EMBRACING INNOVATION FOR IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION

Canada prides itself in being a nation of immigrants – approximately 20% of Canadians were born outside of Canada and nearly 40% are the children of immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2017). In some of Canada's largest cities, such as Toronto and Vancouver, the majority of the population is born outside the country and is also racialized (Statistics Canada, 2019). The Government of Canada (2020) is acutely aware of the significant role immigration has in driving economic growth, and has set ambitious immigration targets with a focus on attracting skilled migrants. Apart from our humanitarian programs targeting refugees, we focus our systems on attracting the best and the brightest from around the world through an immigration system which rewards skills and education. However, in spite of the fact that most immigrants have better levels of education than Canadian born job seekers and employees, they face high levels of unemployment and underemployment: for example, in Ontario, only 20% of internationally educated engineers are working in their field of expertise (OSPE, 2015).

> "The causes of unemployment and underemployment lie in various barriers these equity-deserving groups are facing, including systemic and individual discrimination on the part of employers, nonrecognition and devaluation of credentials and work experience obtained outside of Canada, and immigrants' lack of familiarity with Canadian work culture, and lack of social networks."

With Canada's declining birthrate and aging population, there is a growing need for young skilled workers to address the labour shortage. The employment of highly skilled immigrant workers is one potential avenue to solve this problem. However according to Statistics Canada (2019), immigrants and racialized people despite being skilled workers have some of the highest unemployment rates. This disparity between having skilled workers with high unemployment rates – also known as the skills gap – represents an underutilized task force. Numerous studies have provided strong evidence that the causes of unemployment and underemployment lie in various barriers these equity-deserving groups are facing, including systemic and individual discrimination on the part of employers, nonrecognition and devaluation of credentials and work experience obtained outside of Canada, and immigrants' lack of familiarity with Canadian work culture, and lack of social networks (Ng & Gagnon, 2020; Guo, 2009; Kaushik & Drolet, 2018). The barriers exist at multiple levels – often international experience and education, while important for entry into Canada – are not recognized in the Canadian labour market. Even when immigrants have the recognized qualifications, those with "foreign-sounding" last names are less likely to get called to interviews than those with Anglo-Saxon-sounding names (Banerjee et al., 2017).

There is little doubt that the employers bemoaning labour and skills shortages are part of the problem and that bias is often built into the systems used to recruit, assess, and promote employees. At the same time, employers will cite mismatches between the criteria used to select newcomers and the lack of attention on the needs for skilled trades and general labourers. Postsecondary institutions are also part of the problem in addition to being part of the solution. For instance,

while bridging programs are designed to provide immigrants with the Canadian experience needed to advance in the labour market, they produce uneven outcomes for newcomers often because they are not tailored to the needs of employers (Sattler et al., 2015).

Settlement organizations funded by the government also produce uneven results. For example, while there are many government-funded settlement agencies that provide employment-related services, there is evidence that they have limited engagement with employers particularly with small and medium enterprises, which account for the majority of private sector employment in Canada (IECBC, 2012; Drolet et al., 2014). Moreover, less than one third of principal applicants report using these services (IRCC, 2017) and other research has suggested that the higher their level of education the less satisfied they are with settlement employment services (Diversity Institute & Region of Peel, 2009). Often the models of teaching and learning are antiquated and ineffective. For example, English language training in the province of Ontario has been critiqued by the auditor general: "we found that just 33% of English learners with 800 or more hours of instruction progressed by an average of one Canadian language benchmark" (Auditor General of Ontario, 2017).

Another challenge is fragmentation and lack of information sharing: "Agencies are often not aware of relevant projects beyond their boundaries. The absence of a transfer mechanism acts as a significant brake on innovation at the industry level… the sector already has an innovation engine in the form of individuals with skills and creativity; what it lacks is a transmission for linking this creativity to a learning and dissemination strategy that would lead to enhanced sector-wide performance" (CISSA, 2012).

> "A systemic approach is needed that is based on careful analysis of disaggregated data to understand where the barriers and friction occur."

Currently in Canada, there are challenges in the skills and employment ecosystem in terms of the supply (job seekers), demand (employers) and intermediaries (service providers). A systemic approach is needed that is based on careful analysis of disaggregated data to understand where the barriers and friction occur. Put simply, there are areas where newcomers and racialized Canadians need support in developing their skills and capacity, where employers need to embrace more inclusive approaches instead of looking for skills in all the wrong places, and where service providers need to adopt employer-centred, culturally appropriate approaches to ensure that they are not training people for jobs that do not exist. Evidence-based approaches can reduce friction and help build more accountable and cost-effective solutions, but the first step is to recognize the complex nature of the problem and the nuanced differences facing different populations, sectors, regions, and sizes of organizations.

> "It is difficult for the public sector to solve complex problems, as accountability and responsibility is entrenched in "narrowly focused vertical silos" at the expense of horizontal collaboration."

ADOPTING AN ENTREPRENEURIAL APPROACH TO SUSTAIN INNOVATION

Bureaucracies are designed to preserve stability and structure and to avoid risk. They are often preoccupied with gathering evidence and conducting analyses rather than implementing action. Bureaucracies are also predisposed to working independently and autonomously. It is difficult for the public sector to solve complex problems, as accountability and responsibility is entrenched in "narrowly focused vertical silos" at the expense of horizontal collaboration (Urban, 2018). Evidence of fragmentation in the sector appears in countless evaluations. For example, the auditor general's recent follow-up report on settlement and integration services notes close to no progress on all the recommendations that pertain to enhancing coordination between ministries, including the critical first step of improving information-sharing mechanisms (Auditor General of Ontario, 2019).

In recent years, new and innovative approaches that erode barriers and challenge assumptions have evolved to address the skills and employment needs of newcomers and refugees. Applying a systems model to the skills and employment ecosystem have led us to challenge assumptions and to think of new ways of bridging gaps. New models, new technologies, new partners and new approaches to funding have created new opportunities.

One of Canada's innovations in the immigration sector was the development, for example, of private sponsorship, which emerged in 1979-80 as a way to help resettle Indochinese refugees. By leveraging government resources with supports provided through community organizations and individuals, the country was able to resettle more than 60,000 refugees with high levels of success owing in large part to the fact that sponsors provided social capital as well as financial capital to aid in the job search process (Lambert, 2017). This model was used again in 2017 when Canada pledged to create pathways for Syrian refugees, but the government also introduced a wide range of policy and service innovation enabling it to bring 26,000 Syrian refugees to Canada in only 118 days and 40,000 over a two-year period (Hamilton et al., 2020). "There was a shift in the planning culture from 'does it fit program/policy' to 'how can we make it happen'" (Hamilton et al., 2020,

p. 208). In "Lessons from the Private Sponsorship of Refugees," we explore the case study of the Ryerson University Lifelong Syria Challenge private sponsorship program as an example of effective social innovation that focused on removing roadblocks for sponsors in order to attract more than the usual suspects.

> "Programs that engage employers from the outset, such as work-integrated learning initiatives, can be used to facilitate and build relationships between settlement organizations and the private sector."

While public-private partnerships are increasingly being formed to optimize service delivery, private sector engagement in the provision of settlement services has been limited to date, even though both service providers and employers stand to benefit substantially from collaboration (Drolet et al., 2014). Evidence suggests that employers understand and accept the business case for hiring immigrants and see immigrant recruitment as vital for their business growth (IECBC, 2012). Programs that engage employers from the outset, such as work-integrated learning initiatives, can be used to facilitate and build relationships between settlement organizations and the private sector.

While settlement agencies rely for the most part on government funding, new models of employer-centred organizations have emerged in recent years – the Toronto Region Immigration Employer Council (TRIEC) broke new ground when it was founded in 2002 and since has been replicated across the country. The Employer-Refugee Round table is another example which put employers at the centre of the process focused on integrating Syrian refugees into the Canadian economy.

> "Rather than working independently and in silos, the entrepreneur devotes significant time to building teams and expanding networks. Research shows such human connections are the entrepreneur's best asset and critical to the success of their endeavours."

Sectoral and organizational change will take time. It requires close "attention to leadership, structures, reward systems, building a more risk-tolerant culture," (Cukier, 2016). At the same time, there are many examples of innovation in the settlement sector and beyond. An entrepreneurial approach does not "strive for perfection but rather allows for quick adoption and the iteration of new strategies" (Cukier, 2016). Entrepreneurs start with an opportunity and make adjustments as they go along, without losing sight of the overarching goal. Indeed, an entrepreneurial approach prioritizes impact over output as a measurement of success. Rather than working independently and in silos, the entrepreneur devotes significant time to building teams and expanding networks. Research shows such human connections are the entrepreneur's best asset and critical to the success of their endeavours (Deutsch, 2020). It is the confluence of these characteristics – being opportunity-minded, action-oriented, impact-driven, iterative, and collaborative – that cultivates a fertile ground for innovation. (See Figure 1)

TECHNOLOGY-ENABLED SOLUTIONS

While innovation is not synonymous with new technologies, these tools can certainly be drivers for innovation. New platforms such as Magnet, have been able to achieve massive scale for example, in matching newcomer job seekers with prospective employers. Other have provided new ways of assessing, developing and utilizing skills more effectively and have provided ways of providing customization for individuals (Harrington et al., 2020). COVID has rapidly accelerated the adoption of technologies across sectors – online learning, digital health, videoconferencing and remote work – which have been available for decades but underutilized. While COVID has also accelerated the digital divide – exacerbating gaps in access to technology, devices, affordability and skills – it has also provided new opportunities for innovation in pathways to employment for newcomers.

Language ability is repeatedly identified as one of the most important factors that facilitate the successful labour market integration of immigrants (Grenier & Xue, 2011; Boyd & Cao, 2009). Yet, evaluations of official language training courses show no improvements in listening and speaking skills beyond what students would have gained from living in Canada (IRCC, 2010). In "Innovations in Language Learning," we look at the role of technology in enhancing language acquisition for newcomers. The paper features many examples on tested language learning practices that have demonstrated the capacity to provide more targeted and customized education, enhance participant motivation and engagement, and offer greater flexibility to accommodate the diverse needs of learners thereby making language learning more accessible.

CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT SKILLS AND CAREER PATHING

While there is a plethora of skills training and career development programs targeting newcomers and racialized job seekers, these have often not considered the particular needs of people who have been subjected to intergenerational trauma, racism and discrimination, the experience of

FIGURE 1. ENTREPRENEURIAL APPROACH VS. TRADITIONAL BUREAUCRATIC APPROACH

ENTREPRENEUR		MANAGER
Start with perception of an opportunity	⟷	Start with ressources in hand (budget)
Bias toward action	⟷	Bias toward analysis
Marke adjustment as they go	⟷	Formal structure
Build teams and informal networks	⟷	Work independently and autonomously
Focus on impact	⟷	Focus on traditional metrics

Source: Adapted from Cukier. (2019). Developing Canada's Digital-Ready Public Service. Public Policy Forum. https://ppforum.ca/publications/developing-canadas-digital-ready-public-service/

conflict or the experience of displacement, immigration, and poverty. The research is clear: one size does not fit all and the starting point for individuals who have experienced trauma is significantly different than those with privilege and supports (Cukier et. al. forthcoming). Immigrants and refugees are more likely to have experiences with trauma which, coupled with other dimensions of their experience, may shape their interactions with institutions, with education and training and with the job search.

In "Trauma-informed Career Pathing," the impact of individual and systemic trauma on employment is explored. While there has been extensive literature regarding the role of trauma in health care and youth education, discussions on the effect of trauma on adult education and skills development has only recently begun to take shape. This paper explores the benefits of trauma-informed approaches to skills training, particularly for victims of violence, people struggling with mental health issues, and Indigenous communities living with systemic and intergenerational trauma. By acknowledging the lived experiences of students in their skills training, trauma-informed approaches can be an important step towards addressing learning challenges and reducing disparities in the labour market.

There has been a growing acceptance of more demand-driven (that is, employer-facing) approaches to settlement services. Rather than focusing on "fixing" the newcomer jobseeker, newer and more effective models are looking to engage employers in programmatic design and delivery of services – as active participants, partners, or clients. In "Employer-focused Strategies to Support Newcomer Employment," we explore the various roles employers have undertaken to support newcomer integration – including skills development, work-integrated learning, and mentorship programs.

In "Entrepreneurship as a Pathway to Integration," we explore the ways in which entrepreneurship training can be harnessed to support immigrants' transition into Canada. Evidence shows that newcomers have a greater and growing propensity for pursuing entrepreneurship compared to the Canadian-born population (WEKH, 2020). While entrepreneurship can certainly be a pathway to economic success, through embarking on the entrepreneurial journey, immigrants develop various important skills that support their overall integration into Canadian life. The paper features four pilot programs, extracting best practices that can be scaled up across the settlement sector, such as providing "wraparound" support, mentorship and networking opportunities, and access to funding.

FOR MANY NEWCOMERS AND REFUGEES, EDUCATION IS THE GREAT EQUALIZER

INVESTING UPSTREAM

The public school system in Canada has played a critical role in supporting the integration of newcomer youth and helping other marginalized groups overcome barriers that hinder their learning. Canada has one of the highest rates of social mobility and access to public education is one of the critical factors shaping this. For many newcomers and refugees, education is the great equalizer – for example in the Toronto District School Board, immigrants tend to outperform Canadian-born students, in part because of the expectations of their parents. However, barriers persist, particularly for some racialized students and especially those who are Black (*TDSB*, 2017). COVID has further exacerbated these disparities, disrupting the face-to-face experience of the classroom which has played a critical role in socialization processes. In "Tutoring for School Success," we explore how an online tutoring program facilitated collaboration between community organizations and universities to address the needs of underserved groups,

including newcomers. Not only did the program improve learning outcomes for participating students and reduce familial stress, but the Study Buddy program increased awareness of inequities within the education system among the teacher candidates at the early stages of their career.

CONCLUSION

This special issue provides some recent examples of innovative practices and their potential to address current barriers to employment for immigrants, particularly those who are also racialized. The main focus is on driving in the skills and employment ecosystem as a challenge for supply (job seekers) demand (employers) and intermediaries (postsecondary institutions, training and settlement organizations). COVID-19 has demonstrated that there are opportunities to drive transformation if we can learn from our experiences with new technologies and models and resist the tendency to accept the status quo as inevitable.

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