

BRIDGES

MIGRATION | COMMUNITY | IMPACT

**IMAGINE CARE
IN YOUR OWN
LANGUAGE**

Codeword: Connection

The time for armchair scientists is over

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Should we talk
housing together?

Picturing citizenship
and belonging

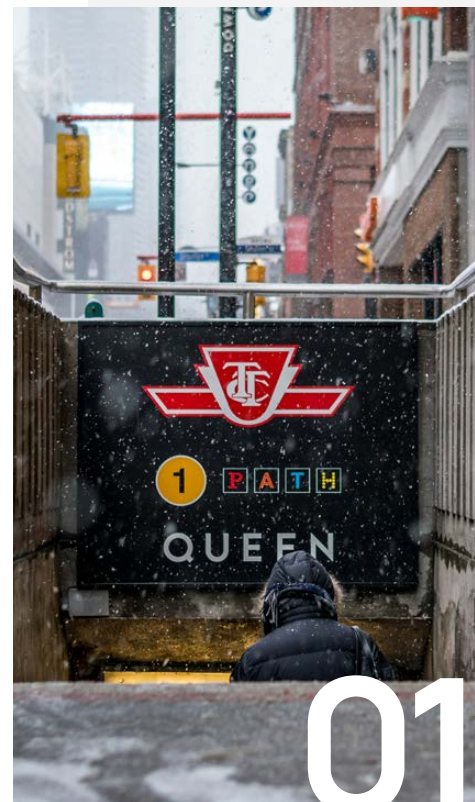
A mentor's case for
thinking beyond data





Migrant Integration in the Mid-21st Century: Bridging Divides is a multi-institutional, interdisciplinary research program led by Toronto Metropolitan University that examines how digital technologies impact immigrant integration at a time of rapid social and economic change. The initiative brings together researchers from Concordia University, the University of Alberta, and the University of British Columbia to inform policy and practice. Bridging Divides is funded by the Canadian Government through the Canada First Research Excellence Fund (CFREF).

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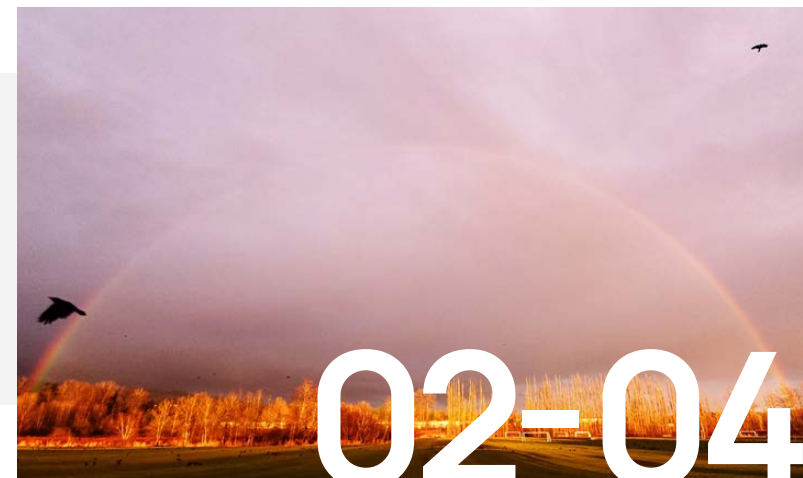
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Message from the Directors

It is not an easy time to be a migrant. It is also not an easy time for the many dedicated people who toil across sectors to support newcomers as they build their lives in Canada. And yet, when the Bridging Divides team began assembling this second issue of Bridges, there was no shortage of uplifting stories to spotlight. We would hear about a project launched after months of conversations with a community partner. A study shaped by consultations with experts. A local government representative offering an insight that changed the framing of a research question. This type of work is demanding and takes time, but for many of our colleagues it is simply second nature.

As researchers, we are often embedded in the topics we explore. Many of us have lived experiences of migration, personally or in our families or communities. We understand that migration is not something that happens to others. It is a social reality that shapes Canada in visible and invisible ways, regardless of status. It is something we all live with, contribute to, and can meaningfully influence. It is also something we can, and must, make better.



The recent federal budget, with its renewed emphasis on permanent residence and sustainability, signals a shift toward long-term planning and a focus on addressing critical labour gaps. The work showcased in this issue offers practical insights that speak directly to this moment. You will read about new approaches to citizenship and belonging through visual methods; how collaborations with cities and community stakeholders are leading to changes in health-care and housing services delivery; and how interdisciplinary research models can help governments and providers understand needs on the ground.

This is all part of the lesser-known – but just as important – side of the research process. The emails, the meetings, the field visits, the recordings, the photos, the conversations that stretch across time zones and generations, all of the minutiae that leads to the stories you find here. We share them to remind our communities, and ourselves, that the work we do touches people, and so will the work we have not done yet.

We hope these pages provide a nod to what has already been built, a celebration of what continues to grow, and a clear look at what is still possible. We will always have stories to tell. We are also ready to begin new ones. If anything in this issue inspires you, we hope you will join us in shaping what comes next.

ANNA TRIANDAFYLLIDOU

Canada Excellence Research Chair in Migration and Integration
Scientific Director, Bridging Divides

MARTHA MUNEZHI

Executive Director, Bridging Divides

FEATURED STORY: _____

What Happens When You Invite People In



Inside a community-driven model where dialogue, technology, and partnership shape better health outcomes

When **Mabel Ho** walked into an early Bridging Divides meeting in 2023, the conversation was centred on immigrant health. As a social worker and then Director of Education and Research at a non-profit providing community and long-term care to older adults, she listened, and she noticed who was missing from the discussion.

“The conversation often revolves around youth and adults,” Ho says. “I thought, what about the older immigrants from diverse backgrounds receiving community care or long-term care?”

She described residents who spoke limited English or French, or who forgot those languages as dementia progressed. She talked about people reverting to village dialects that even bilingual staff could not understand, and about care interactions reduced to pointing and guesswork.

“In community care or long-term care, it is not just about ‘I need a glass of water’ or ‘I need to go to the bathroom,’” Ho explains. “It is much more than that, there’s often a cultural component. How do we communicate that with the care provider?”

That first interaction was the genesis of a new research project, one that looks at ways in which we can empower providers and patients through digital innovation. It was a reminder that immigrant health is also about older adults in institutional settings, and about the everyday communication that makes care feel human rather than transactional.



From the outset, Wong and Yoon framed the project as a partnership effort rather than a study led from the outside.

For Wong, this is also about what happens after data collection.

Older adults and families are not treated as subjects who supply data and disappear. Their experiences inform the questions, guide the methods and ground the findings. “I always think that to have meaningful research is not just about the researchers coming with ideas,” Ho says. “It is always about the researchers, the practitioners, the older adults, families, community partners, everybody working together. That is the beauty of partnership, and I think partnership is at the heart of meaningful research.”

“Research is about finding knowledge and not allowing it to sit on a shelf. And knowledge translation is about making that research accessible.”

So rather than moving directly from literature review to tool testing, the team focused on dialogue. They wanted to know how different groups understood the same problem, and what they would need from any future solution. And they invited more people in.

Research as something you do with people, not to them

For **Josephine Wong**, professor in Toronto Metropolitan University’s Faculty of Community Services and co-lead of the project, how research questions are formed matters. The problem was not defined in a proposal and then taken to partners. It emerged from a dialogue between community leaders, service providers, and researchers based on what partners were witnessing on the ground.

Wong and **Rosanra (Rosie) Yoon**, Assistant Professor at the University of Toronto and a Bridging Divides affiliate, began by looking at what was already known. Together with students and research assistants, they conducted a scoping review of language technology in long-term care and community care settings.

The result was stark. “We did a scoping review of the current state of evidence specific to the adoption and use of language technology tools in long-term care,” Yoon says. “We found one article. We thought we did something wrong and double checked our methodology, our strategy, we checked with the library again. Just the one”. By contrast, a search for translation technology in hospitals and acute care returns thousands of studies.

“Within the healthcare space, you see inequity even in the research. There is tech interest in emergency departments and surgical units, but nobody is doing research in long-term care. Older adults with language barriers are a neglected space.”

Ho had seen earlier attempts to improve communication, such as picture books and bilingual word lists. They helped with simple tasks, but not with feelings. “At that time we probably just focused on something very tangible and essential,” she says. “While I was working on this project I also learned about how we can be more human in terms of providing care as well as doing research.” At the same time, partners were describing very practical problems with staff in long-term care homes caring for residents who could not express pain, fear or basic needs in a language their caregivers understood.



Bringing technologists to the table

As the work unfolded, **Abdolreza Akbarian**, now at Women's College Hospital and a member of the Bridging Divides team, worked on another gap. The project involved long-term care staff, community partners and researchers, but not yet the people building translation tools.

"This is a very multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary kind of project," Akbarian says. "We need technology experts. We need people from long-term care homes, people with clinical experience. What we were lacking was that outside view from vendors and other stakeholders."

Driven by what he calls a fascination with how technology is developing, he began reaching out to companies producing language translation devices and apps. He anticipated polite refusals or no answer at all. Instead, he found a surprising openness.

"To my surprise they were very responsive, and they really wanted to collaborate with researchers," he says. "I was thinking these vendors are always looking for money or profit. But these technologies are so novel, they want researchers to use them because it adds to their data sets and helps validate their models."

Some vendors agreed to provide devices at no cost so the team could explore basic questions: how well do they recognize accents, how do they handle different dialects, are they comfortable for older adults to hold and see, do they fit into care routines without causing disruption.

For Akbarian, this changed how he viewed the relationship between research and industry. "We live in an era of connectivity," he says.

"The time for armchair scientists is over. If you want better research and better evidence, you need to find ways to connect."

A forum for mutual learning

To gather perspectives systematically, the team hosted a community knowledge exchange forum focused on culture- and language-concordant care. Ninety-one participants took part, including researchers, long-term care staff, home and community care providers, community agencies, engineers and technology developers. Using a World Café format, the group rotated through discussions and compared notes across sectors before working together to identify common themes.

Two themes came up repeatedly. The first was financial constraint. Translation tools that comply with health privacy standards are expensive, and long-term care homes and community agencies operate with limited budgets. The second was the double-edged nature of technology. "Technology can be an enabler of social connection and well-being, but it can also inadvertently create disconnection by replacing humans," Yoon says. "In this space, we need to grab control of who is creating the discourse."

The Forum also served as an unexpected connector. People who rarely meet in the same room — front-line staff, researchers, engineers, and early-stage tech developers — ended up sharing business cards, continuing conversations in the hallway, and beginning side projects that extended past the event. The Forum made clear that dealing with language barriers in long-term care would require coordination well beyond any single sector.

As a follow-up, the team hosted another event several months later to broaden the conversation and bring stakeholders together once more. At one point, Yoon asked how many in the room had to translate for an older relative. Most hands went up. "We are not talking about strangers," she said. "We are talking about us."

Among the speakers was **Jordan D'Souza**, Manager of Innovation at **VHA Home HealthCare**, whose team explores tools that could help staff communicate more clearly with clients in their first language. Long-term care leaders shared what it means to work with residents who revert to mother tongues and local dialects. Researchers and technologists raised questions about privacy, regulation and the limits of existing tools.

From the practice side, the key message was that any tool has to work in the conditions front-line staff actually face. "Technology only works if it fits the realities of care," D'Souza notes. "If it gets in the way, people will abandon it."

"Technology only works if it fits the realities of care. If it gets in the way, people will abandon it."

Building towards impact, one relationship at a time

While the project is still underway, the team is preparing new publications, formalizing the partnership so that testing can be done in a systematic way, and laying the groundwork for changes that could influence day-to-day practice in long-term care. What began as a problem identified by partners is now becoming a model for collaborative innovation, where older adults, families, practitioners, technologists and researchers work together from the very beginning.

Wong is honest about what is at stake. "We need to think of the human aspect in the service provider, the technology development, the research," she says. "We simply cannot lose the human-centred approach as we focus on the technology part."

For Ho, the collaboration has reinforced what she believed when she first raised her hand in that meeting. "When community organizations, academic researchers, older adults and families work side by side, we are not just collecting data," she says. "We are co-creating solutions that reflect real lives and real needs, so that we can provide better care to older adults."

Few countries are experimenting with translation tools in long-term care in such a coordinated, research-informed way, and what is happening in these facilities is beginning to position Canada as an innovator in culturally and linguistically concordant care. For Akbarian, the lesson is simple. "If you want to build better solutions, if you want to have better research, better evidence, a better future, you need to find a way to connect. "Those who are at the forefront of connecting disciplines will do better. It's the only way."

EAR TO THE GROUND: —————

Narratives of Citizenship: Seeing Belonging Through a Newcomer Lens

02



CITIZENSHIP AND BELONGING



A visual exploration of newcomer belonging in Canada, made possible through community connections

Citizenship and belonging are not synonyms. The space between them, this twilight zone between formal recognition and emotional connection, is where *Narratives of Citizenship* unfolds. Led by the UBC Centre for Migration Studies, this project explores how people experience and understand Canadian citizenship, particularly in relation to Truth and Reconciliation. The project builds on strong relationships with two key community partners: **MOSAIC**, one of Canada's largest settlement and employment service organizations, and **YMCA BC**, whose newcomer integration programs support vibrant and connected communities across the province.

Citizenship is more than legal status; it is a shared identity shaped through stories of nationhood and belonging. Yet for newcomers, official narratives often differ from lived experience. They can obscure inequities, simplify histories, or overlook the complex emotional terrain of what it means to belong. By forging a collaboration between researchers and community organizations, the project set out to explore those lived narratives up close and through the eyes of the people living them.

A portrait of belonging

One branch of the project invited 20 participants from MOSAIC and YMCA BC's newcomer programs to reflect on their migration journeys and their understandings of citizenship, belonging, and Truth and Reconciliation through a photo-based storytelling initiative.

Each participant was asked to take photos, write short reflections, and join in paired interviews about their experiences. The result is over 85 photographs and dozens of reflections that form a striking digital gallery of what belonging in Canada looks and feels like, from the everyday to the profound.

Through their words and images, we see hope and fear, the quiet beauty of starting over. Migration journeys appear as mountains to climb, well-worn shoes, or multicultural dinners. Belonging reveals itself in moments of recognition: a lighthouse, a crab pool, the arc of a rainbow after a storm. Citizenship shows up in the everyday; it is a traffic light, an "I Voted" sticker, a seat at a hockey game.

While many participants arrived in Canada with limited knowledge of its settler colonial past and present, each engaged thoughtfully with the project's Truth and Reconciliation prompt. Their photos capture Indigenous artworks in public spaces, museum visits, guided tours, and reflections on learning about colonial harms and the responsibilities of

living on this land. These images show newcomers as participants in the process of reconciliation as each carefully considers what it means to build a life on Indigenous lands as a migrant.

One participant's reflection captures the emotional depth at the heart of the project:

"I took this photo of my winter jacket hanging beside my traditional African attire because it reflects the dual identity I carry with pride every day. The jacket keeps me warm in the country I now call home, while the attire reminds me of where I come from — the strength of my roots, my culture, and my values."

For many, participating in the project was as transformative as it was creative. One participant described the process as "a mirror, reflecting not just where I've been, but how far I've come." They said that telling their story through image and word gave them space to process memories and feel "seen, heard, understood."

Grounding research in community needs

For **Adrienne Bale**, Senior Manager of Settlement and Integration Programs at MOSAIC, the collaboration was a natural fit.

“As a settlement service provider, citizenship and belonging is our ultimate goal,” she explains. “When folks don’t need our services anymore, that’s usually when they feel a full sense of belonging. But citizenship and belonging are not always synchronous. Some people feel belonging long before they get citizenship, and others get citizenship without ever feeling they belong.”

That insight, she notes, is precisely why partnerships like this matter. Settlement organizations like MOSAIC witness these experiences daily, but research provides a way to formalize them, validate what service providers know intuitively, and deepen understanding across sectors.

“In our work, we have a lot of anecdotal evidence. It’s good to have research to back that up, to show policymakers and funders how people really experience belonging.”

“Research adds that layer of reflection that we often can’t take time for when we’re helping people day to day,” adds Bale. For her, what makes *Narratives of Citizenship* stand out is its attention to reciprocity and the commitment to ensuring that research is not extractive but empowering.

“It’s so important that research isn’t just about taking people’s stories. There has to be a loop-back, a form of knowledge mobilization that gives back to the community. I really see that shift happening now in academia, and this project represents that.”

She also sees the project’s exploration of Truth and Reconciliation as particularly valuable for newcomers, especially those who are early in their migration journey. “Understanding Canada’s colonial history may not be a priority

when someone is brand new and focused on finding housing or work, but it’s still a vital part of belonging and it’s important these conversations are introduced in meaningful ways,” she says.

YMCA BC shares this perspective. “One rewarding aspect of this work has been seeing how collaboration between settlement or community service organizations and academic researchers can create deeper, more practical insights than either could develop alone,” said **Lizeth Escobedo**, Director of Newcomers, Youth and Community Wellness. “Community organizations contribute firsthand knowledge of newcomers’ lived experiences, while researchers provide tools to analyze and strengthen those experiences with evidence.”

She notes that this kind of partnership not only supports stronger programming but also helps ensure that academic research stays grounded in real community needs.

“Through this project, it has become clear that gaining citizenship can shape newcomers’ lives in powerful and lasting ways — fostering a sense of belonging, expanding access to opportunities, and supporting long-term stability as individuals and families build their futures in a new country.”

Findings from the study are, in many ways, a “report card” for settlement organizations. Hearing directly from participants about their sense of belonging can help practitioners understand what they are doing and how their work is shaping newcomers’ experiences.

Without partners like MOSAIC and YMCA BC, *Narratives of Citizenship* would not have been possible. Beyond recruitment, these organizations act as the deeply human, on-the-ground link between researchers and the communities they serve.

Creating knowledge together

For Project Manager **Lisa Brunner**, Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the UBC Centre for Migration Studies, the project’s success came down to trust and intention. Together with Graduate Researcher **Claudia Serrano**, she worked carefully to reduce possible burdens and make the process supportive and respectful, given the significant time commitment it required of participants. Brunner says she was struck by how eager participants were to share their stories, a response that speaks to the strength of arts-based research and the deep personal resonance of its themes.

Arts-based methods, she notes, open a space for reflection rarely found in daily life. By combining photography and storytelling, participants could express emotions and insights that traditional research methods might overlook.

“I’m deeply grateful to the twenty participants for their vulnerability and I believe their contributions have the potential to spark important reflection and conversation.”

What emerges from the intentional collaboration between researchers, community partners, and newcomers is a mosaic — both literal and symbolic — of Canadian life as newcomers experience it: layered, evolving, hopeful.

“Belonging is reciprocal. It’s not only for the newcomer, but for the community as a whole.”

“When people feel they belong, they participate, they give back, and everyone benefits,” says Bale.

Through stories told in words and images, *Narratives of Citizenship* invites us all to reconsider what it means to belong and reminds us that the citizenship journey stretches long before and after the naturalization ceremony, in the quiet, everyday acts of care, learning, and connection that make a place feel like home.



EAR TO THE GROUND: _____

Listening to Learn in Canada's Housing Research

03



PLACE AND
INFRASTRUCTURE



Consultations in Alberta revealed questions researchers *weren't* asking

They say you can't see the whole elephant just by looking at the tail. This old adage is being confirmed by a group of Bridging Divides researchers looking into the causes of Canada's housing crisis. While the media, politicians, and casual observers often seem to have accepted the claim that the housing crisis is a direct cause of immigration levels, researchers across the country are taking pause and mobilizing to examine the issue from a multi-causal perspective, taking nothing for granted. Professor **Feng Qiu** is one of them, and she believes that this research requires listening to community. "We wanted to know not only what the data says about housing affordability, but also how people working on the ground understand the problem," she explains.

Based at the University of Alberta, Qiu leads the Bridging Divides project *Is Immigration Responsible for the Current Housing Crisis in Canada?* The team has been systematically analyzing data to examine the relationship between migration and housing affordability, with a focus on Alberta's two major cities: Edmonton and Calgary. Rather than

waiting until the end of their study to share results, the researchers did something different. Before finalizing their survey questions, they opened the research process to the community and invited those who work on housing every day to help shape the study with their own insights and expertise.

Over a series of three expert meetings, the team brought together municipal representatives, economists, real estate professionals, and non-profit organizations to discuss their perspectives on affordability, demand, and supply. Each meeting focused on a different group: Edmonton stakeholders, Calgary stakeholders, and a third group of participants from across Alberta.

"The goal," Qiu says, "was to understand the challenges that different communities face, and to hear what measures or indicators they think truly capture affordability." Those conversations directly influenced the design of the research survey, which now includes more than 30 questions informed by stakeholder input.

Research by co-design

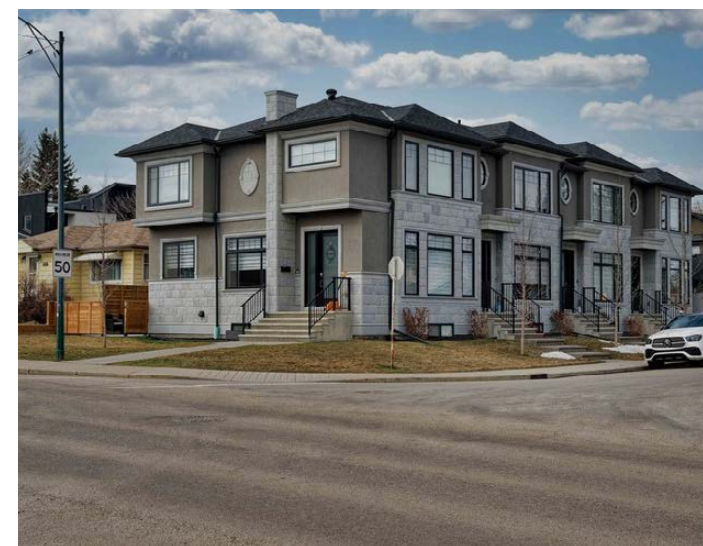
These consultations were not only an opportunity to validate the research design, but also an exercise in the co-creation of knowledge. The same experts who are often consulted to respond to findings had the opportunity to shape the direction of the study itself, sometimes sparking entirely new research areas.

In one instance, participants emphasized the growing role of domestic migration — people moving from other provinces, often from Ontario and British Columbia — in local housing markets. "These people are much more likely than international migrants to purchase higher-end homes or investment properties," Qiu explains. "That kind of internal movement has a very different impact on housing than international migration."

This insight sparked an entirely new line of inquiry. "We realized we needed to treat intra-provincial and international migration separately in our analysis," she says. "That came directly from the consultations."

In Edmonton, participants identified zoning reforms passed two years earlier as a critical factor affecting affordability — something the research team had not yet integrated into its study design. The discussions inspired a new follow-up study in collaboration with **The City of Edmonton** to assess the policy's effects.

"I appreciate the consultations so much," Qiu reflects. "All the participants have first-hand experience and a type of knowledge that we truly need. I'm honestly so appreciative of their time and expertise."



A practitioner’s perspective

From his perspective as an economist, **Hotaka Kobori**, who currently works at **The City of Calgary**, found the sessions equally enlightening. Having moved from academia as a graduate student to a public sector role as a housing economist, he saw the consultation as an opportunity for open dialogue between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. He believes that should happen far more often.

He recalls being struck by how open the process was. “I was pleasantly surprised at the level of work the research project undertook. Their professional consultation invited feedback from different sectors, and they took our input seriously. We were able to contribute to the survey in a meaningful way.”

For Kobori, this represented a new model for producing academic work, one that evolves not only through peer review and scientific methods, but also through real-world engagement with those most familiar with the subject. “Academics are sometimes seen as staying in their own field,” he notes, “but this project really tried to incorporate multiple perspectives. There were representatives from The City, industry and real estate. I think that makes the research stronger and more connected to real-world issues.”

Building on what works

Kobori believes collaborations like this one shouldn’t end when a project does. “Right now, many partnerships between municipalities and universities are on a project-by-project basis,” he says. “What we need is a more systematic and continuous way of working together. We can all gain from a collaboration that is more institutionalized, rather than ad hoc.”

He imagines a model where universities and public sector agencies meet regularly to share data, review findings, and co-develop research priorities. “Different ideas or approaches would need to be explored but could include things like ongoing workshops or regular updates,” he says, though he notes the differing timeframe between public-sector and academic environments can pose a challenge. “It’s important that knowledge and experience don’t disappear when a project concludes.”

The consultation also offered him a chance to see the housing issue through the eyes of other stakeholders. “For example, at the City of Calgary, we’ve been trying to deliver this comprehensive housing strategy called *Home is Here*,” he says. “It was interesting to hear how different industry experts like those in the real estate industry or academics perceive some of those changes we have been implementing. It gave me a broader view of the current challenges.”

He also sees a broader lesson for policy and research communities. “Projects like this one show alignment between different parties and create real value,” he says. “The investigation into the relationship between immigration and housing will provide insights that can help with planning for the future.”

That alignment between evidence and policymaking, Kobori argues, is essential for evidence-based governance. “The more research we have, the better equipped we are to apply evidence-based policy making that benefits citizens. Collaboration helps build that evidence base, especially when studies focus on relevant areas.”

Such continuity, he believes, would also make it easier to evaluate policies in a more rigorous way. “At the municipal level, collaboration with multiple stakeholders often happens at the pre-implementation stage of policies. I see real potential for more collaboration with academic partners in the post-implementation stage as well. Then, policies’ outcomes can be assessed in a more causal way, rather than casual, supported by academic expertise,” Kobori explains. “The collaboration can help by providing additional transparent, independent policy evaluation that citizens deserve to know.”

Looking ahead

It all comes down to what is best for the community. “As public servants and practitioners,” says Kobori, “we want policy implementation to be as evidence-based as possible. The more research we have, the better it is for policymaking and ultimately for citizens.”

Qiu agrees. “There’s a lot of energy and goodwill across sectors to address complex issues like housing,” she says. Trying to find ways to integrate those perspectives meaningfully can be a challenge, but it shouldn’t stop researchers from trying.

This idea of strengthening and sustaining partnerships systemically and across projects is central to Bridging Divides’ approach to research. Whether through co-designed surveys or community-driven research questions, the goal is to bridge not just academic and policy divides, but also the gap between knowledge and action. For both researchers and practitioners, collaboration is a way to generate understanding that is both locally grounded and widely relevant.

“My advice to other public servants interested in collaborating in a similar way with researchers? Do it. There’s nothing to lose in collaboration, and always something to gain.”



EAR TO THE GROUND: _____

AI Takes a Village: How Collaboration is Powering Canada's Digital Future

04

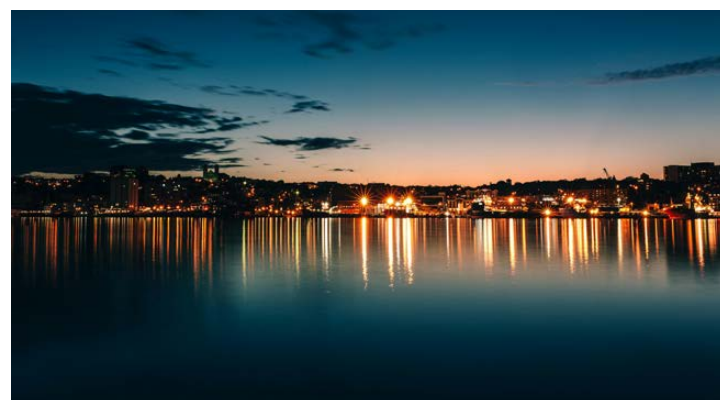
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EMPLOYMENT
AND LIFELONG
LEARNING

How a cross-sector AI conference sparked dialogue on Canada's digital future

When it comes to understanding how artificial intelligence is reshaping the world of work, researcher **Tony Fang** believes the answers cannot come from one sector alone. “We’ve brought together scholars, industry leaders, and policymakers to explore the impact of emerging technologies like AI and remote work on productivity and newcomer integration,” says Fang, Stephen Jarislowsky Chair in Economic and Cultural Transformation at Memorial University of Newfoundland. To dive deep into the topic, his team, in partnership with the **Diversity Institute** at Toronto Metropolitan University, co-organized the *2025 AI, Remote Work and Productivity International Conference* in St. John's earlier this year.

A showcase of what happens when sectors work together to shape Canada's digital future, the two-day conference explored how artificial intelligence and new work arrangements are transforming productivity, inclusion, and economic growth. Discussions moved fluidly between theory and practice, examining how Canada's small and medium-sized enterprises can adopt AI responsibly, how workers can upskill for a changing economy, and how technology can enhance equity rather than deepen divides.



Building partnerships that drive innovation

The conference built on years of collaborative groundwork led by the organizers. In Atlantic Canada, where Fang's Bridging Divides research team is leading a project on the impacts of AI on business and immigrant workers in the post-COVID era, the initiative connects Memorial University with business and non-profit organizations across the region, including the Atlantic Chamber of Commerce, Public Policy Forum, Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia, and the Saint John Newcomers Centre.

These partnerships have sparked community-driven research and Mitacs-funded internships that link students and researchers directly with local employers and newcomer organizations. The result is a trusted regional network focused on exploring the ways in which technology can both improve productivity and strengthen labour market participation and newcomer retention while supporting multicultural, inclusive communities.

The conference was hosted at Memorial University of Newfoundland in St. John's, bringing together lessons from Atlantic Canada and beyond to a national and international audience. The event, explains Fang, was supported by

15 different funders and sponsors across industries. “This showcases our effective community engagement, partnership building, and knowledge mobilization.”

Janette Jackson, one of Canada's leading voices in cleantech, a field that uses technology to advance environmental sustainability, believes AI-supported hybrid and remote teams can strengthen workplace connection and resilience. “The event reinforced my belief that the future of work is both flexible and high-performing,” she said.

As former CEO and now an active board member and strategic advisor to **Foresight**, Canada's largest cleantech accelerator, Jackson continues to champion collaboration between innovators, industry, investors, and academia. “With the thoughtful use of AI, organizations have a real opportunity to enhance integration, unlock talent potential, and redefine what high-performance teams look like in a digital world. It was an honour to support such a great event, I'm excited to see this work and training continue.”

Connecting Canada's AI ecosystem

What made the St. John's gathering stand out wasn't just the topics discussed but the mix of people in the room. Under the roof of academia, industry partners and government representatives joined in the conversation, pulling in the same direction: ensuring that the AI transition strengthens inclusion and productivity across sectors.

For Canada, this remains a critical issue. **Wendy Cukier**, Founder and Academic Director of the **Diversity Institute**, whose team co-led the conference's development and organization, touched on what she called the country's "AI paradox": while Canada leads in AI research and innovation, adoption — particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises — lags behind.

The conference program, co-developed by the event's hosts, covered other urgent and connected topics, from AI's potential to revolutionize rather than merely improve existing systems, to expanding access to AI training and education for diverse populations. Academic experts such as **Ebrahim Bagheri** of the University of Toronto and industry leaders like **Marc-Étienne Ouimette** of Amazon Web Services discussed strategies for upskilling employees, including newcomers, developing educational pathways for a diverse workforce, and integrating green technologies to build inclusive workplaces. A key theme throughout was the recognition that immigration, EDI and Canada's AI transition shape each other in important ways.



For an inclusive, innovative future

The discussions in St. John's reaffirmed that bridging silos is essential if Canada wants AI to enhance, not replace, human potential. Across panels and hallway conversations, participants spoke about the importance of experimentation and trust to create shared spaces where employers, educators, and communities can test new ideas together.

From Dalhousie University, **Christian Blouin**, Associate Dean in the Faculty of Computer Science, pointed to the need for programs that prepare students for the digital realities of work today, not the ones of a decade ago. The sentiment was shared by Cukier, who has long advocated for matching solutions with the needs of businesses.

"It takes an entrepreneurial mindset and a 'just try it' approach, whether you run a small business, work in a government department, or at a university."

The importance of holding these conversations collectively cannot be overstated. If a whole-of-society approach is necessary to ensure AI adoption is rooted in ethical and inclusive practices, then subject-matter experts, practitioners, and the communities directly affected must reflect and work together to shape a future where AI is mobilized for the common good.

PARTNERSHIPS IN PROGRESS:

Allies in Action

Spotlights on partnerships
shaping the future of migrant
integration research at
Bridging Divides

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SKILLS FOR CHANGE & RESEARCHER JULIA SPANIOL

Psychology offers powerful tools for understanding how people learn, adapt, and navigate change, which is why **Julia Spaniol's** new collaboration with **Skills for Change** is generating excitement across both research and settlement communities. Together with **Shawn Newman** and the Skills for Change team, Spaniol and her own team are examining how newcomers engage with generative artificial intelligence, what helps them feel confident using it, and how their thinking habits shape their learning.

Using an experimental approach, their two-year project is testing modules that build both basic GenAI skills and metacognitive skills, meaning the ability to notice and reflect on how you think. The aim is to see whether strengthening these abilities can boost digital confidence and support better employment outcomes. By bringing together complementary strengths, the partnership is developing practical, evidence-based strategies to help newcomers thrive in an increasingly AI-driven labour market.

SINKUNIA COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION AND MULTICULTURAL HEALTH BROKERS COOPERATIVE & RESEARCHER ELIZABETH ONYANGO

Elizabeth Onyango's research recognizes that cultural food security is inseparable from community health. Working with the **Sinkunia Community Development Organization** and the **Multicultural Health Brokers Cooperative**, Onyango and her team are exploring how community gardening can support both cultural continuity and mental well-being among newcomer communities in Edmonton.

Grounded in an eco-social and culturally responsive approach, the partnership has focused on community-engaged activities that prioritize shared learning. A recent Afrocentric Sharing Circle with women from South Sudan brought these principles to life, creating a warm and trusting space where participants could reflect on gardening practices passed down through generations. Their insights are shaping a collective vision for a community garden that nurtures belonging, honours cultural traditions, and strengthens intergenerational ties. For researchers, the collaboration offers invaluable guidance on designing health initiatives that are grounded in lived experience.

COMMUNITY MUSIC SCHOOLS OF TORONTO & RESEARCHER FRANK RUSSO

Singing together is one of the oldest human practices for building connection. **Frank Russo's** team is exploring how this simple act can support newcomer well-being. In partnership with the **Community Music Schools of Toronto**, Russo and colleagues **Arla Good**, **Dawn Merrett**, and **Isabelle Peretz** are examining how group singing can enhance belonging, social connectedness, and mental health.

The School has become a central hub for the project, hosting weekly sessions that welcome newcomers from Regent Park, Jane and Finch, and surrounding communities. Participants engage in communal singing while researchers gather qualitative and quantitative data on changes in well-being. Early findings are striking: many report feeling more rooted in their community, more confident socially, and more connected to others. The collaboration highlights the power of music as a low-barrier, joyful way to build confidence, practice language, and form meaningful social connections.

COSTI IMMIGRANT SERVICES & RESEARCHER PHIL TRIADAFILOPOULOS

How do newcomers understand what it means to be a “good” citizen, and how do official narratives shape those understandings? These are the questions guiding a collaboration between **Phil Triadafilopoulos** and **COSTI Immigrant Services**. Together, they are examining how materials such as citizenship guides, settlement resources, and policy messages shape everyday experiences of inclusion.

The partnership is overseen by a Steering Committee that meets every four months to ensure alignment between research goals and frontline realities. The collaboration also includes a hands-on internship: PhD student **Vaishnavi Panchanadam** is supporting joint research activities and program evaluation at COSTI, bringing academic and practice-based perspectives into conversation. By combining analysis from the university with insights from service delivery, the partnership is shedding light on how citizenship narratives influence newcomers' expectations, motivations, and sense of belonging.





INSTITUTE FOR CANADIAN CITIZENSHIP (ICC) & RESEARCHER ANTJE ELLERMAN

Naturalization ceremonies are powerful and emotional moments, yet surprisingly little is known about how new Canadians interpret their identity at the point of becoming citizens. Through the Content of Citizenship project, **Antje Ellerman** and her team are working with the **Institute for Canadian Citizenship** to explore precisely that.

Over the summer, PhD candidate **Natasha Goel** completed an internship with the ICC, where she led a large-scale statistical analysis of a survey of 4,919 verified immigrants who use the Canoo app. The findings reveal five main factors shaping intention to stay in Canada permanently, with optimism about the future and feelings of identity and belonging emerging as the strongest motivators. By combining rigorous analysis with the ICC's deep engagement with newcomer communities, the collaboration is providing timely insights into how citizenship is experienced, understood, and lived.

QUEBEC ASSOCIATION OF IMMIGRATION LAWYERS (AQAADI) & RESEARCHER MIREILLE PAQUET

Mireille Paquet's collaboration with the **Quebec Association of Immigration Lawyers** is documenting Canada's immigration system in real time as it undergoes one of its most significant digital shifts in decades. Together, they are examining how Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's Digital Platform Modernization and Transformation project is reshaping decision-making and administrative practice.

Preliminary research shows that the shift toward automated and digital workflows has fundamentally changed how lawyers access information, interpret case notes, and interact with clients' files. Digital systems now underpin nearly every aspect of practice, demanding new skills in navigating complex interfaces and deciphering detailed digital records. The collaboration is generating insights not only for legal practitioners but also for policymakers seeking to understand the real-world implications of digital transformation. Earlier this year, Paquet and her team shared these findings with the Quebec legal community in a keynote presentation at the 2025 AQAADI Conference in Montreal.

STUDENT-LED INNOVATION:

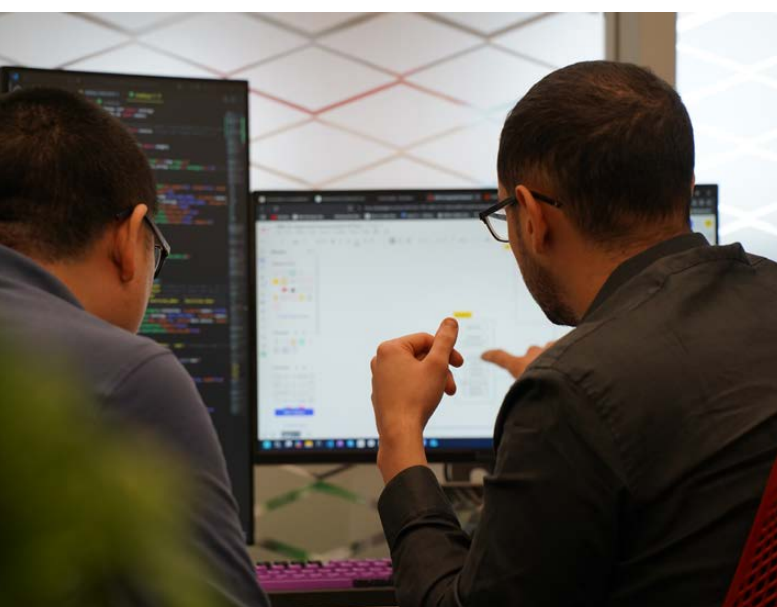
Challenge Accepted: Mentorship Beyond the Data

A national experiment in curiosity, teamwork and bringing data to life

When more than 300 students across Canada applied to the 2025 Migration Data Challenge, most expected a week of intense problem-solving, late-night brainstorming, and the thrill of competition. What they didn't expect, and what made the experience stick, was how much they would learn from the people guiding them through it.

In May 2025, Bridging Divides ran its first national Migration Data Challenge, inviting teams from partner universities to explore underused datasets and tackle open-ended questions about housing, services, mobility, and newcomer integration. It wasn't a simulation. Students worked with real migration data, often combining it with additional publicly available sources, to see what stories the numbers could tell about the places they come from and the communities they hope to support.

There were prizes, a public showcase, and judges from Statistics Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), the National Research Council, and Toronto Metropolitan University. But awards weren't the point. Participants left with new ways of approaching data, stronger presentation skills, and a clearer sense of how their work might influence policy or practice. Much of that came from one of the Challenge's most distinctive elements: mentorship.



When ideas meet experience

To guide teams through the “messy middle” of research and problem-solving, the Challenge brought in mentors from the public service, the nonprofit world, and tech start-ups. They helped students navigate ambiguity, refine their questions, and connect what data shows to what people experience.

One of them was **Craig Damian Smith** from **Pairity AI**. Smith has spent years working at the crossroads of migration, policy, and technology, and he immediately noticed an interesting pattern: students often started with the dataset.

“Most came in with very specific data questions,” he explained. “I urged them to take a step back and reflect on the policy problem first. What is the puzzle here? What are we actually trying to understand?” He also encouraged them to embrace the personal experiences that often shaped their interests. “It was obvious the focus was informed by their lived experience, but they weren’t saying it. Sometimes stating it clearly makes the work stronger.”

In the final presentations, several teams grounded their projects in personal stories, connecting analysis to lived reality, something mentors and judges appreciated.

While Smith offered a bridge between academia and tech, **Aida Radoncic** from the **Ontario Public Service** approached mentorship from another angle. Radoncic is a humanities graduate who transitioned into data science later in her career, and she recognized herself in many of the students navigating both technical and human questions.

“The passion they had, the curiosity, that was really striking. Talking through problems with them was so mentally stimulating. I was like, oh my! This is so much fun.”

What stood out to her was how students worked to connect their findings to real-world meaning. “In industry, you are communicating data to people who do not speak statistics. You have to understand why it matters. What is at stake? How does this improve outcomes on the ground?”

She believes the Challenge gave students the chance to think across disciplines, to start with a dataset but also consider the social, cultural, and human context behind it. “You need the technical side, but you also need the human side. Nothing exists in a vacuum.”

The job market is changing, so must the skills

Both mentors spoke to a broader shift in the world students are entering. Public and private sectors are blending together, and emerging technologies are reshaping everything from product development to policymaking. The pace of change, especially with AI, is something entirely new.

“Innovation and change are not really the purview of the government, nor should they be,” Smith said. “But with AI, the type and scope are novel, and the pace is something never seen before.” Policymakers are reacting to technologies already in use, which in his view makes cross-sector collaboration essential. “Researchers shouldn’t position themselves completely against partnering with the private sector. We need to understand the impacts of what is being developed.”

“I very much wish this existed for me when I was a student.”

He also sees gaps between student training and what employers need. “We see huge cohorts of computer science students entering a job market that has fundamentally changed after having been trained for something else.” Academic programs, he added, can help by emphasizing transferable skills such as stakeholder relations, product timelines, and communicating evidence to different audiences.

For Radoncic, that openness to collaboration resonated on a personal level. “I don’t have a PhD, and I don’t come from a math or technical background at all. I come from the humanities,” she said. Moving into technical work showed her how valuable it is to draw on more than one kind of training. “There is a lot of movement toward interdisciplinarity. Employers are realizing they need critical thinking, cultural awareness, and social science perspectives.” It is also why she found the Challenge so meaningful. “I very much wish this existed for me when I was a student.”

Why we do this

One participant summed it up simply: “Because data is people, and there are faces behind the numbers.” Students expressed gratitude for the support, the quick feedback, and the opportunity to learn from professionals who had walked entirely different paths into the world of data. As one team member put it, “When we started, the data was a lot and we were confused. Our mentor helped us create a vision. I’m really glad I got to be part of this.”

If the Migration Data Challenge demonstrated anything, it is that collaborative initiatives spanning universities, public institutions, and tech innovators can spark real learning. Smith sees these partnerships as essential. Too much migration research, he argues, focuses on the very real risks of new technologies, but that attention can sometimes overshadow the possibilities for positive impact. Cross-sector collaboration can help shift the conversation toward solutions rather than fear.

As he put it, “If you are in a room with policymakers and trying to talk about improving systems, being alarmist doesn’t help. They stop listening. The technology is already there, it is already happening.” The concern many researchers have is legitimate, he noted, but it reflects only one side of how technology will shape policy, regulation, and programming.

Thinking back to her experience, Radoncic offered a reflection that became something of an anchor for this story. “Being a mentor, the back and forth with the students, it brought me life,” she said. “Why else do we do this? The data we work with comes from people. From the real world. And students need to understand that.”

In the end, the Migration Data Challenge was a successful exercise in interdisciplinary problem solving. And above all, it was fun. A reminder that curiosity and community, matched with thoughtful guidance, can turn a week of hard work into something that stays with you long after the final presentation ends.

Q&A FEATURE:

Reporting Across Borders

Storytelling, migration, and seeing Canada up close with this year's Journalism Fellows

Pradipta Mukherjee and **Valentín Díaz** spent October in Toronto as part of the Bridging Divides Journalism Fellowship, a month-long program designed to bring global journalists into direct conversation with migration researchers, policy leaders, and community partners. The fellowship was created to spark two-way understanding: journalists gain deeper access to cutting-edge research and on-the-ground expertise, while researchers strengthen the way they share evidence with media audiences around the world. At a time when public conversations about migration shift quickly, building these connections has never been more important.

During their month on campus, Pradipta and Valentín attended events, met with researchers, followed their own reporting interests, and explored Toronto's diverse communities. Here's what they shared about the experience.

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Tell us a bit about your work and what you focus on as journalists.

Mukherjee:

I am Pradipta Mukherjee, a journalist based in India, and I'm a Correspondent at Coingeek Digital Media. My areas of interest keep shifting as the economy changes, but right now I focus on emerging technologies — I cover the policies, concerns and impacts of those technologies.

Díaz:

My name is Valentín Díaz, and I'm a reporter at Agence France-Presse (AFP). I cover breaking news in Colombia and the intersection between technology and human rights. I'm also interested in Geographic Information Systems (GIS), data journalism, and open-source reporting.

What made you want to apply to this fellowship?

Mukherjee:

It felt like the right moment for an Indian journalist to be in Canada. India and Canada recently announced a collaboration on several sectors, including AI and digital public infrastructure, which are my areas of interest.

Díaz:

Migration is central to my reporting. I've lived in Colombia and Mexico, so covering migration has been part of my daily work for the past five years. The Bridging Divides team works directly on many of the topics I report on and I'd been waiting for the right opportunity to apply for a fellowship for a while.

How did the fellowship shape or change your approach to reporting?

Mukherjee:

I've met several leading researchers, professors and policy makers in the thick of things, which has been a great experience. It's one thing to work remotely in India and send questionnaires or do Zoom interviews, but it's another thing to be here and meet people. Participating in conferences and listening to questions from others also broadened my perspective. I got answers to questions I didn't even know I had.

Díaz:

It's a highly multicultural experience. This is my first time in Canada and the first time I've met so many people from so many backgrounds. It has been really interesting to understand other's experiences and realities while comparing them with my own.



What has been the most valuable part of the fellowship?

Mukherjee:

The resources, contacts and networking opportunities. I knew the researchers from their online work, but I didn't expect meeting them in person to be this helpful. They shared research and survey reports with me, and being able to incorporate that into my stories was invaluable. Being on the ground also gave me access to people I normally wouldn't meet, from professionals working near the office to Uber drivers. It really helped me understand the realities of employment and lifestyle in Toronto more clearly.

Díaz:

Relationships. With researchers, with exchange fellows, with people who were incredibly open to integrating me into their circles. Learning about the nuances of immigration systems and how researchers analyze public policy has also been really helpful, really helpful for my reporting, there was a lot I didn't know about the migrant experience in Canada.

The **Bridging Divides Journalism Fellowship** re-opens annually. Applications for the 2027 cohort will open in 2026. Check the Bridging Divides website for updates.

This article has been edited for clarity.

What surprised you the most about being in Toronto?

Mukherjee:

From the minute I landed, I was surprised by how approachable, kind and friendly people were. People smile, they give you directions, they aren't rude. Toronto gets a lot of immigrants every year, and now I know why.

Díaz:

Toronto is full of surprises. I didn't expect a city this large and active to feel so approachable. There's always something happening but it isn't overwhelming. I really enjoyed my time here.

Would you recommend the fellowship to other journalists?

Mukherjee:

Absolutely. In every other fellowship I've joined, the topic was already decided, and whether it was relevant to me or not, I had to meet the same set of people. Here, it's completely flexible. I'm not stuck in an office from 9 to 5, I can choose my own migration-related topic, step out, meet people, and pursue my own stories. The flexibility is why I'd encourage every journalist working on these issues to apply. For me, this was the perfect fellowship.

Díaz:

Sure, I would recommend it. It's a highly stimulating experience. From the first day, you're meeting people and diving right into research. It was an ideal time for me to visit because there were so many events happening and so many opportunities to learn. It was also great to meet researchers who are working on topics so close to my own. It's a beautiful feeling to discover that someone on the other side of the world is exploring the same questions, but from a completely different angle.

Credits

Front cover
Bridging Divides

4-5 Bridging Divides and CERC Migration

8-10 Bridging Divides

14 (top left) William Fonseca; (top right) Oluchi (Ollie) Omogbai; (middle left) Anonymous; (middle right) Anonymous; (bottom) Natalia Ruiz

17 Anonymous

21 (top and bottom left) Courtesy of The City of Calgary; (right) Bridging Divides and CERC Migration

23 Bridging Divides

26 Bridging Divides

27 Courtesy of the Stephen Jarislowsky Chair in Economic and Cultural Transformation

32-34 Bridging Divides and CERC Migration

37-47 Bridging Divides





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