CENTRES OF EXPERTISE: AN EXPANDED ROLE FOR COLLEGES AND INSTITUTES IN IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION

ABSTRACT

Canadian colleges and institutes play a vital role in preparing students to enter the labour market. Internationally educated immigrants comprise a growing element of the student population. This paper proposes centres of expertise to enhance the capacity of colleges and institutes to help immigrants on their pathway to employment.

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Canadian colleges and institutes have long been in the business of preparing students for labour market entry. Many have also seen dramatic changes in the composition of their student body, including an increase in internationally educated immigrants seeking access to their occupation in Canada. Individual colleges and institutes have introduced innovative measures to respond to the needs of this growing population. Collaboration across the system is needed, however, to make the best use of limited resources and to ensure sustainability. This paper proposes the concept of Centres of Expertise to meet this pressing need.

I. THE NEED FOR ACTION

Context

Changing student population

The population of community colleges and institutes is changing, particularly in major urban centres. Students are increasingly older and more diverse. In almost all Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs), recent immigrants aged 18-24 year are more likely to attend school than their Canadian counterparts. According to a Statistics Canada study of 2001 census data, this difference was 23 percentage points in Victoria.[1]

The same study found that more than 25% of full- and part-time students in Vancouver and Toronto between the ages of 18 and 24 immigrated to Canada less than 10 years earlier, and this figure was 10-13% among the student populations in seven other CMAs. The study also shows that recent immigrants aged 25-54 were at least twice as likely as Canadian-born persons in this age group to be enrolled in post-secondary education.

The study further found that recent immigrants who had already obtained a post-secondary credential were more likely than those with high school or less to attend post-secondary education in Canada. This group accounts for a significant share of adult students in many CMAs: 25% in Toronto and Vancouver, 10-14% in several others.

Immigrants who could benefit from college programs are a diverse group with differing needs and varying levels of skills and experience. They include recent arrivals and people who have been in Canada for a significant period of time. They also include international students who may, ultimately, apply to stay in Canada as immigrants. Colleges and Institutes need new and innovative programs to support this diverse and growing element of the student population.

Under-utilization of immigrant skills

It is well-documented that immigrants' education and skills are often not fully utilized in Canada. A recent paper[2] describes the significant discounting of education and work experience obtained abroad (discounted by 30% and 70%, respectively) but also shows evidence that this discounting can be recouped quite readily with some top-up of Canadian education and work experience.

The role of colleges

Canadian colleges and institutes are ideally placed to improve labour market access for immigrants in a variety of areas. Colleges and institutes:

- are in the assessment, training and labour market preparation business; applied learning is their *raison d'être*;
- are in the forefront of implementing prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR);
- have been offering English and French as second language programs (ESL/FSL) for years;
- have connections and working relationships with employers and regulatory bodies;
- have collaborated with community-based organizations on bridging programs that help immigrants fill gaps in skills, credentials or work experience;
- have the expert staff, infrastructure and credibility in their communities to design tools and programs that could be of real benefit to the immigrant client group; and
- have a national association and an established record of cross-Canadian collaboration.

Recent developments

Public awareness and engagement

Public awareness and stakeholder engagement in improving labour market access for immigrants have increased dramatically in recent years. This is reflected in government policies, priorities and funding, as well as in stakeholder innovations and partnerships involving community organizations, sector councils, employer associations, regulatory bodies and post-secondary institutions.

Initiatives in Canada

Many colleges and institutes have introduced new ways to serve internationally educated immigrants. This was documented in a diagnostic survey and report by the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC) and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (now Human Resources and Social Development Canada, HRSDC)[3] as well as subsequent ACCC symposia and roundtables. The report also identified barriers that colleges and institutes faced in delivering services, barriers immigrants faced in trying to access them, and lessons learned.

Initiatives in place or underway by Canadian colleges and institutes include:

- Mentorship, buddy and peer helper programs;
- Bursaries for immigrants;
- Career training and worksite experience with tailored language instruction;
- Multicultural counsellors and diversity offices;
- Employment resource centre for immigrant professionals;
- Competency-based assessment of skills for particular occupations;
- Occupation-specific language training;
- Occupational bridging and 'fast track' programs for immigrants in specified professions and trades;
- Training on workplace culture and communications combined with work placements;
- Customized, modular programs leading to employment and licensing in specified professions;
- Exam preparation courses to write provincial licensing exams in regulated professions; and
- A pilot project on immigrant attraction and retention to meet the unique needs of small and rural communities.

All these initiatives represent important progress. We do not know, however, the extent to which they have been documented or evaluated, nor is there a mechanism for assessing whether they are sustainable or transferable. There is also a real danger that institutions are duplicating efforts and resources to 'reinvent the wheel.'

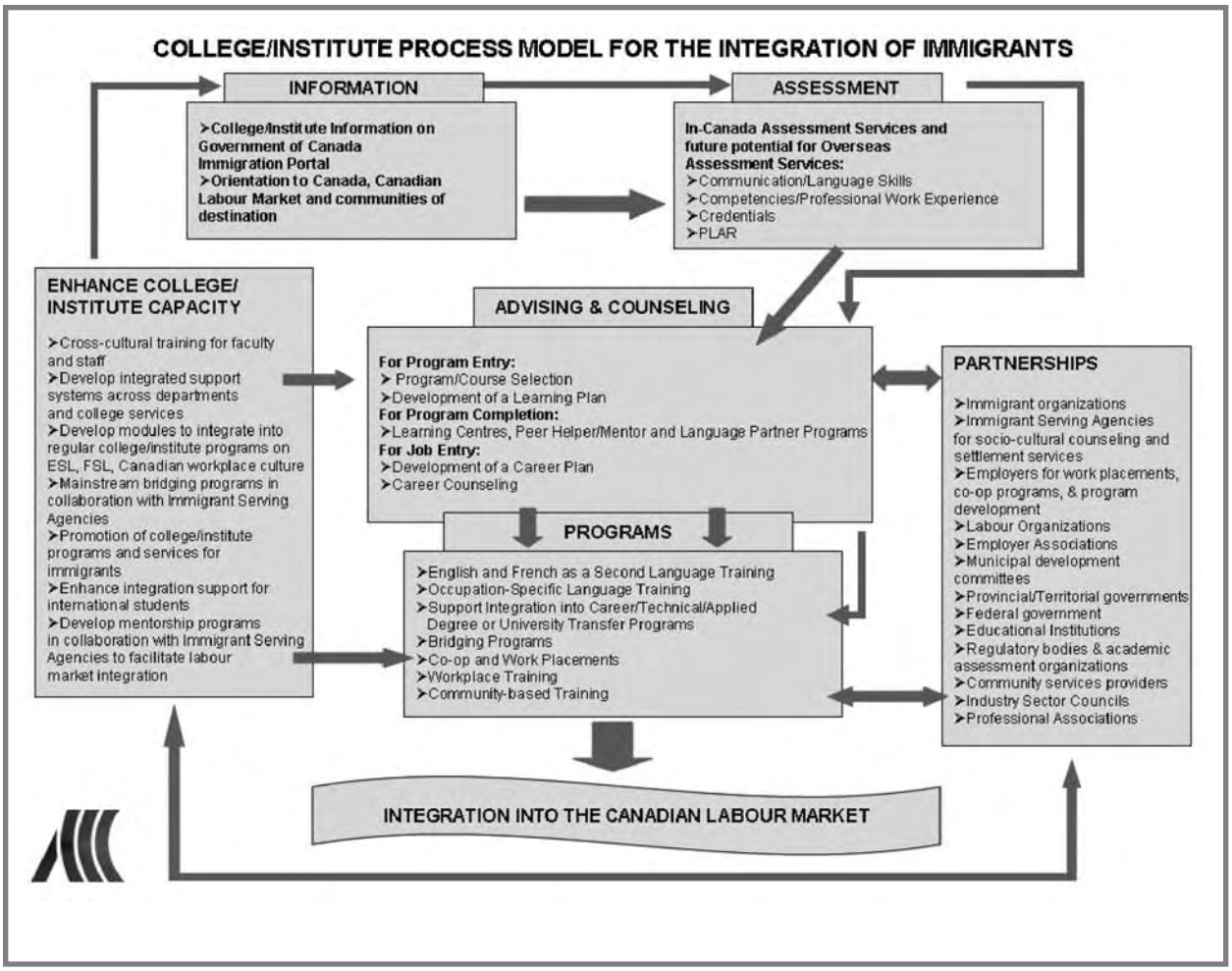
Emergence of frameworks

There is a growing recognition of the need for a unifying vision and systemic approach to serve as a framework for action, to assist immigrants from the time they begin seeking information on labour market access, until they enter the workplace in their desired occupation.

In *Fulfilling the Promise*,[4] Naomi Alboim and the Maytree Foundation advocated the following framework for integrating immigrant skills:

- Incentives and supports for stakeholders to provide services and for immigrants to access them;
- Access for immigrants to:
  - Information and expert advice to support immigration decisions and labour market entry;
  - Assessment of education and experience acquired overseas;
  - Educational and work experience programs to fill identified gaps between an individuals' technical assets and the Canadian requirements to enter the occupation;
- A leadership council to foster collaboration, identify priorities and linkages, and communicate results.

Building on *Fulfilling the Promise*, the ACCC developed a Process Model, which was published in its March 2004 diagnostic report. This model includes the provision of information, assessment services, advising and counselling and other programs. It also emphasizes the importance of partnerships and increased college capacity.[5]



Decision to explore centres of expertise

Despite promising developments in the post-secondary and other sectors, many challenges remain. How can progress be achieved in a systematic and integrated way? How can learning and capacity be shared across the college system? How can new ideas be tested without "reinventing the wheel"? How can sustainability be ensured for promising new initiatives? How can colleges respond to the changing needs of immigrants from different world locations and with different educational and occupational backgrounds? How can colleges be encouraged to collaborate when they compete for prospective students and funding?

At the November 2005 ACCC symposium, Naomi Alboim, an associate of the Maytree Foundation, challenged participants to consider the development of a series of "Centres of Excellence for Immigrant Integration" across the country in order to address these challenges. Subsequently, ACCC obtained funding from HRSDC to flesh out the centres of expertise concept and to engage in discussions on potential models. Accordingly, the ACCC retained Ms. Alboim and Karen Cohl to help develop the "centres of expertise" concept, which is set out below.

II. CENTRES OF EXPERTISE CONCEPT

Vision

The centres of expertise concept flows from the following vision and is built on the ACCC process model outlined above:

Services to immigrants
Colleges and institutes in high immigrant-receiving areas will provide one-window access to services and programs for immigrants, whether delivered directly or through referral to external experts.

College and institute capacity
All colleges and institutes will have access to tools and expertise to provide services and programs for immigrants.

Collaboration
Colleges and institutes will collaborate with each other and stakeholders to ensure that immigrants seeking labour market entry are well-served.

Under this vision, immigrants would have access to the following services and programs:

- Information: college information and orientation to Canada and its labour market mechanisms;

- Assessment: language skills, academic credentials, and occupational competency;
- Advising and Counselling: learning plans, mentorship, and career counselling;
- Programs: employment-oriented language training, gap-filling career/technical courses, bridging programs, and work placements.

In addition, the capacity of colleges and institutes to provide these services would be enhanced through: coordinated policy development; cross-cultural training; improved funding models; and the sharing of promising programs, services and tools.

Further, colleges and institutes would collaborate to design and deliver programs with settlement organizations, employers, other educational institutions, regulatory bodies, governments and local leadership councils.

Principles

The challenge is to create centres of expertise that would help to achieve the vision through sustainable innovations, sharing of expertise, and community partnerships. The following principles are proposed to guide the development of centres of expertise.

Added value

Centres of expertise should be created only where they can provide clear benefits in improving labour market access for immigrants.

The creation of centres of expertise will be resource- and time-intensive. Before establishing a centre, it is essential to show, in concrete terms, how immigrants will benefit in preparing for the labour market.

The benefits would be enhanced if centres offer to provide certain services to external parties in keeping with the community development mandate of colleges and institutes. For example, their PLAR service could be offered to regulatory bodies, employers and non-student immigrants on a fee-for-service basis.[6] Similarly, career counselling, mentoring, and work experience opportunities could be offered to immigrants who do not require additional education or credentials.

Building on existing expertise

Centres of expertise should build on existing expertise in Canadian colleges and institutes while also taking advantage of external expertise.

Certain colleges and institutes already have extensive expertise in service to immigrants. In developing the centres of expertise model, it is essential to learn from and build upon this expertise.

Considerable expertise also exists externally. While centres of expertise ideally will provide one-window access, they should not be expected to develop or directly deliver all services to immigrants. In some cases they could refer students to, or contract with, outside experts.

For example, the Canadian Centre for Language Benchmarks (CCLB) is expert in the development of language benchmarks and assessment tools, including tools for assessing occupation-specific language skills. Moreover, there are several recognized organizations expert in international academic credential assessment across Canada. In addition, many community agencies provide settlement counselling. Rather than trying to duplicate that expertise, colleges and institutes could make arrangements with selected external bodies to obtain the support required.

Similarly, other colleges and institutes could arrange for a centre of expertise to provide programs and services for their immigrant student population.

Sharing expertise

Innovations should be shared.

While there is great value in centres of expertise serving their own immigrant student population, the model is more attractive if the expertise can be shared more broadly. Where a centre uses public funds to develop, test, deliver and evaluate new tools, services or programs, they should make them available for adoption or adaptation by other interested colleges and institutes.

Voluntary access

Colleges and institutes should decide, on a voluntary basis, whether they wish to use or adapt a Centre's products or services.

While centres of expertise should be willing to share expertise with and offer services to other colleges and institutes, it should be entirely up to the individual institutions to decide whether and the extent to which they may wish to utilize the centre's expertise and services.

Fair process

Any college or institute should have an opportunity to become a centre of expertise in immigrant programs and services.

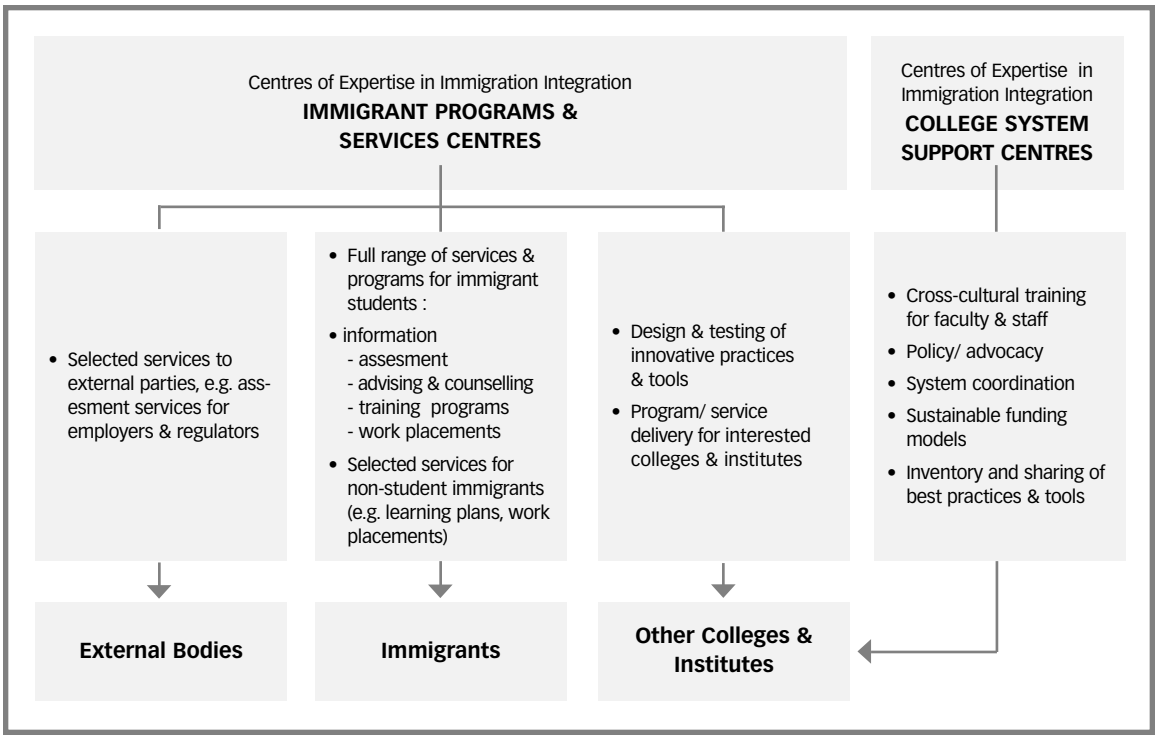
Every Canadian college and institute need not become a centre of expertise in immigrant integration. However, in order to maximize college capacity, all that are interested should have the opportunity to develop into such centres. If funding or incentives become available to develop centres of expertise, a fair process should be developed to determine college and institute access and eligibility.

Two types of centres

We propose two types of centres of expertise. The first would be expert in the delivery of programs and services for immigrants. The second would provide support to enhance the capacity of colleges and institutes across the system to respond to immigrant needs.

Centres of Expertise in Immigrant Programs and Services

Centres of Expertise in Immigrant Programs and Services would ensure that immigrants receive the full range of information services, assessment services, advising and counselling services, and educational programs, whether through direct delivery or referral to other organizations.



Some such centres would be *all-purpose centres of expertise*. That is, their expertise would encompass immigrants in all occupations for which the institution offers educational programs.

Other centres could be sector or *occupation-specific centres of expertise.* That is, their expertise would focus on one or more specific occupations (e.g. nursing) or sectors (e.g. health), or functions in an occupation or sector (e.g. PLAR for nurses). Ideally, expertise would be geared to occupations or sectors in which a large number of immigrants have had training or experience before immigrating to Canada, and those that have existing or projected skills shortages.

A major benefit of the sectoral approach is the focused use of resources and hence not reinventing the wheel. For example, one good virtual simulation to assess and demonstrate competency (PLAR) or language skills in a particular occupation should be sufficient, rather than having multiple institutions devoting time and resources to produce duplicate models.

Centres of expertise in college system support

Colleges and institutes - including those that are centres of expertise in immigrant services - may need access to more generic expertise. Individual colleges, for example, may need access to intercultural training for faculty and staff, or to an inventory of best practices and tools (e.g. how to adapt mainstream education programs into modular programs). In addition, the college system as a whole would benefit from strategic and concentrated policy and advocacy activities (e.g. for sustainable funding models) or for coordination (e.g. information portals).

Therefore, *Centres of Expertise in College System Support* would be created to provide support and the sharing of promising practices to enhance the capacity of colleges and institutes across the system. This would include policy development, coordination, sharing of best practices and training.

III. CONCLUSION

Canadian colleges and institutes play a critically important role in producing a well-trained labour supply for our ever-changing labour market. Internationally educated immigrants comprise a growing population who are turning to the community college system in their pathway to employment. Centres of expertise are a way to enhance the capacity of colleges and institutes to help integrate immigrant skills into the Canadian labour market.

Notes

[1] Grant Schellenberg, *Trends and Conditions in Census Metropolitan Areas – Immigrants in Canada's Census Metropolitan Areas*, Statistics Canada, 2004.

[2] Naomi Alboim, Ross Finnie and Ronald Meng, *The Discounting of Immigrants' Skills in Canada: Evidence and Policy Recommendations*, IRPP Choices, Vol 11, no. 2, February 2005.

[3] ACCC / HRSDC Report on "Responding to the needs of Immigrants: Results of the Diagnostic Survey of College and Institute Programs and Services for Immigrants and Conclusions of the College and institute Immigration Roundtable" (March 2004).

[4] Naomi Alboim and the Maytree Foundation, *Fulfilling the Promise: Integrating Immigrant Skills Into the Canadian Economy*, Caledon Institute, 2002.

[5] In Ontario, the Colleges Integrating Immigrants to Employment ("CIITE") project also took a framework approach. The CIITE framework focused on four components: information and advisement, assessment, program delivery, and employment preparation. See Phase 1 Final Report, December 2004. Implementation of some components is now underway.

[6] Fees might not be necessary if Centres of Expertise receive ongoing funding to provide such services.