WESTERN CANADA'S UNIQUE IMMIGRATION PICTURE

ABSTRACT

Because of its aging workforce, declining birthrate and specific context, the Canadian West must find ways of attracting immigrants. With the Bulding the New West initiative put forth by the Canada West Foundation, a certain number of immigration trends in western Canada have been identified: problems stemming from cultural proximity; negative impact of media reporting of crime and racial tensions in Toronto, Montréal and Vancouver; a decline in immigration during the last two decades; an increased rate of immigrant activity as well as a high level of refugees; and non-recognition of foreign credentials and foreign work experience, which is exacerbated by the percentage of Asian-born immigrants.

An aging labour force and a declining birthrate represent a much-discussed international challenge. For a majority of western Canada, this concern is particularly acute because of low population growth rates, declining shares of new immigrants a burgeoning Aboriginal youth component of the regional population that has low workforce participation rates.

While immigration represents an important opportunity for the West, there are also substantial barriers to maximizing its positive potential. Improvements are needed in immigration approaches from the various orders of government and in the attitudes of western employers and the public toward immigrants. If the West is going to compete more effectively for immigrants, employers need to be more willing to hire immigrants, professional associations need to reevaluate the appropriateness of their standards and the public needs to become aware of the important role immigrants play in regional economic success. Realistically, changing these attitudes and issues may take several years, but improving today's policies and regulations can play an important role in catalyzing this process.

Immigration Consultations

For their part, those individuals working in immigration-related fields in western Canada understand the kinds of changes needed to bring about better immigration outcomes in the region. When brought together as part of the Canada West Foundation's Building the New West to discuss immigration concerns in the various provinces, a number of common themes emerged.

While immigration levels vary greatly from big city to small city to rural areas, the basic immigration priorities for the region as a whole were markedly similar. Participants in our consultations saw the need for: increases in the amount and the accuracy of information on the West and its opportunities available to prospective immigrants; more efficient and more flexible immigrant selection criteria; an investment in strengthening the West's settlement and integration resources; greater efforts to make western residents more welcoming of immigrants; and improved workplace transition and skills acquisition opportunities for immigrants in western Canada.

Gaining an advantage in these areas would lead to better immigration outcomes for those immigrants already in the West, and increase the attractiveness of the region to new immigrants.

Beyond the areas of commonality shared by participants, there were of course high priority issues that relate to the wide disparity of immigration levels among western Canada's cities. Participants in Vancouver, Winnipeg and Calgary – cities with proportionately higher rates of immigration – mentioned issues related to settlement and funding as a high priority. Those in Edmonton and Saskatoon – cities that draw less than their share of immigrants – mentioned the need for creating a welcoming atmosphere and making immigration a priority for their communities.

In Winnipeg, the success associated with its rapid increase in immigration over the last three years has created a number of high profile issues related to the funding of settlement services, housing, and wait lists for training. Interprovincial competition for immigrants, climate, and the appeal of other destinations within Canada are recognized as a threat to retaining the positive aspects of immigration. Participants spoke of particular concerns about losing immigrants to Ontario and Alberta. Winnipeg also faces an equivalent need to address the city's Aboriginal employment issues.

For Regina, interprovincial competition for immigrants is described as making it difficult for Saskatchewan to appear as an appealing destination. Participants recognize that increasing

JASON AZMIER

Jason Azmier has been a public policy principal analyst at the Canada West Foundation since 1995. He is considered one of Canada's leading experts in research on gambling.

immigration is difficult because the city has a number of strikes against it, including climate, little or a negative international reputation, historically low immigration levels, and relatively limited economic opportunities. Regina participants indicated that more flexible immigration policies might enable the area to more easily attract immigrants. For example, finding rural immigrant farmers is hindered by high financial qualification criteria. Lowering some standards might encourage more immigrants to settle in rural areas and contribute to rural economies. Another specific community problem mentioned in Regina is that the current low numbers of immigrants make it difficult to develop the critical mass of services which will offer a welcoming place for immigrants. Finally, urban Aboriginal priorities and difficulty in attracting immigrants are also significant barriers for Regina.

Calgary draws a great deal more immigrants than its share of the national population, and participants in this session focused on issues related to concentration. In particular, secondary migration from other provinces was a concern for participants as settlement funding is not as available for secondary migrants. Alberta's low minimum wage was also mentioned as a specific challenge for Calgary immigrants. Many immigrants occupy the lowest paying jobs in the community and may have difficulty meeting their basic needs in an increasingly costly city. Also unique to Alberta, participants felt that immigration suffers from negative perceptions among the public and elected officials, giving the impression of Calgary as an unwelcoming community.

These concerns were largely echoed by Edmonton participants. The low wages and the perception of negative attitudes represented even more of a barrier to attracting and retaining immigrants in Edmonton as it is not a major port of entry for immigrants. Edmonton respondents felt that greater municipal government awareness of immigrants' value to the city would go a long way to making it more attractive.

The priority issues of Vancouver participants reflect the region's experiences with high volumes of immigrants. The concentration of immigrants, particularly from the Pacific Rim, creates tensions with respect to community and social services, increases perceptions of immigrant-related crime, and fosters more racial tension in the community. Further, immigrants must deal with a cost of living in the region that is high; yet the economic opportunities for immigrants are not as bountiful as in some other centres. It is important to note, however, that lowering the concentration of immigrants was not seen as a priority. Rather, the priority issue was better distribution of the benefits of immigration into the surrounding rural areas outside the Vancouver region.

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Unique Immigration Trends in Western Canada

The opinions of Canada West Foundation immigration consultation participants reflect the circumstance of immigration policy, activity, and history in the West. In particular, immigration outside the policy shadow of the "Big 3" destinations (Toronto, Montréal and Vancouver) presents a number of unique circumstances and priorities.

First, public attitudes towards immigration in the West are skewed by the circumstances of the Big 3 – often in a negative manner. New immigrants in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal face the highest employment barriers associated with acquiring language skills, having their foreign work and education experiences rated and recognized, and beginning job searches and networking. The media reporting of crime and racial tensions in the major centres can also negatively influence the populations in areas where immigrant-related crime is negligible.

Second, while Canada's immigration levels remain high, immigration activity to the West has been in a prolonged period of decline for most of the last two decades (CIC, 2005). Buoyed by Manitoba's immigration successes, this trend is creeping back upwards, yet the West's share of immigrants remains below its share of the population. Extended periods of proportionately light immigration will have an impact on labour force needs and on the capacity of the region to attract more immigrants. These data suggest that the West faces a relatively tough road in trying to fill these shortages.

A third trend in the West involves higher employment activity of immigrants. Male immigrants aged 25-54 in western Canada's cities are significantly more likely to be employed full-time than are immigrants in the rest of Canada. The six cities in which immigrant unemployment rates are most closely matched to Canadian-born rates are all located in the West (Chui, 2003).

The stronger immigrant employment situation in the West is reflective of employment activity in the region and lower concentrations of recent immigrants. Combined, these data suggest it may be easier for those immigrants who settle in the West to enter the workforce. However, it should be noted that these data do not indicate if the employment is more likely to be within the immigrant's area of study or experience, only that immigrants are more likely to have a job.

The problem of the non-recognition of foreign experiences and education is certainly not unique to the West, but its application in the West represents a fourth important trend due to the high number of Asian and Middle Eastern immigrants in the region. The language issues, credential recognition concerns, and the devaluation of immigrant degrees and work experiences relative to Canadian-born workers appears to most negatively affect Asian immigrants.

Research suggests that Asian immigrants, both with and without credentials, appear to gain the least value from their previous experiences and education, when compared to other immigrant groups (Najm, 2001; Ferrer and Riddell, 2003). So while not only a western Canadian problem, addressing the systemic barriers associated with the under-employment of Asian immigrants is one that is particularly pronounced.

A fifth significant regional trend is the emerging importance of Provincial Nominee Programs (PNP) as provincial population growth and distribution mechanisms. Manitoba's use of the PNP is the most aggressive, with half of all Manitoba immigrants now entering through a provincial immigration procedure as part of a Manitoba population growth strategy. These programs represent emerging policy tools by which labour shortages, business investment, the regionalization of immigrants, retention of immigrants and other local policy issues can be addressed.

A final influencing trend in the West is the high level of refugee immigrants in the West – 38% of government-assisted and private refugees class immigrants in 2004 settled in West compared with only 26% for the immigrant population as a whole (CIC, 2005, preliminary data). Saskatchewan is of particular note, as 27% of all immigrants that settled there in 2004 had government-assisted and private refugees class status, compared to a national average of only 4.5%.

The implications of these data are varied. The prairie region benefits strongly from the humanitarian effects of immigration, such as fostering compassion within communities. Yet the economic contributions of refugee immigrants may be less vibrant than economic class immigrants. Refugee needs also place an additional burden on community supports in the West because the specific circumstances of their compassionate grounds can require social supports that are not easily created or made available. Given the high numbers of non-economic class immigrants in the West, the double impact of employment barriers and additional support needs make refugee assistance programs a high profile western concern.

In conclusion, immigrants in the West provide a host of non-economic, cultural and humanitarian contributions to the region and provide important population growth possibilities, particularly in high need areas. There are a number of immigration successes, particularly in Manitoba, that point to and underline the contributions that immigrants are making to the West in manufacturing, community building, population growth, innovation, development of export markets, and cultural diversity.

References

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