

SKILLS FOR THE POST-PANDEMIC WORLD ∴ MAY 2021

Immigration and the Success of Canada's Post-Pandemic Economy

KATHERINE FEENAN & SHAMIRA MADHANY



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The Future Skills Centre is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead. The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are:

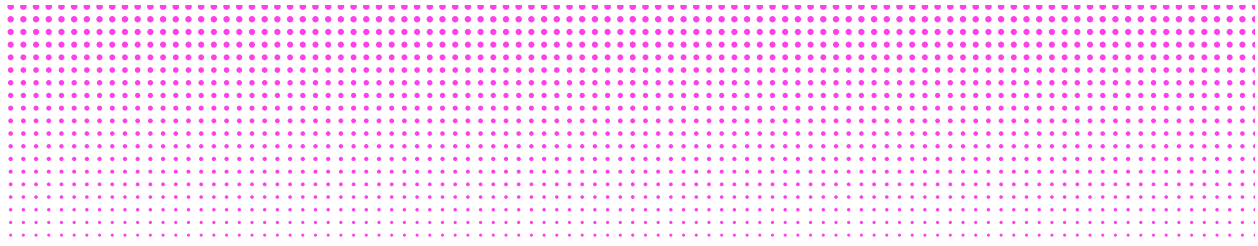


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Blueprint

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

Skills for the Post-Pandemic World tackles key questions facing policymakers, employers, training providers and workers. It is urgent that society turns to face the fundamental changes in the labour market precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and many players must rise to meet the new conditions of a post-pandemic world.

Society will slowly reopen and business will resume, but there will be no “return” to normal: the pandemic has dragged the future of work into the present. Digitization, work from home, plus other steepened trajectories and intensified shifts well documented in the future-of-work discourse are here now, and likely to stay.

Building on the collaborative success of the **Skills Next** series, the Public Policy Forum (PPF) and the Diversity Institute (DI), funded by the Future Skills Centre (FSC), and with new support from Microsoft, join once more to face these rapid societal shifts head-on, with research looking at the future of skills, training and retraining in ways that will chart a path forward as the pandemic continues to unfold.

The goal of this series is to build a robust policy ecosystem that supports the mobility needed for workers and employers to navigate the new reality. To do this, we examine eight key topics:

1. **Job polarization in Canada: Skills for the post-pandemic world**
2. **Digital infrastructure for the post-pandemic world**
3. **New working arrangements**
4. **Building inclusive workplaces**
5. **Immigration and the success of Canada's post-pandemic economy**
6. **Innovation in post-secondary education**
7. **The mother of invention: Skills for innovation in the post-pandemic world**
8. **Supporting entrepreneurship and SMEs**

For more information about the project, please contact: **Andrée Loucks**, Policy Lead (PPF) and **Michael Crawford Urban**, acting Director, Research, Special Projects (FSC).

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Canada 

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AUTHORS

KATHERINE FEENAN

Katherine Feenan joined the Public Policy Forum as a Policy Lead in May 2018 after a dozen years of experience in Canada and overseas. Katherine has held a variety of positions in the public and private sectors; these include roles in the Office of the Prime Minister of Canada, with the member of Parliament for Vancouver Centre and with polling firm Angus Reid Public Opinion. Her passion for politics and interest in international affairs led her overseas. With the National Democratic Institute, Katherine served as an election analyst, observer and trainer in Georgia and Algeria. She has also observed elections in Ukraine with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Katherine holds a master's in comparative ethnic conflict from Queen's University Belfast.

SHAMIRA MADHANY

Shamira Madhany is Managing Director, Canada, and Deputy Executive Director at World Education Services (WES). Shamira joined WES in 2018 after more than two decades of public service. She has extensive experience working with licensing bodies, settlement agencies and higher education and post-secondary sectors in Ontario. She served as the chief architect of several government programs that enable highly skilled immigrants to obtain employment in their fields. Shamira played a key role in the launch of WES in Canada in 2000 during her tenure at the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration as provincial lead, access to professions and trades.

Thank you to contributions from Joan Atlin, Director, Strategy, Policy and Research at World Education Services, and Helen Seifu Wolde, Senior Policy Adviser at World Education Services.

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FOREWORD

SKILLS FOR THE POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

COVID-19 made a devastating debut on the world scene and launched a new era of how we live and work in our global society. The pandemic ushered in dramatic changes and deepened inequalities: health and economic crises, border closures, lockdowns, mass job losses and the curtailment of educational activities. Nevertheless, it also accelerated innovation and particularly the adoption of new technologies, compressed adoption cycles from years to weeks and transformed entire sectors – government, health care, education, retail, financial services and more.

As we see the prospect of a post-pandemic chapter ahead – thanks in part to the incredible pace of vaccine development and production – we are also challenged to imagine a different way of working, learning and living.

At the Future Skills Centre, we focus intently on ensuring that Canadians have the opportunities and resources to thrive in the future of work. It is critical to ensure that everyone, especially under-represented groups who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, can access opportunities to succeed and share in Canada's prosperity. We are also committed to ensuring employers have access to the talent they need to innovate and grow. As we plan for a future after the pandemic – one in which digital skills and connections have become even more essential – we can't stress enough the urgency of developing skills strategies, policies, and programs that enable us to rebuild better and more inclusively.



This paper, part of the **Skills for the Post-Pandemic World** series of research reports, explores how the limits placed on the international movement of people by the pandemic could impact Canada's labour force. Given Canada's aging population and declining domestic birth rate, our country relies on the migration of internationally-educated immigrants and students as an important ingredient for workforce growth. Ensuring that those who choose to migrate, work or study in Canada are provided opportunities to integrate and engage in the workforce will be essential to the country's economic success in the future. Offering a clearer pathway to workforce integration in Canada will be important in guaranteeing that highly-skilled individuals considering immigration are convinced to seek out opportunities in this country. Addressing these challenges will require a comprehensive strategy and a range of policy approaches. Please join us in considering what these findings mean for skills training and opportunities in Canada.

We thank our partners at the Diversity Institute and the Public Policy Forum for convening this research and these discussions. This is a crucial conversation as we turn our collective energy towards rebuilding our economies and educational systems to be better and more inclusive so that we can all share in a more prosperous future. We also thank the Government of Canada for its support of a national future skills strategy that builds on evidence generation and practical delivery of skills training and assessment programs.



PEDRO BARATA

Executive Director, Future Skills Centre



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many highly skilled immigrants in Canada are working well below their potential. The country does a good job of attracting immigrants, but after welcoming them, many immigrants face barriers to finding job opportunities commensurate with their skills, experience and education. One sees it all the time — perhaps it's the economist who's driving for Uber or the nurse who's working the checkout at Loblaws. And regardless of where they have ended up trying to make a living, the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened their lot even more.

But international credential recognition and the unequal socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on the immigrant population are just two of the issues involved in what is a growing problem for Canada's economy. The coronavirus forced the government to temporarily halt immigration, a major disruption for a country that usually welcomes hundreds of thousands of newcomers yearly. This will need to be remedied as a part of Canada's post-pandemic economic rebuilding efforts. After all, Canada has a low birth rate, and more than eight million baby boomers will be exiting the country's workforce in the coming years. Immigrants represent a critical source of population growth and remain one of the key solutions to Canada's skilled labour shortage.

Just as the country must consider the lot of existing immigrants when rebuilding, it must also re-examine its relationship with international students — many of whom have stayed home this year — and its temporary foreign workers (TFWs), who have limited rights and poor working conditions and some of whom were involved in COVID-19 outbreaks while working here in 2020.

The policy areas this report examines include international credential recognition, skills training for immigrants — especially those who've suffered job loss in the pandemic — and the possibility of anti-immigrant sentiment stemming from disenfranchised Canadians who fear that newcomers may threaten their already-precarious jobs.

In studying the problems immigrants face, World Education Services discovered that those with more experience and education tended to have lower rates of employment in Canada. Those surveyed complained about a lack of professional connections as one barrier. In addition to a dearth of connections, we already know that those with “foreign-sounding names” are less likely to advance in the hiring process. Similarly, a University of Waterloo study showed that the employment rate of university-educated Canadian-born women dropped by five percent between May 2019 and May 2020, but that of immigrant women dropped by 13 percent. One has to wonder if the latter were employed in sectors, such as hospitality, that were disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

Some things government should consider as they plan how to rebuild:

- Investing in childcare, career assistance, training, reskilling and mental-health services for immigrant women;
- Implementing a possible permanent resident stream for the lower-income end of the economy, which now relies on temporary workers;
- Reviewing the complicated process of verifying credentials and licensing, for all sectors and particularly the health-care sector, which is experiencing labour shortages;
- Determining ways to quickly identify pandemic-displaced workers and helping them find new roles;
- Finding innovative approaches to overcoming language barriers, such as blending language training and work-integrated learning;
- Adopting employer-centric approaches to bridge the gap between attracting immigrants and ensuring they find a skill-matched role in Canada;
- Better recognizing entrepreneurship as a viable route to integration for immigrants and better responding to the unique challenges and needs that those who choose this path face; and,
- Engaging all levels of government, business, post-secondary institutions, employers, regulators and civil society to chart an inclusive pathway forward.



Calls to action include:

- **Developing a national strategy to enhance immigrant labour-market inclusion;**
- **Establishing policies and programs to mitigate negative impacts of the pandemic on immigrant and migrant groups; and**
- **Developing innovative tools for an immigrant-inclusive post-pandemic economic rebuild for Canada.**



INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on global health and economic well-being. The sudden economic decline that began in early 2020, brought about by government-imposed restrictions to help quell the spread of the virus, has left global markets far worse off compared to the most recent and more gradual Great Recession of the late 2000s. While vaccine rollout has encouraged hope, the end of the crisis, its final economic outcome and its overall impact remain unknown.

Stay-at-home orders, physical distancing restrictions and border closures have impacted the global economy and severely limited the movement of people. Given the country's aging population and declining domestic birthrate, Canada relies on the migration of internationally educated immigrants and students as an important part of maintaining workforce growth. In May 2020, a **Royal Bank of Canada report** indicated that the inevitable reduction in 2020 immigration levels could have a sustained negative impact on Canada's economy.ⁱ

Immigration Minister Marco Mendicino responded to this decline by announcing an increase in the targeted number of permanent residents — to more than 400,000 per year — that Canada would aim to welcome over next three years. As outlined in the September 2020 **Speech from the Throne**, it is the government's intention to ensure immigration is part of a recovery plan with the goal of becoming “the world's top destination for talent, capital and jobs.”

As Canada prepares a post-pandemic build-back strategy, the data shows a continued and increasing reliance on welcoming internationally trained immigrants (economic immigrants),

ⁱ A more **recent RBC report**, released in April 2021, shows Canadian immigration may be rebounding at this stage in the pandemic.

temporary foreign workers (TFWs) and international students as an important aspect of the country's plan for maintaining workforce growth and long-term economic strength.¹ Ensuring those who chose to migrate, work and/or study in Canada are provided opportunities to integrate and engage in the workforce will be essential to the country's economic success. Offering a clear pathway to workforce engagement in Canada will be important to guaranteeing highly skilled individuals considering immigration are convinced to seek out the opportunities this country can and does provide. Additionally, data- and knowledge-gathering will be essential to better understand the systematic policy changes required to formulate the effective immigration and integration strategy required to bring stability and prosperity to Canada's post-pandemic future.

As Churchill famously said (perhaps becoming a too-often-heard cliché of the pandemic), “never let a good crisis go to waste.” In meeting the challenge of COVID-19, Canada has an opportunity to better prepare for the needs of the workforce of the future, while strengthening the economy. This response needs to be collaborative — between all levels of government, educational institutions, employers, regulators, and civil society — and multifaceted. Before discussing some of the opportunities and challenges the country will face in efforts to welcome an increased number of skilled immigrants over the next few years and into the future, this report analyzes the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic on different populations, which have accentuated barriers — potential and actual — to full economic and societal inclusion. Specifically, this analysis focuses on three types of skilled workers — internationally trained immigrants, international students and TFWs.

While Canada is seen as **a welcoming destination** with an inclusive immigration process — identified internationally as a model — the pandemic has had an **unequal socio-economic impact** on the lives of many newcomers to Canada. This report examines the current barriers to successful integration, both long-standing and those that have emerged in the past year, which include:

- The long-standing challenge of labour-force attachment (utilization and income equity) for skilled immigrants;
- The unequal socio-economic burden recent immigrants and women, in particular, have faced since the pandemic's first wave;
- The disproportionately high number of immigrants working on the front lines in health-care and service industries;
- The working conditions and limited rights of TFWs in Canada; and,
- The possibility of a rise in anti-immigration sentiment among Canadians in response to seeing their livelihoods negatively impacted by the pandemic.

While the total impact of the pandemic cannot yet be known, a collaborative response is urgently needed by all levels of government to ensure that those hardest hit are not forgotten in the effort to “build back better”.

This report will analyze four policy areas required to not only preserve Canada's reputation internationally as an immigration destination of choice, but also to prevent a decline in population growth, ensure Canada remains competitive by leveraging the skills of immigrants and provide a continued path towards the creation of a fair and equitable country and society. These four areas of analysis include:



1
Improving the mechanisms required to assess international credentials, skills and competencies rapidly and effectively;



2
Offering access to skills training for immigrants of all skill levels, particularly for those working in sectors where the pandemic has led to large-scale layoffs;



3
Gathering and analyzing data to determine policy options, influence government decision-making processes and design creative methods to assess prior skills, such as bridging programs; and



4
Paying attention and responding rapidly to any rise in anti-immigrant sentiment.

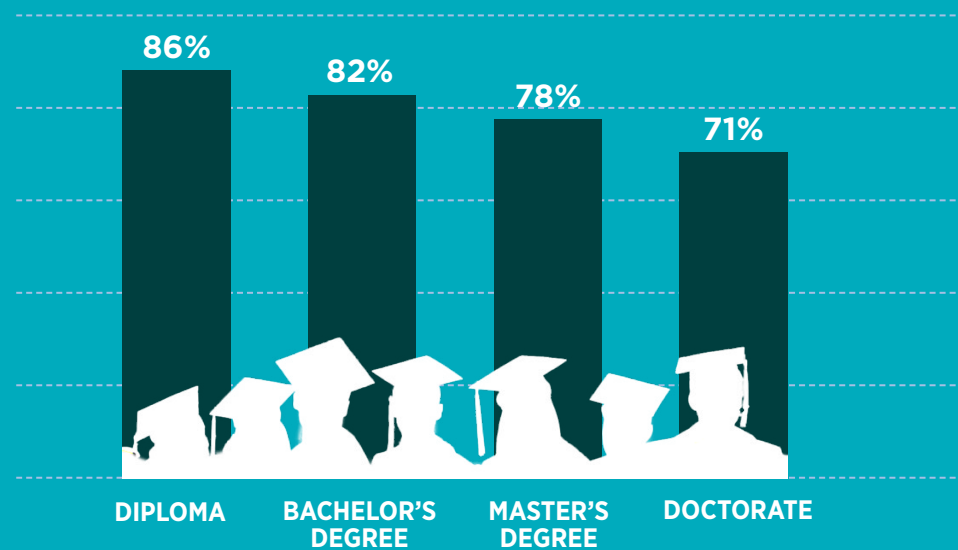
As Business Council of Canada President and CEO, Goldy Hyder noted recently, “Newcomers bring energy, skills, new ideas and entrepreneurial spirit. They start companies, fill skill shortages, buy houses and pay taxes.”² Ensuring those who chose to work and/or study in Canada are provided with opportunities to integrate, engage in the workforce and become Canadian citizens will be essential to this country's economic success. Offering a clear pathway to workforce engagement in Canada will be important to ensuring highly skilled individuals considering immigration are convinced to seek out the opportunities this country can and does provide. Simultaneously, continuing to refine and better target our skills training initiatives will help to ensure lower-skilled immigrants also have access to pathways to employment success.³



A CHALLENGING TRANSITION TO EMPLOYMENT IN CANADA

Despite government policies focused on attracting skilled immigrants, upon arrival in Canada the “disconnect between immigrant skills and employer recognition of those skills,”^{4, 5} often leaves newcomers unable to find employment related to their qualifications and experience. Many highly skilled immigrants are thus left seeking opportunities in sectors unrelated to their employment history or accepting positions for which they are overqualified, thus leading to **deskilling**, downward career mobility and wasted talent. World Education Services (WES) released a report in 2019 titled **Who is Succeeding in the Canadian Labour Market? Predictors for Career Success for Skilled Immigrants**. The report analyses survey data from 6,402 immigrant respondents (56% of whom were residents of Ontario) and concludes that “Canada is recruiting skilled immigrants, yet losing out when the labour market does not leverage what they bring.”⁶

WES’ data analysis found immigrants with higher international educational attainment, as well as those with more international employment experience, tended to have lower rates of employment in Canada than those with lower levels of international educational attainment. For those with one to five years of experience, 83 percent were employed, compared to 72 percent of those with 15 or more years of international work experience. Figure 1 shows a decline in employment that correlates directly with the level of education achieved.

Figure 1: Employment Based on Level of Education

Source: World Education Services. (2019). Who is succeeding in the Canadian labour market? Figure 3 Employment Rates.

Almost half (48.5%) of respondents identified a lack of professional connections as their greatest challenge when seeking employment, while 31 percent felt their greatest barrier was employers not accepting qualifications and experience and a quarter said their international education was not recognized in Canada.

Additionally, according to a **2017 study by researchers at the University of Toronto**, skilled workers with “Asian-sounding names” were also 20 to 40 percent less likely to proceed through a job hiring process, dependent on organization size.

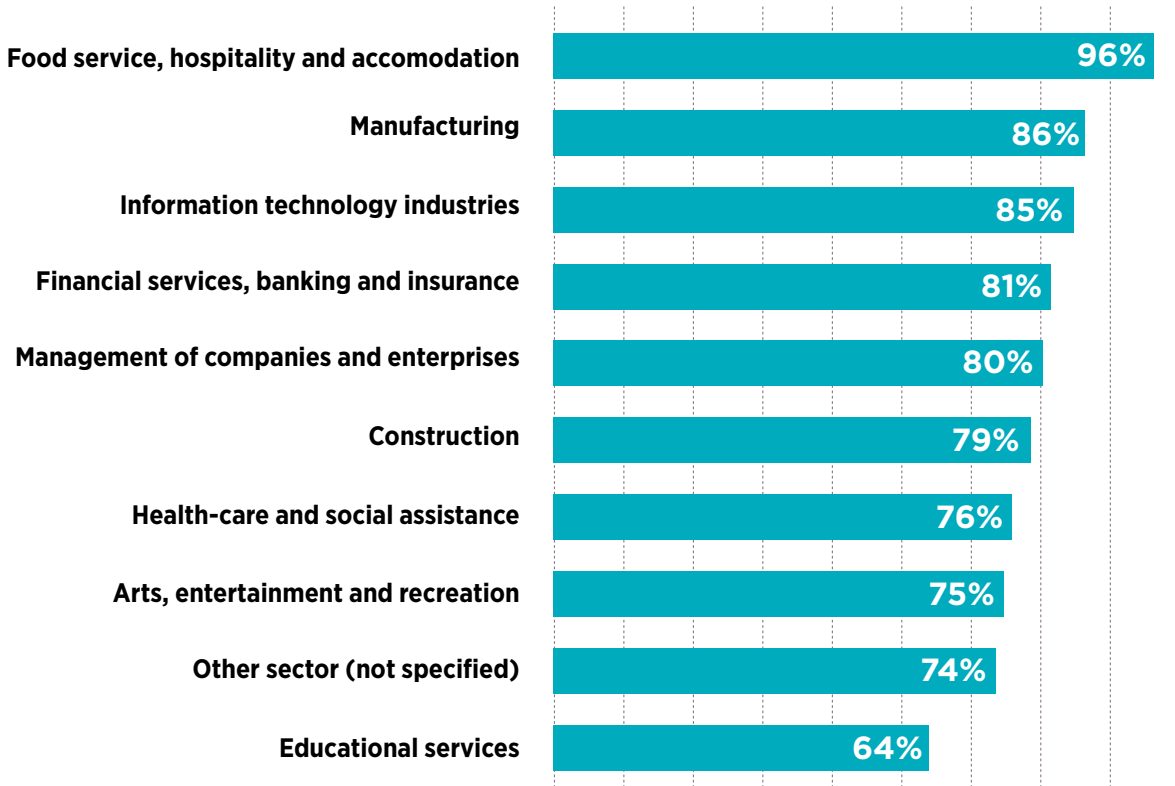
The WES study also highlighted how the sector of employment prior to immigrating was a determining factor of employability in Canada. Certain professional backgrounds transitioned more easily into the Canadian workforce.

For example, nearly all of those with previous international experience in food service, hospitality and accommodation (some of the businesses most affected by the pandemic) were able to find employment in Canada, while only three quarters of respondents who had previous experience in the health-care and social assistance sectors were able to find work in their fields (see Figure 2).

A somewhat troubling finding, given our current public health-care crisis and need for qualified health-care professionals with permanent employment and status in Canada.

The obstacles immigrants face to gaining employment commensurate with experience will require keen attention by government, particularly considering the increased number of permanent residency (PR) visa-holders Canada is looking to welcome over the next three years. The final section of this report will look at prospective policy steps and processes government should consider to ensure better economic integration of qualified immigrants.

Figure 2: Employment rates by pre-migration work sector



Source: World Education Services. (2019). Who is succeeding in the Canadian labour market? Figure 4: Employment rates by pre-migration work sector

THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON IMMIGRATION

The Government of Canada's Fall Economic Statement 2020 describes immigration as the most important source of Canada's population and labour-force growth; however, an obvious result of the pandemic has been the severe disruption in international immigration patterns, leaving many prospective immigrants (and employers) in a challenging position and policymakers left trying to figure out the best way forward during these uncertain times.

In 2019, Canada approved 341,180 PR applications and handed out 404,369 temporary work permits.⁷ Similar target numbers were set by the government for 2020, but actual PR arrivals to Canada will likely be close to 40 percent fewer than expected.⁸ While many PR visa holders were unable to travel due to restrictions and border closures, the granting of new temporary immigration permits (such as work and study permits) also plummeted while the government temporarily stopped processing applications over a three-month period. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) did, however, continue to encourage applications through the economic immigration Express Entry streams, but in the first months of the pandemic, they were issued exclusively to temporary workers and international students already in Canada. This represents a continuation of the trend towards "two-step" immigration — a process whereby immigrants enter Canada first with temporary status, which can then become permanent.



Canada's population only increased by 0.4 percent in 2020⁹, compared to growth of 1.5 percent in 2019 – with international migration pointed to as a key reason for the decrease – thereby impacting overall labour supply and economic growth.

Fewer international students arriving in Canada will alone account for a large economic hit:

in 2019, 642,000 foreign students injected more than \$22 billion into the economy, in turn supporting 170,000 jobs.¹⁰

The reduction in foreign worker and student arrivals to Canada in 2020 presents a number of issues for workers and their families, but also for Canada's economic prosperity.

THE UNEQUAL IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON IMMIGRANTS

“Migrants — regardless of their immigration status — are overrepresented in essential roles and industries that have been hardest hit. As a result, they have been disproportionately affected by job loss and by the virus itself.”¹¹ Understanding how and why the crisis has impacted some types of workers and communities above others is important to determining the policies required to move Canada forward in the near and medium term. An inclusive analysis of the immigrant groups most affected by COVID-19 will be important to the government’s development of policy solutions for post-pandemic economic development. However, any projection of post-pandemic economic conditions depends in large measure on how long the pandemic lasts. The length of the current crisis will also help us better understand how to maximize the immigrant contribution to economic recovery.

The best way of understanding how the economic and labour situation will evolve in the months and years ahead requires an understanding of the challenges and obstacles to accessing employment that immigrants — and international students who choose to become permanent residents — face, as well as the individuals and sectors most impacted economically by the pandemic. In some cases, current economic hardships are more a result of the changing nature of work, changes that have been accentuated and accelerated by the current crisis.

RECENT IMMIGRANTS FACE HIGHER UNEMPLOYMENT

The pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on certain sectors, businesses, and workers.¹² Service sector industries, such as food service, hospitality and accommodation have been widely affected by shutdowns and physical-distancing measures. But even before 2020, automation and technology had already placed some of these jobs under threat.¹³ For example, with the full embrace of self-ordering checkouts, food service companies like McDonald’s have replaced the work of cashiers, and the pandemic has seen a rise in some hotels employing check-in kiosks and delivery bots.¹⁴ The digitization of roles requiring a lower level of skill is here to stay as “the affordability and availability of platform technologies in the sector are growing.”¹⁵ The public health crisis is only likely to quicken business owner’s acceptance of using technological options to remove face-to-face interactions. Canadians have all been blindsided, to one degree or another, by the pandemic’s sudden occurrence and continuity, while also being relatively unprepared for changes to the world of work.

According to an August 2020 Statistics Canada report, recent immigrants, who are over-represented in low-wage roles and roles with shorter job-tenure, were more likely than Canadian-born workers to have lost employment in the early stages of the pandemic.

From February to April 2020, the rate of transition into non-employment for recent immigrants jumped from 2.7 percent to 17.3 percent, respectively.¹⁶ While at the time of this writing, most Canadians are still dealing with the third wave of the pandemic, it is likely, with stay-at-home orders and curfews in place (not to mention the spread of mutated variants of the virus), that recent immigrants will continue to face losses of employment. Many of those who reported a jobs loss or reduction in hours were ineligible or unable to collect CERB or EI.¹⁷ According to a **recent WES study**, 52 percent of the aggregated respondentsⁱⁱ indicated they had not received any government benefit, with many others signaling they were unaware of the option or thought themselves ineligible.

Additionally, newcomers to Canada were more likely to indicate that the pandemic has negatively affected their ability to meet financial obligations than non-immigrants (55 percent versus 26 percent).¹⁸ International students have also been dealt a particularly tough financial blow over the past few months, as “more than a quarter (26%) reported the temporary loss of their primary income. More than a third (35%) indicated difficulty paying rent or utilities, and 18 percent had difficulty affording other essentials.”¹⁹ Among small business owners across business sectors, immigrants have experienced a significant decrease in business self-ownership (-16.1%) and a significant decrease in aggregate hours (-44.3%).²⁰ When compared to Canadian-born self-employed workers, immigrants, especially those who have been in Canada fewer than 10 years, have dealt with pandemic-related business ownership loss or unemployment to a greater degree.²¹

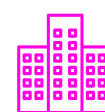
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS EXPERIENCE...

26%



loss of primary income

35%



difficulty paying rent/ utilities

18%



difficulty affording other essentials

ii Respondents were **WES Applicants**, most identifying as PR visa holders, TFWs and study permit holders, all of whom were eligible to receive CERB if they met income and employment criteria. Many of the most recent immigrants and international students would not have met the requirement of having earned \$5,000 in the 12 months previous.

Unemployment is expected to remain high for years to come, with losses concentrated among low-income workers, as well as those in part-time and precarious roles.²² Human capital, as the Business Council of Canada's **Powering a Strong Recovery** report indicates, is Canada's "most important asset". Supporting Canada's population, the "foundation of economic success,"²³ will require policymakers to rapidly determine an evidence-based pathway forward to reverse the negative impact of the virus. Determining which segments of society have been most negatively impacted by the pandemic will require the analysis of disaggregated data to fully gain insight across a wide range of population variables, such as ethnicity, race, geographic location, educational attainment and occupation.²⁴ This response should be driven by a collaborative effort between government, educational institutions and employers to outline a post-pandemic return-to-work plan.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC

Many recent immigrants face a range of social challenges that can impact their ability to work, as well as their potential for contracting COVID-19.²⁵

It is important to highlight that recent immigrants, racialized individuals in particular, are more likely to live in low-income areas characterized by crowding and multigenerational households, both of which have led to a disproportionately high rate of COVID-19 infection.²⁶ Living in tight quarters can be especially challenging in situations where physical distancing is required, particularly when individuals are placed under quarantine and must isolate themselves. Moreover, crowded living conditions also mean that individuals do not have the needed privacy when accessing mental-health or social supports.²⁷ This can have adverse mental-health consequences for immigrants and especially newcomers. **Toronto Public Health researchers** have indicated that the highest rates of COVID-19 in the city can be found in lower income communities, where a large proportion of recent immigrants reside.

Low-income areas, even in major cities such as Toronto, often have less access to quality infrastructure, such as broadband internet access, which can gravely impact the ability to telework.^{28, 29} Limited access to quality internet services (not to mention tools), as well as limited knowledge of English, means recent immigrants are also less likely to be able to provide the supports needed by their children to adapt to home schooling.ⁱⁱⁱ

iii This has led to the launch of programs such as Diversity Institute's **Study Buddy**, designed to support parents struggling to balance the responsibilities of work with their children's rapid transition to online-learning by pairing parents and students with tutors providing free tutoring powered by an online, interactive tutoring platform.

The difficult balance many parents are required to strike has led to a negative financial burden for more than half of Canadians, according to research by the [Vanier Institute of the Family](#) that also finds recent immigrants are struggling to pay bills and their rent or mortgage.

IMMIGRANT WOMEN AFFECTED MOST BY COVID-19

While all Canadians are managing their own COVID-19-related issues, placing an intersectional lens on the current situation highlights how many recent immigrants, particularly racialized individuals,³⁰ are dealing with a longer-list of impediments.³¹ Already marginalized, immigrant women have experienced the greatest impact of the social-economic losses and struggles to date.

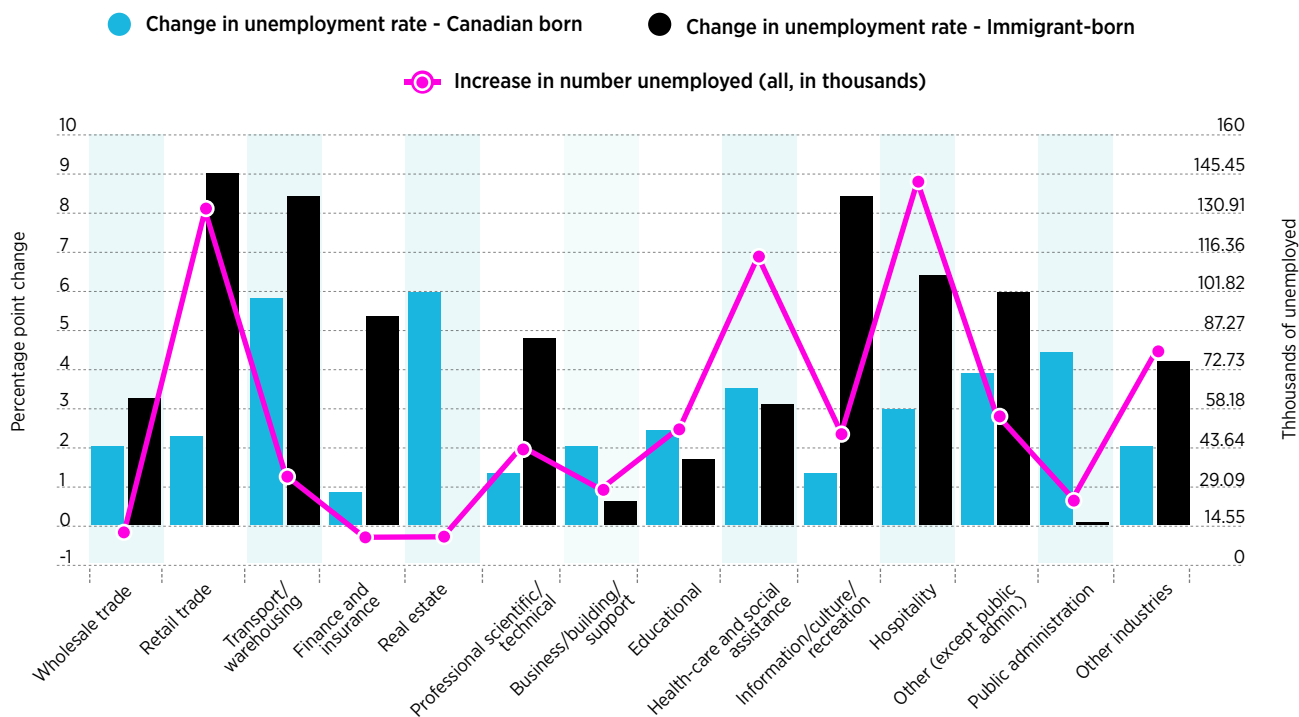
The general long-term impact of COVID-19 on women has been increasingly troubling, but for immigrant women, the effect has further intensified pre-existing socio-economic challenges. Prior to the pandemic, “racialized minorities and immigrants experience[d] greater unemployment and underemployment collectively and...immigrant women experience[d] poorer outcomes than immigrant men.”³²

While statistics have pointed to a higher overall loss of employment for recent immigrants, **an analysis** of Statistics Canada Labour Force survey data by two scholars at the University of Waterloo, Ana Ferrer and Bessma Momani, shows that women who arrived in Canada more than 10 years ago saw a 12-percentage-point drop in employment between May 2019 and May 2020.^{iv} The study also found that while the employment rate of university-educated Canadian-born women only dropped by five percent between May 2019 and May 2020, the unemployment rate of immigrant women with a university education fell by nearly 13 percent over this period. Similarly, across many sectors, employment rates for immigrant women saw a noticeably higher year-over-year decline, when compared to Canadian-born women. There is also a considerable unemployment gap between immigrant and Canadian-born women in sectors such as retail, finance and insurance, hospitality and roles in information/culture/recreation. The reasons for this decrease are not yet understood; however, it is possible that university-educated immigrant women are, to a greater degree than Canadian-born university educated women, leaving their jobs in order to manage the greater number of tasks required of parents and caregivers or they are underemployed in a sector made vulnerable by the pandemic.^{v, 33}

iv Momani and Ferrer are part of a team looking in depth at [Women, Work and the Economy](#) over a 5-year research project.

v Naomi Lightman is currently undertaking a research project on this subject titled, [Caring During the COVID-19 Crisis: Immigrant Women Working in Long-Term Care in Calgary](#).

Figure 3: Women’s unemployment change in service industries (May 2019 to May 2020)



Source: Ferrer, A., and Momani, B. (2020). The startling impact of COVID-19 on immigrant women in the workforce. Policy Options. Author’s calculations using Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey data. Figure retrieved from <https://infogram.com/momani-figure-1-1hkv2nko17rr2x3>.

Another 2020 **study of 50 post-secondary-educated immigrant women** found those who had been in Canada for some time were experiencing a negative impact on their career trajectory, while the opportunity to seek out employment has been delayed for newer arrivals. Balancing teleworking and familial responsibilities have made the process of finding and keeping employment much more challenging. The negative influence of the pandemic and unequal impact on immigrant women is being **reported internationally** and in other developed nations reliant on immigration for workforce growth.³⁴

Many immigrant women who have been able to keep their jobs have done so because they have been deemed essential workers. One field, above all others, that is heavily dominated by immigrant women is health-care. According to the 2016 Census, more than one third of individuals employed as nurse aides, orderlies and patient service associates were immigrants, and of those, 86 percent are women.³⁵ However, women, whether immigrant or Canadian-born, make up very few of the health-care leadership and management roles (despite the high proportion of women chief medical officers in Canada).³⁶

The impact of COVID-19 on health-care workers ranges from **a heightened potential of contracting the virus**, to psychological distress³⁷ and **discrimination**. Overall, immigrants comprise 25.5 percent of the health care and social assistance sector in Canada.³⁸ Yet almost half (47%) of

immigrants with post-secondary health education from abroad are “underutilized”, meaning they are unemployed or work in non-health occupations, requiring no more than a high school diploma.³⁹ Rates of underutilization are higher among women and among visible minorities. Among internationally trained immigrants, underutilization rates are highest for those with a nursing background, at 34 percent.

A Statistics Canada study, released in June 2020, looking at nurses’ aides, orderlies and patient services associates, found that 41 percent of workers in those roles in Ontario — and 79 percent in Toronto — are immigrants.

Across Canada, 25 percent of recent immigrants in these jobs hold at least a bachelor’s degree, and of those, nearly 70 percent hold a nursing degree.

Whether out of work or on the front lines, immigrant women will require investment and support from various levels of government, both in the near term and in the post-pandemic future. Access to quality childcare, help with home schooling, career assistance, training and re-skilling options and mental-health services are a few of the areas where government should be planning to deliver relief. In so doing, it will be critical to utilize an inclusive approach and focus on those most in need.

WORK ON THE FRONT LINES

While automation, lockdowns, physical distancing and a wide range of socio-economic factors are negatively influencing the ability of many recent immigrants to work, a great number are also part of the essential workforce. As mentioned previously, recent immigrants, particularly those who are racialized, are over-represented “in low-paying sectors such as accommodation and food services, where they make up 35 percent of the labour force, and where the average pay is \$383 per week compared to \$976 per week across all industries.”⁴⁰ While redundancies in these sectors have been high, those who have retained their jobs have continued to work through the pandemic in public-facing roles, for example, in retail locations deemed essential, such as grocery stores and drugstores, or in precarious and **low-paying gig-work jobs**. Immigrants to Canada, especially women and racialized individuals, also tend to work in occupations with a higher risk of COVID-19 exposure.⁴¹

While low-income, public facing jobs place individuals at a somewhat greater risk of contracting COVID-19, it is the disproportionately higher number of immigrants employed across the health and long-term care (LTC) sectors that provides another reason for an overabundance of COVID-19 infections among Canada’s internationally educated immigrant population. It should not come as a shock that in some provinces 50 percent of LTC home employees are migrant workers.⁴²

The numbers are telling, as immigrants represented 43.5 percent of all positive COVID-19 cases between January and June and accounted for 45 percent of the health-care workers who tested positive for COVID-19 in Ontario.⁴³

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the ongoing weaknesses in our care system, as the majority of Canada's COVID-19 deaths to date have occurred in LTC homes. While the required fix for the LTC sector is complex and outside of the scope of this report, one recommendation, as it relates to LTC workers, is that understanding the true impact on these frontline workers will require the capturing of **high-quality health-care data**, including race-based data. Collecting inclusive data would help inform policymakers by highlighting jobs, sectors and communities most unequally impacted by COVID-19 infections and spread. This would help drive a post-pandemic response that targets funding and programming to the most affected.

The government's response will also require an evaluation of health-care worker mental-health supports, as COVID-19 has not only infected individuals, but the stress of the situation has pushed workers to burnout and **even suicide**. The long-term impacts of high levels of stress and trauma these workers are feeling will require targeted attention once the pandemic subsides. Post-COVID concern over health-care and LTC staffing numbers is also likely to continue, emphasizing the continued need for focused recruitment of more internationally trained LTC workers and skills training opportunities for individuals interested in joining the sector.

ESSENTIAL MIGRANT WORKERS

Many of those filling the demand for frontline care support in Canada's hospitals, care homes and private homes are only in Canada for a specified period as Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs). Moreover, a disproportionate number of these essential workers are racialized women who are undervalued and underpaid for the challenging roles they fill. Much of the work undertaken within the long-term care sector by TFWs is low-wage and viewed as low-skill. The reality, however, is that many of these jobs require a lot of skill, and the individuals doing them require significant training. As indicated above, the skills of internationally educated immigrants in the health sector are underutilized and some are overqualified for the jobs they take on. While the current public health crisis has brought to light the long list of hardships faced by essential personal support workers (PSWs) whose issues have long been ignored, the precarity in employment and immigration status are issues that, thanks to Canada's aging population and overall PSW needs, clearly require immediate and focused attention from policymakers.

Outside of care sectors, Canada is one of the **world's largest agri-food producers** with a supply chain that remains highly reliant on migrant labour. The efficient harvesting and processing of vast quantities of mostly seasonal produce depends on an essential workforce of predominantly TFWs. Sixty percent of Canada's TFWs are employed in "agricultural, food and fish processing."⁴⁴ Meanwhile, "the number of Canadian citizens and permanent residents employed in the industry has remained relatively stagnant and even declined."⁴⁵ In 2019, Canada accepted 46,000 TFWs under the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program, of which 13,000 were from the Caribbean and the remainder from Mexico.⁴⁶ The number of TFWs entering Canada between 2015 and 2019 grew substantially, but with travel restrictions impacting migration to Canada, **2020 saw a labour shortage.**



Some provinces and farmers tried to fill the farm-labour void by appealing to Canadians looking for work, but these efforts met with little success and only further underlined the country's reliance on migrant workers.

Of the frontline workers currently in Canada, TFWs have been especially hard hit by the pandemic, largely due to long-standing and unfair living and working conditions^{47, 48, 49} that have contributed to a high rate of positive cases among this population.⁵⁰ One example is the April 2020 **COVID-19 outbreak at a Cargill meat-processing plant** that infected hundreds of the predominantly Filipino workforce (many of whom were TFWs, while others were permanent residents). "Public-health officials named carpooling and crowded living arrangements as contributing factors to the rapid spread of the virus, but overlooked labour practices and socio-economic conditions that lead to shared living and transportation arrangements in the first place."⁵¹

Studies have highlighted workers' fears in asserting their rights due to the precarity of their immigration status, lack of health-care access or knowledge of how to access health information. Poor sanitation, fear of the loss of income, the inability to physically distance due to crowded living conditions, not being paid while in quarantine and increased intimidation tactics by employers add to their challenges.⁵² Additionally, non-essential industries with a high number of TFWs have had to suspend operations leaving workers in a difficult situation — left without income, benefits and options.⁵³ An investigative report by **CBC's The Fifth Estate** looking at migrant farm workers in Ontario highlighted the unequal treatment and loss of income faced by TFWs, as they waited in Canada to receive government approval to return home.

To date, **government announcements relating to immigration have focused on PR visa holders.** Greater attention, policy and legislative change needs to be paid to other migration programs.

Providing opportunities for migrant workers to come to Canada requires clear policies for employers and protections for employees. A 2018/2019 Action Canada Task Force Report titled, **Permanently Impermanent: Migrant Agricultural Workers in Canada** outlines a list of eight policy recommendations grouped under four categories: settlement, health-care, program administration and employment relationship. While this report looks at migrant agricultural workers, the recommendations are relevant to migrants coming to Canada to fill vacancies across a variety of sectors. The pandemic has only illuminated further the need to evaluate, respond to the current crisis and fix the broken TFW program. In addition, policymakers must address whether there is a need for an economic PR visa stream for the lower-income end of the economy, now largely reliant on temporary workers in agriculture, care work and food/hospitality.

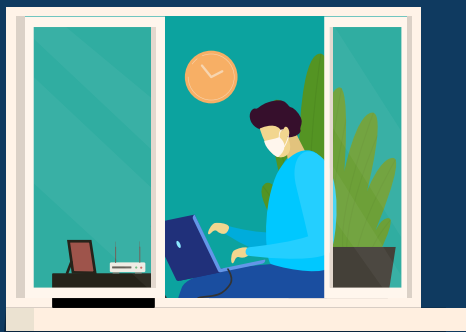
Many immigrants face a higher risk of COVID-19 exposure, and complex barriers to working from home



Large households in high density neighbourhoods



Lack of privacy for accessing support



Decreased ability to telework due to Internet access & quality



Decreased ability to home school because of lack of Internet & hardware



IS COVID-19 CHANGING CANADIANS' VIEWS ON IMMIGRATION?

Canada has been described as a “nation of immigrants,” where population growth, for more than 150 years, has been the result of the migration of peoples. An early adopter of inclusive policies and laws such as multiculturalism, Canadians have, compared to other nations, tended to view immigration in a positive light.⁵⁴ The government of Canada boasted in 2017, on the occasion of the country’s 150th anniversary, that **22 percent of the population was foreign born**. By 2031, projections show 80 percent of Canadian labour force growth will be in some way connected to immigration.⁵⁵ However, some are concerned with how receptive Canadians will generally be to accepting large numbers of newcomers in light of COVID-19’s health and economic impacts.

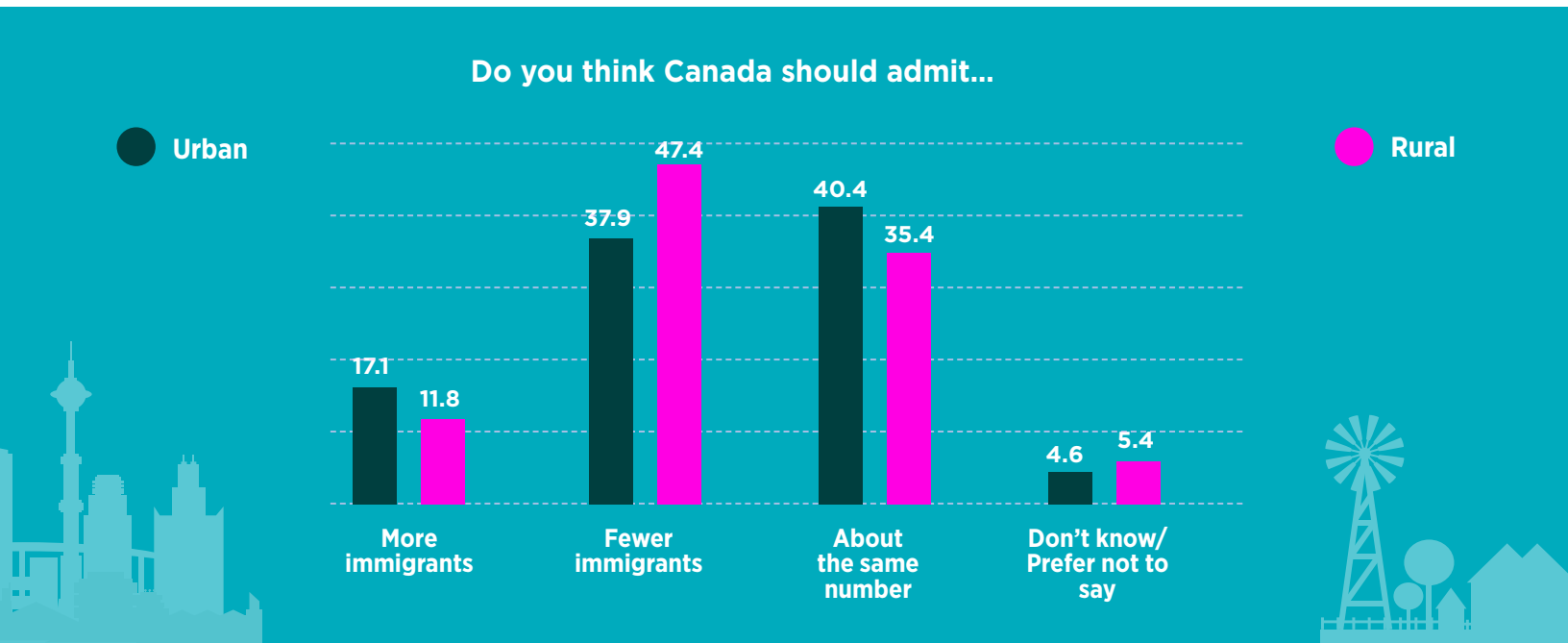
The Environics Institute Focus Canada Fall 2020 survey found Canadians, overall, continue to respond positively to high levels of immigration; indicating, so far, that the pandemic does not seem to have had a negative impact on how Canadians view immigration policies. Nonetheless, some racialized newcomers have voiced a growing sense of concern about COVID-19-related discrimination and prejudice: as **a study by the Institute for Canadian Citizenship** reveals, 64 percent of new Canadian citizens are worried about negative treatment.

Additionally, developing a thorough understanding of how different segments of the population view immigration, as well as monitoring the rise of trends in global populism and polarization is essential to determining whether Canadians’ views are changing. For example, a **2021 Public Policy Forum report**, analyzing 2019 Canadian Elections Study data, found a divergence of opinion among urban and rural dwellers responding to questions related to policies on immigration, refugees, integration and settlement.⁵⁶ Figure 4 displays a near 10-percent difference between

urban and rural respondents who would like to see fewer immigrants in Canada, highlighting how nearly half of rural respondents feel Canada should welcome fewer immigrants.^{vi}

Figure 4: Urban-rural views on immigration admission levels (percent).

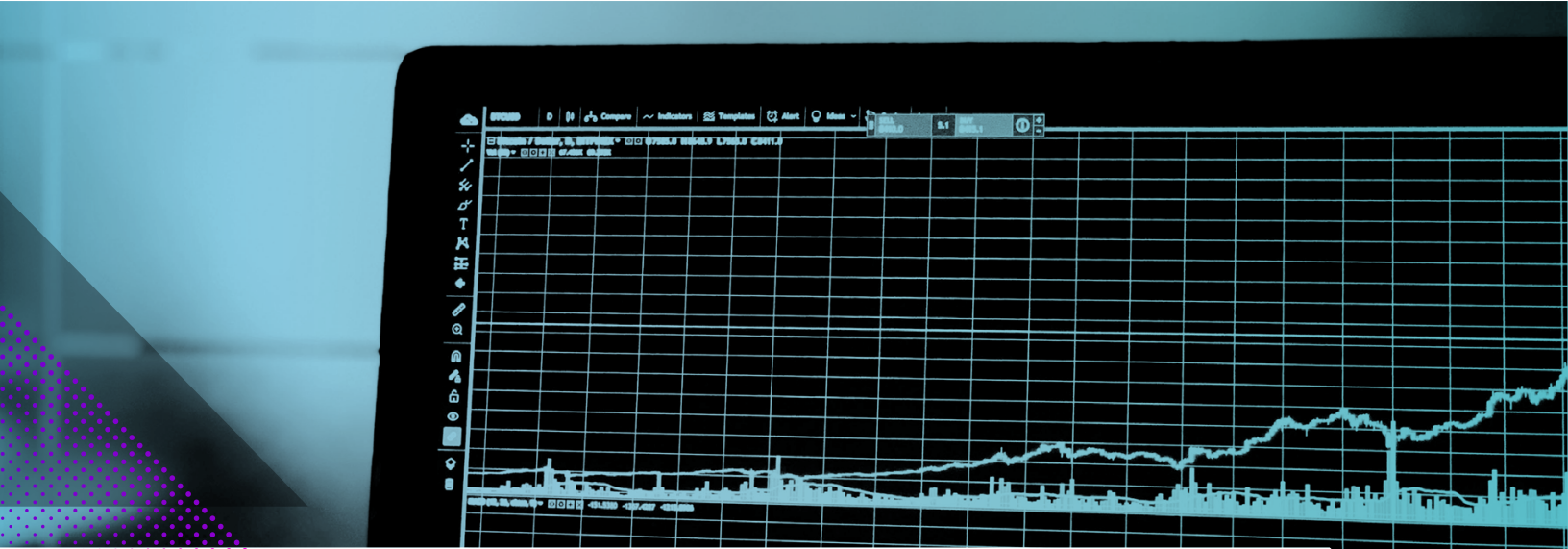
Survey question:



Source: Loewen, P., Speer, S., and Bertolo, S. (2021). Fault Lines and Common Ground: Understanding the State of Canada's Urban-Rural Divide. Public Policy Forum.

It will be critical for policymakers at all levels of government to highlight the importance of immigration to Canada's economy in the months and years ahead, to reduce the likelihood that negative reactions will emerge. In this time of ongoing crisis and in the years that will follow, it will be crucial to Canada's economic success to remember that "immigrants are a necessary component to achieve economic growth and keep taxpayer-funded systems such as pensions and health-care stable and balanced."⁵⁷

^{vi} Due to the nature of the survey questions, the report's authors were unable to determine respondents' reasoning for their attitudes towards immigration.



CONSIDERING IMMIGRANTS IS ESSENTIAL TO GOVERNMENT ECONOMIC REBUILD EFFORTS

Canada's economic success is reliant on the migration and immigration of individuals with a wide range of skills and backgrounds to fill gaps in the labour force. It is in the country's immediate best interest to respond to the current economic challenges by aiming to ensure all immigrants, of all skill levels, can fully participate in the labour force starting today and in the years ahead.

RECOGNIZING IMMIGRANT EDUCATION, SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES

The federal government is rightfully keen to encourage talented and skilled immigrants to consider a move to Canada; however, workforce integration is a key part of the process and is deserving of greater attention from policymakers. A long-standing problem, existing before the current COVID-19 crisis, has been the number of long-standing barriers skilled immigrants often face to successful economic integration.

Despite government policies focused on attracting skilled immigrants, upon arrival in Canada the “disconnect between immigrants' skills and employer recognition of those skills”⁵⁸ often leaves newcomers unable to find employment commensurate with their qualifications, abilities and experience. Many immigrants are thus left seeking opportunities in sectors unrelated

to their employment history, accepting positions for which they are overqualified and/or deskilling. These circumstances can lead to downward career mobility, wasted talent and huge costs to both individuals and society at large.

If Canada wants to reap the benefits of being a top destination for skilled workers, credential recognition is one part of a larger puzzle, which also includes offering **employers the right tools and systems** to assess skills and competencies beyond a person's curriculum vitae. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportune moment for Canada to revisit current policies related to the assessment of international credentials and do a better job of including processes for the evaluation of competencies that may lead to greater employment access for skilled immigrants to Canada. Additionally, it should not be forgotten, this response is a joint effort. While the federal government has the overall responsibility for immigration, provinces and territories, through immigration and labour-market agreements, are responsible for settlement and workforce integration.

The need for more health workers and PSWs brought about by our current public-health crisis highlights the issue of credentials, skills, and competencies recognition. Health-care is an important field for employment analysis, not only due to pandemic, but also because Canada is projecting a shortage of doctors over the next decade.⁵⁹ As previously mentioned, care homes, where COVID-19 outbreaks have led to a disproportionate number of Canada's pandemic deaths, are also suffering a shortage of staff as a result of challenging working conditions and low wages.

Internationally educated health professionals (IEHPs), licensed to practice in other countries, could provide the needed labour-force boost. IEHPs are keen and ready to work in Canada,^{vii} but face long-standing barriers to labour-force inclusion.⁶⁰ The attention the current crisis has placed on the needs of the health system and LTC facilities



vii [A Change.org petition, International Medical Graduates in Canada Responding against COVID-19](#), has garnered close to 34,000 signatures.

points to an opportunity for a solution-driven plan to effectively and efficiently integrate IEHPs in Canada's workforce.⁶¹

While the dire need for internationally educated health-care workers, many of whom are very experienced and have impressive credentials, is one essential sector to review, the complicated process of verifying credentials and licensing extends broadly across the labour force. Indeed, in some respects, the barriers faced by immigrants are just one dimension of the wider challenge of advancing more systematic approaches to defining, assessing, developing, and utilizing skills across the entire economy.^{62, 63} Not only would immigrants likely benefit from innovative approaches to skills recognition,⁶⁴ such as greater emphasis on "asset-based" approaches,⁶⁵ but the economy as a whole would benefit from more inclusive approaches such as the creation of alternative pathways to skills recognition and employment.^{66, 67}

SUPPORTING IMMIGRANT WORKERS DISPLACED BY THE PANDEMIC

The socio-economic impact of COVID-19 has broadened the employment gap between Canadian-born and immigrant workers, as immigrants have been most negatively impacted by job loss. Many of those early job losses disproportionately affected recent immigrants working in low-skilled roles, already threatened by automation.

In a PPF report, economist Jim Stanford has projected that fewer than half of those furloughed in the early stages of the crisis will return to the jobs they lost. Determining accessible strategies to quickly identify displaced workers and helping them pivot to new roles is crucial to post-pandemic workforce transformation and competitiveness.

The pandemic has forced an acceleration towards a further embrace of the digital economy, automation and artificial intelligence (AI),⁶⁸ while also identifying a potential need to re-shore some production and manufacturing. Canada needs to develop a strategy for inclusive human-capital development in a world of work being forced to change rapidly. How precisely to make this change a reality is not yet completely clear, but innovation and investment will be required to ensure individuals of all skill levels and backgrounds are able to participate. Identifying labour shortages and finding ways of transitioning furloughed workers with reskilling opportunities or on-the-job training is a way of reversing the economic damage of the pandemic. Considering other methods of assistance such as income supports, as outlined by Sean Speer in Reforming Canada's Income Support Framework, is also important to post-pandemic workforce rebuilding.

Palette Inc., a not-for-profit platform, offers a rapid upskilling opportunity for individuals to transition to high-tech work. The rapid embrace of digital technology and the disruption brought on by the pandemic has increased the need for information and communications technology workers, which makes the development of programs such as Palette even more important. The potential of the Palette model is further detailed in [a report by founders AJ Tibando and Arvind Gupta](#).

Palette and similar programs, such as Ryerson University's **ADaPT** program — which provides digital literacy, research, business finance, communications and career skills training — and **NPower** — which offers no-cost technical and professional skills training, job placements and continuing education and mentorship support for five years post-hire — are examples of an important innovation gaining ground in the skills training space. ADaPT and NPower are successful because they tightly target specific skills needs, identified by employers and provide intensive training programs in these focused areas. Because these training interventions are much shorter than traditional degree or diploma programs, they tend to be more accessible — especially to students with fewer resources or greater family responsibilities as is often the case for immigrants.

Another key aspect of these programs is their explicit focus on placing learners in employment after completion, which is brought to life by features such as mentorship programs, work-integrated learning placements, and other “wraparound supports.” These wraparound supports are especially valuable for immigrants because they can help overcome some of the key labour-market access challenges by providing Canadian work experience or by helping them build networks. While these programs were developed prior to the arrival of COVID-19 — and will remain critical well after the public-health crisis has faded — these sorts of innovative approaches will be critical to a successful economic recovery that includes immigrants.

Another area where targeted interventions designed to address obstacles specific to the immigrant experience could have an outsized impact is in language training. Research suggests that one of the key obstacles to immigrants reaching their full employment potential lies in language skills, particularly those immigrating to Canada through processes that do not require language tests, such as IELTS, CELPIP or TEFL. Indeed, one recent study found immigrants who have English or French as their mother tongue tend to realize significantly better employment outcomes compared to those who do not.⁶⁹ At the same time, there is also evidence that traditional language-training approaches, which tend to emphasize a sequential approach to language acquisition in which language training precedes employment, are not meeting the needs of immigrants.⁷⁰ What is needed are more innovative and flexible approaches, such as those blending language training with work-integrated learning.

The tax system also offers opportunities to support immigrants' abilities to access skills training. For example, the **Canada Training Benefit** offers a tax credit to low-income earners who seek out education opportunities. However, the research has demonstrated that those most in need of training are the least able to access it. As such, it will be important for governments to "consider the challenges of intersectional groups when designing policies."⁷¹ Ministers of Labour and Education need to drive and invest in a collaborative response tailored to those most affected by COVID-19, such as that highlighted in the recent publication, **How to Mobilize Higher Education and Workforce Development for the Rapid Re-Employment of Canadians.**

Enhancing social capital through access to social networks can offer recent foreign-educated immigrants greater access to employment opportunities.⁷² For example, the **Workforce Innovation and Inclusion Project (WIIP)** offers an approach that aims to identify methods of alleviating economic and social challenges for newcomers. WIIP offers an innovative and collaborative approach, with the aim of improving the settlement sector services and broadening the talent pool by scaling effective skill-development programs and increasing employment and entrepreneurial opportunities.⁷³

These examples show that the opportunity is there to successfully respond to the crisis by developing a workforce ready for an inclusive post-pandemic future.

A TOP DESTINATION FOR SKILLED IMMIGRANTS

Canada's immigration policy has successfully welcomed large numbers of immigrants with relatively strong public support for many years. The opportunity is there to continue to create jobs for internationally trained immigrants who see a place for themselves within our economy. While difficult to quantify, over the course of the Trump presidency, Canada may have become an alternative destination for many, by explicitly welcoming immigrants and offering immigration opportunities to a high number of people. By easing business immigration, Canada may also have benefited from the obstacles created by increased U.S. protectionism and visa delays. While the Biden Administration has just recently outlined its commitment to modernizing the immigration system through the U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021, Canada needs to continue to make substantive policy decisions to set the country apart and chart a clear path forward to attract the wide range of internationally trained and highly skilled talent needed for continued economic growth.

WELCOME

In response to the pandemic-induced decline in immigration in 2020, Canada is looking to welcome more than one million permanent residents between now and 2023 through initiatives such as:

- the Provincial Nominee Program;
- the Federal Skilled Worker Program;
- the Atlantic Immigration Pilot;
- the Canadian Experience Class; and
- the Global Skills Strategy.

The Global Skills Strategy has been applauded by the Business Council of Canada for effectively “facilitating the entry of immigrants with specialized skill sets and international experience”.⁷⁴ Individual employers have also used Canada’s open immigration system to promote expert relocation to Canada. Communitech’s We Want You U.S. tech worker recruitment effort in response to the suspension of the U.S. H-1B visa program and Shopify’s similar h1bengineer.com initiative are good examples.

As already discussed, attracting skilled immigrants and successfully integrating them into jobs that fully leverage their skills are two separate steps that are not always well connected in practice.⁷⁵ Helping to better prepare immigrants through the provision of better labour-market information is one way of connecting these steps. Initiatives such as the Facilitating Access to Skilled Talent (FAST) program, operated by the Immigrant Employment Council of B.C. (IEC-BC), provide a good example of how this can be done. FAST is a free online employment-preparation tool designed to help incoming and landed immigrants learn about their sector of choice in Canada, the workplace culture they can expect to find and the skills, occupational standards and requirements they will need to possess to succeed in their chosen occupation or profession. By helping immigrants better prepare for the Canadian labour market prior to and upon arrival, programs such as FAST can help to improve immigrants’ prospects for success.

Additionally, companies such as SkyHive — founded on a mission of reducing global unemployment and underemployment — specialize in using AI in their skill-matching technology to provide individuals, enterprises and governments with real-time knowledge of the labour market. SkyHive supports individuals by applying proprietary technology to the individual’s previous work and educational experience to generate a skills profile. Its deep knowledge of labour markets is then used to provide dynamic, skills-based recommendations on career pathways, training and job opportunities for jobseekers. When working with enterprises, SkyHive performs AI-based skill assessments of entire workforces, provides insights into the capabilities of the organization’s labour pool, and pushes forward informed, company-wide reskilling, retention and engagement initiatives. While established to reduce unemployment and underemployment

writ large, SkyHive's technology can also be used to address the underemployment of skilled immigrants and a country's skills gaps.

Adopting more employer-centred approaches can also help bridge the gap between attracting immigrants and ensuring they find a role in Canada commensurate with their level of skill. For instance, multiple studies have found that potential employers are often confused by the large number of initiatives, programs and streams⁷⁶ and many simply do not have the capacity or wherewithal to identify and take advantage of opportunities to help them attract top talent to Canada.⁷⁷ By reducing the burden on employers and streamlining the work required to identify and use the program best suited to their needs, not only can employers access and connect with the skilled workers they need, but the immigrants being recruited will have a much better chance of successfully and quickly integrating into the Canadian workforce and society because of their relationship with the recruiting employer.

RECOGNIZING AND SUPPORTING ENTREPRENEURS

Immigrants clearly play a critical role in driving economic growth in Canada. But it is important to remember that, in addition to driving the growth of the workforce, immigrants also play a key role as entrepreneurs who create new ventures and, consequently, new jobs for all Canadians.

In fact, immigrants, regardless of the class under which they entered Canada, are more likely to be entrepreneurs than people born in Canada.⁷⁸ By better recognizing entrepreneurship as a viable pathway to inclusion, policymakers can help strengthen an already dynamic ecosystem capable of contributing to Canada's economic recovery.

Immigrant entrepreneurs face many of the same challenges as those born in Canada, such as navigating the system of government supports, grants and subsidies and accessing mentorship and networks. Any action taken to lessen these challenges will help all entrepreneurs. Immigrants, however, also face challenges that tend to be more specific to their experience, such as accessing help to develop a business plan and navigating the unfamiliar Canadian regulatory and tax system. Moreover, many service-providers focused on immigrants tend to concentrate on more traditional pathways to integration instead of entrepreneurship, meaning these organizations, the organizations on which many immigrants depend for assistance, are often ill-equipped to assist immigrants with a desire to follow an entrepreneurial path. Conversely, many organizations centred on assisting entrepreneurs have only a limited understanding of the immigrant experience and are not well-positioned to provide help and encouragement tailored to the needs of the immigrant entrepreneur.⁷⁹

Indeed, the most important step towards better supporting immigrant entrepreneurs is recognizing they exist, that they face distinct challenges and have distinct needs. This recognition can take many forms, including:

- ✓ offering tailored assistance and advice in languages other than English and French;
- ✓ working to ensure pre-existing systems of exclusion, for example, in business financing or government procurement, are not recreated in new programs (such as the myriad business supports rolled out to help businesses during the pandemic); and
- ✓ adding skills development programs specifically targeted at immigrant entrepreneurs and the skills needs they have identified.⁸⁰

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

International students are also key to Canada's workforce success. According to IRCC, Canada's international student population totalled more than 642,000 in 2019, with a majority of these students choosing computer science and engineering programs.⁸¹ Canadian institutions of higher learning are dependent upon international students, just as the economy in general is. Encouraging international students to remain in Canada upon completion of their studies should be a priority for government and business. As described earlier, international students have been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, with many concerned they will not be able to pay for the basics. The federal government has offered some **measures to support international students**, including **a temporary change to the Post-Graduate Work Permit** and the opportunity for students to study in their home country, while maintaining the eligibility to qualify for a three-year post-graduate work permit. International students are now also able to apply for permanent residency through an increased number of immigration programs — such as the economic classes — which were not previously open to them.

However, the current and ongoing response to hardships faced by international students will again require a collaborative response between government, educational institutions and employers.⁸² While work options are important and key to retaining foreign-born, Canadian-educated individuals, the COVID-19 response will require an evidence-based approach to ensuring the right supports are identified and rolled out.

CONCLUSION

Immigration has long played a vital role in Canada's economy, providing a relatively young stream of workers to power the country's economic growth. With a low birth rate and millions of baby boomers exiting the workforce, immigration now represents an even more important source of population growth and remains a key solution to Canada's skilled labour shortage.

While Canada's skills-based immigration policy attracts highly skilled workers, the gap persists between those skills and immigrants' success in the labour market. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the existing problem of underemployment of immigrants, an issue that is evident and well documented. More so, the pandemic has had a disproportionate adverse impact on vulnerable groups such as racialized women, largely due to pre-existing socio-economic inequities. These challenges must be addressed to avoid widening the gap between immigrants and Canadian-born peers during the recovery. It is in the country's immediate best interest to respond to the current economic challenges by ensuring all immigrants can fully participate in the labour force starting today and in the years ahead.

Now is the time to take action!

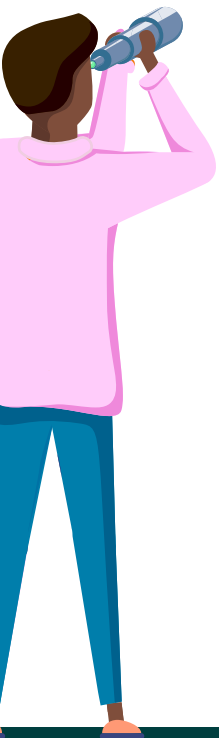
The post-pandemic response, therefore, requires concerted efforts among all levels of government, business, post-secondary institutions, employers, regulators and civil society to chart an inclusive pathway forward.



CALLS TO ACTION

1. Establish a national strategy to enhance immigrant labour-market inclusion:

- Develop a federal government-led strategy, co-chaired by representatives from the provinces, territories and municipalities (through the Federation of Canadian Municipalities), employers (with associations such as the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, Business Council of Canada, Canadian Federation of Independent Business and Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters) and post-secondary sector (through organizations such as Universities Canada, Colleges and Institutes Canada and Polytechnics Canada) to address labour-market barriers and strategize how best to leverage the talents immigrants bring to Canada. Doing so will require recognizing the different challenges faced by different types of immigrants, including internationally trained immigrants, temporary foreign workers and international students. Each of these groups has its own unique skills profiles and sets of challenges, which will need to be recognized for the strategy to succeed.
- Ensure a priority focus on underutilization of the education, skills and experience of Canada's internationally educated health professionals (IEHPs).



2. Put in place policies and programs targeted at mitigating disproportionate negative impacts of the pandemic on vulnerable migrant groups:

- Broaden eligibility and increase targeted settlement and employment service interventions for immigrants, temporary foreign workers, and international students. This includes more flexible language-training provisions that better integrate opportunities for work-integrated learning and program designs that incorporate more wraparound services. These language-training opportunities should be targeted and occupationally specific.

- Support programs and initiatives focusing on the inclusion of migrant groups hardest hit by the pandemic, including racialized women and youth, in our rebuilding stage to avoid further exacerbating inequality.

3. Develop innovative tools and approaches for an immigrant-inclusive economy as Canada recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Support inclusive recruitment and hiring strategies that incorporate immigrant and refugee talent sources. This includes enabling more holistic assessments of immigrants' and refugee's skills that supplement academic credentials through the greater use of competency-based assessments that look "holistically at an individual's ability to apply knowledge and skills with appropriate judgement in a defined setting."⁸³
- Promote innovative and scalable solutions that enable better recognition of education, skills and competencies of workers and determine future labour-market demand.
- Support the development and scaling of innovative interventions specifically targeted at what immigrants need to integrate into the Canadian economy. These include initiatives focused on identified needs such as access to Canadian work experience and ongoing network-building support. It also includes better recognizing and supporting entrepreneurship as a pathway to economic integration for immigrants.
- Ensure that high-quality and timely labour-market information is available and accessible to newcomers at appropriate points in their immigration journey, including prior to their arrival in Canada.



ENDNOTES

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