

CSA PUBLIC POLICY CENTRE

Unlocking Potential

Strengthening Employment Services for Skilled Newcomers

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CSA Public Policy Centre

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Karen has championed data capacity building across governments and nonprofits, helping organizations develop the tools and capabilities needed for continuous learning and performance improvement. She is currently advancing Blueprint's work on methodologies that ensure digital transformation efforts lead to more inclusive, user-centered public services that strengthen public trust.

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Introduction

As Canada confronts economic uncertainty, an aging population, skills mismatches and a rapidly changing labour market, the successful economic integration of immigrants is more important than ever.[1] While immigration levels have slowed, immigrants already represent 28.9% of the Canadian labour force,[2] and even conservative estimates suggest this share will grow.

Canada's prosperity depends on ensuring that their skills are recognized, well-matched to labour market needs and put to productive use. Yet too many immigrants struggle to secure employment that reflects their qualifications. While most countries face similar challenges, immigrants to Canada are more likely to be overqualified than in any other OECD country (see Table 1). This matters because mismatches between talent and opportunity carry real costs to immigrants whose potential is underutilized, to employers who cannot find the skilled talent they need, and to a country struggling to grow its economy.

Despite significant policy focus on immigrant labour market integration, gaps remain in what is known about how best to help them find work that reflects their education and experience. Much research has examined the barriers immigrants face, but far less is known about the actual employment trajectories they take after arriving in Canada. Moreover, while there is broad recognition that employment and training services help shape labour market outcomes, there is limited evidence on whether and how these services help immigrants secure employment that reflects their skills, education and experience.

According to research from the OECD, Canada has one of the highest overqualification rates among comparator countries. In 2021, 57% of employed immigrants in Canada were considered overqualified, compared to 30% in Australia, 35% in the U.S. and 31% in Germany.[3]

While Canada's relatively high overqualification rate is concerning, we note the important caveat that Canada has the most highly educated immigrants of any country in the study, which increases the potential for immigrant overqualification.



This paper examines these gaps and identifies opportunities to strengthen services to help newcomers[4] succeed. We ask three key questions:

1. **Do post-migration employment dynamics matter?** What do we know about the long-term impact of early employment pathways—such as survival jobs, joblessness, and skill-building strategies—on immigrants' labour market outcomes?
2. **What works to help immigrants obtain commensurate employment?** Which programs and services are most effective in helping immigrants achieve long-term economic success?
3. **Are newcomers accessing effective services?** To what extent are newcomers engaging with evidence-based services? What can we learn from their experiences? Given the variation in newcomer services across the country, this analysis focuses on Ontario as a case study.

We provide new insights into how employment services can better support newcomers in securing meaningful and sustainable work. Findings have implications for policymakers, service providers and stakeholders working to maximize the economic contributions of immigrants and ensure that Canada's immigration system fulfills its promise of shared prosperity.

Table 1. Overqualification rates among skilled immigrants (2021)

Selection of comparator OECD countries	Percentage of immigrants (%) in total population	Overqualification rates (%) in various types of immigrants, 2021				
		Total	Recent (<10yrs)	Settled (>+10yrs)	Foreign educated	Host-country educated
Canada	22.2	57	60	56	62	51
Australia	30.4	30	34	28	33	28
US	15.2	35	37	35	40	32
Germany	19.8	31	33	30	39	19
New Zealand	28.2	27	32	25	*	*
UK	17.1	31	33	30	34	25
Netherlands	16.2	24	25	23	37	17
Japan	2.8	65	*	*	*	*
Korea	3.5	73	76	65	76	53

Sources. OECD. (2023). *Indicators of immigration integration 2023: Settling in. [*Table A B.10. Overqualification rates, 2021]. https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2023/06/indicators-of-immigrant-integration-2023_70d202c4/1d5020a6-en.pdf; United Nations. (n.d.). *International Migrant Stock.* https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock.

"*" means value is missing.



Inside this report

This report is organized into four sections.

Section 1

Post-migration employment dynamics:

We begin by examining the employment pathways newcomers take after arrival and their long-term implications. We draw on findings from discussions with employment-services staff and newcomers, as well as Canadian research on post-migration employment trajectories.

Section 2

What works:

Next, we examine evidence on services designed to help newcomers obtain commensurate employment, such as bridging programs and mentorships. This section integrates findings from our review of effective practices and insights from settlement service providers to develop a nuanced understanding of needs and promising practices.

Section 3

Current state of access to effective services:

Using Ontario as a case study, we analyze service use patterns, explore the extent to which the services newcomers access are aligned with their needs, and review the evidence base on what works.

Section 4

Opportunities for moving forward:

We conclude by summarizing our findings and propose ways to enhance services to ensure better outcomes for newcomers.



Our approach

We used a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative insights to provide a nuanced understanding of how different employment pathways influence long-term labour market outcomes. The study also examined whether existing services effectively support newcomers in finding employment that matches their skills and experience.

Our approach included:

- **Evidence review:** We examined Canadian research literature on post-migration employment dynamics, and evidence on employment and training interventions for newcomers.
- **Program participation analysis:** We analyzed provincial and federal government data to assess the number of newcomers accessing different types of employment services, using Ontario as a case study.
- **Jurisdictional scan:** We reviewed reports on employment service systems in British Columbia, New York State, Australia, and Germany. Jurisdictions were selected based on their geographic and economic similarities to Canada and Ontario, and the proportion of immigrants in their population.
- **Survey analysis**: We analyzed data from a survey conducted by Blueprint that reached 1,492 unemployed and precariously employed jobseekers in the Greater Toronto Area. This survey was conducted as part of a larger initiative to understand what works for job seekers in Toronto. For this analysis, we focused on a subsample of 932 newcomers who reported using employment services, assessing their experiences and outcomes.
- **Stakeholder engagement:** We conducted a series of focus groups and interviews to better understand the perspectives of newcomers and expert practitioners who provide employment services to them. Our engagement included:
  - Two focus groups with newcomers
  - One focus group with frontline staff drawn from a range of Ontario-based general employment service providers
  - Two focus groups with leaders from Ontario organizations that provide both general employment services and newcomer-specific services
  - Nine interviews with practitioners from settlement organizations across the country

1.0 Post-migration employment dynamics

This section draws on a mix of quantitative evidence, service provider insights and the perspectives of newcomers themselves to understand post-migration employment pathways and their implications for long-term success.

Pathways newcomers take during their first few years in Canada vary significantly. Some enter survival jobs—temporary, often lower-skilled positions to cover living expenses—after arrival to meet immediate financial needs. This is termed rapid entry. Others delay labour market entry so they can focus on credential recognition or targeted training. Others transition between employment types, adjusting their strategies as they learn to navigate the market.[5] This raises the question: **How do various early employment pathways influence earning potential and career progression?**

The service providers and newcomers we spoke with highlighted the trade-offs associated with different employment pathways. Many newcomers spoke of how financial pressures led them to take the first available job, even if it did not align with their skills and experience.[6] They shared that while taking a survival job provides much needed income, local work experience and potential opportunities for networking, doing so is not without its costs and can make it harder to focus on progressing toward commensurate employment.[7] Table 2 summarizes these trade-offs and competing priorities.

Despite the very real nature of tradeoffs between various employment pathways, there is limited research on how they play out for newcomers to Canada. To our knowledge, only two Canadian studies systematically explore newcomer employment trajectories. We discuss both studies below, focusing first on employment pathways newcomers may choose, and then the outcomes of taking one pathway over another.

Table 2. Potential benefits and drawbacks of rapid versus delayed entry

	Potential benefits	Potential drawbacks
Rapid entry (part-time or mismatched work)	▪ Gain local work experience, improve language skills and expand professional networks ▪ Acts as a 'foot in the door,' mitigating employer concerns about hiring risks	▪ Limits field-specific skill accumulation and may trap individuals in low-wage, low-skill positions ▪ Risks underemployment, hindering long-term career progression
Delayed entry (joblessness) to find more commensurate employment	▪ Offers time for skill-building, credential acquisition, and deeper understanding of the local labour market ▪ Enables targeted strategies for better occupational matching, supporting long-term career success	▪ May signal low productivity to employers, reducing future employability ▪ Risks skill erosion, which could diminish competitiveness in the labour market over time

Sources: Prepared by the authors based on Blueprint. (2024). *Marketing Employment Services in Toronto: Going from Good to Great;* Fuller, S. (2018). Do pathways matter? Linking early immigrant employment sequences and later economic outcomes: Evidence from Canada. *International Migration Review,* 49(2), 355–405. https://doi.org/10.1111/imre.12094

1.1 Understanding employment pathways

The first Canadian study is Sylvia Fuller's 2015 analysis of the *Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada* (LSIC).[8] Her research categorizes newcomers into six distinct pathways based on patterns of employment, education and training in their first four years post-arrival. Table 3 summarizes the six pathways and their associated outcomes. Outcome comparisons across pathways control for language proficiency, foreign education, age and measures of friendship networks.

Not surprisingly, quick integration into a good job is associated with the best outcomes, while labour market exclusion is associated with the worst. Interestingly, immigrants who delay their integration fare better than immigrants who enter the labour market quickly, but not in good jobs (the redirection pathway).

Fuller's findings suggest there are distinct early employment pathways that are associated with diverging outcomes—even during the relatively short four-year observation period. However, because her study is descriptive, we are unable to disentangle cause and effect.

Table 3. Six employment pathways

Pathway	Description	Finding
Quick integration	Rapid entry into stable, full-time employment shortly after arrival.	Best outcomes—higher wages, job satisfaction and upward mobility. Strong alignment with pre-immigration skills.
Delayed integration	More gradual entry into stable, full-time employment after an initial period of joblessness. The study does not provide details of specific activities for this path.	Second-best outcomes—delayed progress, but comparable wage growth and occupational attainment to "Quick integration" pathway.
Redirection	Starts similarly to quick integration with full-time employment, but lower-quality matches lead to transitions into part-time work, study or other states.	Long-term outcomes for this group are less favourable compared to quick and delayed integration.
Study	Extended periods of education to upgrade skills, acquire credentials or address qualification gaps.	By the end of the observation period, most immigrants in this pathway were still engaged in education. A longer observation period is needed to assess the extent to which this pathway pays off.
Exclusion	Persistent non-employment, with immigrants spending most of the observation period out of the labour market. For women, this often involves family care; men in this group often experience prolonged joblessness.	Exclusion results in the poorest long-term outcomes, as extended non-employment limits the accumulation of Canadian work experience and exacerbates skill erosion.
Self-employment	The self-employment pathway reflects a mix of entrepreneurial ambitions and necessity-driven choices when other employment opportunities are scarce. Immigrants in this group often transition into self-employment after initial periods of unemployment or unsatisfactory jobs.	While self-employment offers an alternative route to labour market integration, outcomes vary widely. Some immigrants achieve financial stability and autonomy, while others face challenges.

Source: Fuller, S. (2018). Do pathways matter? Linking early immigrant employment sequences and later economic outcomes: Evidence from Canada. *International Migration Review*, *49*(2), 355–405. https://doi.org/10.1111/imre.12094

1.2 Understanding the impact of early pathways on long-term outcomes

Research by Zhang and Banerjee[9] provides the only robust analyses of post-migration employment dynamics in Canada. They used the *Extended Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada* (LSIC-IMDB) linked with 16 years of tax records to assess the relationship between early labour market experiences and long-term outcomes. The study controlled for education (both country-of-origin and Canadian credentials), marital status, visible minority status and immigration category. Below is a summary of the study's findings according to the following pathways.

1. **Rapid entry into part-time work:**
    - Part-time employment during the early settlement period leads to significant long-term earnings disadvantages for both male and female immigrants (23.1 percentage points lower for women and 17.6 percentage points lower for men).
    - Immigrants who remained in part-time work after four years faced the most pronounced earnings penalties and showed limited earnings growth over the long term.
    - These results indicate that rapid entry into, and extended periods with, part-time status may have long-term, negative effects for immigrants.
2. **Occupational mismatch:**
    - Occupational mismatch during the intermediate period after arrival (2.5–4 years) is strongly associated with lower earnings for men six years after landing—30.3 percentage points lower and statistically significant. The estimate for women is 8.5 percentage points lower, but is not statistically significant.
    - While occupational mismatch over the intermediate and longer term is associated with lower earnings, mismatches immediately after arrival had no significant impact on long-term earnings for either gender, provided immigrants moved out of occupational mismatch by the intermediate period.



3. **Joblessness:**
    - Immigrants who experienced months of joblessness early on had better long-term economic outcomes than those who worked in part-time or in occupationally mismatched jobs.

Taken together, these findings suggest that delaying labour market entry for at least a short time is associated with better long-term employment and earnings outcomes. It is possible that employers may perceive initial joblessness as a normal part of the adjustment process for immigrants, reducing its negative signals. It is also possible that some newcomers use the first few months in Canada to put themselves on a pathway to better labour market outcomes.

We note that while the study controls for education, it does not allow us to fully disentangle the impact of challenges related to foreign credential recognition from other types of labour market barriers or the choices newcomers make, such as whether to take a survival job. Despite this limitation, the study provides a strong rationale for ensuring employment services support newcomers to make the most of their first few months in Canada.

2.0 What works for newcomers

This section examines what is known about what works for newcomers.

2.1 Types of employment and training services for newcomers

The barriers newcomers face are well-documented in both academic literature and applied research reports.[10] In Table 4, we organize barriers into three categories:

- Structural, involving policies, processes or systems
- Societal, such as assumptions and biases
- Human and social capital, related to professional networks, skills and experience

We also identify the major types of programs available in Canada to address these barriers.

Table 4. Services available to respond to newcomer employment-related barriers

Barrier category	Barrier examples	Programs and services to address barriers
Structural barriers Challenges related to policies, processes or systems	Foreign credential recognition[11]	Foreign credential assessment and recognition programs,[12] bridging programs[13]
	Service navigation[14]	Information and orientation services[15]
Societal barriers Challenges related to assumptions and biases	Employer biases and preferences to hire candidates with familiar backgrounds and experience[16]	Coaching and support for employers for hiring newcomers[17]
Human and social capital barriers Challenges related to networks, skills, and experience	▪ Targeted skills gaps[18] ▪ Lack of Canadian social and professional networks and references[19] ▪ Lack of Canadian work experience[20] ▪ Lack of understanding of the labour market and job search processes[21] ▪ Knowledge gaps about Canadian workplace culture[22]	Skills development programs[23] Bridging programs[24] (may include a range of services) or single service programs, such as a mentoring program, work experience program, workplace culture program, or resources on the Canadian job market
	Language proficiency[25]	Language training, including basic language classes and occupation-specific language training[26]

2.2 Current state: Ontario case study

Economic integration of newcomers is an area of shared jurisdiction in Canada.[27] For example, the federal Settlement Program and its employment-related services are funded and administered directly through Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). Other programs, such as the Ontario Bridge Training Program, are co-funded by the federal and provincial governments, but administered by the province through the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development (MLITSD).

Adding further complexity, in Ontario, newcomers can also access programs for the general population of job seekers. Table 5 shows the range of employment services available to newcomers in the province. It illustrates how MLITSD administers both general employment and skills programs, along with newcomer bridging programs. Meanwhile, IRCC administers employment-related services, along with language training and some sector-specific training programs.

In Ontario, like other jurisdictions in Canada, a range of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also design and deliver programs for newcomers, with funding from IRCC, provinces and territories, foundations and private fundraising. There is a wide range of programs that fit in this category.

Table 5. Employment services available to newcomers in Ontario

	Program	Program name and description	Target population
MLITSD	Employment services	Integrated Employment Services[28] Information and resources, career exploration and planning, job search support, mentorship and networking, job development, work placement, subsidies and retention supports	General
	Skills development	Skills Development[29] Range of programs including literacy, pre-employment, apprenticeship, financial support, Better Jobs Ontario, Skills Development Fund and Youth Job Link	General
	Bridge training	Ontario Bridge Training Program[30] Occupation-specific training programs and licensure supports	Newcomers only
IRCC	Employment services	Settlement Program's employment-related services[31] Information and resources, career exploration and planning, job search support, mentorship and networking, job development, work placement, subsidies and retention supports	Newcomers only
	Language training	Language Instruction for Newcomers (LINC)[32] English classes at all levels, including advanced job-specific language classes	Newcomers only
	Bridge training	Sector-specific training[33] Funded in collaboration with Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC)	Newcomers only



For example, noticing an opportunity to help newcomer women achieve commensurate employment, the Newcomer Women's Services Toronto launched the Sister2Sister program,[34] which now receives between 300 and 500 expressions of interest per cohort.[35] Sister2Sister focuses on building community leadership capacity among newcomer women. It provides tools, resources and training on how to draw on lived experience to organize in the community, and engage civically and politically to influence policy. A new Sister2Sister program component provides free access to MBA Project Management and Digital Fluency courses, along with wraparound support, career coaching and a paid job placement, leading many to gain employment in well-paid managerial positions.

Another example is the work of the Syrian Canadian Foundation to mobilize community members and resources in a range of innovative ways. They include collaborating with University of Toronto Mississauga's Department of Language Studies to provide language training, coordinating English language tutors to meet Syrian women in their homes, working with Jumpstart to run a women's entrepreneurship program, and inviting mentors to join newcomers for the breaking of the fast during Ramadan to build professional networks.[36]

> **The Newcomer Women's Services Toronto launched the Sister2Sister program, which now receives between 300 and 500 expressions of interest per cohort.**

2.3 Other jurisdictions

We conducted a high-level comparison of other jurisdictions' newcomer employment service provisions with Ontario's. We selected four jurisdictions—British Columbia, New York State, Australia, and Germany—based on their economic, geographic and governmental similarities to Ontario, as well as their comparable proportions of immigrant populations. Table 6 provides a high-level summary of our analysis. Broadly speaking, we found that all comparator jurisdictions took a similar approach to Ontario. We highlight three key findings here.

1. Like Ontario, all four comparator jurisdictions have specific programs to help skilled newcomers find commensurate jobs, and these programs are roughly similar to programs delivered in Ontario. All four comparator jurisdictions also expect that newcomers will participate in general employment services. One jurisdiction, Australia, recognizes that refugees and those from cultural and religious minorities require tailored support to be properly served by general employment services, so they provide licences for specialist providers to serve these groups.[37]
2. Also similar to Ontario, all comparator jurisdictions report employment outcomes of clients by newcomer status, but only Australia reports information about the quality of the jobs that newcomer clients obtain.[38]
3. Finally, almost no jurisdictions have publicly available evaluations of programs that support newcomers to access commensurate employment.

Table 6. Newcomer employment services jurisdictional scan

Jurisdiction	Available employment services		Available data and evidence		
	General (newcomers may access)	Specialized for skilled newcomers	Newcomer job attainment	Newcomer commensurate job attainment	Skilled newcomer program evaluations
Australia	✓ Yes[39]	✓ Yes, several state-level programs for highly skilled newcomers[40]	✓ Yes[41]	Sector matches and mismatches at different timepoints for employed skilled migrants and family reunification migrants (not migrants who arrive through other streams) [42]	✗ No
New York State	✓ Yes[43]	✓ Yes, state-level programs[44]	✓ Yes[45]	✗ No	✗ No
Germany	✓ Yes[46]	✓ Yes[47]	✓ Yes[48]	✗ No	Refugees only[49]
BC	✓ Yes[50]	Career Paths for Skilled Immigrants (provincial)[51]	✓ Yes[52]	✗ No	✗ No
Ontario	✓ Yes[53]	Ontario Bridge Training[54]	✓ Yes[55]	✗ No	✗ No

2.4 Evidence review

The following section examines the evidence related to each program type outlined in Table 5. We drew on academic literature and publicly available program evaluations and reports. We prioritized studies from the past five years, supplementing with older research where no recent evidence was available. Note that it is possible that additional relevant reports exist that are not publicly available and therefore excluded from this review.

Our assessment is guided by a hierarchy of evidence (see Figure 1) that prioritizes robust evidence, such as randomized controlled trials, and supplements it with less robust evidence, such as outcomes- and implementation-focused program evaluations.

Pre-arrival services

Pre-arrival services provide permanent residents (PRs) with information and supports so they can begin the settlement process while overseas and make informed decisions about their new life in Canada. Services include needs assessment and referrals, information and orientation, employment-related services and community connections.

A 2018 publicly available report by IRCC evaluates the effectiveness of its pre-arrival services. The study, using a quasi-experimental approach, examines employment outcomes for those who accessed pre-arrival services versus those who did not. It found that those who accessed pre-arrival services are more likely to be employed full-time than those who did not access pre-arrival services.

Figure 1. Evidence hierarchy

Strength of Evidence

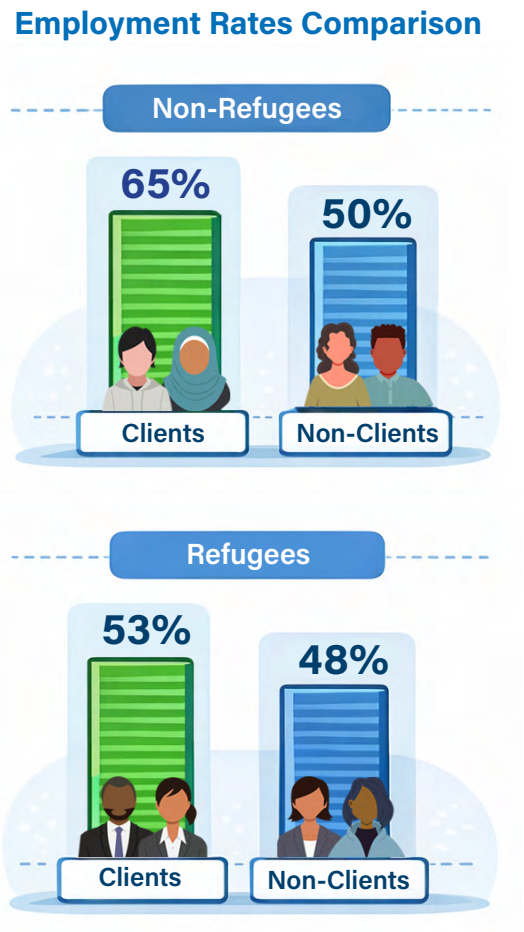
	Type	Example	Evidence Quality
High	Individual studies with randomized/credible source of exogenous variation	▪ Randomzied experiments ▪ Natural experiments ▪ Systematic reviews and meta-analyses	Very strong evidence
Medium	Limited or no source of exogenous variation but with credible comparison group	▪ Some control in the assignment of treatment ▪ Correlation studies (including case studies with a comparison group)	Moderate to very strong depending on design features
Low	Studies without measured comparison groups	▪ Studies without a comparison group ▪ Participant satisfaction ▪ Expert opinions ▪ Exploratory case studies	Evidence should be considered suggestive and interpreted with care and attention to biases

Source: Sweetman, A., Frenette, M., Myers, K., et al. (2014). *A practical guide to understanding returns to training investments: Adult learning and returns to training project.* SRDC. https://www.srdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/adult-learning-practical-guide.pdf

Among non-refugees, 65% of clients were working at the time of being surveyed, while 50% of non-clients were working. Among refugees, 53% of clients were working compared to 48% of non-clients.[56] The authors note that the finding was statistically significant when controlling for a range of variables in a multiple regression model, but the report provided limited methodological detail.

The evaluation also found that participants who accessed pre-arrival services were less likely to experience difficulty obtaining credential recognition or finding job-related training opportunities. However, both groups reported similar challenges in finding employment overall. For example, 39% versus 41% reported difficulty getting a job, and 64% versus 65% reported finding work that matched their qualifications.

In addition, those who accessed pre-arrival services were more likely to access post-arrival services. A larger share of those who accessed pre-arrival services reported having sufficient information to contact settlement organizations, get their professional credentials recognized, and understand Canadian workplace culture and norms. The evaluation also found that most newcomers are not aware of pre-arrival services.



Mentorship

The only report investigating mentorship for newcomers is Blueprint's 2020 evaluation of the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) Mentoring Partnership program, including approximately 1,000 participants. Effects were estimated by comparing participants to a group of similar non-participants.[57]

The program matched internationally trained newcomers seeking a job in their field with a mentor who is a professional working in the same field. Over a three-month period, mentors helped their mentee navigate the local job market and build their professional networks to improve their job search.

The evaluation found that program alumni were 2.45 times more likely to be in good quality employment after three months of participation compared to those who did not participate.[58] It also found that mentees were almost four times as likely to have expanded their professional networks three months post program compared to those who did not participate.

Work placements

SRDC's 2020 evaluation of the Canadian Work Experience Pilot Projects, funded by Employment and Skills Development Canada (ESDC), examined work placements for newcomers.[59] The study assessed outcomes for 1,154 participants who received various supports and a work placement, comparing employment outcomes to individuals who received the same supports but were not given a work placement.

The Canadian Work Experience Pilot Projects operated between 2017 and 2018, aiming to help highly skilled newcomers gain Canadian work experience in their profession. The pilots were delivered by local agencies alongside other assistance, such as one-on-one support, career development services, training, mentoring and wage subsidies.

The study found that participants had better employment outcomes than non-participants. In fact, 86% were employed in a full-time, commensurate job three months after the work placement, versus 64% for those who did not participate in the work placement program.

The study found participants had better job search skills, understanding of the Canadian job market, and confidence in their skills and career development. It also found that identifying employers willing to provide meaningful placements was a challenge.

Bridging programs

While there are several reports on bridging programs in Canada, their methodological rigour is limited. To our knowledge, there are no studies on bridging programs and their outcomes, compared to the next best option. Further, given there is wide variation in program design (especially for unregulated professions), drawing conclusions about overall effectiveness is challenging.

The term "bridging programs" is relatively recent in Canada, formally recognized in 2000.[60] Initially, these programs focused on helping internationally trained professionals in regulated fields such as medicine and engineering obtain licensing and accreditation. They offered learning assessments, gap training and systems navigation support. They have since expanded to include non-regulated professions.

These programs are generally cohort-based and sector-specific, including training on the Canadian work environment, sector-specific terminology, workplace culture and communication skills, technical skills and networking opportunities. They are delivered by various partners, including colleges, industry associations and employment services providers. See Box 1 for a description of the Bridge Training program developed by ACCES Employment, one of Ontario's largest employment services organizations specialized in serving newcomers.

In its 2017 Annual Report, the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario found that around 6,000 newcomers accessed bridging programs in the province in 2016–17.[61] The review found that 71% of participants who completed their program during the three years preceding the report found employment in their field. However, due to review limitations, we have no estimates of how many participants would have found sector-specific employment without participating in a bridging program. The review also found significant variety in participant

employment outcomes across funded bridging programs, and that there was no data suitable to analyze cost-effectiveness or quality of the programs.

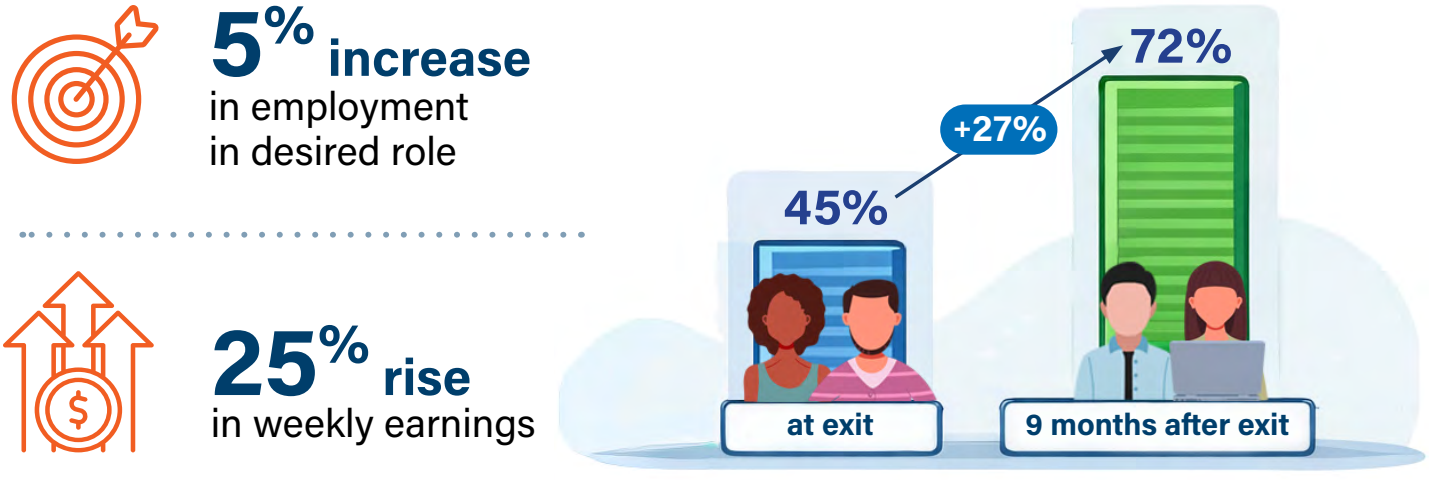
A 2019 literature review for the Forum of Labour Market Ministers identified best practices for bridging programs in regulated professions, focusing on Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), effective program components and delivery considerations.[62] The review found that providing individual learning plans, mentorship, occupation-specific language training, work experience and skills gap training were considered best practices of bridging programs. It recommended sustainable funding, client-centred delivery and strong program evaluation practices.

The evidence for bridging programs in unregulated professions is limited. The sole exception is Blueprint's evaluation of Facilitation Access to Skilled Talent (FAST). Developed by BC's Immigrant Employment Council with funding from the Future Skills Centre (FSC), FAST is an online, self-paced tool for pre- and post-arrival newcomers. It is designed to help accelerate their job search and better understand their target occupations and industries, their necessary competencies, and their qualifications and understanding of Canadian workplace norms.

The FAST program provides industry-focused technical competency assessments, workplace culture training, gap training, referrals to credentialing services and access to job search resources.[63] It aims to improve industry knowledge and awareness of Canadian workplace norms in accounting and finance, IT and data services, biotech and life sciences, seniors care and skilled trades.

An evaluation of participants' experience found that 61% of participants felt satisfied, with culture training seen as the most useful, and 80% would recommend the program.[64] Employment outcomes improved over time, with 72% employed nine months after exit versus 45% at exit. Participants also reported a 5% increase in employment in their desired role and a 25% rise in weekly earnings nine months later. As with other evaluations cited above, these findings are limited in that the study did not include a comparison group, meaning we do not know whether an individual who participated in FAST had better employment outcomes compared to similar individuals who participated in general employment services or received no services at all.

FAST Program Employment Outcomes





Box 1

ACCES's Bridging Program model

In Ontario, ACCES Employment developed a bridging program to support highly skilled newcomer job seekers to get work in their field that reflects their past experience. According to a white paper by Taneja Consulting that used 2022 data, more than 82% of ACCES Bridging Program graduates found employment that reflected their skills and experience.[65]

The model encompasses the following components: [66]

- **Industry participation**: Each program is guided by an Industry Advisory Committee whose members provide guidance on program curriculum, and participate in delivery as guest speakers and mentors. This allows industry leaders to shape talent before hiring, ensuring training responds to industry needs, dispelling myths about hiring newcomers and positioning internationally trained professionals as competitive in Canada.
- **Canadian context academic training**: Academic training is provided not to replicate participants' education, but to deliver information about their sector in the Canadian context, upgrade technical skills and provide credibility through an affiliation with a recognized Canadian institution.
- **Experiential learning to build essential skills, gain Canadian experience, demonstrate expertise and establish professional contacts**: Participants take part in business challenges and present their solutions to employers to gain experience and demonstrate their skills. Participants also have access to a mentor in their industry who provides support for 20 weeks.
- **Specialized employment retention and career mobility services**: Once participants obtain employment, they have access to ongoing supports, including language coaching, business communications coaching and document editing. Where possible, they also have access to a workplace "buddy" who provides guidance in the new job.

Participants also receive access to wraparound supports such as housing, mental health, language and healthcare services.



Language training

We included two studies in our review:

1. A 2010, IRCC-led evaluation of its LINC program that considered language gains for participants and non-participants using a quasi-experimental approach.
2. A 2013 academic study by Lisa Kaida that drew on the LSIC to explore the role of language training on earnings, comparing language training participants with non-participants.

LINC provides basic language training in English or French to adult permanent residents. IRCC's evaluation found that LINC led to improved language abilities for students in the areas of reading (by 0.88 of a benchmark level) and writing (by 0.51 of a benchmark level), but not in listening and speaking beyond what they would have gained from living in Canada. Broken down by hours spent participating in LINC, the evaluation found that more time spent as a LINC learner was associated with greater impacts across Canadian Language Benchmarks dimensions.[67] The evaluation also found lack of childcare an obstacle to attending. It did not include analysis of the role of language training in newcomer employment outcomes.

The 2013 Kaida study uses 2000 to 2001 data from the LSIC, and data on poverty from 2004 to 2005. It found that language training was helpful in assisting recent newcomers to exit poverty.[68] For recent newcomers whose first language was neither English nor French, and whose household income was below Statistics Canada's Low-Income Cut-Off (LICO) two years after arrival, participation in language training increased the likelihood of exiting poverty two years after completing the training (four years after arrival), compared to those who did not take language classes. This study demonstrates that language training makes a difference in earnings income.

Employment Ontario employment services

We did not find any studies that specifically address the effectiveness of Employment Ontario employment services for newcomers. However, we can share relevant findings from a 2024 Blueprint initiative exploring perceptions of, and experiences with, employment services in Toronto.

We surveyed just over 900 newcomers about their experience with Toronto Employment Ontario services[1] and found that just over half of respondents felt the services they received were useful in helping them gain employment. Among the newcomers we reached who were employed at the time of the survey, 50% agreed that they would not have been able to get the job they did without the help of employment services. Just over half (53%) agreed that Employment Ontario services helped them reach their employment goals. But despite these numbers, only 29% were very likely to recommend the services to other newcomers.

1 This study was conducted before Toronto Employment Services transitioned to the province's new Integrated Employment Services (IES) program.

In addition to the survey, this study conducted focus groups with newcomers who had accessed Employment Ontario services. Focus group participants shared that while they found employment services helpful in many ways, they also experienced several challenges. These included receiving conflicting advice—for example, about handing out resumes in person versus applying to jobs posted online—and minimal availability of more intensive supports perceived to lead to employment, such as work-integrated learning opportunities. They also shared frustrations with service provider-organized job fairs, citing examples of receiving no advanced notice about which employers would attend, and attending job fairs with no employers at all.

The focus groups we held with Ontario-based employment service providers suggested that Ontario's Integrated Employment Services (IES) system was not well-positioned to support newcomers to obtain commensurate employment. They shared that because providers' success is measured by whether their clients obtain and retain employment (as per the program guidelines), there is limited incentive to invest extra effort and resources to help a client find a commensurate role.

While the IES system is explicitly designed to support a diverse client base, including persons with disabilities, newcomers and racialized individuals, services are general and key performance indicators (KPIs) are focused on employment—not commensurate employment.

Specifically, Ontario's IES Performance Management Framework Guidelines state that providers are measured against the following KPIs:

- Achievement of employment outcomes at three and 12 months
- Client satisfaction at EAP (employment goal/plan) outcome and at 12 months
- Achievement of specific client volumes across streams and priority population groups
- Service volumes for client education and training completion[69]

There is no KPI for commensurate employment.

2.5 Newcomer-specific versus general-population services

This evidence review demonstrates that newcomer-specific employment services appear to align with the specific employment-related challenges that newcomers face. However, evidence of what works to support them obtain *commensurate* employment is limited, and the evidence that does exist has significant shortcomings. These include:

- **Outdated data**: Data used are often old. It is unclear if results would be the same with more recent data. Several of the best studies methodologically used the LSIC, but the respondents immigrated in 2000 and 2001—roughly 25 years ago—and both the composition of immigrants and Canada's labour market have changed considerably over that time.
- **Inconclusive results**: Studies about some services fail to find statistically significant effects. It is unclear whether this is because there are no effects, or because there are effects but not enough statistical power to detect them.
- **Inconsistent outcomes tracked**: Some studies fail to measure medium- and longer-term labour market outcomes, so long-term effects of employment services are unclear.

To move our understanding forward, we need research that uses recent data and measures long-term outcomes using rigorous methods, including comparison groups. This is important for identifying and investing in the services most likely to achieve outcomes for newcomers.

3.0 Current state of access to services

3.1 MLITSD and IRCC programs

Using data from several public sources, we estimated the proportion of working-age newcomers[70] in Ontario who accessed either IRCC's employment-related services or MLITSD employment services (see Table 7 below).

As of 2021, estimates suggest there are 586,606 working-age newcomers in Ontario. Only about 4.4% of Ontario's working-age newcomers accessed IRCC-funded employment-related services in 2022–2023, the most recent publicly available data for IRCC. By contrast, we estimate that 13.5% of Ontario's newcomers accessed Employment Ontario's employment services in 2023–2025, using the most recent data available. Thus, newcomers in Ontario are much more likely to use Employment Ontario employment services than IRCC-funded services. Indeed, publicly available data suggests that at least 49%[71] of Employment Ontario clients are newcomers.

These participation patterns are important because, as discussed above, the differences between the two types of services are significant. Moreover, while publicly available data do not indicate how many newcomers use both services, even if we assume no one uses both types of services, only about 18% of newcomers are using either service in a year. Given the scale of unemployment and underemployment among newcomers, this suggests either considerable underutilization of services or lack of available services.

3.2 Other programming

Newcomers also take part in programs funded through other employment and training initiatives, including Ontario's Skills Development Fund, and federal programs such as those offered by the Future Skills Centre (FSC) and Upskill Canada.

While we do not have total participation numbers for these three initiatives, we share participation rates for FSC's Scaling Up Skills Development program as an illustration of the relatively high participation rates of immigrants. The program features 10 skills development projects delivered by local organizations across Canada, including sector-specific training, skills training for youth at-risk of not completing high school, and pre-employment training for the long-term unemployed.

Only one of these projects, FAST, is designed specifically for newcomers. Even so, 75% of participant respondents across the 10 Scaling Up Skills Development projects are immigrants (5,504 out of 7,332), including 57% of participants (2,451 out of 4,279) in the projects other than FAST.

Participating newcomers are typically more highly educated than their Canadian-born counterparts. In response to the large proportion of newcomer participants—and the more advanced skills of this group—one provider in this program, NPower Canada, adapted their model to establish a specific newcomer stream. However, most other projects have not made similar adjustments.

Table 7. Immigrants in Ontario who participated in employment services (2022–2024)

		Target population	Number of newcomer clients	Number of total clients served	Percentage of Ontario's 584,680 newcomers served
MLITSD	**Integrated Employment Services**	General	35,280	72,000	49%
	Employment Services	General	~81,795 (estimate)	166,926	13.5%
	Ontario Bridge Training Program	Newcomers only	2,400		0.4%
IRCC	**Settlement Program: Employment-related Services**	Newcomers only	34,235[1]		4.4%

Source: Government of Canada. (2024). *Canada Employment Insurance Commission (CEIC).*

[1] We assume 75% of these clients are newcomers (arrived in Canada within the last five years) based on IRRC service patterns, with the remaining clients arriving in Canada more than five years ago.

4.0 Findings and opportunities moving forward

4.1 Findings and discussion

Canada's performance on commensurate employment for newcomers lags behind many peer countries. Recent OECD analysis shows that immigrants in Canada are more likely to be overqualified for their jobs than immigrants in other high-income countries—even when education and experience are held constant.[72]

Canadian research points to a relationship between early post-migration employment pathways and long-term outcomes. Specifically, there is evidence to suggest that delaying labour market entry—at least temporarily—is associated with better long-term employment and earnings. Moreover, initial joblessness does not appear to have the same negative consequences for newcomers as it might for other populations. Instead, this period can offer time for newcomers to gain credentials, understand the labour market and pursue a better job match. By contrast, early entry into part-time work is associated with lower long-term earnings, particularly for those who remain in such roles beyond the initial settlement period.

As noted, existing research does not allow us to clearly separate the effects of foreign credential recognition challenges from other labour market barriers or from newcomers' own decisions, such as taking a survival job. Despite this limitation, the study provides a strong rationale for ensuring employment services help newcomers make the most of their first few months in Canada.

While the barriers newcomers face are well documented, and many programs have been developed to address them, rigorous evidence on what works—particularly for achieving commensurate employment for skilled newcomers—remains limited.

Bridge training programs are seen as promising by experts, service providers and clients alike. While these programs have service components that clearly align well with the needs of skilled newcomers, few have been rigorously evaluated. Most existing bridge training evaluations lack comparison groups or long-term outcome data. More robust evidence on what works—and for whom—is needed to inform future investments and improve service design.

Other promising approaches for skilled newcomers—such as mentorship, sector-specific training and occupation-specific language supports—exist, but are often fragmented across federal and provincial systems, limiting their visibility, uptake and scalability. Skilled newcomers also face a fragmented and difficult-to-navigate service landscape. It is not always clear how they become aware of bridging programs or other targeted supports. As a result, they must navigate multiple systems to access services that meet their needs.

Newcomers account for nearly half the clients in Ontario's Integrated Employment Services (IES) system. Although IES is designed to serve all job seekers, our research indicates that more can be done to ensure IES is better equipped to support skilled newcomers in securing commensurate employment. Specifically, KPIs that focus on simple job attainment, rather than job quality or skills alignment, can weaken incentive for providers to support better job matching.

Taken together, these findings provide strong evidence that Canada can take further steps to ensure employment and training services are tailored to the needs of highly skilled newcomers—and delivered at a scale that reflects population-level demand. This includes improving service design, investing in rigorous evaluation, and strengthening data infrastructure to support effective planning and delivery.

4.2 Opportunities moving forward

Improving long-term labour market outcomes for skilled newcomers will require targeted efforts across multiple dimensions. As noted, the literature on employment barriers experienced by newcomers emphasizes a need for changes to structural and societal barriers, particularly around how foreign credentials are recognized by employers and professional associations.

However, this paper focuses on the human and social capital barriers experienced by newcomers—and how employment and training services can better help skilled newcomers obtain commensurate employment.

Our findings point to four key areas of opportunity:

1. Align services with commensurate employment outcomes

There is an opportunity to strengthen existing services to better support skilled newcomers in securing jobs that match their education and experience. While promising programs exist, particularly bridge training, they operate on a small scale relative to need. Although approximately half of clients in Ontario's IES system are newcomers, the current focus is on rapid job placement rather than skills alignment. Governments could consider more directly incorporating commensurate employment into policy goals and service design. This could include revising performance metrics and provider incentives, and integrating evidence-based practices that promote commensurate employment into service delivery.

2. Improve access by streamlining navigation and referral pathways

Currently, programs and services are fragmented and difficult to navigate. More integrated access points, stronger referral pathways and better coordination across systems could help skilled newcomers find the supports that best match their needs. These improvements would also reduce confusion and make the overall service experience more accessible and efficient.

3. Strengthen the evidence base to support innovation and continuous improvement

As policymakers and service providers work to improve outcomes for skilled newcomers, there is a growing need for more rigorous and actionable evidence to guide decision-making. The iCARE database—which contains administrative data on participants in IRCC-funded settlement services—represents an underused resource for this purpose. With more systematic analysis, it could reveal patterns in service use, disparities in access, and links between specific supports and labour market outcomes. These insights could strengthen service planning, enable continuous improvement and inform more cost-effective investments.

4. Assess cost-effectiveness and support value-for-money decision making

Given fiscal constraints and growing demand, there is a strong rationale for assessing which interventions deliver the greatest impact for public investment. Evaluating cost-effectiveness—and not just effectiveness—can help identify scalable, high-impact approaches and guide decisions about where to target funding. Building this lens into program evaluations and service planning can support a more efficient and outcomes-oriented employment system.



4.3 Beyond services: System-level enablers of commensurate employment

While our analysis focuses on improving employment and training services, broader system-level factors also influence whether skilled newcomers can access commensurate employment. Three areas, in particular, stand out as important enablers of success:

1. **Credential recognition and licensing**. Regulatory bodies and licensing processes continue to present barriers in many high-skill professions, such as medicine and engineering. More research is needed to understand how these institutions can better recognize international credentials without compromising professional standards.

2. **Employer practices and hiring norms**. Employers play a critical role in shaping opportunities for skilled newcomers. Hiring processes, reliance on Canadian experience and undervaluation of foreign credentials all contribute to underemployment. Future efforts could examine how public policy and employer engagement strategies might shift demand-side behaviour to support inclusion and better job matching.

3. **System coordination and efficiency**. Improved alignment between federal and provincial systems, stronger referral mechanisms and streamlined program delivery could reduce complexity and enhance the newcomer experience. Coordinated systems are also better positioned to achieve results at scale.

By addressing these enablers alongside service improvements, Canada can better harness the skills of its immigrant population—strengthening both economic performance and social inclusion.

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