

July 28, 2021

Ontario's Workforce Recovery Advisory Committee

Submitted by email: OWRAC@ontario.ca

OCASI - Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants submits the following recommendations to the Committee on shaping the future of work in Ontario.

ENDING LABOUR FORCE UNDERUTILIZATION OF IMMIGRANT TALENT IN ONTARIO: AN ACTION PLAN was developed in consultation with OCASI member agencies.

OCASI is the umbrella organization for immigrant and refugee-serving organizations in Ontario, and now has 240 member agencies across the province. As the collective voice of the immigrant and refugee-serving sector in the province OCASI is an important advocate for access and equity for refugees, refugee claimants, immigrants, migrants and people with precarious immigration status.

OCASI has also made a [Joint Submission with South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario and Chinese and Southeast Asian Legal Clinic](#).

ENDING LABOUR FORCE UNDERUTILIZATION OF IMMIGRANT TALENT IN ONTARIO: AN ACTION PLAN

GOAL: Pursue a bold and systemic approach, with a clear target to end the underutilization of immigrant skills in 4 years.

Context:

The pandemic has exacerbated long standing economic inequalities in the labour market. While high-income earners have seen little to no change in their wages, Indigenous peoples, recent and racialized immigrants are among those most likely to have experienced a drop in earnings. Immigrants and racialized persons are also disproportionately represented in jobs with greater exposure to COVID-19.

Modest employment gains made by immigrants in recent years are at risk of being reversed due to the pandemic. There have been significant labour force inequities that immigrant and racialized women have felt the more so than others. In addition, the crisis unleashed a new destructive wave of xenophobia, that is amplifying long standing social, gender, and racial inequalities, including exacerbating economic inequalities.

- A recent [report](#) from the Future Skills Centre found that recent immigrants, workers who are racialized, Indigenous workers and young workers are disproportionately holding precarious jobs, and all have experienced adverse income outcomes due to the pandemic.
- A [study](#) conducted by the Law Commission of Ontario found that recent immigrants were the 3rd highest overrepresented category of persons holding precarious employment.
- Statistics Canada [reports](#) that in Ontario's most diverse neighbourhoods (aka racialized/immigrant communities) COVID-19 infections were three times higher, hospitalizations rates were four times higher and deaths were twice as high.
- A [RBC study](#) indicates the earnings gaps between immigrants and those born in Canada, despite comparable educational levels, is estimated to cost the national economy approximately \$50 billion. Because Ontario receives the largest share of immigrants to Canada [46.3%](#), this economic loss is deeply felt across the province.
- [Ontario government unemployment rate data for Q1 2021](#) showed high rates of unemployment for very recent immigrants (10.8%), recent immigrants (10.7%) and even established immigrants (8.0%) compared to 6.9% for those born in Canada.

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- An [interdisciplinary research team](#) at Carleton University reported that immigrant women encounter vulnerabilities due to gendered responsibilities that negatively impacted their employment experiences. This included a reversal of career trajectory, layoffs, and decreased availability for short-term employment opportunities. In addition, many were deemed ineligible for emergency government support.
- [Statistics Canada labour force survey data](#) showed the unemployment rate for racialized women was 10.5% compared to 6.2% for white women and the former group's unemployment rate was only slightly higher than racialized males (10.0%).
- Researchers at University of Toronto, [report](#) a sharp rise (up from 11% to 35%) amongst those reporting discriminatory experiences in the last two years.

Given the urgent need to strengthen our economy for recovery, policy makers must now look ahead and pursue bold and inclusive strategies to rebuild the provincial labour force by ending the persistent underutilization and under-compensation of immigrant talents and skills. Integrating immigrants effectively into the labour force in a systemic and equitable manner will require commitment to 3 key elements:

- Commit to inclusive labour market integration
- Address immigration status barriers
- Address persistent barriers to registration and labour market integration in regulated professions and trades

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1. **Commit to inclusive labour market integration:**

There is a need to resolve long standing and disproportionate race and gender labour market inequities across all sectors, including in healthcare and the service industries where racialized people and immigrants are disproportionately employed. Ending this injustice requires a commitment to creating and sustaining decent jobs, as well as raising employment standards protections and occupational health and safety provisions. Those being left behind must become a priority in rebuilding the provincial economy.

Recommendations:

- Collect disaggregated provincial labour force data, modelled on disaggregated patient healthcare data collected during the pandemic.
- Adequately support the Anti-Racism Directorate to enable the full implementation of the Anti-Racism Act.
- Advance representative workforce legislation¹ that mandates diversity, equity, and inclusion in recruitment, hiring, retention and promotion.
- Prioritize Community Benefits Agreements within public infrastructure projects that ensure diversity in hiring; include contract compliance in publicly funded projects.
- Expand investments in affordable housing projects, and support the hiring of immigrants, racialized persons, women, Indigenous and youth communities in publicly funded construction projects. Prioritize opportunities for those with international experience in the trades and related professions, and who are seeking certification (i.e. architecture, project management) to be part of these workforces.
- Raise the minimum wage **to at least a living wage – an estimate of at least \$20/hr** and require employers to provide a guaranteed minimum number of hours of work each week, legislate 10 permanent paid sick days, end the misclassification of gig workers as independent contractors, and invest in stronger enforcement and compliance measures to the Employment Standards and Occupational Health and Safety Acts.
- Increase and target supports within Employment Ontario programs that will identify and remedy systemic barriers to enhanced labour force attachment for immigrants.
- Invest sufficiently in community-based services that provide targeted support for racialized and immigrant communities - including Francophone immigrant communities - for workforce entry, as well as supports needed to dismantle systemic barriers and integrate effectively in the workforce including housing, education and training, settlement services, language interpretation and affordable childcare.

¹ A representative workforce must reflect the diversity of the available labour force and that under-represented or designated groups (e.g. Black, Indigenous, Persons of Colour aka, BIPOC, women, persons differently able) are represented at all occupational levels in proportion to their numbers in the provincial or select comparative population base.

2. Address immigration status barriers:

The current federal Temporary to Permanent Resident Pathway initiative for temporary workers (essential and healthcare workers) and international students, which is meant to accelerate transitions, is not meeting its targets. There is a need to expand and improve this initiative to be more equitable and to ensure long term, accessible and rapid transitional pathways to permanent residence for those holding temporary work permits. While this is a federal responsibility, the province can support more effective and equitable implementation of the current initiative, as well as using provincial policy tools like the Provincial Nominee Program.

Recommendations:

Broaden available provincial pathways:

- Utilize and expand the provincial PNP program by creating expanded streams targeting applicants from essential occupations and trades, including low wage occupations.
- Revisit lessons learned from the GTA pilot for out-of-status construction workers and expand to other temporary workers and sectors.

Improve the current temporary to permanent pathway:

- Increase provincial outreach efforts including targeted information sessions and plain language/pictorial and multilingual explanations of the application process that can be disseminated by trusted community stakeholders.
- Review provincial efforts on an ongoing basis to identify gaps and inequities in who is applying and implement inclusive processing steps.
- Support the deferral of federal fees until after approvals, along with guidance for how to access Immigration Loans Programs. Explore supplementing existing immigrant loan programs with provincial resources.

3. **Address barriers to registration and labour market integration in regulated professions and trades.**

There are long standing and well documented barriers for immigrants attempting to re-enter their professions and trades. While some advances have been realized, significant barriers remain, including inadequate resources. Systemic changes are required in order to end the underutilization of immigrant talent.

Recommendations:

Bring stakeholders together for professions and trades to collectively address barriers and facilitate access

Creating timely and equitable access involves a range of stakeholders for each profession or trade. Barriers to access can only be effectively addressed by key stakeholders working collaboratively.

- Establish provincially based occupation-specific centres that: bring together all key stakeholders, including regulators, relevant ministries, educational bodies, employers, immigrants, and service providers to address barriers in the assessment, bridging and registration process; that provide information and career navigation services to immigrants; and that streamline access to bridging and career laddering opportunities.
- Immigrant and refugee serving sector organizations across Ontario must be involved in the above process as they have expertise and experience in delivering services in settlement, language training and labour market integration, know local labour market needs and employers, and can be a catalyst to fast-track labour market integration of immigrants in regulated professions and trades.
- Prioritize the development and dissemination of educational materials for employers illustrating general equivalency of international qualifications by occupation sector.
- Identify occupational categories in which immigrants disproportionately find employment (such as: interpretation, translation, personal support worker, childcare) and explore measures to ensure better wage/working conditions, while not creating any additional labour force attachment barriers.
- Prioritize public appointments to occupational regulatory body councils of immigrant professionals and tradespeople with lived experience of the registration process

Guarantee timely assessments/registration and occupational licensing:

For immigrants in regulated professions or trades, regardless of when they arrived or their status, a commitment is needed to ensure regulatory/licensing body assessments are completed within an appropriate timeframe. That means assessment and direction to applicants must be completed before their previous experience expires as stipulated by the regulatory body.

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- Establish a process whereby the Ontario Fairness Commissioner works with regulatory bodies to identify the appropriate time (as defined above) for each occupation and the resources required to ensure assessment of and direction to candidates within that time frame.
- Provide regulatory bodies with the necessary resources to guarantee assessment within this timeframe.
- Require reporting to ensure compliance with this timeframe within the Fair Access to Regulated Professions Act; and enact legislation to mandate equity provisions in the recognition and granting of credentials in a timely manner; collect disaggregated data; and reporting by regulated professions.
- Examine legislative requirements adopted in some EU countries (e.g. Denmark, Germany) that establish maximum processing time limits for regulatory bodies to assess international credentials. In Denmark, this is 30 days for uncomplicated cases
- Establish dedicated information tools and platforms including internet portals that provide concise, easily accessible information about recognition processes/occupation.

Invest in bridging & gap filling opportunities:

- Ensure that all immigrants have access to the necessary bridging or gap filling programs for their intended occupation within the appropriate time frame, and that these programs are provided adequately in English and French.
- Increase investment in proven and innovative bridging models, pathways, and programs that are scalable, replicable to ensure access for all eligible candidates.
- Focus on coordinated career laddering and bridging initiatives where the labour market need is most urgent, such as for internationally trained nurses to advance their careers in the long term and home care sectors. Explore similar initiatives for other sectors, at scale.
- Explore and expand the use of virtual technologies and simulations to speed and scale up the skills learning and competency assessment aspects bridging and assessment processes.

Establish a portable professional/trades integration benefit:

Ontario's healthcare sector and other sectors will realize significant labour market skills development gains by establishing a portable professional integration benefit for eligible immigrants that can be used to meet their occupation-specific licensure requirements (bridging tuition, exams, fees etc.,)

- Establish equitably accessible funding supports per regulated in-demand occupations for internationally trained newcomers to cover expenses such as competency assessments, registration exams, and bridge training. Other career related expenses such as a living allowance, transportation, and childcare could also be supported through this benefit.

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