8
Other challenges	9
None/No response	5

Q.13 Thinking back to when you first arrived in Canada, what was your single biggest challenge at that time?

## SETTLEMENT SUPPORTS

Looking back over their early years in Canada, refugees recalled receiving helpful supports of various kinds, the most prominent being financial assistance, language training, help with accommodation, access to needed health care and emotional support (see Figure 1). For those sponsored privately, most found the support they received to be essential to getting settled, and the relationship with sponsors proved enduring, with three-quarters of this group remaining in touch with their sponsors several years later. The types of government assistance most widely considered to be helpful included language training, health and dental care, and financial support.

FIGURE 1. IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORT PROVIDED BY PRIVATE SPONSOR



Q.23b Which one of the following statements best describes the importance of the support provided by your private sponsor?



**Thinking about the services the government provided, what did you find to be most helpful?**

“It’s a chain: everything was important to get us settled. Everything from financial support all the way to small things to opening a bank account helped significantly.”

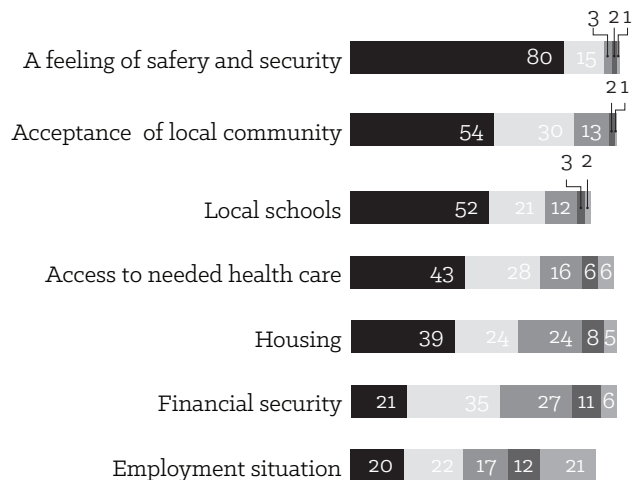
“The warm welcome at the airport when we first arrived. They gave us permanent residency on the spot and said this country is your country now.”

**CURRENT LIFE IN CANADA**

With the benefit of several years of resettlement and adjustment, most Syrian refugees feel good about their current life in Canada, with almost nine in ten describing it to be “very” or “generally” positive (see Figure 2). Across specific aspects of their lives, refugees were most widely satisfied in feeling safe and secure, being accepted by their local community, and with local schools. By comparison, refugees were much less apt to be satisfied with their financial security and employment situation.

What refugees appreciate the most about life in Canada is the safety and security it provides, along with the human rights protections in the areas of equality and freedom. What they like the least is the Canadian climate, as well as its unfamiliar culture and lifestyle, and being separated from family and friends living abroad. All things considered, almost all the interviewed refugees said they were glad to be in Canada.

**FIGURE 2. SATISFACTION WITH ASPECTS OF LIFE TODAY**



- Very satisfied
- Generally dissatisfied
- Generally satisfied
- Very dissatisfied
- Neither satisfied/dissatisfied

Q.29a-g How satisfied are you with each of the following aspects of your life today?

**FROM THE DATA COLLECTED**

**What do you like most about living in Canada?**

“Everyone is subject to the law. Sometimes the issue is with the law itself, but at least everyone is subject to it. People are friendly.”

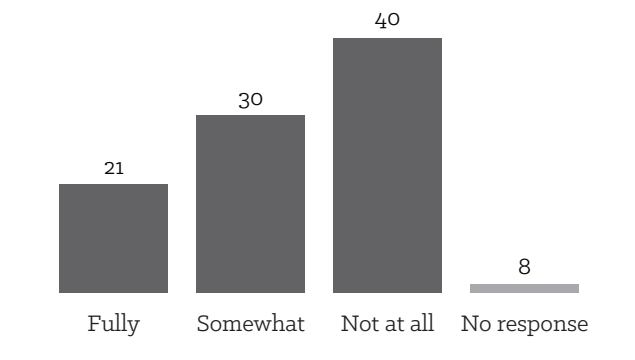
“Social and economic stability. Anyone who works faithfully can find good results. There is fairness in the distribution of wealth and opportunities.”

“Education: it’s a huge difference between here and Syria. Parents graduated from University in Syria and couldn’t work in their field. Whereas here there are no restrictions on where to work.”

**EMPLOYMENT AND OCCUPATION**

About half of the refugees interviewed were employed in full- or part-time jobs (including those self-employed), which is below the national average (see Figure 3). Most of those employed were working in sectors that typically provide entry-level opportunities, such as transportation or warehousing, retail, construction and accommodation or food services. Notably, only one in five of those employed reported being in a job or occupation that matched his or her education, skills and experience. Close to half said that the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted their employment situation, in most cases by reducing their hours of employment or eliminating their job altogether.

**FIGURE 3. HOW WELL DOES YOUR CURRENT OCCUPATION MATCH YOUR EDUCATION, SKILLS, AND EXPERIENCE**



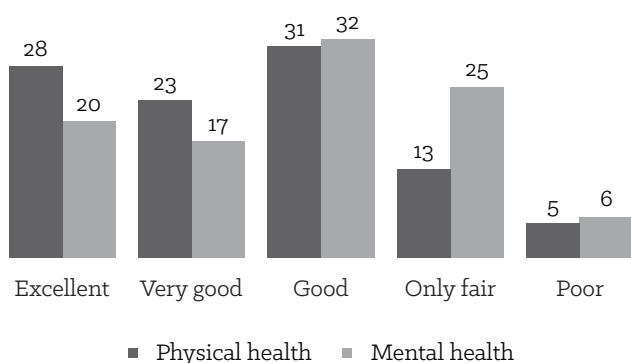
Q.37 Would you say your current or most recent occupation matches your education, skills and experience fully, somewhat, or not at all?

**HEALTH AND WELL-BEING**

Most refugees rated themselves to have generally good physical health, at levels slightly below, but generally comparable to, the Canadian population-at-large. But they were not

doing as well in terms of their mental health, with fewer than half describing it in positive terms, and almost as many indicating it to be only fair or poor (see Figure 4). Three in ten said they experienced a considerable amount of stress in their daily lives, with this most commonly being reported by men, Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR) and those in financial hardship. Among those experiencing daily stress, most attributed it at least in part to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

FIGURE 4. PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH STATUS



Q.40 In general, would you say your physical health is excellent, very good, good, fair or poor?

Q.41 In general, would you say your mental health is excellent, very good, good, fair or poor?

## SENSE OF BELONGING AND ACCEPTANCE

Most refugees expressed a strong sense of belonging to Canada, and for some this was now stronger than the attachment to their ethnic or cultural background. Almost everyone interviewed reported they had either become a Canadian citizen, were in the process of becoming one, or intended to do so when eligible.

Almost everyone interviewed said they felt welcomed by others in their local community and believed that other Canadians, as a whole, held generally positive opinions of Syrian refugees (see Figure 5). At the same time, many spoke about feeling the pressure of their host country's expectations of them to fit in and become productive citizens. About half of those interviewed reported experiencing discrimination by other Canadians at some point since arriving in the country, although few reported this to be happening regularly. Refugees were most likely to attribute this mistreatment to their ethnicity or culture, and less so because of their religion, language or gender. Few women linked experiences of discrimination to their gender, but they were more likely than men to attribute it to their religion (likely due to wearing a hijab).

### FROM THE DATA COLLECTED

Is there one thing you wish Canadians understood about refugees from Syria who now live in this country?

"There is a lot of expectations. Most of us need time to heal from the war. Our people are scared to deal with strangers because of the war; you can't force people to heal fast."

"I didn't come for money or benefits, Syrians don't want money or anything, they just want peace. In Syria, my parents worked and we had a lot of things. But towards the end, there was no security, which I think comes first. This is what Canada gave us."

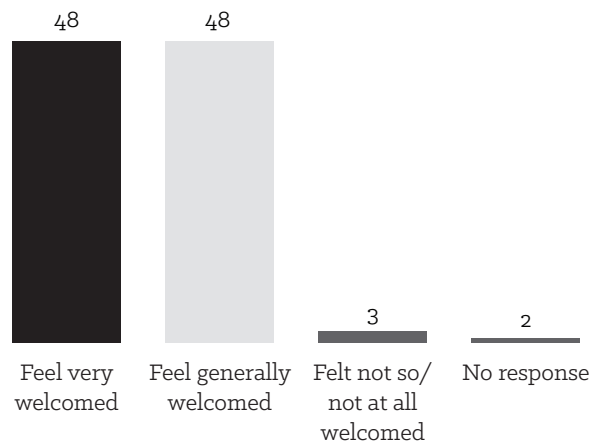
"We are not like you see in the news. Not terrorists and we're peaceful and want to live in peace. Left our country because of war that was out of our control."

## FAMILY AND CHILDREN

Most parents felt that their children had done very well in adapting to life in Canada, including being accepted by others in school. They were most likely to credit the school system in supporting their children's adjustment, while pointing to language acquisition as the most notable barrier their children had to overcome.

Half of those interviewed said they experienced changing roles within their family since moving to Canada, which has been most frequently reported by women and refugees between the ages of 18 and 24. Such changes were most likely to entail increased responsibilities in such areas as parenting and household finances, while others mentioned changes in how children were disciplined, and who in the home was employed. One in ten said they experienced greater independence in their lives, while a comparable proportion reported the opposite.

FIGURE 5. RECEPTION BY YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITY



Q.46 To what extent do you feel you and your family have been made to feel welcome by other people in your local community?

## LOOKING AHEAD

Syrian refugees identified a range of personal goals they hoped to achieve in their lifetime, the most prominent being home ownership, completing their education, and realizing employment or career aspirations. Parents' wishes for their children's futures most commonly focused on them getting a good education and having a good or happy life. Most refugees expressed optimism about achieving at least some of their life goals, basing this confidence on their own capacity to work hard and maintain a positive outlook, but also through the support of government and Canadian society. The most significant challenges to achieving life goals were seen to be financial and employment-related, as well as language fluency (see Figure 6)

### FROM THE DATA COLLECTED

#### What do you most hope for your children in their lives as they grow up?

"I wish my children to grow up to be good "Syrian Canadian" citizens. I don't want them to forget their heritage and culture and want them to be successful."

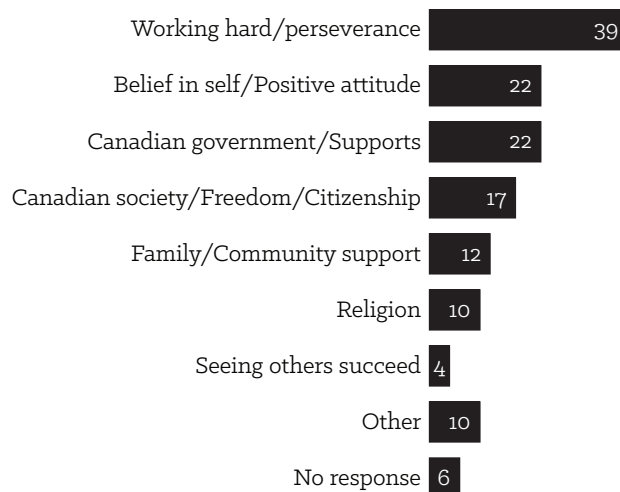
"To finish their school and go to higher education. Serve the society; be active contributors to society."

"My daughter loves to study about space and astronomy, while my other kids love hockey. I hope they follow what they like."

## GROUP PROFILES

Syrian refugees arriving in Canada in 2015-16 are a diverse group, in terms of their backgrounds, demographic profile, and life circumstances at the time of being interviewed for

FIGURE 6. BASIS OF CONFIDENCE TO ACHIEVE LIFE GOALS



Q.46 To what extent do you feel you and your family have been made to feel welcome by other people in your local community?

this study. This diversity notwithstanding, the main findings and conclusions from the research largely apply to everyone interviewed, regardless of age, gender, region of residence, or whether they are government or privately sponsored refugees. Those in this group who experienced the greatest challenges in the beginning – notably refugees who were young, with the least education and relying on government assistance – also made the most significant progress over the ensuing years.

Household income stood out as making an important difference in how successful refugees have been in creating new lives for themselves in Canada. While only a quarter of this group experienced clear financial hardship at the time they were interviewed, they fared less well than others in many ways, including not receiving the settlement supports they needed, under-employment, experiencing lower levels of physical and mental health, not feeling fully welcomed in their community, and being less optimistic about the future.

# FROM CRISES TO CONTRIBUTIONS: SYRIAN SUCCESS STORIES

**MATTHEW EDWARDS** is a Senior Research Associate at the Diversity Institute, in the Ted Rogers School of Management, at Toronto Metropolitan University. He is a disability activist and disabled researcher whose scholarly and community oriented work focuses on the relationship between able-bodiedness, power and social and cultural mobility. Within the Diversity Institute, he performs research on a wide range of issues concerning the experiences of equity-deserving communities in Canada and supports internal facing initiatives around accessibility and inclusive workplace strategies. Matthew Edwards received his PhD in Latin American Cultural Studies from Emory University.

In 2015, Canada's federal government launched the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative, as a response to the humanitarian crisis unfolding in that country. Over the span of just 15 months, more than 40,000 refugees were resettled across the country with the support of government services and private sponsors. Operation Syrian Refugees involved a collective, government-wide effort and although it was led by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), it involved the collaboration of five federal departments as well as local communities responsible for resettlement post arrival.<sup>1</sup>

Data gathered from the 2015-16 Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative shows that resettled refugees landed in more than 350 communities across Canada.<sup>2</sup> The experiences of

this cohort of Syrian refugees were documented through a national study conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, based on in-depth interviews with 305 individuals from this cohort.<sup>3</sup> This study reveals that refugees not only initially struggled with culture shock and trauma, English and French language proficiency and acquiring basic necessities, but they have also have continued and prolonged difficulties encountering adequate and fulfilling employment. Even five to six years later, when most Syrian refugees expressed satisfaction with their lives overall, employment continued to be a problem for many. For example, 95 percent expressed satisfaction with their safety and security, 84 percent felt accepted by local community members, 73 percent felt satisfied with local schools, 72 percent felt they had access to needed health care and 63 percent of those surveyed felt

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- 1 Leah Hamilton, Luisa Veronis and Margaret Walton-Robert, eds., *A National Project: Syrian Refugee Resettlement in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), 331.
  - 2 Jennifer Hyndman, "Geo-scripts and Refugee Resettlement in Canada: Designations and Destinations," *The Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe canadien* 66, no. 4 (2022): 653-668. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12785>
  - 3 Environics Institute for Survey Research, *Syrian Refugee Lived Experience Project* (Toronto: Environics Institute, 2022), [www.environicsinstitute.org/docs/default-source/project-documents/syrian-refugee-lived-experience-project/syrian-refugee-lived-experience-project---final-report.pdf?sfvrsn=fa2b421d\\_2](http://www.environicsinstitute.org/docs/default-source/project-documents/syrian-refugee-lived-experience-project/syrian-refugee-lived-experience-project---final-report.pdf?sfvrsn=fa2b421d_2)

that they had access to adequate housing. Fewer than half (44 percent) of those interviewed were very or generally satisfied with their employment situation: a situation that is all too common among newcomers to Canada as the comparisons with other countries show.<sup>4</sup> The refugees' lack of satisfaction related to their employment situation gains importance when compared to other satisfaction indicators.<sup>5</sup>

After six years in Canada, only one in four (26 percent) refugees were working full time, compared to 49 percent of the non-retired Canadian population ages 18 and older. In addition, they were more than twice as likely, at 18 percent of the refugee population, to be unemployed and looking for work when compared to 8 percent of Canadian nationals.<sup>6</sup> Full time employment was more common among refugees with post-secondary education and those with previous work experience in Syria, while older refugees (ages 45 and above) were most likely to be unemployed and looking for work. For Syrian refugees who were fortunate to be employed, most were working in sectors offering entry-level jobs such as transportation and warehousing, retail trade, accommodation and food services, and construction. Just one in five (21 percent) said their current or most recent occupation fully matched their education, skills and experience.

In broad strokes, this research document demonstrates how the programs and services developed by governments, settlement sector organizations and Canadian citizens have made a critical difference in the resettlement process of Syrian refugees. At the same time, the study signals that these newcomers have not been supported especially well when it comes to ensuring they can find meaningful employment and suggests that this lack of support presents a barrier to achieving a long future for themselves and their families in Canada. The ensuing case studies focus on Syrian refugees' workforce-related experiences; the stories they tell help shape the way we understand employment within the newcomer framework.

## WHAT IS SUCCESS?: A SYRIAN REFUGEE'S PERSPECTIVE

Integration into the labour force has long been a measure of the general effectiveness of immigrant resettlement pathways and of newcomers' satisfaction and well-being understood broadly.<sup>7</sup> Despite the initial struggles associated with the arrival and the frequency of lived trauma, refugees have shown surprising success over time in their economic integration. Research demonstrates that although the economic earning of refugees is on average lower than that of other immigrant categories and of Canadian born nationals, these differences often decline after 10 years.<sup>8</sup> This is in large part due to the values and decision-making practices of refugees. For example, newcomers place significant importance on homeownership – an essential means of building personal equity – and can quickly breach traditional barriers in the housing market by building social capital, enabling the pooling of resources, sharing of living space and increased opportunities for employment and professional networking necessary for the initial purchase of real estate.<sup>9</sup>

The barriers that refugees, and immigrants face, in general, when entering the workforce shape how their successes are understood. Additionally, they are and filtered through resilience, problem solving, and increased cross-cultural competency. For this reason, integration into the labour market clearly does not capture the complexity of success as it relates to newcomers and refugee populations, in particular. In the case studies below, we return to the Syrian Refugee Project of 2015-16. The demographic profile of Syrian refugees differed from other refugee arrivals in Canada. On the one hand, Syrians had larger family sizes – 40 percent had four to six family members, and another 9.8 percent had seven or more. On the other hand, of the Syrian refugees who entered Canada through the Government Assisted Refugees (GAR) program, 60 percent under the age of 18.<sup>10</sup> These demographic particularities suggest that age and family life will shape how Syrian refugees gauge their success in Canada into the future.

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4 In recent years, Canada's immigration strategy has been compared to Australia's. Both countries are regarded as leaders in the global relocation of skilled immigrants. Harrap et al., argue that the ability of Australia's federal government to support policy in favour of foreign credential recognition and drive employer-centric strategies has allowed this country to surpass Canada as the model nation for skilled immigrant resettlement (2). See Cukier for a detailed analysis of the skilled immigrant case in Canada.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Yuqian Lu, Marc Frenette and Yasmin Gure, "The Long-term Labour Market Integration of Refugee Claimants Who Became Permanent Residents in Canada," *The Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series*, November 12, 2020, Statistics Canada. [www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2020018-eng.htm](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2020018-eng.htm)

8 Lisa Kaidaa, Feng Houb and Max Sticka, "The Long-term Economic Integration of Resettled Refugees in Canada: A Comparison of Privately Sponsored Refugees and Government-Assisted Refugees," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46, no. 9 (2020): 1687–1708. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1623017>

9 Bronwyn Bragg and Daniel Hiebert, "Refugee Trajectories, Imaginaries, and Realities: Refugee Housing in Canadian Cities," *Canadian Journal of Urban Research* 31, no. 1 (Summer 2022): 16–32.

10 Leah Hamilton, Luisa Veronis and Margaret Walton-Robert, eds., *A National Project: Syrian Refugee Resettlement in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020).

## SUCCESS AS UNDERSTOOD BY YOUNG REFUGEES

Ghamr Saeed was 16 years old when he arrived in Canada with his family in 2016.<sup>11</sup> Together they had fled their home country of Syria by way of Dubai and resettled in Kingston, Ontario. Shortly thereafter Saeed began attending a local high school where teachers spoke to him about university and asked about his career goals. Two years later, he was named the recipient of one of ten national scholarships to the University of Toronto. Ghamr recognizes that the expectations for his future are high, but he welcomes the challenge along with all of the support he has received from teachers and community members.

Nour Abdoulah left her home in Syria shortly after the war began in 2011 and eventually landed in Canada as a refugee in 2017.<sup>12</sup> For her, success is tied to the future, and to the ability to chase one's dreams. As a competitive swimmer and dedicated university student, enrolled at the time of the interview at Carleton University in Ottawa, Nour dreams of a future where she is committed to sports and competition, and is able to share her life close to family and friends. The destruction and sadness caused by war in her home country forced her to make the difficult decision to relocate with her brother, and leave her older sister behind. She dreams of a future when they can be together again.

As a grade nine student, Mouhamad Alaarab fled Syria in 2012.<sup>13</sup> He describes the experience of being homeless and spending three years living in a tent in a refugee camp in Lebanon as difficult for a large family, such as his own. Mouhamad later arrived in Canada as a refugee and, at the time of this interview, was a university student studying Aerospace Engineering. He believes that anything is possible and recognizes that hard work and perseverance bring success into arms reach.

## ENTREPRENEURSHIP: DEFINING SUCCESS FOR YOURSELF

*Peace by Chocolate* was a family business that served the

Middle East and Europe with its homemade chocolates for 30 years.<sup>14</sup> But like so many others, the routines and traditions of this family enterprise came to a halt with the onset of the Syrian Civil War in 2012. Shortly after their chocolate factory was destroyed, the family fled to Lebanon, where they spent the next three years in refugee camps. Their future changed when they were invited by the Canadian Government to immigrate to Canada. Settling as refugees in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, the family has rebuilt their small business and today remains committed to satisfying sweet tooth from across the globe. Their trademark "One Peace won't hurt" along with their Syrian flavors tell a story of struggle, sadness, and hope from a new home.

By 2020, over 1000 Syrian refugees had settled in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Assaf Alhamade left Syria in 2012 with his wife and two daughters and spent the next five years in Lebanon.<sup>15</sup> In 2017 they received an invitation from the Canadian Government to resettle as refugees and shortly thereafter arrived in Saskatoon. Despite the difficult transition, Assaf quickly found work in the cement and stone industry, as he had years ago in Syria. Since then, the Alhamades have made a place for themselves making meaningful connections with local families through newcomer service providers like *the Open Door Society* and with already established immigrant communities of Arabic descent. For Assaf, these connections have not only helped his family live well in their new country, but have also provided a unique opportunity to contribute to the local economy. In 2016 Assaf Alhamade opened the Al Rabih Brothers Market, a grocery store stocked with Middle Eastern flavours.

In Syria, *Tayybeh* means both "kind" and "delicious." For a small group of women in Vancouver, British Columbia, it has shaped a business model centered around community formation and cross-cultural communication.<sup>16</sup> For Nihal Elwan, an Egyptian-British permanent resident, *Tayybeh* was the name she had given to the pop-up dinners that she helped coordinate in support of recently settled refugees from Syria. Together she, and fellow organizers, would sell tickets to intimate private dinner functions hosted by a group of women

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- 11 Mark Postovit, "Transplanted Syrian Teen wins National Scholarship," *Global News*, March 26, 2018, <https://globalnews.ca/news/4106948/transplanted-syrian-teen-wins-national-scholarship/#:~:text=Eighteen%2Dyear%2Dold%20Syrian%20newcomer,to%20the%20University%20of%20Toronto>
  - 12 Hodman Ali, "Refugee Voices: Inspiring Stories of Young Refugees in Canada," *Local Story News Releases*, February 21, 2020, UNHCR Canada. [www.unhcr.ca/news/refugee-voices-inspiring-stories-young-refugees-canada](http://www.unhcr.ca/news/refugee-voices-inspiring-stories-young-refugees-canada)
  - 13 Ibid.
  - 14 Peace by Chocolate, "About Us," accessed September 1, 2023. <https://peacebychocolate.ca/pages/our-story>
  - 15 Mandy Vocke, "Seeking a Better Life, Syrian Refugees find Success Living in Saskatoon," *Global News*, December 23, 2020. <https://global-news.ca/news/7540025/syrian-refugees-success-saskatoon/#:~:text=Tareq%20Nila%2C%2023%2C%20has%20also,scary%20moving%20somewhere%20completely%20different.&text=Despite%20challenges%2C%20Nila%20has%20adjusted%20to%20the%20Canadian%20lifestyle>
  - 16 Alexandra Wrage, "A Syrian Success Story," *Forbes*, August 28, 2017. [www.forbes.com/sites/alexandrawrage/2017/08/28/a-syrian-success-story/?sh=67d76b70232e](http://www.forbes.com/sites/alexandrawrage/2017/08/28/a-syrian-success-story/?sh=67d76b70232e)

refugees. The dinners were announced on social media and around the local communities and featured authentic cuisine, Middle Eastern ambiance, and an opportunity for strangers to share space, food, and conversation. Since its conception in 2017, *Tayybeh* dinners have been a huge success and have developed into a food truck catering business and an ambitious line of culinary products. Its success reflects the dedication of their chefs and owners to learn how to manage a business for themselves, in addition to the routine struggles of refugees and life in a new country. It also reflects a community eager to support their international neighbours as they settle into their new homes.

Slieman al-Jasem had never cleaned a fish until meeting Kendall Dewey, owner of Prince Edward County's Lone Lake Ontario fishery, one year earlier.<sup>17</sup> Now, Mr. al-Jasem is working with Kendall and Joanne Dewey to learn the fish processing business in order to bring Dewey Fisheries into the future and continue offering the local communities' fresh seafood. At 21 years of age, Slieman is a motivated, fast learner who is eager to make his home in Canada after leaving Syria in 2015. Kendall learned of the al-Jasem family's arrival in a TVOntario documentary and reached out to Slieman's private sponsor to offer him work. Together they worked with the *Prince Edward County Learning Centre's* Inspire Youth employment program to train the young refugee to scale and fillet the local fish. After the 17-week program, Slieman now works directly with restaurants, local clients, and, with his brother, operates multiple stands at Farmers markets across the region. Alongside the watchful eye of his mentor, Kendall Dewey, Slieman has become an efficient fish processor and is learning new skills to help him manage accounts, process payments and track deliveries and orders. The young refugee looks forward to a successful career that helps him contribute to his family and to the local Lake Ontario economy.

## EMPLOYING SYRIANS FOR SUCCESS

Jim Estill is president and CEO of Danby Appliances in Guelph, Ontario.<sup>18</sup> In 2015, after having seen images and read stories of the suffering caused by the war in Syria, Estill began sponsoring families in their resettlement process. In collaboration with the "Ease into Canada" Program, Estill and Danby

Appliances have sponsored more than 87 families by providing them with employment and initiating their education in English as a second language during their first 90 days in Canada. Whether the families decide to stay and continue to work at Danby, they develop important cultural competencies and real workplace experience that serve newcomers in a tangible way. While refugees are able to develop a support network, Estill and other leaders within Danby Appliances serve as mentors that guide community building within their local context.

The *IKEA Refugee Skills for Employment initiative* works with the unique situations of newcomers in order to create individualized pathways for career advancement.<sup>19</sup> In collaboration with ACCES Employment, the program provides paid work placements, career mentoring, and cultural and language coaching to refugees who struggle as they transition to living in a new country, often far from family and friends. As part of a global campaign to connect with the exceptional talents of newcomers, the program aims to shift narratives around refugees and build knowledge both within IKEA and beyond, centering on the important place the experiences of refugees have in our community.

In 2017, Starbucks Canada made a commitment to hire 1000 Syrian refugees over a period of five years.<sup>20</sup> The organization is attracted to newcomer populations, regarding them as resilient, loyal, and talented. Refugees are often highly educated, while also possessing significant work experience from their home countries, which aids in retention efforts in Canada. In collaboration with *Opportunity Youth* and other government and local agencies across the country, Starbucks has developed a hiring program to address Canada's disconnected youth population. In it, strategies such as leadership meet and greets, provide streamlined pathways to employment where candidates can learn about the organization and share their own experiences in a friendly, relaxed atmosphere. Partnering with *Hire Immigrants* and other refugee serving entities, Starbucks Canada will employ similar strategies to welcome refugees into their organization. Programs like this are important to building a diverse workplace and developing a culture of care across the company. And while Starbucks looks to strengthen itself internally, this initiative connects refugees to extended benefits such as tuition reimbursement, and dental, vision and mental healthcare.

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- 17 Camilla Cornell, "Syrian Refugee, Fisherman's Friend: How a Retiring Couple Found a New Heir to their Lake Ontario Business," *Globe and Mail*, July 31, 2018, [www.theglobeandmail.com/business/small-business/managing/article-syrian-refugee-fishermans-friend-how-a-retiring-couple-found-a-new](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/small-business/managing/article-syrian-refugee-fishermans-friend-how-a-retiring-couple-found-a-new)
  - 18 Lauren La Rose, "Meet the Canadian CEO Sponsoring and Hiring Refugees," *UNHCR Magazine*, October 13, 2019. [www.unhcr.ca/news/homegrown-entrepreneur-jim-estill-refugees-fresh-start-canada](http://www.unhcr.ca/news/homegrown-entrepreneur-jim-estill-refugees-fresh-start-canada)
  - 19 IKEA Canada, "IKEA Canada Partners with ACCES Employment to Create Pathways to Success for Refugees," *IKEA Canada Corporate News*, August 31, 2021, [www.ikea.com/ca/en/newsroom/corporate-news/ikea-canada-partners-with-acces-employment-to-create-pathways-to-success-for-refugees-pubccd17ca7](http://www.ikea.com/ca/en/newsroom/corporate-news/ikea-canada-partners-with-acces-employment-to-create-pathways-to-success-for-refugees-pubccd17ca7)
  - 20 "Starbucks and the First One Thousand," *Hire Immigrants*, accessed September 1, 2023. <https://hireimmigrants.ca/stories/starbucks-and-the-first-one-thousand>

## SUCCESS THROUGH EMPLOYMENT

Nabil Al-Dabei arrived in Canada as a Privately Sponsored Refugee (PSR) in 2016. After a member of his sponsoring group discovered his ability to fix cars, Al-Dabei was quickly invited to work small shifts of one hour a week at a local body shop in Ottawa's West End. His part-time job soon turned into full time work where Al-Dabei's supervisors and colleagues showered him with praise. "He's an excellent worker, Nabil," says Gaetano Frangione with Bemac, "and I always say I wish we could get at least another 10 employees like Nabil. The new generation today, nobody wants to learn the trade where they're going to get their hands dirty."<sup>21</sup>

In a tourist industry struggling to find employees within Atlantic Canada, newcomers represent an opportunity to meet these immediate needs. For Amer Sankari, a recently arrived refugee from Syria, the openings in the hotel industry represent a dream to learn and grow, and the chance to contribute and make a difference.<sup>22</sup>

In 2016, Reham Abzaid arrived with her husband and two children.<sup>23</sup> As Government Assisted Refugees (GARs), the family was brought from a Jordanian camp and resettled in St. John, New Brunswick. While the federal government provides financial assistance for the first year of their stay, Abzaid's new neighbourhood grocery store welcomed them with shelves stocked with tastes from the Middle East, recently added as a show of support to the over 600 Syrian refugees who now share their community. Reham is young and is committed to her future being in Canada. After her arrival in New Brunswick, she made time to take the English lessons offered to her at the local YMCA and has since developed enough language proficiency to help others as the community centre's translator. With her husband also working full-time as a mechanic, Abzaid attributes her family's successes to their inquisitive nature, their insistence on asking questions and getting explanations, and their explicit search for help within the community.

Madhi and his wife Subhiya had well developed careers in Syria prior to arriving in Toronto in 2016. Subhiya worked as a Social Worker at the same local school that her children attended.<sup>24</sup> Mahdi was a well-established dentist and had worked at a clinic for 18 years. When the conflict came too close to home, they relocated to a neighbouring city. Different

from other friends and family members who had left Syria over the years to study and work abroad, and more recently fleeing the dangers of war, the Nassif family had too much to lose and did not take "starting over" lightly.

Mahdi, Subhiya and their children arrived in Toronto through a privately sponsored initiative coordinated by Toronto Metropolitan University, then known as Ryerson University. Having only arrived with what they could carry, Mahdi and Subhiya enrolled their three children in school and themselves in English language classes. Together they decided that Mahdi would prepare for equivalency exams in order to bring his extensive experience in dentistry to their new home. Mahdi recalls that "Learning the word for teeth in English was an important first step for me to become a dentist in Canada." Together, the family made sacrifices that allowed him to study day and night, seven days a week for the next three years. Today, Mahdi is a dentist in Newfoundland. His family is comfortable and happy, and they are planning for the future. Subhiya is looking to return to school and to work, and, together, she and Mahdi are evaluating/contemplating homeownership.

## CONCLUSION

Research shows that, overall, the employment experiences and outcomes of Syrian refugees in Canada are disappointing and that more needs to be done to ensure they have pathways to employment and social mobility. A range of factors including discrimination, lack of recognition of foreign credentials, informal processes and challenges in navigating, social capital, language skills are some of the notable factors that have been identified as challenges/roadblocks. Nevertheless, there are many shining examples of success and ways in which Syrians who came to Canada as refugees have made important contributions. Their experiences must inform our next steps. More research is needed to understand the factors which shape their success in rural as well as urban areas and how we can remove obstacles and provide supports.

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21 Joanne Schnurr, "A New Life, a Full-Time Job: A Success Story for Syrian Refugee Family Living in Ottawa," *CTV News*, January 6, 2017. <https://ottawa.ctvnews.ca/a-new-life-a-full-time-job-a-success-story-for-syrian-refugee-family-living-in-ottawa-1.3226219?cache=%3F-clipId%3D2079986%2F7.307518->

22 Tourism HR Canada, "Destination Employment: Atlantica Hotel Halifax," filmed March 26, 2019 at Atlantica Hotel Halifax, Halifax, NS, video, 3:02. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=uduQZbqvHTQ&list=PLqMkJKwMei9aVRo2lkMN\\_Fl7n01OPXQu&index=1-](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uduQZbqvHTQ&list=PLqMkJKwMei9aVRo2lkMN_Fl7n01OPXQu&index=1-)

23 Nadine Yousif et al., "The Struggles and Successes of Five Syrian Refugee Families," *Toronto Star*, February 8, 2019, [www.thestar.com/news/canada/2019/02/08/the-struggles-and-successes-of-five-syrian-refugee-families.htm](http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2019/02/08/the-struggles-and-successes-of-five-syrian-refugee-families.htm)

24 Story gathered from an interview performed by the author with the family on August 25, 2023.



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