

# BRIDGES

MIGRATION | COMMUNITY | IMPACT



## Building Games and Community *Unlocking Immigrants' Game Design Skills*

IN THIS ISSUE:

Where and why you should teach AI to immigrants

Toronto entrepreneurs have a new ace up their sleeve

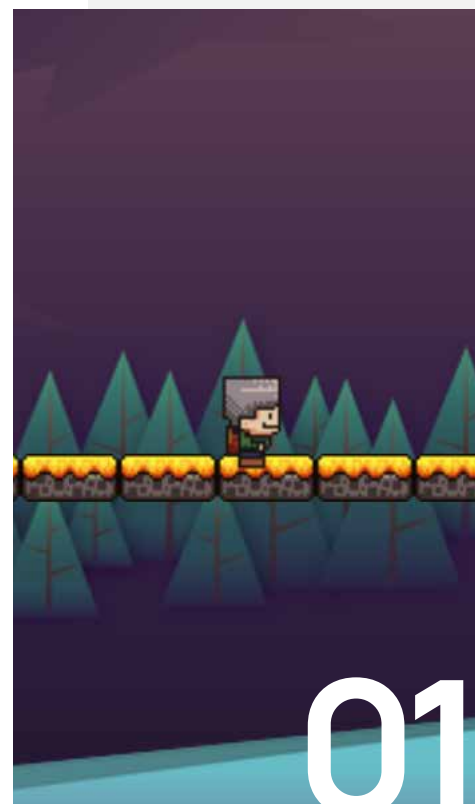
Can these student ideas solve migration problems?





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).

# Table of Contents



FEATURED STORY:

## Making Space to Play

GAME STUDIES RESEARCHERS THINK THERE IS A LOT TO LEARN FROM TEACHING MIGRANTS ABOUT VIDEOGAMES 06



PARTNERSHIPS IN PROGRESS:

## Allies in Action 26

The Immigrant Education Society and researcher Anusha Kassan

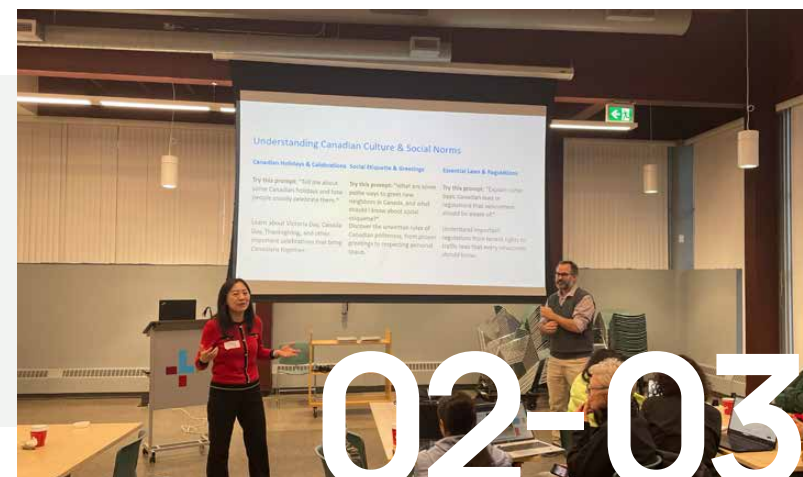
Environics and Scientific Director Anna Traindafyllidou

Conseil québécois de la musique, Caroline Marcoux-Gendron and researcher Marie-Jeanne Blair

Graphic Designer Sofia Donner and researcher Maria Cervantes-Macias

Justice4TruckDrivers, Labour Community Services of Peel, West Coast Trucking Association and researcher Émile Baril

Small and Rural Alberta Municipalities and researcher Sandeep Agrawal



EAR TO THE GROUND:

## Workshopping Confidence in the Age of AI

OKANAGAN VALLEY, BRITISH COLUMBIA

14

## How to Design an Entrepreneurship Program for Migrants: A Practical Guide

TORONTO, ONTARIO

20



STUDENT-LED INNOVATION:

## From Student Projects to Startup Potential 32

CAN THESE STUDENT IDEAS TURN MIGRANT CHALLENGES INTO BUILDABLE SOLUTIONS?



Q&A FEATURE:

## Translating Lived Experience Into Immigration Policy 36

WITH THE HONOURABLE RATNA OMIDVAR

# Message from the Directors

In the Spring of 2025, we launched this magazine with the hope of showing what an ambitious research program can achieve when collaboration is at the heart of the work. A year later, this publication continues to invite us to pause and look more closely at some of the lives the program is touching.

There is so much in the world pulling us in different directions. As migration scholars, health practitioners, economic experts, urban planners, and innovators, urgent issues demand our attention all at once, stretching our focus and fragmenting our efforts. With so many fires burning at the same time, it can feel like we do not have the capacity, the resources, the time, or even the emotional strength to respond to all of them.

And yet, when the pressure tempts us to look down, we must choose to look up. It is precisely in the moments when it is easiest to focus only on our own survival, that it is most vital to look outward, notice who is sitting next to us, and who isn't. That is when we need to make room, to ask for help, and to recognize that progress rarely happens in isolation. As one of the researchers in this issue puts it, we can achieve far more when we work together.

That is what we are focusing on in this issue. We are celebrating the amazing work of researchers, partners, and community members, coming together to uplift newcomers by helping them gain new skills. From young entrepreneurs to highly skilled workers, from youth who grew up in refugee camps to international students forging new lives far from their families. These pages underscore the reciprocity of sharing knowledge, how much you can learn from those you teach. We also explore how the connections made and the conversations held can be the most powerful outcomes, the synergies that take shape after the last slide is shown.

If, after reading, you think this issue is about teaching newcomers the fundamentals of game design, how to set up a business, how to use AI tools, or how to take an idea to a working prototype, you would not be wrong. But you would not be entirely right either. This issue is about the places, the people, and the institutions that make those things possible, and the ongoing effort of researchers and communities working together to ensure they continue to happen, even when so much is pulling us in different directions.



**ANNA TRIANDAFYLLIDOU**

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



**MARTHA MUNEZHI**

Executive Director, Bridging Divides



FEATURED STORY: \_\_\_\_\_

# Making Space to Play

# 01



## Game studies researchers think there is a lot to learn from teaching migrants about videogames

For Mia Consalvo, the path into game research began with wanting to understand more about the people who play them. “I first started researching players and game culture,” she says, recalling the early work that put her on the path to becoming a professor and Canada Research Chair In Game Studies and Design at Concordia University. “My very first project was looking at people who cheat in games and how and why that happens, and how that plays a part in gameplay.”

Over time, that focus expanded. As the tools for making games became more accessible, what once required deep technical expertise began to open up to a wider range of creators. This made it possible for Consalvo to move from studying games to actually building them. “Tools like Twine or Ren’Py or Bitsy made it possible to experiment,” she explains. “I started playing around a little bit and making games on my own, then teaching a class on using games for research creation.” That shift from observing player culture to participating in game creation laid the groundwork for a different kind of research practice, one that often blends creativity, experimentation, and critical inquiry.

It also set the stage for a project that would connect game development to questions of migration and belonging. In a city like Montreal, where the gaming industry is both prominent and deeply networked, the opportunity was a perfect fit. “Montreal is this huge centre for the game industry,” Consalvo says. “So when I saw in Bridging Divides the opening for more research on immigrants who are new to the area, I thought about the opportunities in games for newcomers. It felt like an interesting thing to try, combining those two worlds.”

## A permanent buff to inclusive design

What was not new, however, was Consalvo's relationship with the local non-profit **GAMERella**, and its longstanding model of making game development more accessible by rethinking who gets to participate in game jams and how. Originally focused on supporting women entering the field, the game jams offered by GAMERella have since broadened their scope to include a wider range of underrepresented groups, always guided by the same principle: lower the barriers, and more people will see themselves as creators.

For **Courtney Blamey**, co-director of GAMERella, that work begins with challenging what a game jam is supposed to look like. "Traditionally, a game jam is a kind of marathon," she explains, where participants work intensively over a short period to produce a game. But that model, she notes, often mirrors the industry's own "crunch" culture, where long hours and constant output are normalized. "It romanticizes this idea that you can just stay there, keep working, eat pizza, and not leave," she says. GAMERella deliberate-

## Your quest-giver told you to have fun

Game developer, mentor, and keynote speaker at the event, **Sarah Raine** is no stranger to the game jams Blamey described. She is used to environments shaped by competition, where tight timelines and industry visibility create a sense of pressure. "You can feel the tension in the air," she says. "There are prizes, judges from companies, and you're wondering, am I going to get scouted or something? And that is fun, but it can be a lot of pressure."

This event, by contrast, was deliberately structured to shift the focus on learning. "We made it very clear from the beginning that even if they didn't come out of this with a fully functional project, that's fine," she explains. "What matters is that they came and tried things and experimented." That shift in expectations allowed participants to approach the work differently, focusing less on outcomes and more on process.

To capture that mindset, Raine introduced a simple framework during her keynote: ELF. "It stands for Experiment, Learn, and Have Fun. That, to me, is the recipe to a good game jam," she says, reflecting on her own experiences of projects that may not have been successful in a conventional sense, but still provided valuable learning. "One thing

ly takes a different approach. "We send people home. We make sure people rest. We put safeguards in place so people aren't burning out."

That shift in structure reshapes the experience itself. Rather than focusing on output alone, the emphasis moves toward learning, connection, and sustainability. "It was less about making the games and more about learning, but also connecting with each other," Blamey says, reflecting on the Bridging Divides game jam she helped design and run at Concordia University. In addition to collaborating on projects, participants — who were all newcomers — took the time to share experiences, compare pathways into the industry (and the country), and bond over the challenges of navigating life in Canada as an immigrant. "During the breaks, there was a lot more of everyone coming together and talking than what we normally see," she adds. "That kind of connection was really lovely."

that's consistent is that I always came out of it learning something I could use in a future project."

That emphasis on learning proved especially important given the backgrounds of the participants. Many arrived with strong skills in adjacent areas, like software development or design, but little experience with game engines or interactive systems. "It was their first time using Unity," Sarah recalls of one team she supported. "But they all came in with great ideas, and that was fun." Her role, as she describes it, was not to direct them toward a finished product, but to guide them through the process of scaling their ambitions and building step by step. "Start with the minimum thing you can do, and then build from there."

By the end of the jam, the results spoke for themselves. Participants had indeed produced playable prototypes, while also gaining confidence in their ability to create.

**"They came out of it having learned a lot, having made friends, and having something they can put on their portfolio. I think that's a great first step."**

## Farm your resources, gather your party

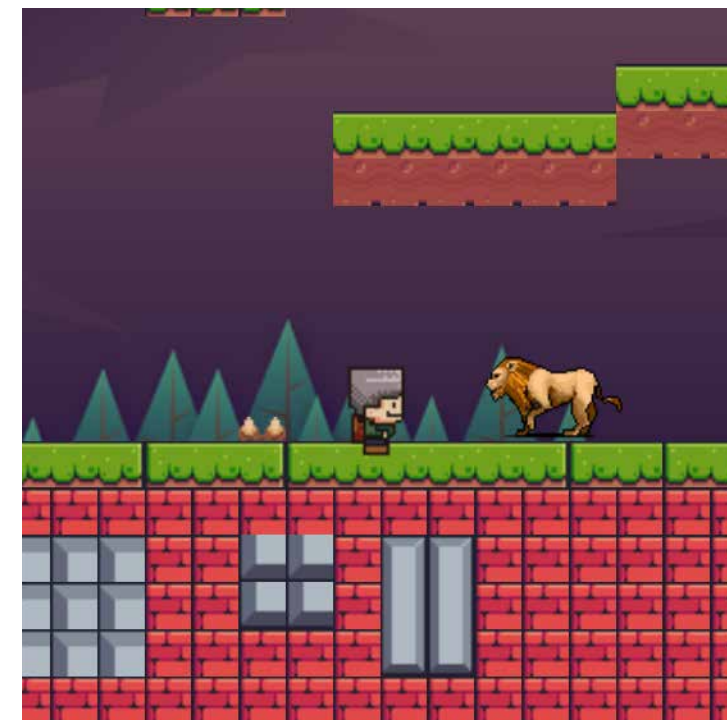
The research team was struck by the level of technical skill participants brought with them. "Most, if not all, of our participants came in with really strong coding or design skills," says **Beck de Heuvel**, graduate student and project manager for the event. "Some were full stack developers or web developers, but they had never worked on a game before. It really felt like a reskilling event." To the ear of a migration researcher, the idea that newcomers are often overqualified relative to the jobs they hold (or are applying to) in Canada is not surprising. What is interesting, however, is how even in a less studied industry, immigrants were translating their existing expertise into a new context, using the game jam as a way to expand their professional possibilities.

At the same time, the conversations that emerged during the event reflected broader shifts and uncertainties within the industry itself. One theme surfaced repeatedly: the growing role of artificial intelligence. "Participants talked about how AI is affecting their work environments, and the industry," de Heuvel explains. "Some saw it as something that's making their jobs more precarious, while others were using it as a tool to learn or to become more efficient." This dual perspective of AI as both threat and resource truly underscored the complexity of entering a field that is itself in flux.

Consalvo identifies these concerns as part of an existing pattern. "The industry itself is very cyclical," she notes, describing how studios expand rapidly during production phases and then contract once projects are completed. "Employment isn't always stable," she adds, pointing to recent layoffs and the lingering effects of pandemic-era growth followed by market correction. For newcomers, these structural dynamics can make entry even more challenging, particularly when combined with barriers such as limited networks or a lack of familiarity with local hiring practices.

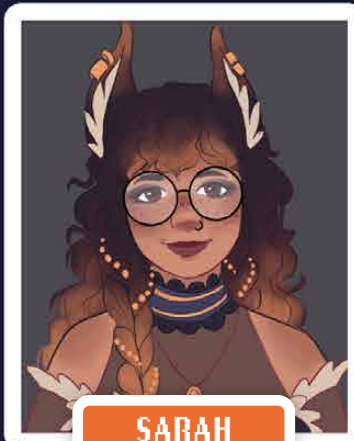
"Who you know matters," de Heuvel emphasizes, pointing to the informal communities that shape access to opportunities. In Montreal, these networks take many forms, from organized meetups to ad hoc gatherings of developers sharing knowledge and resources.

**"There are community spaces where people connect, look for jobs, and learn from each other. That's a big part of how the industry works."**





NYX



SARAH



ALLIE



MEG



BECK



MIA



HANINE



COURTNEY



ARIELLE

## Leveling the playing field

In this context, initiatives like the Bridging Divides game jam are essential to creating entry points into the broader ecosystem. By bringing together participants, mentors, and industry professionals, the event offered a first step into the networks that often shape career pathways in game development. Blamey believes that pathway does not need to begin with landing a job. “If folks walk away having learned something and produced something — even if it’s just a proof of concept or a small mechanic working well — that’s a success,” she says. “It’s more than they had when they walked in.”

For Raine, who is herself a first generation Canadian, having moved to Quebec from Morocco with her family at the age of five, that sense of community was one of the most meaningful outcomes of the experience. “There was a wider range of ages and backgrounds than I usually see,” she reflects, noting the presence of participants coming from different fields and levels of experience. “It was very community-oriented.”

That diversity also shaped the kinds of conversations that unfolded, creating space for perspectives that are not always visible in more traditional industry settings. “There was more sensitivity around social issues than I would expect,” she adds, recalling how discussions about representation and inclusion emerged organically throughout the event.

The project stood out because of the way it bridged research and lived experience. “It was nice to do a research project that had a genuine human element to it,” de Heuvel says. “Something that involved community and actually made a difference for people.” That impact, however, is not always easy to measure. Recruiting participants, for example, proved more difficult than expected, highlighting the challenges of reaching communities without established relationships. “Starting from scratch, people don’t necessarily know who you are or why you’re doing this,” Consalvo reflects, pointing to the importance of trust and long-term engagement.

And yet, the response from those who did participate was overwhelmingly positive. “If we were to repeat this event, everyone said they would come back,” de Heuvel says. Participants left with tangible outputs, many with a playable game and a portfolio piece, as well as a new set of skills and a clearer sense of possibility.

In many ways, the game jam offered a reminder that the video game industry is not just defined by competition, instability, and rapid change. At its core, it’s a space shaped by creativity, experimentation, and a deep sense of belonging: by the stories people want to tell, the worlds they want to build, and the reasons they are drawn to games in the first place. Creating space for more people to enter the field means expanding who gets to imagine, shape, and ultimately be part of those stories.

## Choose Your Character

To ensure the Game Jam success, a team of passionate researchers and industry professionals provided operational and educational support before and during the event. Artist and Game Jam mentor Alissia Bocarro produced a series of portraits to introduce the “characters” behind the project. From the top-left corner: **Nyx Galipeau**, Mentor, Creative Director at Lucid Tales; **Sarah Raine**, Keynote Speaker and Mentor, Independent Game Developer; **Alissia “Allie” Bo-**

**carro**, Mentor, Independent Artist; **Meg Hutchison**, Mentor, Narrative Designer at Motive Studios; **Beck de Heuvel**, Project Coordinator, PhD Student at Concordia University; **Mia Consalvo**, Primary Investigator, Professor at Concordia University; **Hanine El Mir**, Mentor, PhD Student at Concordia University; **Courtney Blamey**, Mentor, GAMERella Co-Director; **Arielle Wong**, Mentor, Independent Game Developer.

Conducting research on topics such as the meaning and role of AI in facilitating employment opportunities — particularly for new immigrants—prompted me to reflect deeply about the impact of my work beyond academia. It brings into sharp focus the ways in which research can meaningfully touch people's lives, and how, in turn, those interactions can profoundly affect the researcher. I was reminded of this in mid-March 2026, when I received an email from one of the participants in our study.

At the outset of the project (November 2025), this participant had requested a formal letter from me and the university confirming his involvement in the research. While it is standard practice for us to thank participants multiple times, both during interviews and via follow-up emails, and to offer a modest honorarium in the form of a \$20 gift card, this request signaled something more. It appeared to function as a form of credentialing that he might use in his job search. At the time, I noted that his engagement reflected not only a willingness to contribute to the research, but also a hope that participation might, in some way, support his own aspirations. There was a mutuality in this exchange, an implicit understanding of both giving and seeking support.

In his follow-up email, he expressed gratitude for the letter I had written. He also shared that, at the time of the interview, he had been uncertain about participating in future research, largely due to concerns about its potential outcomes. This hesitation is not uncommon among participants, particularly given the pressures and uncertainties they face while trying to establish themselves in Canada. However, in his message, he indicated a renewed willingness to engage in future studies and an interest in receiving the reports and summaries we plan to disseminate at the project's conclusion.

What made the email especially striking was his reflection on the research topic itself. He wrote:

"I trained as a teacher and taught for 11 years before coming to Canada as a permanent resident. I have dealt with more than six settlement agencies in the past 14 months. Your topic has allowed me to reconsider my understanding of AI, and in just a few hours, claude.ai has provided me with three times more support than all those agencies combined. Thank you for this work and best of luck. With deepest respect XXX"

His comments were both surprising and deeply moving. It is important to emphasize that his comparison does not diminish the significant efforts made by settlement agencies and their staff, whose work is often both demanding and invaluable. My own interactions with the agency involved in this project were highly positive and reaffirmed the importance of their role. However, his reflection underscores a critical point: while academic research is valuable in its own right, its translation into accessible, actionable knowledge for communities, particularly those navigating urgent challenges such as employment and settlement, is equally vital. This speaks directly to the importance of knowledge mobilization.

Most impactful for me was his statement that the research had led him to "reconsider [his] understanding of AI." When I began this project, I too was in the process of grappling with AI — seeking to understand not only its technical capacities, but also its implications for human lives, including my own. His acknowledgment of undergoing a similar process of reflection highlighted the shared, human dimension of this inquiry. It reinforced the importance of engaging critically and thoughtfully with AI, not only as a technological development, but as a force that is reshaping how individuals navigate their futures.

To know that this research may have contributed, even in a small way, to another person's sense of possibility is profoundly meaningful. Even a single instance of such impact is deeply gratifying. When participants open up about their struggles, aspirations, and efforts to build a life in a new country, they extend a level of trust and vulnerability that transforms the research encounter into something more than data collection. It becomes a moment of human connection. In that brief exchange, there is a mutual recognition that transcends roles, researcher and participant, and affirms a shared humanity. For me, that moment was both grounding and validating, reaffirming the purpose and value of the work I do.

*Annamma Joy is Associate Dean, Research and Professor of Marketing at the University of British Columbia, Kelowna campus. At Bridging Divides, she leads the AI Empowerment Initiative, a project designed to connect immigrants with small businesses and nonprofit organizations through tailored AI training programs. You can read more about one of those trainings in the next article of this issue.*

# A Letter, A Life, A Lens on AI

BY ANNAMMA JOY

EAR TO THE GROUND: \_\_\_\_\_

# Workshopping Confidence in the Age of AI



## An AI workshop series in Kelowna helping newcomers build confidence, skills, and connections

Located in British Columbia's Okanagan Valley, Kelowna is a growing, vibrant destination for newcomers settling in the province. With access to outdoor activities and a strong offering of urban amenities, it's no surprise that immigration has played an important role in driving population growth in the region over the past two decades.

It's also no surprise that, during a cold, rainy fall weekend in a city known for its mild climate, so many showed up in person for a free AI workshop series offered by the University of British Columbia in partnership with **Kelowna Community Resources** and the **Okanagan Regional Library**.

**"And so many brought their kids! That was unexpected,"** says **Ying Zhu, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Management at the University of British Columbia-Okanagan and the Bridging Divides researcher leading the workshop.**

### The room where it happens

At the downtown branch of the Okanagan Regional Library, **Evan Burgess** wears many hats: public services librarian, technology instructor, community outreach coordinator. "Basically, if somebody's looking for something, whether it's a book, a service, or a resource, my job is to help them find it," he says. "And if I can't, I'll find someone who can." That role has evolved over time. Increasingly, it means bringing people into the library not just to borrow materials, but to learn, connect, and participate.

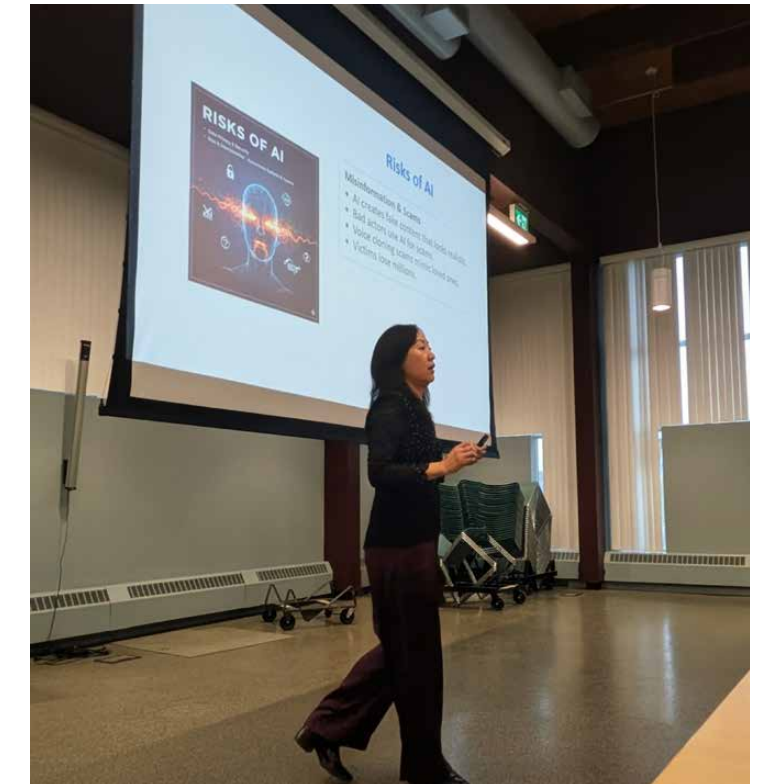
"We put on educational classes, technology workshops, community events. And we collaborate with partners," Burgess explains. When Zhu reached out, it was a natural fit. The library provided space, technology, and promotion, aligning closely with its mandate to serve the public.

"I was asking myself: how can we better equip newcomers with AI skills so they can integrate more confidently into Canadian society? To me, AI is not just a technical tool. It can help people overcome language barriers, better understand government policies and services, learn Canadian workplace culture, and build confidence as they navigate unfamiliar systems. It can support learning, communication, and cultural understanding in very practical ways." The training series is part of one of the Bridging Divides projects Zhu is involved in, *AI Empowerment Initiative*, led by her University of British Columbia colleague, Annamma Joy.

Zhu, an expert in digital marketing, consumer behaviour, and strategy, knew from the outset that delivering a workshop series directly to immigrant communities would be ambitious. "If we wanted to do something meaningful, we needed to work closely with organizations already embedded in the community." The series eventually took shape as four free sessions offered over two Saturdays in an open, accessible space, one described as the "last bastion of democracy" in the 2018 film *The Public*.

What makes libraries especially powerful in this context is not just infrastructure, but accessibility. "We're increasingly one of the few free spaces where people can just be," Burgess says. "There are no expectations, except to be respectful." For newcomers, that matters. Some come to use computers or print documents, others attend language exchange programs or conversation circles, and many are simply looking for a place to start. "Libraries are often one of the first places people go. When you host something here, you're reaching people in their own community."

Hosting an event in a public library also brings a different kind of audience. "We're very central, very downtown, so we see a different demographic than you might on a university campus," he adds. And, as Zhu quickly noticed, that includes families. "Yes," he continues, "you're going to be reaching families. A lot of families use the library, we have parents with their kids here all the time. You are definitely getting that."



## Training newcomers where they are

Not everyone, however, feels ready to walk into a library workshop. For some newcomers, especially youth, confidence, language, and familiarity can all be barriers. That is where organizations like Kelowna Community Resources (KCR) come in. They helped Zhu connect directly with immigrant communities, shared the workshops through their networks, and provided hands-on support. They also helped her reach an untapped audience.

**“My role is to support newcomer youth in finding employment,”** says Yana Pavlova, an employment specialist working with participants aged 15 to 30. **“We create individual plans based on their skills, their goals, and their background.”** A key part of that work is creating opportunities for connection, something she sees as essential for young newcomers trying to find their footing.

“For many of them, especially refugees, networking is the biggest challenge,” she explains. “They don’t have family here. They don’t have connections. Even going to a workshop can feel intimidating.” So, instead of expecting youth to go out into the community, Pavlova brought the community to them. She invited Zhu to lead an AI session at a summer youth employment boot camp organized by KCR.

The need was clear. Some participants had very limited experience with technology, to the point that even using a laptop or email was new. At the same time, the employment landscape is shifting quickly, and understanding digital tools, including AI, is becoming essential. The session also emphasized how to use the tools responsibly.

“We talked about safety and trust,” Pavlova says. “How to protect your personal data when applying for jobs online, and how to use AI in a smart way. It’s important, especially for newcomers, because many arrive with a high level of trust. We try to remind them to stay aware and protect themselves.”

Interestingly, for her, one of the most memorable parts of this very practical workshop was the human factor: Zhu. “You could feel that she is passionate about what she does,” Pavlova says. “It was not just a presentation. She asked questions, she adapted to the group, she made it relevant to their needs.” For many participants, it was their first time thinking critically about AI. “We only had one session, so we couldn’t go too deep,” she adds. “But it gave them ideas. It made them curious. It made them reflect.”



## Turning one workshop into a model that works

It’s easy to assume that people who move to a new country and rebuild their lives are inherently confident and resilient. And often, they are. But confidence doesn’t always translate in the same way when it comes to navigating new systems, new tools, and new expectations.

That’s where the impact of this kind of work becomes visible, not in a single outcome, but in the way people begin to engage. “You can feel the energy in the room,” Zhu says. “People are curious. They are asking questions. They are learning from each other.” At the end of the last session, several participants approached her with the same question: what’s next? “That stayed with me,” she says.

None of this would have been possible without collaboration. “Our most successful programs are always the ones we collaborate on,” Burgess says. “We can only reach so far on our own. Partners extend that reach.” For organizations like KCR, those partnerships also open up something less tangible, but just as important.

“When people come to a new country, they need to have hope,” Pavlova says. “They can meet people from universities, from different careers, and think, maybe this is possible for me too.” That sense of possibility, of knowing where to go next and feeling confident enough to take that step, is at the core of the work.

The workshops themselves may have been short-term, but the need they respond to is not. “AI is going to stay,” Zhu says. “The demand for accessible, practical learning opportunities will only continue to grow.” Her advice to other researchers is to start building relationships early, reach out to libraries and community organizations, and treat collaboration as long-term commitment rather than a one-time exchange. “When you collaborate meaningfully, the impact is far greater than what you could achieve alone.”

In Kelowna, that collaboration turned a research idea into a room full of people learning together, forming connections, and starting to dwell on possibility. Sometimes, it’s worth pausing there for a moment to reflect on that very question: *what’s next?*



EAR TO THE GROUND: \_\_\_\_\_

# How to Design an Entrepreneurship Program for Migrants: A Practical Guide





## A poverty-fighting, migrant-empowering model arrives in Canada, and Toronto entrepreneurs are already putting it to work

For an immigrant new to a country like Canada, it only takes one person to make a difference. It can be a moment of encouragement, a new connection, or an unexpected encounter that opens doors that once seemed impossible to unlock.

Shatvahi Ramesh, one of the 28 graduates of Enterprise Bridge's first cohort in Toronto, says that push led her to start her own business, *Thethani and Co.*, a mobile tea and snacks stall. "They helped me really feel like my idea is worth pursuing," she says, referring to one of her conversations with her mentor.

When University of Notre Dame professor of entrepreneurship and social innovation **Michael Morris** first spoke with Bridging Divides postdoctoral researcher **Anil Dhakal** about introducing the **Urban Poverty and Business Initiative (UPBI)** in Toronto, Dhakal felt an instant connection to the project. The UPBI, founded and directed by Morris, leverages university resources to help low-income and disadvantaged individuals start and grow sustainable businesses. Using a six-pillar model, the initiative includes a structured 80-step pathway, guiding participants through training and mentoring while addressing social problems like poverty through the process.

With a background in international development and poverty alleviation, and a deep appreciation for community building, Dhakal often noticed a disconnect between academic research and project implementation. "The UPBI provided the rare opportunity to support communities through direct development initiatives, while also continuing to drive meaningful research," he says.

The project has expanded to 58 cities worldwide, including, now, Toronto. For Morris, introducing the program within a university setting meant embedding it in an environment where academic and community strengths could intersect. Tapping into Toronto's diverse communities also added to the appeal, he says, given immigrants' unique backgrounds and needs, and what can be learned from their lived experiences. "It's a rich opportunity for research," he says.

So, finally, the UPBI was launched at Toronto Metropolitan University under the name of Enterprise Bridge. Morris recognizes the value in partnering with a research program focused on migration, a clear demonstration that the model can be adapted beyond traditional business school settings.

## STEP 1: Start with a plan, and put it motion

Dhakal began planning the launch of Enterprise Bridge in May 2025. The structure was clear and intensive: a nine-month program beginning in the Fall, with six bootcamp sessions delivered over six weeks, followed by a mentorship phase and a student consultation phase. Each bootcamp session was designed to be immersive, combining a two-hour workshop with sessions featuring both a guest speaker and a guest entrepreneur.

Workshops covered key stages of the entrepreneurial journey, from ideation to execution, financing, securing resources, marketing, and other essential business fundamentals. Participants also heard from guest speakers across sectors such as government, financial institutions, and local businesses, who offered specialized insights. Guest entrepreneurs shared their personal journeys and day-to-day experiences.



In a cohort where two-thirds of participants were women, individuals came from diverse backgrounds and were at different stages of establishing their businesses. Ventures ranged from community-focused initiatives such as art studios and online tutoring to product-based businesses like stuffed dates and organic candles.

Many were also balancing entrepreneurship alongside full-time jobs, family responsibilities, and other commitments. For Dhakal, what stood out was each participant's determination. "They have kids, they have challenges," he says, "but they share a strong collective desire to build truly sustainable business ventures."

## STEP 2:

**Make mentorship the engine**

For Morris, embedding mentorship and student consultation as core components of the program was a priority from the outset. The model was designed as a continuous journey rather than a series of one-off interventions. "It's like a woven cloth," he says. Grounded in the program's 80-step framework, participants built on previous learning with mentors and student consultants guiding progress toward tangible outcomes.

Participants were connected with a pool of 12 mentors, each bringing their own expertise from sectors including finance, technology, non-profit, academia, and media. Among them were **Levicel Calang**, founder of the **All Women Entrepreneurship Circuit (AWEC)**, and **Akash Khullar**, Business Banking Relationship Manager at **BMO**.

For Calang, the experience was empowering. "You share your knowledge," she says. "But at the same time, you also learn from your mentees, you learn from their stories and struggles." As an immigrant herself, she understands how overwhelming the entrepreneurial journey can be, and when mentorship makes the biggest difference.

"Inspiration is at the core of mentorship," she says. "Learning about your mentor's journey and the challenges they had to overcome makes you feel less alone. They need that support."

Khullar describes the experience as eye-opening. While he provided advice and guidance to participants, he is also someone who hopes to eventually open his own venture. Speaking directly with aspiring entrepreneurs, rather than established businesses, gave him insights into how many barriers exist, especially at the early stages of the journey. Despite those barriers, he saw that starting often comes down to "simply an idea."

Calang also highlighted the value of knowledge sharing across sectors, pointing to the synergies that emerge through these partnerships. "We are very grassroots level," she says, emphasizing the direct and personal connections non-profits build with the communities they serve. "We connect with them in terms of what their actual needs are."

This layered understanding, she suggests, offers researchers a multi-dimensional lens. The exchange flows both ways. Non-profits often lack the resources to conduct large-scale studies, while research findings offer critical insights, especially when applying for funding. "This is where collaboration comes into play," she says.

For Morris, the consultation process also offered students an opportunity to gain real insight into business ownership. "When a student is sitting there listening to entrepreneurs who have overcome all kinds of obstacles, that's a reality check," he says



## STEP 3:

**Define what success actually means**

This Spring, participants are being matched with student consultants from universities and the wider community, who will provide guidance as they move into the next stage of their journeys. Dhakal will conduct a qualitative study on the structural constraints, including systemic barriers, that shape immigrant entrepreneurship, while also examining how university-led programs act as supportive resources.

Existing research suggests immigrants are more likely than Canadian-born individuals to pursue entrepreneurship, often in response to labour market barriers, with many turning to self-employment out of necessity. Despite this, Dhakal notes that there is a gap in the literature that explains what entrepreneurship can do for migrant integration more broadly.

Entrepreneurship can embed individuals in the social fabric of their communities in ways that other forms of employment often do not. As a result, the study moves beyond narrow definitions of success and considers broader measures of impact, including social connection, confidence, and long-term sustainability for participants and for the communities they are part of.



PARTNERSHIPS IN PROGRESS:

# Allies in Action

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

# 04

## THE IMMIGRANT EDUCATION SOCIETY AND RESEARCHER ANUSHA KASSAN

Bridging the gap between international expertise and the Canadian workforce is a journey filled with both ambition and invisible hurdles, which is why the collaboration between **Anusha Kassan** and **Katerina Palova** is proving so exciting for the settlement community. The partnership between UBC-based Bridging Divides researcher Kassan, and Palova, who works at **The Immigrant Education Society** in Calgary, is looking closely at how highly skilled newcomers such as nurses, teachers, and IT professionals, navigate the digital world while trying to restart their careers in Canada.

Their project considers the lived experiences of immigrants through surveys and interviews, moving from research to real-world action with the creation of **The Seeker**. This digital tool acts as a specialized guide that moves beyond general advice to provide “wiki-style” support tailored to the specific needs of Filipino nurses, Indian IT professionals, and Ukrainian teachers. Combining university research with the expertise of private developers and community expertise, the partnership helps the team understand where digital supports are effective, where gaps remain, and how technology can be improved, creating a more personalized, digital roadmap to help immigrant professionals turn their global experience into local success.

## CONSEIL QUÉBÉCOIS DE LA MUSIQUE, CAROLINE MARCOUX-GENDRON AND RESEARCHER MARIE-JEANNE BLAIN

What are the pathways for immigrant artists to access Quebec’s professional music sector? How can this ecosystem be strengthened? These questions are at the heart of a partnership-based action research project conducted with the **Conseil québécois de la musique** and an intersectoral advisory committee bringing together organizations from the arts, immigration, and employment services.

Led by **Caroline Marcoux-Gendron** (Université du Québec à Montréal and MITACS postdoctoral fellow at HEC Montréal) alongside co-researcher **Marie-Jeanne Blain** (Concordia University and Bridging Divides), the project explores how advanced digital technologies can be leveraged to better support the settlement sector.

Through sustained collaboration between researchers and practitioners, the initiative has successfully mapped existing resources for immigrant musicians while identifying the systemic challenges that continue to shape their career trajectories. One of the project’s central outcomes is the development of a specialized digital platform designed to provide clear, accessible information for both artists and the professionals who support them. Through an intersectional lens, the platform, available online, reflects the complex intersection of immigration, labour, and cultural systems that musicians must navigate. The English version of the platform is set to launch at the end of March 2026, with future plans to expand these vital connections to partners in other Canadian provinces.

**JUSTICE4TRUCKDRIVERS,  
LABOUR COMMUNITY  
SERVICES OF PEEL,  
WEST COAST TRUCKING  
ASSOCIATION AND  
RESEARCHER ÉMILE BARIL**

The Bridging Divides research program explores how emerging digital technologies are fundamentally reshaping the settlement experience for newcomers in Canada. A critical component of this inquiry focuses on changes to the labour market. Concordia-based researcher **Émile Baril** is uncovering the profound destabilizing impacts of tech-driven shifts within the trucking sector. His work highlights a concerning transition from stable, full-time employment toward precarious and temporary labour models that disproportionately affect migrant drivers.

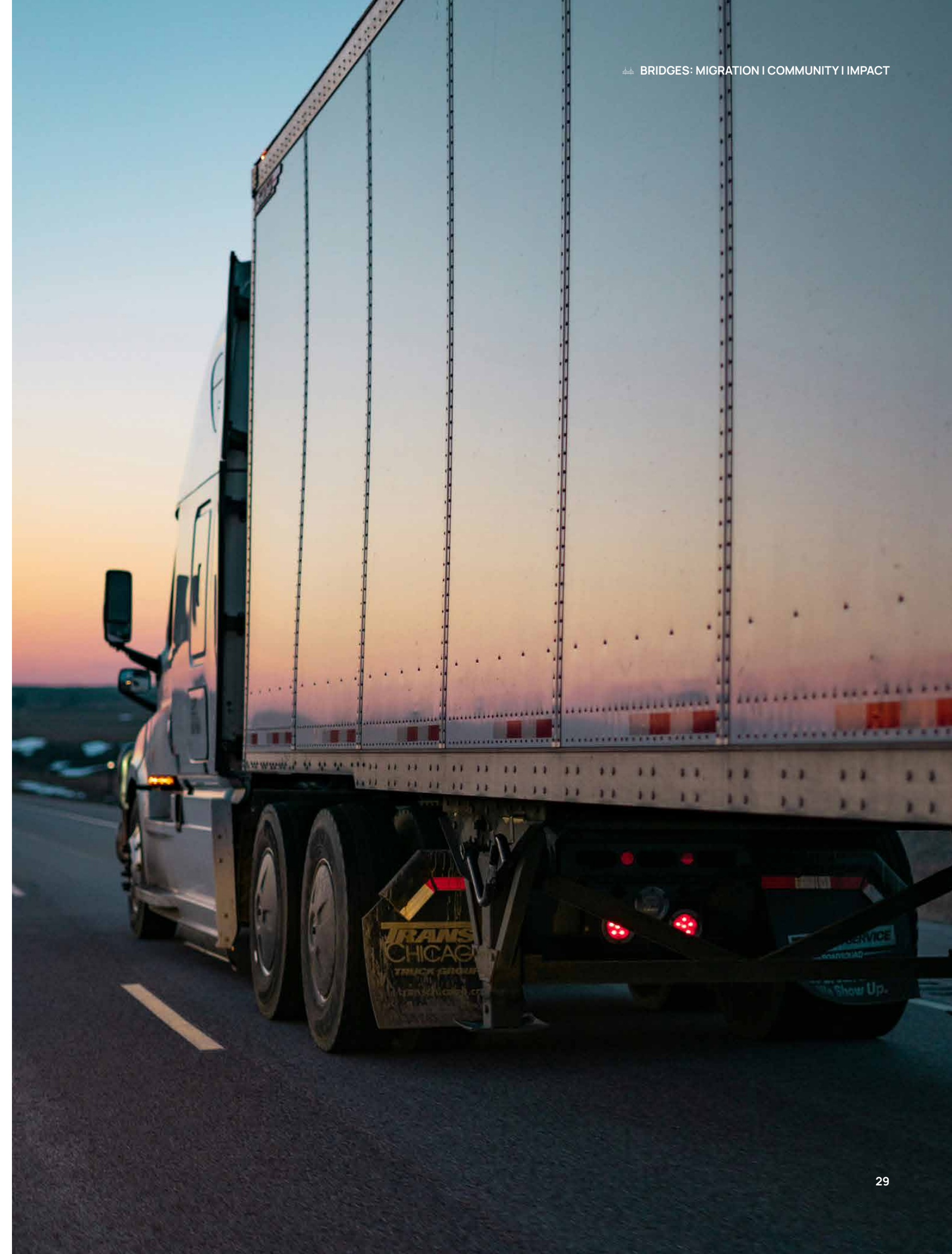
This research gains its strength through deep insights gained through engagement with grassroots community organizations, including **Justice4TruckDrivers**, **Labour Community Services of Peel**, and the **West Coast Trucking Association**. These connections are allowing Baril to document the evolving landscape of the industry while amplifying urgent concerns regarding worker abuse and exploitation.

The project aims to expose critical regulatory blind spots and advocate for policy reforms that ensure technological progress does not bypass human rights by illuminating the lived realities and harsh working conditions of migrant truck drivers.

**ENVIRONICS AND  
SCIENTIFIC DIRECTOR ANNA  
TRAINDAFYLLIDOU**

As liberal democracies around the world find themselves facing increased polarization, Canada is no exception. Despite historically positive attitudes towards immigration, economic instability, changing demographics, and global uncertainty, are taking a toll. To gauge the extent of shifting sentiment, the Bridging Divides research program is launching a definitive study exploring changing attitudes towards multiculturalism and diversity. Central to this initiative is a powerful partnership between **Anna Triandafyllidou** and the **Environics Institute**, combining Toronto Metropolitan University's academic rigor with Environics' deep expertise in public opinion and social trends.

The project merges scholarly inquiry with real-world data collection, ensuring that research remains grounded in the lived experiences of over 6,500 Canadians. Together, the team is examining how systemic barriers and digital transformations impact social cohesion. This bridge between sectors does far more than data gathering, it translates complex academic insights into actionable knowledge. Once complete, the findings are set to become the authoritative benchmark for understanding the complexities of Canada's diverse society.





## GRAPHIC DESIGNER SOFÍA DONNER AND RESEARCHER MARIA CERVANTES-MACÍAS

When academic research meets creative design, the result is a powerful new way to tell stories that matter. Researcher **Maria Cervantes-Macias** recently partnered with graphic designer **Sofía Donner** to transform complex findings from Cervantes-Macias' latest study into a vivid, research-based comic. While her paper in *Digital Geography and Society* explores the serious ways digital platforms and immigration laws shape the lives of migrant workers, from software engineers to delivery riders, the collaboration with Donner ensures these insights don't stay locked behind academic walls.

This partnership is a masterclass in **knowledge mobilization**: the art of making sure research actually reaches the people it affects. Through the co-creation of a visual narrative (page 30), researcher and artist have turned data into a human story, illustrating how digital labour is "tethered" to the real world and how workers rely on one another across borders. This bridge between social science and graphic design proves that when we simplify the delivery without losing the depth, we create a more inclusive conversation about the future of work and belonging in Canada.



## SMALL AND RURAL ALBERTA MUNICIPALITIES AND RESEARCHER SANDEEP AGRAWAL

How do small and rural municipalities in Alberta develop and sustain welcoming environments for newcomers, and what factors truly influence their decision to stay? These questions anchor a Bridging Divides research project conducted in partnership with **Alberta Municipalities (ABMunis)**. Led by Director of Research Rachel de Vos, ABMunis previously spearheaded the Welcoming Communities initiative to combat discrimination (2016-2022). This partnership builds on ABMunis' experience, connecting it with evidence-based academic insights to inform local planning, service coordination, and provincial-municipal dialogues on regional development and immigrant retention.

Through interviews across six small Alberta municipalities, the University of Alberta research team (Areej Jamal, Nimil Hussain and Stephen Baffoe), led by **Sandeep Agrawal**, has identified that while attraction is a headliner, retention is the central challenge. Success depends heavily on localized governance and seamless coordination between municipal departments, employers, and settlement organizations. Mechanisms such as the provincially funded Family and Community Support Services (FCSS), which supports community-based services, are being leveraged, although FCSS is not specifically designed for newcomers' integration. Other innovative practices are emerging, such as anti-racism frameworks and "neighbourhood connector" programs. However, structural constraints like funding reductions and the new *Provincial Priorities Act* create hurdles for local implementation. Through workshops and dialogue, the partnership is bringing together diverse stakeholders to collaborate on policy recommendations that strengthen the capacity of Alberta's smaller communities to serve as enduring homes for immigrants.

STUDENT-LED INNOVATION: \_\_\_\_\_

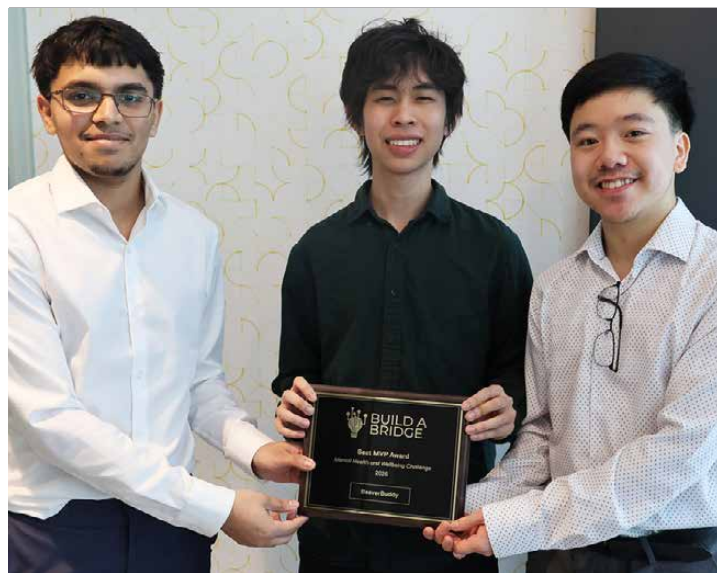
# From Student Projects to Startup Potential

# 05

## Can these student ideas turn migrant challenges into buildable solutions?

Over eight weeks, a group of students across four Canadian universities set out to get out of their classrooms and build something practical. Not a paper or a pitch deck, but a working solution to challenges they, or people like them, were already navigating in real life. By the end of the second edition of Build a Bridge, some of those solutions existed as usable prototypes, tested concepts, and in a few cases, early versions of something with the potential to go much further.

Fifty-seven students from Toronto Metropolitan University, Concordia University, the University of Alberta, and the University of British Columbia took part in a tightly structured program of workshops, roundtables, and mentorship. They worked across key research areas: mental health and wellbeing, labour and employment, place and infrastructure, and citizenship and participation. They learned how to identify and define a problem, and then design implementable solutions that respond to it using AI tools, user feedback, and real-world constraints.



From the beginning, Build a Bridge is not positioned as an isolated academic exercise. Students move through the program with input from mentors in entrepreneurship, immigration studies, and AI research and engineering, and at Toronto Metropolitan University, the partnership with the **Office of Zone Learning and Strategic Initiatives** connects their work to a wider ecosystem of incubators and venture-building support, following the principle that ideas should not stall at the prototype stage simply because students run out of runway.

**Sidhant Sakhuja**, a business development and commercialization manager at the **Ontario Centre of Innovation (OCI)**, immediately recognized that ambition. “You can usually tell when something is still conceptual and when it’s starting to move into something real,” he says. “A few of these projects were already crossing that line.”



Sakhuja spends his days speaking with founders, researchers, and early-stage teams, mapping where ideas might find funding, partnerships, or a path to market. He also came to Canada as an international student nearly a decade ago, which meant that the problems being tackled by Build a Bridge felt particularly real.

“I’ve gone through that process myself,” he says. “So when I saw what they were working on, it wasn’t just interesting... it was familiar.”

Sakhuja’s role in Build a Bridge was to read through and evaluate the submitted projects. He remembers musing on the practical implications of a platform to connect retiring small business owners with newcomers ready to take over viable enterprises, and feeling excited about the idea of a game-based VR simulation of a newcomer’s first 30 days in the country, where every decision carries trade-offs between finances, legal status, social capital, and mental health.

“Some of those ideas were really good. What stood out is that they were solving real, immediate gaps,” Sakhuja says. “You can think of people who would use these tools right away.”

And then the kicker, not just how implementable the projects felt, but how far into the developing stage some of the work already was. “Some teams had prototypes, they had spoken to users, they had validated parts of the problem,” he says. “That’s not typical. Usually, at this stage, you’re still very early.”



Build a Bridge is one of those programs that are trying to intervene in the delicate spot where ideas crash into reality. Where, more often than not, things fall apart. “Ontario produces a lot of strong research,” Sakhuja says. “Where we struggle is turning that into something that actually operates in the world.” He talks about the need to support young ventures after the idea, when a project needs funding, technical development, legal structure, and time to become viable. Without that support, even the most promising concepts tend to stall.

Partnerships can provide some much needed infrastructural support at that stage. “When you bring in the right people early, such as incubators, funders, organizations that understand how to scale something, you change the trajectory of that project,” he says. “It doesn’t have to end as a student exercise.”

At Toronto Metropolitan University, that trajectory is something the program is actively trying to shape, in part by working more closely with internal partners like Zone Learning, and in part by building relationships with external actors who can carry ideas forward. The goal is to produce exceptional student work that can continue to evolve beyond the program itself.

For **Zachary Rose**, director for strategic initiatives at **Magnet**, that ambition resonates with a broader challenge he sees across the systems he works in. “What I found interesting across the projects is that they were all, in different ways, trying to solve problems of connection,” he says. “Connecting people to services, to opportunities, to resources that are technically available but not always accessible.”

At Magnet, the focus is on the future of work, which often means looking at how education systems, employment systems, and community services intersect, or fail to. From that vantage point, the issue is rarely that support does not exist, but it’s often fragmented. “There are a lot of good things happening,” Rose says. “But they don’t always link up in a way that makes sense for the person trying to navigate them.”

It’s also good to force different parts of the system into the same room. “We don’t operate as one system,” he says. “Postsecondary education, community organizations, employment services, they’re all structured separately, funded separately, and often working on different timelines.” Collaboration is not automatic and needs to be built deliberately, sometimes against the grain of how institutions are set up to function.

“Any initiative that brings those pieces together is doing important work,” Rose says. “Because that’s how you start to create something more coherent.”

As technological change accelerates, AI tools are reshaping how people access information, how services are delivered, and how skills are developed, often faster than institutions can adapt. We slip back and forth through those institutions more and more fluidly.

**“The idea that you move through education once and then you’re done is just not how things work anymore. Learning, work, and reskilling are all blending together.”**

In that environment it’s more important than ever to build those connections, between students and practitioners, between research and application, between sectors that do not usually collaborate. “If even a few of these projects can move forward, you’re not just solving a problem,” Sakhuja says. “You’re creating something that can employ people, that can grow, that can have a real economic and social impact.”

The competition has produced three winners, who received their prizes at an in-person award ceremony and showcase hosted in Toronto. And the projects were definitely award-worthy. The more consequential outcome, however, may lie in the connections formed across institutions, sectors, and experiences, and in the recognition that moving from idea to impact is not a single step, but a system that has to be built around it. As Rose puts it: “None of us are operating in isolation anymore and none of us are finished learning.”

## With The Honourable Ratna Omidvar

Few people in Canada have bridged lived experience, community advocacy, and public policy as seamlessly as Senator Ratna Omidvar.

Before shaping national conversations on immigration and citizenship, Senator Omidvar experienced displacement firsthand. After meeting as university students in Germany, she and her husband moved to pre-revolution Iran, a country she still loves deeply. When her husband was called to serve in the Iran-Iraq War, they fled with their baby, joining thousands of others trying to leave. With cans of milk and bags of diapers, and money hidden in the pipes of a dismantled stroller, they crossed the border under dangerous and uncertain conditions. The experience of navigating systems, relying on them, and at times fearing them has stayed with her ever since. It feels all the more present at a time when so many others are forced into similar realities.

From frontline work in Toronto's settlement sector to legislative change in the Senate, her career has been defined by a constant effort to translate lived experience into systems that work better for others.

In this conversation, she reflects on that journey, the limits of research without application, and why rebuilding trust between the public, policymakers, and academia is more urgent than ever.

Q&A FEATURE:

# Translating Lived Experience Into Immigration Policy

# 06

**You've spent much of your career working on migration and displacement. What first drew you to this field, and how has your own personal story shaped that path?**

My personal story is the foundation of my engagement with migration, because for me, the personal is not only foundational, but also political.

Taking the perspective of lived experience, whether mine or that of others, and translating it into coherent policy options and then, hopefully, into legislation is never a straight line. But I feel that my own personal experience gives me grounding. It gives me authenticity.

**You've worked across community organizations, philanthropy, and government. Was there a moment early in your life or career that made you realize migration would become central to your work?**

I started off at St. Stephen's Community House, surrounded by immigrants, English classes, citizenship classes. I got steeped into that reality. Then, I transitioned to a place called Skills for Change, although it had a different name then. When I think of my accomplishments, I think about what I learned during my time there about the lived reality of people trying to seek work, and how systems and structures impede them instead of facilitating them. That's where I got interested in the complexities of credential recognition, integration of citizenship law, refugee law, and all of that.

When I eventually went to the Maytree Foundation, I got far more involved in policy, specifically the research on credential recognition and solutions. From there, I came to TMU (still Ryerson at the time), and for two years and a bit, I created this think tank called the Global Diversity Exchange. And I thought that would be my last gig, I really did! But then, I was called to the Senate.

**Looking back on your time in the Senate, is there a moment or initiative that you feel particularly proud of?**

It's hard for me to say, because for a legislator, the Holy Grail is changing law.

I think my Senate record shows that I brought that interest and passion [on migration matters] to the Senate. I created the Working Group on Immigration and we moved the needle in ways that were not outwardly seen, but people on the inside could.

I was also pretty instrumental in pushing forward the Citizenship Reform Bill, whose goals were to make citizenship easier to get and harder to lose. One of the more significant efforts I'm really proud of was when I was the chair of the Senate Social Affairs Committee and we launched a substantive study on low-paid temporary work in Canada.

I'm also very proud of the work I did in the charitable sector, where I was successful in changing a law related to income tax, it was important.

**From your perspective, what does academia do well when it comes to influencing policy, and where does it fall short?**

I think academics do a great job researching, absolutely top notch, but they have a harder time translating that research into policy ideas that will stick. For example, it's one thing to say "the government must ensure this." But what specifically should be done? How? Academics are less able to do that. I think TMU is somewhat different. It has reshaped my opinion of academics.

**Indeed, after your time in government, you've returned to an academic environment, here at TMU. What motivated that decision and what are some of your advocacy goals now?**

I've always been a risk taker in my life. I walk through doors when I have no idea what is coming next.

So, very shortly before I retired, I got a call from TMU asking if I would become their Public Policy Fellow. I wanted to stay engaged, and since I had worked here before, the answer was an easy yes. I will say this: every activist needs an institutional perch, and this institution has provided me with that. I am so incredibly grateful that all my sometimes 'crazy' ideas are heard, and that I'm able to act on them.

Recently, I have been more focused on what I think is important, such as niche issues like Bill C-12, practical implementation-ready proposals, or pie in the sky ideas like the Global Skills Partnerships we are working on. TMU, CERC Migration, and the newly launched Global Migration Institute have given me the range to do what I want to do.

**Looking ahead, what are the most urgent questions or challenges in migration that both scholars and policy makers need to confront together?**

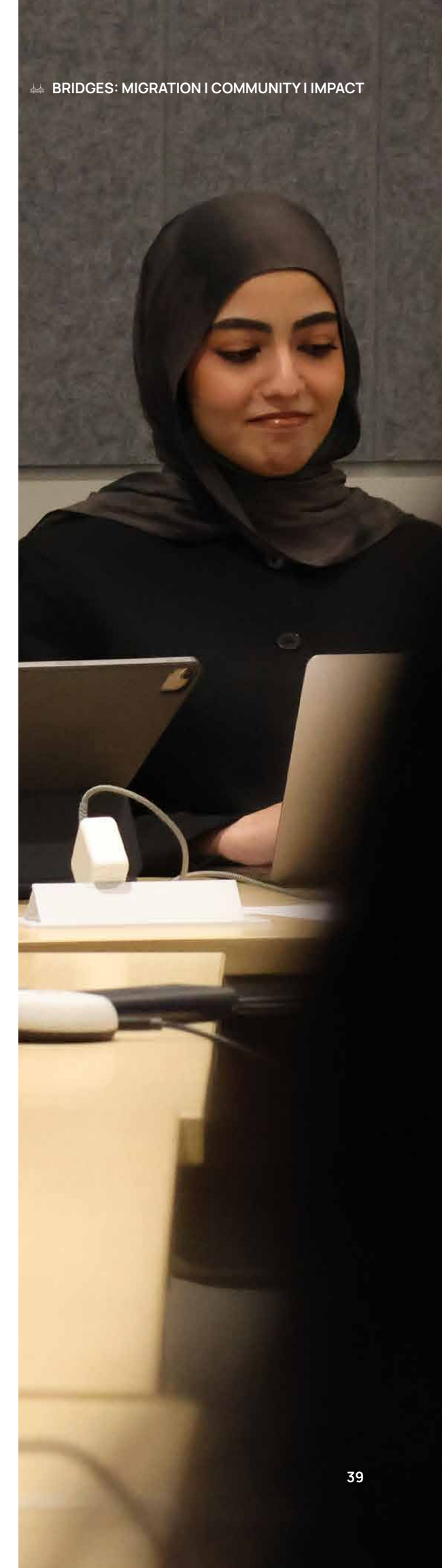
The single most urgent issue is restoring confidence and trust in the immigration system, so that the lost consensus is regained. That is the number one issue. How? I believe the best way is to show and tell Canadians that immigrants succeed, and when they succeed, everyone benefits. It has to be in their interest as well.

I also believe that whilst Canadians may be critical of the immigration system, they are not anti-immigrant. That is what is different about us compared to other countries where an anti-immigration narrative is sweeping over. Mind you, we're not immune to it, but there is ground for optimism.

**As we launch the Global Migration Institute at TMU, what are some things you hope that it will achieve?**

We have all kinds of think tanks in this country, on sustainability, the environment, trade, the economy. We do not have a think tank devoted to immigration. I actually think it would be fantastic if we had a think tank that would take all the knowledge on migration that resides here and translate it into something useful and usable, for policy and for public consumption.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*



**Bridges**  
**Migration | Community | Impact**

Issue 3, Fall 2026  
©Bridging Divides 2026  
Toronto Metropolitan University, Toronto, Ontario

**Credits**

Front cover

Artist: Alissia Bocarro

4-5 Bridging Divides and Global Migration Institute

9 (bottom left) Roxane Huang, Gaby Dumont, Patrick Asamoah Adjei, and Yusif Abubakar, courtesy of Concordia University; (bottom right) Courtesy of Concordia University

10 Original work by artist: Alissia Bocarro

12 Bridging Divides

14-15 Toronto Metropolitan University

17 Courtesy of Ying Zhu

18-19 Courtesy of Ying Zhu

22-23 Bridging Divides and Global Migration Institute

24-25 Bridging Divides and Global Migration Institute

30 Original work by artist: Sofia Donner, courtesy of Sofia Donner and Maria Cervantes-Macías

32-33 Bridging Divides

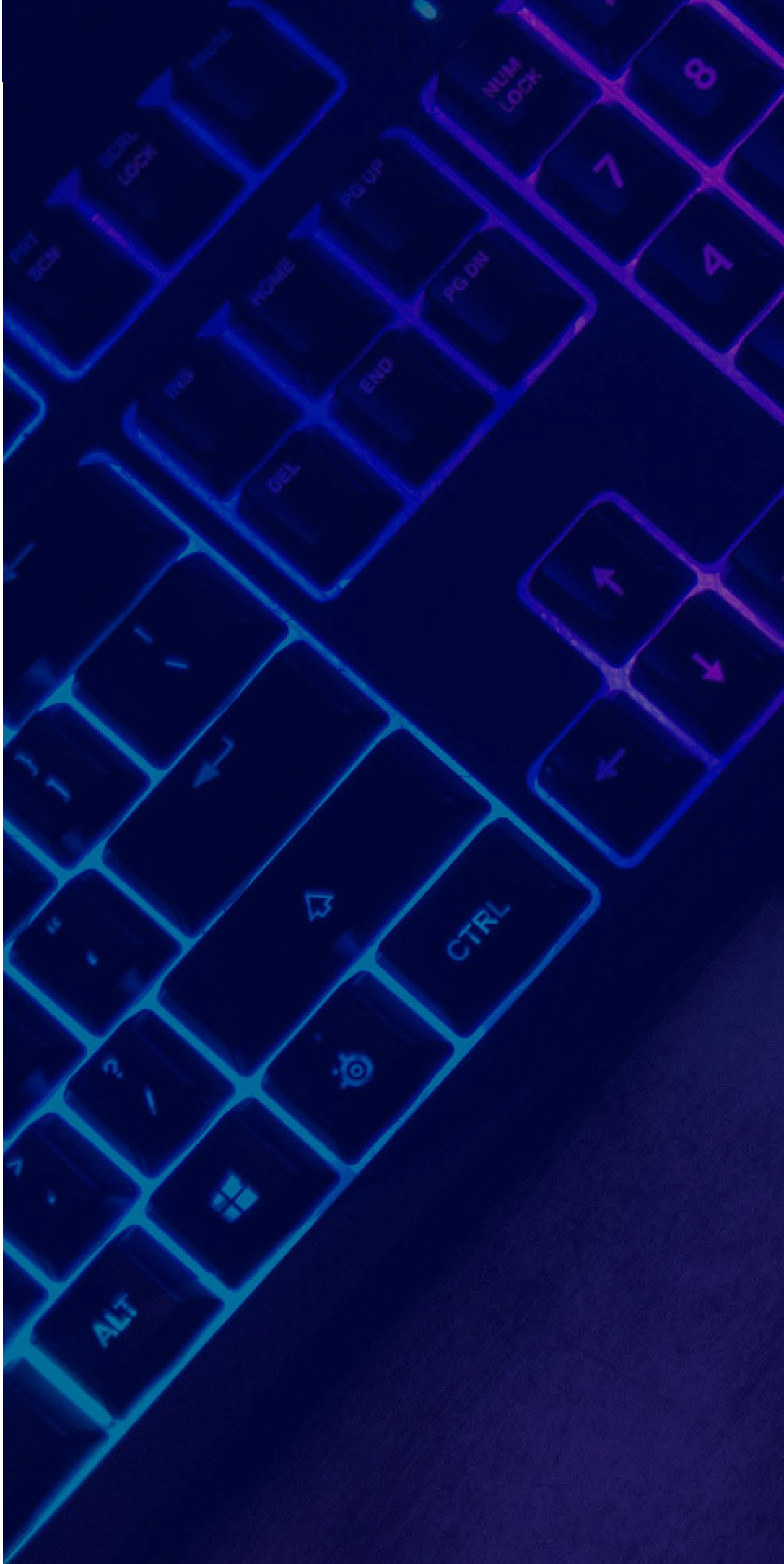
34-35 Bridging Divides

36-37 Bridging Divides and Global Migration Institute

38 CERC Migration and Bridging Divides

40 Courtesy of Concordia University





**Bridging  
Divides**



**CANADA  
FIRST**  
RESEARCH  
EXCELLENCE  
FUND

**APOGÉE  
CANADA**  
FONDS  
D'EXCELLENCE  
EN RECHERCHE

**Canada**