

## **Making the Connections: Ottawa's Role in Immigrant Employment**

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In this comprehensive analysis of programs designed to assist immigrants in finding appropriate employment, Naomi Alboim and Elizabeth Mclsaac note that the federal government's decision to increase immigration targets is consistent with the traditional view of immigration as a cornerstone of our nation-building, but argue that it must be accompanied by coordinated policies to facilitate immigrants' access to Canadian labour markets. The authors point out that, although immigrants who have arrived since the 1990s are more educated than earlier immigrants, their labour market outcomes (whether measured by earnings or employment rates) are worse than those of previous cohorts and of Canadian-born citizens. Furthermore, only about 40 percent of high skilled immigrants work in the profession for which they were trained, with many holding jobs that require no more than a high school diploma.

### **Major Findings**

- The mandates of the federal agencies primarily responsible for immigration and training result in immigrants falling through the cracks. Labour market programs (managed primarily by Human Resources and Social Development Canada) do not specifically address immigrants' needs, and immigration programs (under the auspices of Citizenship and Immigration Canada, except in Quebec) do not effectively respond to labour market needs. This "silo" model is more often than not replicated at the provincial level.
- Across the country, numerous pilot programs that address impediments to immigrant employment (via mentoring and bridge training, among other tools) have produced positive results, but typically lack funding to be ramped up to serve their full target populations.
- The most successful initiatives are the ones that directly address the barriers faced by skilled immigrants: helping them gain Canadian work experience, get training to fill specific skills gaps and enhance their communication skills; creating professional networks; and building employer capacity.
- Initiatives that are conceived, developed and implemented with the active participation of all the relevant stakeholders are better positioned to generate positive outcomes, and in the case of labour market integration of immigrants, this entails very specifically the participation of employers.

### **Policy Implications and Prescriptions**

The authors acknowledge that labour markets are inherently local in nature and require flexible policies and programs. Nonetheless, they argue, the lack of policy coherence across jurisdictions, the sheer size and number of players involved in service delivery, and the simple fact that immigration is a key part of a national human capital

strategy require the federal government to take a leadership role in coordinating delivery of employment assistance programs for immigrants. They outline several examples of roles that the federal government should play, among which the most important are the following:

- The Labour Market Partnership Agreements signed in 2005 by the Martin government and several provinces would have provided dedicated funding for provincially and locally delivered immigrant employment programs, effectively expanding HRSDC's labour market development mandate to new immigrants. However, funding for these agreements was not included in the 2006 budget, and the authors point out that additional employment training funds in the 2007 budget are not specifically targeted at immigrants.
- The federal government should improve existing immigration programming in CIC, particularly with regard to language programs. These should be expanded to include specialized occupation-specific communication skills. HRSDC should expand its activities to support immigrant mentoring and bridge training programs.
- The Foreign Credential Referral Office promised by the Conservatives in the 2006 election campaign is slated to open this spring, and the authors offer several specific suggestions for ways it could better fulfill its missions of enhancing the provision of information to immigrants before and after arriving in Canada and creating effective referral services. Given the "silo" structure of CIC and HRSDC, the authors suggest that the office should draw its funding from and report to both agencies.

## IRPP Comment

This study complements previous IRPP research on immigration and diversity, which demonstrates that the most important impediments to immigrants' access to the labour market are lack of Canadian work experience and discounting of foreign credentials. Some estimates suggest that inadequate recognition of immigrant credentials costs the Canadian economy up to \$5 billion per year. Furthermore, the geographic origin of immigrants has shifted from Europe to Asia (with whose educational institutions and qualifications employers may be less familiar), making it more urgent that these issues be addressed.