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NEWS RELEASE

Programs to Support Economic Integration of Immigrants in Montreal Are Inadequate, says IRPP Study

*Provincial budget is a step in the right direction, but underfunding and
fragmentation of programs remain, according to Marie-Thérèse Chicha
and Éric Charest*

Montreal – With the Charest government intent on increasing annual immigration levels in coming years from their current ceiling of 45,000, a study released today by the Montreal-based Institute for Research on Public Policy casts serious doubt on the ability of existing support programs to fully integrate newcomers into the labour market. “Only a small number of immigrants benefit from them, and even then for a limited period of time,” write authors Marie-Thérèse Chicha and Éric Charest (both of Université de Montréal).

The economic difficulties newcomers to Canada face are well-known, but the authors point out that the problem is particularly acute in Montreal. In 2006 the unemployment rate among recent immigrants in Montreal stood at 18.1 percent in 2006, nearly three times higher than among Canadian-born Montrealers. More significantly, this rate was nearly double that in Toronto and more than 50 percent higher than in Vancouver. These alarming numbers do not square with the fact that, on average, recent immigrants to Quebec have high levels of educational attainment and are in principle selected on the basis of their employability.

Chicha and Charest identify the many factors that contribute to this gloomy picture, including inadequate knowledge of French, lack of recognition of foreign education and experience, and outright discrimination. While any one of these obstacles on its own is difficult to overcome, each reinforces the others, leading to a “vicious circle” of underemployment.

Quebec has many programs to address these obstacles – job search information, language skills development, bridge training and mentoring, among many others – which the authors examine in considerable detail. But there is little coordination among the programs, and they sometimes even work at cross-purposes. Charest and Chicha conclude that an independent agency charged with coordinating these myriad programs would be “extremely useful.”

A more serious issue concerns funding. Chicha and Charest point out that the budget of the Ministry of Immigration and Cultural Communities (MICC) has increased far more

slowly than the number of new immigrants in the past 10 years, resulting in an 18 percent decrease in funding per immigrant. The 2008-09 provincial budget contains some \$22 million in additional funding for integration of immigrants. This sends a signal that the government is aware of the problem, but it is far from sufficient to address more than a decade of neglect.

More worrying, the \$195 million that Ottawa transferred to Quebec for immigrant settlement in 2006 exceeded the MICC's entire budget by over \$70 million, meaning that some of this money is spent by other ministries. The recent provincial budget promises more transparency on immigration programs that are administered by other ministries, but it still appears that some of this transfer may not be serving its intended purpose.

Because most funding for integration programs is renewed on an annual basis, it is difficult for these programs to offer sustained and thorough assistance. As a result, most programs, such as welcoming and information services, provide short-term assistance whose benefits tend to be transitory. Long-term funding commitments are needed to support the more effective programs such as bridge training, mentoring and internships. The provincial budget has taken some baby steps in this direction.

Nevertheless, budget constraints seem to be driving integration policies in Quebec City. Consequently, according to Chicha and Charest, existing integration programs cannot accommodate current levels of immigration, much less an increase. "The result is a considerable waste of human capital, in addition to the personal and social costs," they write.

L'Intégration des immigrants sur le marché du travail à Montréal : politiques et enjeux, by Marie-Thérèse Chicha and Éric Charest, can be downloaded free of charge from www.irpp.org. A summary in English is also available.

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