



WELLESLEY INSTITUTE  
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Policy Brief

# St. James Town Research into Action: Immigrant Employment

*“The evaluation of my credentials from my country were not evaluated the same as in my country...I completed my Masters in biology and got an MBA degree. I worked for fifteen years. But in Canada the basic problem to get a job here is the limitations of language...I was frustrated. I was working in a restaurant in a kitchen job. Standing for sixteen hours. I feel back pain, knee pain and headache.”*

– SJT Initiative Participant, Community Mapping Report.

This series of policy briefs analyzes the implications of the research findings from the *St. James Town Initiative* and sets out recommendations and options for action.

### The Problem: Finding a Suitable Job

- 64% of St. James Town’s population is made up of immigrants to Canada, many of whom arrived in the last 5 years.<sup>1</sup>
- Despite having higher levels of education than their Canadian-born counterparts, most recent immigrants – including many people living in SJT – have not been able to find suitable jobs commensurate with their education, experience or skills acquired abroad.
- Most newcomers with university degrees are employed in jobs that typically require a high school education or less.<sup>2</sup>
- Early intervention is critical, because immigrants who accept a first low-paying job unrelated to their expertise often lose their skills and have trouble finding more appropriate jobs later on.<sup>3</sup>

The *St. James Town Initiative* is Wellesley Institute’s largest research and community capacity building project. In the first phase of the project, participatory research methods such as Photo Voice and Community Mapping were used. The Initiative is the first of its kind to integrate Photo Voice into concept mapping software to organize data for planning and action. Its goal is to work with the community to better understand the ways in which neighbourhood factors affect immigrant residents’ health and well-being.

### The Effects: On the Economy and on SJT Residents

- The effects on the economy of wasting immigrants’ skills are staggering: the Conference Board of Canada estimated that the loss to the Canadian economy from discounting immigrants’ skills is between \$4 and \$6 billion per year.<sup>4</sup>
- SJT residents noted that unemployment, underemployment and precarious employment result in long working hours, sacrificing family time, frustration and increased stress.

<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada, “Census Tract Profile for 0065.00 (CT), Toronto (CMA) and Ontario.”

<sup>2</sup> Alboim, Naomi. “Adjusting the Balance: Fixing Canada’s Economic Immigration Problems.” Maytree Foundation, July 2009, p.21.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.26-27.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC). “Invest in Immigrant Employment for a Stronger Economy.” 2009 Provincial Pre-Budget Submission, November 21, 2008.

## Barriers to Finding Suitable Employment

- Successful integration into the labour market includes the ability to find work that uses an immigrant's education, training and experience, and provides appropriate compensation.
- The main barriers to immigrants' integration into the labour market are well-established:
  - Lack of recognition of foreign credentials and experience;
  - Immigrants' lack of language and communication skills, particularly occupational-specific language skills (i.e. technical jargon);
  - Employers' requirement that immigrants have Canadian work experience; and
  - Discrimination.<sup>5</sup>

## Existing Multi-Sectoral Initiatives

Responsibility for integrating immigrants into the labour force lies with all three levels of government, professional/occupational regulatory bodies, employers, unions, educational institutions, community agencies that serve immigrants and individual immigrants themselves.

### *Federal Initiatives*

- **Foreign Credentials Referral Office and the Foreign Credential Recognition Program**
  - Provide information on credential assessment and fund stakeholders to engage in research and analysis, and develop tools to assess foreign credentials.
- **Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC)**
  - Provides free, *basic* language training for immigrants.
  - Participants also receive support for transportation costs and access to child care.
- **Enhanced Language Training (ELT)**
  - Since LINC only provides basic language training that is insufficient for use in today's knowledge-based workplace, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) developed Enhanced Language Training (ELT) which provides free, higher-level, labour market-oriented language training in combination with labour market support in areas such as workplace culture, resumé-writing and job searching.

### *Provincial and Other Initiatives*

Several innovative initiatives have been developed to help immigrants avoid the catch-22 – that they cannot get a job without “Canadian work experience” but they cannot get such experience without a job:

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<sup>5</sup> Weiner, Nan. “Breaking Down Barriers to Labour Market Integration of Newcomers in Toronto.” *Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP) Choices* 14 (10), September 2008, p.6.

- **The Career Bridge Paid Internship Program**
  - Originally developed as a pilot project by the Ontario government, Career Bridge is currently operated by Career Edge Organization, a national not-for-profit.
  - The program creates 4-12 month paid internships that provide immigrants with Canadian experience and give employers the chance to test newcomers' skills.
  - Approximately 200 immigrants per year participate in Career Bridge internships, and an estimated 75-80% find full time employment in their chosen careers.<sup>6</sup>
- **Bridge Training Programs**
  - The province funds several short-term occupation-specific programs that help newcomers adapt their experience to the Canadian context.
  - Most bridge training programs are funded by the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration which reports that 70% of the graduates of these programs are working in their fields.<sup>7</sup>
- **Immigrant Employment Loan Program**
  - Since many immigrants cannot afford the tuition, books or living costs while participating in bridge training programs, the Maytree Foundation created a pilot project that provides loans of up to \$5,000 to immigrants who seek employment but are unable to obtain a loan from a financial institution.
  - To date, 73% of loan recipients have found a job in their target occupation and only 5% (8 out of 151) of the loans have defaulted.<sup>8</sup>
- **The Toronto Region Immigration Employment Council (TRIEC)'s Mentoring Partnership**
  - Mentors share their knowledge, experience and networks by giving 24 hours of their time over 4 months to help their immigrant colleagues navigate the job search process.
  - Almost 80% of immigrants who participate in the Mentoring Partnership find employment within 3 months and 85% of them are working in their field.<sup>9</sup>

### Policy Action Needed

Despite increased awareness of the difficulties of integrating immigrants into Ontario and Toronto's labour market and recent initiatives that address the issue, the barriers to labour market integration remain significant. More needs to be done:

- **Internships, Bridge Training and Mentoring:** The Ontario government should sustain and expand its commitments to bridge training, mentoring programs and internships, and should expand small loan programs for bridge training.
- **LINC and ELT:** LINC and ELT are only available to permanent residents, convention refugees and those whose application for permanent residency is being processed. Both

<sup>6</sup> Maytree Foundation. "2009 Ontario Pre-Budget Consultations."

<sup>7</sup> Alboim 2009, p.30. Approximately 6,000 immigrants have used bridge training programs in Ontario since 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Maytree Foundation. "2009 Ontario Pre-Budget Consultations."

<sup>9</sup> Alboim 2009, p.29.

programs, especially ELT, should be made available to temporary workers, refugee claimants, international students and immigrants who have already become citizens but may require additional employment-specific language training.

- **Additional Federal Investments:** The federal government should invest in services that successfully integrate immigrants into the labour market, including creating national internship and mentoring programs. The federal government should also increase and stabilize funding for ELT and create a micro-loan program for bridge training.
- **Improved Outreach:** Current government, community agency and educational institution employment programs are typically used by about 40% of recent immigrants who are having trouble finding work.<sup>10</sup> All three levels of government must improve outreach to ensure that all newcomers to Toronto – including St. James Town residents – are aware of these important employment services, and that they can access them.
- **Credential Recognition:** Still a crucial barrier to labour market integration and a source of frustration for both newcomers and employers, several improvements could help improve credential recognition for immigrants:
  - The credentialing process should begin while the prospective immigrant is still abroad;
  - Prospective immigrants should be able to input their credentials into a website to match against realistic information about relevant opportunities and barriers in Canada's labour force;
  - The provincial government or regulatory agencies could develop initiatives to raise employers' awareness of available credential assessment services;
  - Customized services should be developed for different end-users (educational institutions, regulatory bodies and employers) that assess the Canadian equivalence of international institutions, degrees and foreign documents.

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<sup>10</sup> Weiner 2008, p.31.