# IMMIGRATION AS AN ENGINE FOR GROWTH AND INNOVATION

**Senator Ratna Omidvar** is an internationally recognized voice on migration, diversity and inclusion. In 2016, Ms. Omidvar was appointed to the Senate of Canada as an independent Senator representing Ontario. Senator Omidvar is the Chair of the Senate's Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology and was the Deputy Chair of the Senate's Special Committee on the Charitable Sector. Previously at Toronto Metropolitan University, Senator Omidvar was a Distinguished Visiting Professor and founded the Global Diversity Exchange. Senator Omidvar was appointed to the Order of Ontario in 2005 and became a Member of the Order of Canada in 2011.

**Wendy Cukier** is a professor of Entrepreneurship and Strategy at the Ted Rogers School of Management, Founder and Academic Director of the Diversity Institute at Toronto Metropolitan University, Academic Director of the Women's Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (WEKH) and Research Lead of the Future Skills Centre. She co-authored the bestseller "Innovation Nation: Canadian Leadership From Java to Jurassic Park"; and is a leader in disruptive technologies and innovation. She is the former vice-president of Research and Innovation at Toronto Metropolitan University and has authored more than 200 articles on diversity, inclusion and innovation. She holds a PhD in Information Systems, an MBA, an MA, and honorary doctorates from Laval and Concordia. She received Canada's Meritorious Service Cross, one of Canada's highest civilian honours.

Canada has long enjoyed a reputation of being a welcoming and tolerant country for immigrants. With almost one in four Canadians born outside of Canada, it leads the G7 countries in terms of percentage of the population who are immigrants and permanent residents. In some of Canada's largest cities, this percentage is much higher: in 2021, almost half (46.6 percent) of the population living in Toronto were immigrants as well as 41.8% in Vancouver. The majority of the population in these two cities is born outside the country.[1] Across Canada, record high numbers of immigrants are leading to a growing and dynamic constellation of communities and identities. While Canadians benefit from our country's multicultural verve and the cachet of a favorable international reputation, immigration is also an essential solution to a looming labour crisis that stands to seriously impact the economy.

This labour shortage is no surprise; the demographic shifts behind it have been evident for more than 20 years. Current evidence of the mismatch between supply and demand abounds. Recent Statistics Canada data suggests that 36 percent of Canadian businesses are reporting labour shortages and that 61 percent of those reporting recruitment/retention challenges state that obstacles are worse than they were 12 months ago.[2] According to one report from RBC, 25 percent

1 Statistics Canada, "Immigrants Make Up the Largest Share of the Population in Over 150 Years and Continue to Shape Who We are as Canadians," *The Daily*, October 26, 2022, www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026a-eng.htm

2 Statistics Canada, "Business or Organization Obstacles Over the Next Three Months, Fourth Quarter of 2022," released November 25, 2022, https://doi.org/10.25318/3310060301-eng

of Canada's four million tradespeople will need to upgrade their skills within five years amid significant digital disruption.[3] The acute labour and skills shortages present significant challenges across sectors; for example, gaps in labour supply and demand persist even in high-demand STEM occupations. However, in Canada, over half of immigrants with STEM degrees work in non-STEM occupations. Further, among those who did not find a STEM job, only 20 percent found a job requiring a university degree (compared to 41 percent of STEM-educated, Canadian-born individuals who found jobs in a STEM-related field). Only 20 percent of those who do not work in STEM-related occupations work in occupations requiring a degree.[4] Worse, in Canada, even for STEM-educated immigrants working in STEM-related occupations, this group earned 17 percent less than their Canadian-born counterparts.[5]

At the crux of the issue are the many labour market barriers newcomers to Canada face. Among them, the devaluation of their international experience and credentials (Bauder, 2003),[6] and unfamiliarity with official languages.[7] The complexity of the Canadian immigration process also creates challenges, including the cost and length of the process, the complexity of existing pathways, and the need for better pathways to permanent residence and employment. Some employers recognize that newcomers are more likely to have the growth mindset, adaptability, resilience, and skills that the World Economic Forum claims are among those skills most in demand.[8] Indeed, newcomers to Canada tend to be better educated and punch well above their weight when it comes to innovation and entrepreneurship. Furthermore, according to the Business Development Bank of Canada, immigrants are more than twice as likely as their Canadian-born peers to engage in entrepreneurial activity.[9] Statistics Canada data indicate that immigrant-owned businesses are also more likely to implement innovative business practices.[10]

Yet in spite of decades of research and hand-wringing, immigrants to Canada continue to be more likely to be underemployed, underpaid and in precarious survival jobs that are not commensurate with their experience. In spite of human rights obligations, many employers still code racism in the shrouds of "lack of Canadian experience" and screen out applicants with "foreign sounding last names".[11]

Others, while well-intentioned, lack the knowledge and skills to attract, develop and retain newcomers. Many businesses are aware and have been stressing the importance of integrating immigrant populations, but it is challenging for those businesses, especially Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), to keep up. Capacity challenges are a key factor for this type of enterprise; it is very difficult for SMEs to engage with the large number of settlement agencies in their search for talent. Another challenge for employers is the concentration of settlement agencies in urban areas, making it difficult to attract workers to rural communities. In the context of a global war for talent, with the US once again an attractive destination, many newcomers are voting with their feet: a recent national survey found 30 percent of 18-34-year-old new Canadians say they do not intend to stay in Canada.[12]

With the unemployment to job vacancy rate reaching historical lows, we desperately need workers across occupations ranging from highly skilled engineers, tradespeople, as well

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3 Naomi Powell and Ben Richardson, *Powering Up: Preparing Canada's Skilled Trades for a Post-pandemic Economy* (Toronto: Royal Bank of Canada (RBC), 2021), https://thoughtleadership.rbc.com/powering-up-preparing-canadas-skilled-trades-for-a-post-pandemic-economy

4 Garnett Picot and Feng Hou, *Skill Utilization and Earnings of STEM-Educated Immigrants in Canada: Differences by Degree Level and Field of Study* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, December 2019), www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2019023-eng.htm

5 Garnett Picot and Feng Hou, *A Canada-US Comparison of the Economic Outcomes of STEM Immigrants* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, September 2020), www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2020016-eng.htm

6 Wendy Cukier et al., *Immigrant Entrepreneurship: Barriers and Facilitators to Growth* (Toronto: Diversity Institute, 2017), www.torontomu.ca/diversity/reports/immigrant_entrepreneurship

7 World Economic Forum, *The Future of Jobs Report* (Cologny: World Economic Forum, October 2020), www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_2020.pdf

8 Isabelle Bouchard and Pierre-Olivier Bédard-Maltais, *A Nation of Entrepreneurs: The Changing Face of Canadian Entrepreneurship* (Barrie: Business Development Bank of Canada, October 2019), www.bdc.ca/en/documents/analysis_research/bdc-etude-sbw-nation-entrepreneurs.pdf?utm_campaign=Changing-faces-Study-2019--EN

9 Yuri Ostrovsky and Garnett Picot, *Innovation in Immigrant-owned Firms* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, June 2020), www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2020009-eng.htm

10 Rupaleem Bhuyan et al., "Branding 'Canadian Experience' in Immigration Policy: Nation Building in a Neoliberal Era," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 18 (2017): 47-62, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-015-0467-4

11 Sylvie Albert et al., "Building a Self-Directed Process for the Development of Internationally Trained Professional Profiles in Canada," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 14 (2013): 671–688, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-012-0256-2; Institute for Canadian Citizenship, "Immigrants to Canada Facing Crisis of Confidence," Press release, March 23, 2022, http://inclusion.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Immigrants-to-Canada-Facing-Crisis-of-Confidence-media-release.pdf

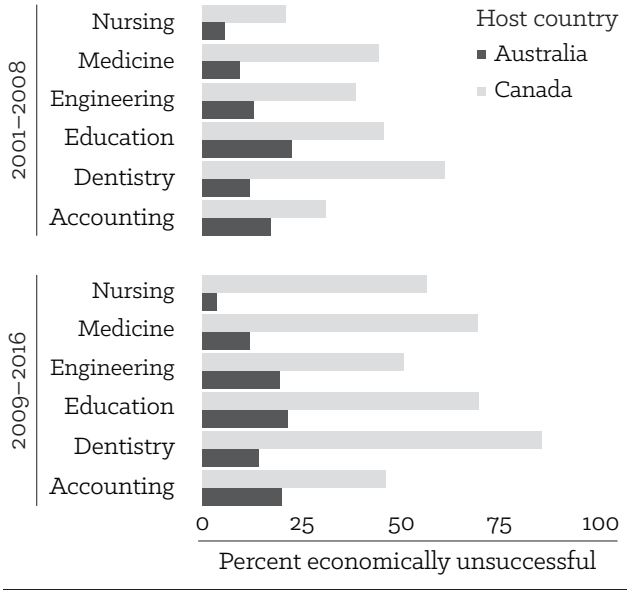
12 Statistics Canada, *Labour Shortage Trends in Canada* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2022), www.statcan.gc.ca/en/subjects-start/labour_/labour-shortage-trends-canada

as manual labourers.[13] Shortages of healthcare workers have also reached crisis proportions. Meanwhile, a recent report by Statistics Canada indicates that low-skilled Temporary Foreign Workers (TFW) are more likely to become permanent residents than highly skilled TFWs, challenging our assumptions about the value of skills. More recently, COVID created massive backlogs, which Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) is promising to address with its new digital strategy.[14]

These employment outcomes, and the impact on the socio-economic position of newcomers, are concerning for Canada, especially when compared with other countries. A recent study by Harrap et al. comparing Canada and Australia throws the critical gaps in Canada's system into high relief. While both Australia and Canada depend on immigrants (and foreign students) for economic growth, and both have points systems that attempt to align skills with employment, the similarities end there.[15] More than 75 percent of immigrants to Australia earn 90 percent of the sector's average wages. In Canada it is only 50 percent. In other words, immigrants in Australia are significantly more likely to be successful from an economic standpoint. In Canada, immigrants who arrived between 2001-2008 were still lagging significantly behind the median income in their fields by 2016; more recent arrivals were faring even worse. Indeed, in the regulated professions for virtually every source country, Canadian immigrants have poorer employment outcomes (see Figure 1).

Australia has never enjoyed Canada's reputation for tolerance and inclusion and yet Australia has leapfrogged Canada in terms of policy innovation. Australians have been innovative in using research to improve selection methods and in working closely with employers. Australia has also continuously worked to ease the recognition of international credentials and provides occupation-specific bridging courses combined with industry internships. In addition, Australia has introduced an expedited-entry system for highly skilled immigrants and, in cooperation with key stakeholders, regularly updates its list of skilled occupations and the skills required as well as its methods of skills assessments.[16]

**FIGURE 1. PERCENT OF SKILLED MIGRANTS EARNING BELOW 50 PERCENT OFT THEIR FIELD'S MEDIAN INCOME BY FIELD OF QUALIFICATION AND PERIOD OF ARRIVAL**




Source: Harrap et al., "Australia's Superior Skilled Migration Outcomes Compared with Canada's," 99.

Certainly, Canada has also invested heavily in official languages programs, in occupational training and wrap-around supports, and massively in settlement agencies. However, the payoff for these investments is uneven. For example, the Auditor General of Ontario has shown gaps in language training outcomes: less than half of all learners are showing progress in learning English or French.[17] There is also a relatively slow uptake of innovative approaches – using technology, adapting learning and employer-centered approaches.

Research has also shown that fragmentation of funding, lack of connections to employers and lack of accountability has led to what can only be described as predatory practices in training organizations which are preparing people for imaginary jobs.[18] Since many newcomers come as TFWs or international students, they are often excluded from the bridging programs

13 Yasmine Hassan, "Health-care Workers Call for Government Help as Burnout Worsens and Staff Shortages Increase," *CBC News*, June 18, 2022, www.cbc.ca/news/politics/healthcare-workers-burnout-1.6492889

14 Victoria Esses et al., "Supporting Canada's COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery through Robust Immigration Policy and Programs," FACETS 6 (2023): 686-759, https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2021-0014; Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), 2022-23 *Departmental Plan* (Ottawa: IRCC, 2022), www.canada.ca/content/dam/ircc/documents/pdf/english/pub/dp-pm-2022-2023-eng.pdf

15 Benjamin Harrap et al., "Australia's Superior Skilled Migration Outcomes Compared with Canada's," *International Migration* 60, no. 5 (2022): 91-107, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/imig.12940

16 Benjamin Harrap et al., "Australia's Superior Skilled Migration Outcomes Compared with Canada's," *International Migration* 60, no. 5 (2022): 91-107, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/imig.12940

17 Office of the Auditor General, *Settlement and Integration Services for Newcomers* (Ottawa: Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2017), chap. 3, section 3.13, www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/arreports/en17/v1_313en17.pdf

18 Eddy Ng and Suzzane Gagnon, *Employment Gaps and Underemployment for Racialized Groups and Immigrants in Canada: Current Findings and Future Directions* (Toronto: Public Policy Forum, 2020), https://fsc-ccf.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/EmploymentGaps-Immigrants-PPF-JAN2020-EN.pdf

and the work-integrated learning opportunities most likely to produce good employment. This is particularly true in health care, where 47 percent of immigrants who received their health care education in other countries are underutilized, with the actual underutilization rate likely higher, because immigrants in health occupations often work far below the skill levels for which they have been trained.[19] In the private sector, where most employment is with SMEs, there are fewer supports for employers in hiring immigrants and less support for immigrant entrepreneurial ventures than the evidence would suggest is needed. Most settlement agencies regard entrepreneurship or self-employment as a failure in settlement even though research shows it is often a pathway that newcomers would prefer.[20] While increasingly wrap around supports – particularly career supports – are recognized as valuable, these services are also hard to navigate and access.

## HOW TO FIX IT: RECOMMENDATIONS

### IMPLEMENT A SYSTEMS APPROACH

There is a need for integration and cross-sector collaboration. Currently, different levels of government and stakeholders work in silos and miss opportunities to share and scale best practices. The current fragmented structure will continue to further restrict the capacity of businesses, like SMEs, to increase inclusivity and the diversity of their workplaces by hiring immigrants and leveraging their skills. Innovative and inclusive solutions need to build on collaboration among different stakeholders, including employers, civil society, postsecondary education institutions and government.

### URGENTLY MODERNIZE POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Harness technology and influence to clear the backlog in a timely fashion. Involve employers in defining skills and occupations in demand and streamline processes for them. Provide pre-arrival assessments and supports to manage expectations and enable newcomers to hit the ground running. As Bergen and Hyder have noted, enhancing the Global Talent Stream would enable employers to have efficient access to the skills they need to grow their business and reduce the red tape they face and complexities in the system.[21] Canada needs to immediately expand access to this program by broadening the list of eligible occupations such as computer networking technicians, software engineers and mathematicians and continuing to update the list over time. Skilled trades are not adequately prioritized, nor are new emerging and in demand technology roles. Address the outdated aspects of policy like dual intent, which require international students to promise to return to their home country – nonsensical for applicants from countries like Afghanistan. Make it easier for International Students and TFW to access support and become permanent residents.

### FOCUS ON SUPPORTING EMPLOYERS, ESPECIALLY SMES, WITH BEST PRACTICES TO SOURCE, HIRE AND DEVELOP NEWCOMERS AND IN TURN EXPORT MORE FROM EMPLOYERS

It is important to emphasize that almost 90 percent of private sector employment in Canada comes from SMEs.22 Employers can do better, and many want to do better, but it is also important to recognize the different realities of different businesses. SMEs need particular supports and tools to get around their capacity challenges and limited resources. Potential solutions to explore could involve collaborating with diverse stakeholders, including postsecondary education institutions and settlement agencies, focusing on system-level change. What is needed is a supply management system to assess talent and skill, using technology and databases, to allow SMEs a line of sight to the talent in the system. In general, economies of scale are needed to help support this sector, and some efforts are underway to create a critical mass of SMEs. Additionally, intentional efforts are needed to address systemic discrimination and promote the agency of employers in order to leverage their critical role.

### TACKLE FOREIGN CREDENTIAL RECOGNITION ONCE AND FOR ALL

More than 40 percent of internationally educated male engineers are underemployed.23 Settlement agencies are retraining doctors as personal support workers. In both cases, qualified applicants who navigated the process and passed

19 Feng Hou and Christoph Schimmele, *Adults with a Health Education but Not Working in Health Occupations* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, April 2020), www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00004-eng.htm; Naomi Alboim et al., *Globally Trained Local Talent: Opening Pathways for Internationally Educated Professionals to Strengthen Ontario's Health Care System* (Toronto: Canada Excellence Research Chairs (CERC), March 2022), www.torontomu.ca/cerc-migration/Policy/CERCMigration_PolicyBrief07_MAR_2022.pdf

20 Wendy Cukier et al., *Immigrant Entrepreneurship: Barriers and Facilitators to Growth* (Toronto: Diversity Institute, 2017), www.torontomu.ca/diversity/reports/immigrant_entrepreneurship

21 Benjamin Bergen and Goldy Hyder, "Canada Can Do More to Attract the World's Brightest Science and Tech Minds," *Toronto Star*, March 28, 2022, www.thestar.com/business/opinion/2022/03/28/canada-can-do-more-to-attract-the-worlds-brightest-science-and-tech-minds.html

22 Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, "Key Small Business Statistics," last modified November 29, 2022, https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/sme-research-statistics/en/key-small-business-statistics/key-small-business-statistics-2022#s2.2

23 Ontario Society of Professional Engineers (OSPE), *Diversity and Inclusion in the Engineering Profession: Fact Sheet* (Toronto: OSPE, November 2020), https://ospe.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/DiversityandInclusion_FactSheet_Nov2020.pdf

their examinations are denied access to the internships and experience they need for professional practice. These kinds of obstacles need to be addressed. Professional accreditation agencies also use archaic methods – for example assessing internationally educated nurses' education on an individual basis (e.g. Ontario) rather than focusing on articulation agreements with institutions and equivalency assessments. In Ontario, internationally trained nurses have to pass exams as well, so the barriers to credit transfers are largely unnecessary and waste valuable time. This situation has given rise to situations where it is faster for some immigrant physicians to get certified through the US and then apply for reciprocity in Canada than to wait years for residencies here. These needless delays need to be tackled. There is no evidence that countries with higher proportions of internationally educated doctors have poorer outcomes.

### BUILD HUMAN CAPITAL – TRAINING AND SUPPORT PROGRAMS THAT WORK

Invest in innovative programs that produce results sharing, replicating, and scaling success. Harness innovative practices and technologies. Build capacity, but also accountability frameworks so investments are producing returns. Provide wraparound supports, recognizing that these investments pay off. Learn and incorporate strategies from the successes of refugee private sponsorship. Develop and adopt existing innovative models to help newcomers build social capital, and find mentors and sponsors with the knowledge and connections to help them navigate systems.

### RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF ENTREPRENEURS (BEYOND THE ENTREPRENEURIAL CLASS) AND PROVIDE SUPPORTS FOR NEWCOMER ENTREPRENEURS

Tailor existing support programs or create new ones to address newcomers' unique financial and technical needs. Immigrants continue to experience barriers when it comes to starting businesses, raising capital and navigating government rules and programs. What's more, organizations that help entrepreneurs are not always equipped to handle needs that are specific to immigrants.

## CONCLUSION

While Canada is among the most attractive destinations for foreign talent, its reputation has suffered in recent years. In a global race for workers, Canada cannot afford complacency. We must continuously strive to create and sustain the conditions that can attract and retain top talent. It also means ensuring that our immigration system is as client-focused as possible by simplifying administrative requirements and reducing processing times. Most of all it means building awareness of the economic imperative and urgency of attracting and retaining talent from around the world and challenging, at every opportunity, ignorance, xenophobia and hate. Immigrants can help companies grow, creating more jobs for local workers and benefitting the Canadian economy for everyone. Canada is a land of opportunity and has one of the highest rates of social mobility in the world.[24] Hundreds of thousands of immigrants choose to make this country their new home every year. But barriers to unlocking the full potential of this enterprising population remain. Recently, however, we are witnessing a softening of support for immigration. Recent moves by the Canadian government to extend a work-permit program initiated in July 2023 to attract 10000 US-based, non-citizen tech workers have been received with mixed emotions. On the one hand, the program that seeks to lure elite visa holders with permanent residency in Canada has been criticized for taking advantage of the widely understood precarity that characterizes immigrants worldwide. On the other hand, the initiative has been applauded with requests for its extension by the domestic tech industry as an innovative measure to address critical gaps in the Canadian labour force.[25] Additionally, skepticism from across the political spectrum was raised regarding recent proposals made by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to increase immigration from 400 000 to 500 000 permanent residents by 2025. In this context, criticism around immigration can be understood as being more directly connected to the current housing shortage and to recent difficulties associated with resettlement. For example, the difficult, costly and time-consuming processes required in the transfer of credentials of recently landed skilled immigrants (see the related chapter in this volume for a detailed look into the case of Internationally Educated Nurses), or, the Toronto Shelter Crisis of August 2023, when asylum seekers and refugees overwhelmed local intake services and were forced to camp in the streets, providing evidence that questions our country's readiness to welcome newcomers in a just and responsible way.[26] We must take care so that Immigration avoids becoming a scapegoat for long standing neglect by all levels of government in dealing with building adequate housing on the one hand and the shortage of skilled professionals on the other.

Immigration is a solution, not the problem. It therefore

24 World Economic Forum, *Global Social Mobility Index 2020: Why Economies Benefit from Fixing Inequality* (Cologny: World Economic Forum, January 2020), www.weforum.org/reports/global-social-mobility-index-2020-why-economies-benefit-from-fixing-inequality

25 David Olive, "How Canada Poached 10 000 Tech Workers from the US–In just 48 hours," *Toronto Star*, August 15, 2023, www.thestar.com/business/how-canada-poached-10-000-tech-workers-from-the-u-s-in-just-48-hours/article_c159c7cc-6163-5414-8453-0db70899df90.html

26 Claire Porte Robbins, "Is Canada Really So Immigrant Friendly?," *Foreign Policy*, August 28, 2023, https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/28/canada-immigration-trudeau-policy-multiculturalism-backlash

becomes imperative to accelerate the rate and pace of integration through sensible proposals that ensure the continued prosperity of Canadians. By working together to remove these obstacles, we can position Canada for a strong economic recovery by unleashing immigrants' extraordinary energy, skills, and ideas. Canada's commitment to welcoming newcomers to its shores has long provided the country with an advantage but we cannot be complacent. We need a renewed commitment and urgent action.

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