CANADIAN IMMIGRATION INTEGRATION PROJECT: A STITCH IN TIME

ABSTRACT

The Canadian Immigration Integration Project is a new pilot initiative funded by the Government of Canada and implemented by the Association of Canadian Community Colleges. Its purpose is to help skilled workers from China, India and the Philippines integrate more effectively into the Canadian labour market by helping them prepare while still in their country of origin.

Canada takes pride in its reputation as a nation built by immigrants and a society that is renewed and enriched by the influx of newcomers from an ever-more diverse range of countries. Canadians point to prominent figures such as Governor General, Michaëlle Jean, and her predecessor, Adrienne Clarkson, as proof that there are no limits to what newcomers can achieve in their adopted homeland.

Certainly, Canada's annual immigration targets suggest that it is a country receptive to immigration and to immigrants. Moreover, Canada's 30-year history of official multiculturalism and of government-funded settlement and integration programs are indicative of a commitment to embrace newcomers and value their contribution to cultural diversity, community development and economic prosperity.

This openness reflects the reality that Canada needs immigrants. Canada's birth-rate falls consistently below the replacement threshold and, as the population ages, labour shortages and skill gaps are likely to increase. Thus, in recent years, economic forecasters, academics, political analysts and others have turned their attention to the effectiveness of immigration as a mechanism for labour market replenishment. A number of studies suggest that there is a significant shortfall between the economic potential of newcomers and their labour market outcomes, particularly among those in the Skilled Worker category.

This conclusion resonates with those in the settlement sector, who have long been lobbying for a new approach to labour market integration that would facilitate accelerated recognition of foreign credentials and a more streamlined and simplified process for entry into regulated occupations. They have also advocated for enhancements to government-funded language training that would reflect occupational requirements and offer bridging into the workplace,[1] as well as increased employer recognition of work experience gained outside Canada. Many have pointed to the importance of effective preparation in the country of origin, so that newcomers may arrive in their new homeland better equipped to enter the labour force, to do so more quickly and to obtain jobs that appropriately reflect their academic background and work experience.

It was against this backdrop that Human Resources and Social Development Canada's (HRSDC) Foreign Credential Recognition (FCR) program approved a proposal from the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC) for a project that would assist prospective immigrants in the Skilled Worker category prepare to integrate into the Canadian labour market while still in their country of origin.

That initiative – the Canadian Immigration Integration Project (CIIP) – is currently being piloted in three countries. This article provides an introduction to the CIIP and highlights its inherent opportunities and challenges. It will address the following questions:

1. Should the Government of Canada invest in immigrant integration overseas?
2. What form(s) of overseas interventions might be most effective?
3. What are the critical success factors for such an initiative?
4. How might results be measured and impact assessed?
5. What role should colleges and institutes of technology play both overseas and in Canada to improve immigrant integration?

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The case for government-funded intervention overseas

Statistics Canada has estimated that immigration will account for all net labour growth within the next 10 to 15 years and for all net population growth within the next 30 years. While immigrants are arriving with higher levels of post-secondary education than in the past, they nonetheless encounter difficulties in finding employment that equates to the knowledge, skills and experience gained prior to coming to Canada. As a result, research suggests that it is taking longer for immigrants' earnings to "catch-up" with the earnings of the Canadian-born, and there is some evidence of poverty. This conundrum suggests not only that newcomers are failing to realize their economic potential, but also that employers are failing to benefit from the available supply of immigrant skills, and indeed that Canada is failing both to harness the wealth of experience that immigrants offer and to fulfill its promise to provide them with an environment in which they and their families can live and prosper.

The Government of Canada has moved to improve immigrant integration. The view of the Prime Minister is that, "The goal for all of us will be to get those who are trained and ready to work in their fields of expertise into the workforce more quickly,"[2] and this was reflected in the 2006 Federal Budget and the proposed creation of a new government agency to improve foreign credential recognition. The mutual commitment of the Ministers for HRSDC and for Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) has been reiterated time and again, and the fact that they have recently swapped portfolios should consolidate that commitment even further.

In spite of these commitments, much of the federal government's settlement-related funding supports programs within Canada.[3] Indeed, program eligibility is based on permanent resident status. Newcomers often land with a very limited (and sometimes distorted) understanding of the realities of life in Canada, and this can create unrealistic expectations and disillusionment, which may prompt immigrants to leave Canada or return to their countries of origin. Even those with more solid information are frequently unsure of how and where to seek support and may spend valuable time waiting for their credentials and language to be assessed or figuring out – often the "hard way" – how best to execute their job search.

CIIP will test the premise that early intervention with Skilled Workers is a cost-effective way to support labour market integration in the long-term. CIIP received $4.5 million in funding and is supporting Field Offices in three pilot locations: a China office in Guangzhou, an India office just outside New Delhi, and a Philippines office in Manila. Each office is headed by a Canadian Field Manager and a four-person team of locally engaged staff. The Field Offices work in close collaboration with CIC staff in the local missions.

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How to intervene effectively

After extensive consultations with CIC and HRSDC, a decision was made to target CIIP interventions at federal Skilled Worker Principal Applicants and their spouses who have reached the penultimate stage in the immigration process; this is the admissibility stage when health and security checks are to be carried out. Applicants at this stage receive a letter from CIC, which includes a description of the CIIP and a registration form. Prospective clients are advised that services are free and that participation, which is entirely voluntary, will not influence the immigration process or application decisions.

Those who do register are offered three inter-related services:

- information to help build a solid knowledge-base and shape more realistic expectations;
- customized guidance and support with planning to facilitate better-informed decision-making; and
- direct referrals to Canadian organizations that can provide practical assistance to enable clients to become better equipped for labour market integration.

The labour market information sessions are offered to groups of up to 20 clients and are organized according to expected province of destination. Each one-day session aims to expose clients to information and resources (largely web-based) that can assist in pre-arrival integration. This includes a general overview of trends in the Canadian economy, as well as a focus on labour market prospects in the province of destination. CIIP staff also provide a case study of two or more occupations to demonstrate licensing and entrance requirements for both regulated and non-regulated fields of employment. Presentations on opportunities are balanced by an examination of labour market and settlement challenges, and options for addressing these challenges are discussed. The day concludes with a session on job-searching in the Canadian environment.

Participants are invited to return the following day for one-on-one counselling interviews at which they can develop an Individual Integration Plan (IIP). The IIP records agreed-upon actions in the areas of credential assessment and licensing, language assessment and upgrading, skills testing and enhancement, settlement-related activities, and job search strategies. The CIIP is intended to guide newcomers through the integration process while still in the country of origin and then

following arrival in Canada. At the client's request, CIIP counsellors make referrals to appropriate sources of ongoing assistance provided either through Canadian organizations operating locally or on-line, or to agencies based in Canada.

Critical success factors

Key to the success of the CIIP is the availability of adequate resources – financial, physical, human and time – for the delivery of services and the tracking and evaluation of results. Beyond that, success depends on clients accessing the services, finding them useful, and taking appropriate action as a result.

Given the voluntary nature of the services and the fact that they are delivered out of a centralized country office, a significant number of eligible clients may choose not to participate. CIC staff have however undertaken to encourage participation, and efforts are also underway to increase awareness of CIIP among immigration officers. Field Managers will consider the possibility of travelling to other parts of the country to deliver services, if justified by demand.

Quality of service depends on ensuring that local staff have comprehensive and accurate information and that their counselling skills are well honed. To that end, they have undergone a three- to four-month training period in-country, including participation in a customized counselling skills course, which was supplemented by a study tour in Canada. They are also being coached on-site over a one-month period by an experienced Canadian counsellor. Clients will be encouraged to use the CIIP website (http://ciip.accc.ca), which contains links to relevant sites. They will also be provided with a Newcomer Day Planner (www.cfeedayplanner.com),[4] and with access to a licensed web-based tool, Career Cruising (http://careercruising.com), to enhance their knowledge-base.

Timely access to Canadian services is also a vital part of the project's success. On-line occupation-specific language and skills assessment and tuition will be required. It will also be essential to initiate credential recognition and licensing processes while still abroad. Locally-focused, settlement-related advice must be available to immigrants before landing. The willingness of employers to accept qualifications and experience gained outside Canada and to admit applications from overseas may however be the most critical success factor of all. Sector Councils, industry associations and corporate leaders are working with employers to reduce some of the barriers that newcomers face. Provincial governments are taking decisive steps to ease regulatory processes and speed up credential recognition. CIIP hopes to capitalize on and advance these efforts further.

Measurement of results and impact

The extension and expansion of the current pilot project will of course depend on the extent to which results can be demonstrated and impact substantiated. This presents a huge challenge for the ACCC. Interim measures, such as client assessment, will be collected onsite in the Field Offices, but what is ultimately required is evidence of the CIIP's impact on labour market outcomes. This information will take time to collect and, in the absence of a control group or baseline data, comparative analysis will be difficult.

However, Field Offices are encouraging clients to provide updates on their progress, and a web-based tool is currently being explored to provide an additional incentive to maintain contact. Links are being established with a range of organizations in the major immigrant-receiving provinces with the intention of developing partnerships for referrals and tracking. Discussions are also planned with Statistics Canada to explore the potential of using the LSIC or other survey tools to provide data on the labour market outcomes of CIIP clients.

The role of colleges and institutes of technology

Community colleges and institutes of technology can play a significant role in the labour market integration of immigrants and are present in more than 900 communities across the country. They offer language training for new immigrants (often focusing on language skills for specific workplaces), transitional programs, as well as education and training. Moreover, colleges and institutes have developed particular expertise in facilitating links to local business, industry and civil society groups. With an increasing focus on the internationalization of their campuses, colleges and institutes of technology are well-placed to bridge the gaps felt by new immigrants in terms of direction, credentials, language and career assistance and, thus, an increasing number are offering services overseas.

As the national and international voice of Canada's colleges and institutes and with its proven track record in international project management, the ACCC is well-placed to implement a tri-lateral project, such as the CIIP.

Conclusion

As Canada's Ambassador to the Philippines, Peter Sutherland, has noted, "CIIP fills a gap in our program to attract and facilitate the movement of qualified immigrants to Canada. By helping skilled workers prepare themselves for the Canadian workplace before leaving their country of origin, it accelerates the adjustment process and eases their integration into their new home."[5] As we begin to welcome clients to the Field Offices, we are keenly aware of CIIP's enormous potential not only to ease and accelerate the process for newcomers, but also to help Canadian employers meet labour shortages, fill skill gaps and contribute to Canada's economic prosperity. The pilot is small in scope, yet we hope that it will demonstrate the value of overseas interventions and that it will provide a model for an expanded program in years to come.

Notes

[1] Such programs are offered through the Enhanced Language Training (ELT) initiative, which is funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

[2] Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Speech, May 12 2006.

[3] The Canadian Orientation Abroad (COA) program is delivered overseas to 12,000-15,000 newcomers – largely refugees and those in the Family Class — at an annual cost of approximately $1 million.

[4] The Newcomer Day Planner is supplied by the Canadian Foundation for Economic Education with funding from HRSDC's FCR program.

[5] Ambassador Peter Sutherland, January 8 2007.