



# GOING THE DISTANCE: Immigrant Youth in Canada's Labour Market

**February 2023**

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## ABOUT WORLD EDUCATION SERVICES

World Education Services (WES) is a non-profit social enterprise dedicated to helping international students, immigrants, and refugees achieve their educational and career goals in the United States and Canada. For more than 45 years, WES has set the standard of excellence in the field of international academic credential evaluation. Through WES Global Talent Bridge, the organization joins with institutional partners, community-based organizations, and policymakers to help immigrants and refugees who hold international credentials fully utilize their talents and education to achieve their academic and professional goals.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

World Education Services (WES) gratefully acknowledges the invaluable contributions of the Canadian Council for Youth Prosperity and the Labour Market Information Council, along with all the members of the National Roundtable on Immigrant Youth Workforce Development, in the development of this report. WES is also grateful to those who provided their expertise and insights, especially John Shields, Juliana Cortes Lugo, Sara Asalya, Sugi Vasavithasan, Javad Soltan, and Michael Lam.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Immigrant and refugee youth in Canada – despite high levels of educational attainment – tend to experience higher unemployment rates and are more likely to be found in low-skilled, low-wage work than their Canadian-born counterparts (Shields and Lujan 2018; Statistics Canada 2019; Turcotte 2019). COVID-19 has only exacerbated this situation, with the result that, in a time of record-high job vacancies, Canada risks failing to adequately support this emerging talent pool and ensure the country’s future economic growth.

This report examines the disconnect between immigrant and refugee youth’s high rates of academic success and the challenges they face when entering the workforce. It also provides several programmatic and policy recommendations to facilitate their inclusion and advancement long-term.

In 2021, World Education Services and the Canadian Council of Youth Prosperity established a partnership to explore this issue, forming a National Roundtable on Workforce Development for Immigrant Youth. Together, they hosted a National Town Hall on Immigrant Youth Workforce Development in February 2022 to hear the firsthand experiences of immigrant and refugee youth and additional stakeholders. This report draws upon those findings and on a broad review of research and data on immigrant youth in the labour force.

The story of immigrant and refugee youth in Canada is one of promise amidst a climate of uncertainty. When compared with their Canadian-born counterparts, immigrant and refugee youth achieve higher rates of academic success in post-secondary education – and do so while navigating a new cultural and linguistic landscape, often supporting their families and communities financially, linguistically, and otherwise. They often shoulder these burdens while working part- or full-time jobs and pursuing career development opportunities. Their high levels of academic achievement in the face of these challenges suggest a certain resilience and ability to persevere.

However, in many cases, the academic success of immigrant youth does not translate into economic inclusion or viable, sustainable careers. A number of systemic barriers, many of them eradicable, prevent immigrant and refugee youth from capitalizing on their educational achievement to secure high-skilled, high-wage jobs and establish sustainable careers.



### NOTE

The lack of comprehensive and up-to-date information, as well as the inconsistency of the age ranges used to define “immigrant youth,” make it very challenging to measure immigrant youth labour market integration. This report takes an expansive view of the relevant age range, examining the labour market outcomes of immigrant and refugee youth between 17 and 30, born outside of Canada.



## Key Challenges:

Gaps in access to language support, credential recognition, mental health services, social capital networks

Many immigrant and refugee youth face an array of obstacles that make the pursuit of career success daunting.

Of these, language is usually the first and most significant challenge, impacting success in both academia and employment. Lack of language proficiency and academic streaming practices may result in immigrant and refugee youth being steered away from university-level education in secondary school. The need for English or French language learning is growing within academic institutions, at a time of reduced funding or tailored programming in many areas. Settlement services for youth – particularly those supporting the school-to-work transition – are inadequate, - are inadequate, and COVID-19 closures have further reduced availability of in-school support.

Lack of recognition of academic and professional credentials earned abroad may force immigrant and refugee youth – especially youth between 20 and 30 years of age – to repeat training they have already completed and limit them to low-paying, sometimes precarious work.

The stress of transitioning to a new cultural, linguistic, and educational landscape can pose many risks to the health and well-being – including mental health – of immigrant and refugee youth. Mental health remains a taboo subject in some cultures, often leading to a reluctance to seek help. For some immigrant and refugee youth, culturally and linguistically appropriate mental health services may be difficult to come by, made even more restricted because of clinic closures, among other support services, due to the pandemic.

Immigrant and refugee youth also may lack the social capital that can help form essential connections to the job market. These young people frequently encounter discrimination and racism when applying and interviewing for a job or pursuing academic opportunities; those from racialized communities tend to face systemic discrimination in education and employment more intensely.



## **Potential Solutions:** Research, policy, and programs

As Canada's population ages and labour shortages continue to increase it is critical to find ways to better support immigrant youth in transitioning from academic achievement into the labour market. The future of work in Canada includes immigrant and refugee youth and we must ensure they are prepared to succeed. This report proposes a number of research, policy, and programmatic responses to the unique and disproportionate challenges that many immigrant and refugee youth face in both the education system and labour market.

These responses include:

- Designing initiatives to build social capital critical to improve access to the labour market
- Amplifying youth-specific employment programs and services
- Cultivating employer practices that mitigate biases against immigrant and refugee youth
- Collecting disaggregated data to more adequately capture immigrant and refugee youth demographics
- Conducting further research into the challenges to career success

This paper lays out a full set of recommendations on pages 21-22. Key to their success is, as we note, collaboration and co-creation with immigrant youth themselves.

# 1.0 – INTRODUCTION

## Background

Canada’s immigration policy has a clear focus on attracting and retaining young people and young talent, but this policy is not translating into labour market success. Despite high educational attainment, immigrant youth experience higher unemployment rates and are more likely to be found in low-skilled, low-wage work than their Canadian-born peers (Shields and Lujan 2018; Statistics Canada 2019; Turcotte 2019).

If we fail to capitalize on the potential of immigrant youth, Canada risks losing them. In a recent study from the Institute for Canadian Citizenship, 30 percent of 18- to 34-year-old new Canadians and 23 percent of university-educated newcomers say they are likely to move to another country in the next two years, and 46 percent report harboring some reservations about recommending immigration to Canada to others (Institute for Canadian Citizenship 2022).

The socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated this problem. Young people have been particularly affected, accounting for nearly a quarter of all job losses nationwide (Sharp 2020). In the Greater Toronto region alone, youth of colour (who make up 76 percent of immigrant youth in the region) have an unemployment rate of about 32.3 percent, almost double that of white youth (at 18 percent) (Toronto Fallout Report 2020).

In early 2021, World Education Services (WES) and the Canadian Council of Youth Prosperity (CCYP) – a national non-profit that provides a cross-sectoral approach to facilitating labour market integration – partnered to explore this issue and support the employment needs of immigrant youth. With input from key stakeholders and workforce development leaders across a variety of industries and regions, WES and CCYP formed the National Roundtable on Workforce Development for Immigrant Youth ([see Appendix A](#)). The goal of the Roundtable’s work is to facilitate the long-term employment and economic empowerment of immigrant youth.

Since its inception, the Roundtable has led discussions and developed strategies to improve immigrant youth’s access to employment. In 2022, this work culminated in a two-day National Town Hall on Immigrant Youth Workforce Development ([see Appendix B](#)). The event brought together key actors within the immigrant youth-serving community and provided a safe space to identify problems and potential solutions with input from immigrant youth themselves. Discussions and recommendations from the town hall have guided this report, which examines the disconnect between immigrant youth’s high educational attainment and lower rates of employment. By analyzing the settlement, academic, and labour market experiences of immigrant youth in Canada, the authors believe, we can better understand the challenges they encounter and identify opportunities to improve their employment opportunities and career trajectories.

The report is made up of three sections:

- **Get Ready, Get Set** examines the experiences of immigrant youth as they prepare to enter the labour market. It explores aspects of their settlement and academic journeys that can hinder their employment outcomes.
- **Going the Distance** examines additional systemic challenges that immigrant youth may face in accessing the labour market, and the implications of those challenges.
- **Picking Up the Pace** identifies how opportunities for their employment and career development can be improved.

## Sources and methodology

In assessing the state of immigrant youth, this report brings together:

- Primary data on the experiences of immigrant and refugee youth drawn from The WES Gateway Program
- WES surveys on the impact of COVID-19 on the Economic Well-Being of Recent Migrants to Canada
- Participant feedback and recommendations from the National Roundtable on Immigrant Youth Workforce Development and the National Town Hall on Immigrant Youth Workforce Development
- Secondary data on immigrant and refugee youth exploring factors that shape their educational and employment experience in Canada



### ADDITIONAL LABOUR MARKET ANALYSIS

The Labour Market Information Council (LMIC) and CCYP have co-written a report on labour market outcomes of landed immigrant youth and Canadian-born youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. The report investigates monthly labour market data from the Labour Force Survey from January 2020, the period before the pandemic started, to September 2022, the most current data available at the time of this writing. This report investigates monthly labour market indicators for landed immigrant youth and Canadian-born youth, including employment rate, weekly hours worked, and average hourly wages.

Landed immigrant youth were harder hit by the COVID-19 pandemic compared with Canadian-born youth. For example, the employment rate for immigrant youth (15 to 24 years old) dropped during the pandemic (it has since recovered and surpassed pre-pandemic levels.) Among all categories of landed immigrants, newcomers' employment rate was least impacted during the peak of the pandemic. The data also show that landed immigrant youth worked fewer hours than Canadian-born youth for most months of the pandemic, and their hourly wages fluctuated and changed more than those of Canadian-born youth.

The LMIC-CCYP report [Labour Market Outcomes of Immigrant Youth: Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) discusses these patterns in further detail.



## Defining immigrant youth

One of the challenges of analysing the labour market outcomes of immigrant youth is a significant lack of current, comprehensive, and disaggregated demographic data. Some of the most comprehensive studies date as far back as 2008, and the great majority of research on immigrant youth predates the onset of the pandemic.

Moreover, definitions of “immigrant youth” as a group vary significantly, making it challenging to understand the actual size and makeup of the immigrant youth population. Age classifications and inclusion for “youth” vary broadly across and within Statistics Canada, Employment and Social Development Canada, academic researchers, service providers, and other stakeholders.

In this report, we define immigrant youth as immigrant and refugee youth<sup>1</sup> between the ages of 17 and 30 who were born in another country (other than Canada). This group includes those who hold permanent residence and those who have become Canadian citizens. To inform this definition, we relied on primary and secondary sources, including input from the National Town Hall on Immigrant Youth Workforce Development, the Roundtable, and data from Statistics Canada.

Our definition starts at age 17 to include youth transitioning from high school to enter post-secondary education or the labour market. It extends to age 30 to account for youth continuing their education or living with their parents for extended periods.

Including this broad group ensures that this report encompasses the diversity of immigrant youth experience and underscores the potential for the far-reaching impact of inclusive policy and program design.

## International students and immigrant youth with precarious status

Many of the experiences highlighted in this report are shared by international students and other migrants including refugee youth with precarious status; many of whom are in the process of migrating to Canada, transitioning to temporary resident status, and then pursuing permanent residency. However, the range of experiences of international students and youth with precarious immigration status is vast and varied, intersecting with several other policy and program areas that are beyond the scope of this report.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term “refugee” in line with the United Nations High Commission on Refugees definition. In this report, refugee youth signify young people who have fled war, violence, conflict, or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country (UNHCR 2022).

## 2.0 – GET READY, GET SET

Moving to a new country can present both opportunities and challenges. For immigrant youth, the key factors that must be addressed before developing a career include settling into a new cultural and linguistic community, accessing education, and finding work.

Immigrant youth in Canada face multiple demands, which may include meeting settlement and integration needs, supporting family members in a variety of ways, in addition to excelling in school, and securing employment. For many, educational achievement is deeply entwined with cultural identity, status, and success in their communities. This is especially true of those whose parents made sacrifices in order to immigrate to Canada (Rae 2018; Shakya et al. 2012; Yan et al. 2008). Navigating these demands during the COVID-19 pandemic has been overwhelming for many, but it has put immigrant youth under greater pressure than that experienced by their Canadian-born peers as both groups seek to enter the labour market. Lacking school-to-work career guidance, possessing limited social capital, and facing discrimination in the labour market, immigrant youth have much to overcome as they prepare to enter the workforce.

### Academic success

Educational attainment is critical to connecting immigrant youth to employment. Many immigrant youth struggle with integration during secondary school yet achieve better post-secondary educational outcomes. In fact, immigrant youth tend to have stronger academic outcomes in post-secondary education than their non-immigrant counterparts.

About 57 percent of first-generation immigrant youth attend university, compared with 38 percent of their Canadian-born counterparts (Rae 2018: 6). Rates of attendance often vary according to the region of the world where immigrant youth originate:

- Sixty-four (64) percent of first-generation immigrant youth from African countries attend university – nearly twice as many as their Canadian-born peers (Rae 2018: 3).
- Approximately 67 percent of youth with an immigrant background<sup>2</sup> from East Asia obtained a university degree or higher, according to a Statistics Canada report.
- About 56 percent of immigrant youth from South Asia obtained a university degree, as did about 50 percent of immigrant youth from North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa (Rae 2018: 6).

Immigrant girls tend to report higher academic achievement and attachment to school than immigrant boys (Shields and Lujan 2018), and more immigrant women are obtaining university degrees (Odo, D’Silva, and Gunderson 2012; Shields and Lujan 2018).

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<sup>2</sup> Children of immigrant background include at least one immigrant parent. In this research study children included those who arrived immigrants themselves, or second generation.

Attaining higher education plays a pivotal role in the integration and inclusion of immigrant youth into Canadian society, as it can have “wide ramifications for individual refugees, the refugee community, and the general common good, and can result in expanded concrete skills, increased empowerment, increased confidence, and community building” (Bajwa et al. 2017: 56-57).

## Language

Immigrant youth identify language as one of the first and most significant challenges they face. Without adequate language skills, successful social integration and employment become harder to achieve (Marshal et al. 2016; Shields and Lujan 2019). Age at the time of migration can impact newcomer integration as younger people are perceived to adapt and learn a new language more easily than older youth (Shields and Lujan 2018: 11).

Among immigrant youth aged 15 to 34 who migrated between 2011 and 2016, 76 percent spoke neither English nor French at home (Statistics Canada 2016). While a household’s means of communication does not necessarily equate to language comprehension levels, this finding suggests that immigrant youth may have limited proficiency of either official language. More recently, immigrant youth reported a decline in their academic and language development as COVID-19 school closures and lockdowns prevented them from accessing critical support and opportunities for practice (Canadian Council for Refugees 2020).

Immigrant youth often serve as interpreters and “language brokers” between parents and workers such as teachers and other community service providers. As such, these young people shoulder additional responsibility and face higher stress navigating a new linguistic and cultural landscape for themselves and others (Fresh Voices Youth Advisory 2013; Shakya et al. 2012; Shields and Lujan 2019).

## National Townhall: What We Heard



“I work in schools and there are so many students who cannot go on to post-secondary or work force, or higher aged students who cannot access high school education because their English language skills are so low. The government is bringing immigrants in but do not have resources to help them and their families sustain a successful life.”

– SWIS worker

For immigrant youth, school has traditionally been an avenue for obtaining new language skills. However, in recent years, the rapidly increasing number of immigrants in many school districts strains school resources at a time of reduced institutional funding. In Ontario, roughly 29 percent of the student population was born in another country—the highest number in any province (Nichols, Ha, and Tyyskä 2020). In 2017, 63 percent of Ontario elementary schools had English language learners (ELLs), but only 38 percent of English language elementary schools had English language (ESL) instructors. Furthermore, schools with fewer immigrant students may have ELL students in need of support but not enough money to hire the necessary ESL instructors (Nichols, Ha, and Tyyskä 2020). As a result, many immigrant youth lack adequate English language training during their early years of study, potentially impeding their academic performance and long-term employability.

## **Academic streaming**

“Streaming” is the practice of dividing school programs into two or more sequences of courses that prepare students for either post-secondary education or employment (Nichols, Ha, and Tyyskä 2020). Across the country, some form of streaming at the secondary school level is common. In Ontario, grade 10 courses are classified as three streams: “essentials” (local workplace programs), “applied” (colleges), and “academic” (university). While switching between streams is possible in upper years, moving from “essentials” or “applied” to the university stream may be difficult because of the prerequisite courses needed.

Streaming is a widespread yet controversial practice where student placement may be determined by factors such as race, language, country of origin, and poverty (Chiu, Chow, and Jon 2017; Nichols, Ha, and Tyyskä 2020). For immigrant youth, academic streaming may be based on English language proficiency rather than educational goals or perceived intellectual capacity (Chiu, Chow, and Jon 2017; Nichols, Ha, and Tyyskä 2020). Twenty (20) percent of elementary schools and 31 percent of secondary schools in Ontario had no formal process for identifying ELL students, which is an essential step in placing students in English language services appropriately (People for Education 2015). This gap may explain why English-speaking youth are sometimes erroneously placed into English language programs, since the absence of a formal process allows for the introduction of biases pertaining to home countries and accents.

## **Settlement services and programming**

While in school, many immigrant youth find it necessary to work (Marshall et al. 2017). For those who arrive with parents, paid work can provide a valuable supplement to total household income. However, for those who arrive alone or with their own dependents – like some older immigrant youth do – securing employment is essential to pay for housing, food, and education.

Across Canada, settlement services support the needs of newcomers. In 2021-22 alone, the Canadian government spent approximately \$1.7 billion on federally funded settlement services (El-Assal 2021). However, the scope and availability of programming specifically earmarked for immigrant youth vary across the country, and many immigrant youth are unaware of which services are available to them (Shields and Lujan 2019). Settlement services – including those matching immigrant youth to appropriate programs and resources – aim to support all newcomers in their first few years in Canada. However, some services such as the Settlement Workers in Schools program (SWIS) – which places settlement workers in school boards across Canada – focus on primary and secondary school children, and do not serve older immigrant youth (such as those pursuing higher education).

A 2020 WES survey on the economic impacts of COVID-19 further illustrates the information gap among immigrant youth, particularly those in the early stages of their settlement in Canada. Among respondents 30 years of age and younger<sup>3</sup>, 65 percent of whom had been in Canada four years or less, 37 percent did not think they were eligible for settlement services, and 11 percent were interested in contacting an agency but did not know how to do so.

In early 2021, the WES Global Talent Bridge team conducted a research scan of youth-specific services available to immigrants and refugees across Canada. The scan indicated that while some programs focus on employment, the majority emphasize building social capital, accessing health supports, and promoting opportunities for involvement in sports and recreation, as well as arts and culture.



## National Townhall: What We Heard

“One barrier [facing immigrant youth] is not having a map or blueprint directly after school, like internships and unpaid opportunities...”

– Immigrant youth

Further analysis of employment-specific services revealed many limitations. For example, while youth may have access to general services geared toward newcomer adults, such as language training and résumé writing, few programs target specific immigrant youth needs such as the school-to-work transition. Many employment services in the scan did not provide eligibility requirements on their websites. Organizations that did share eligibility criteria impose restrictions upon immigrant youth participation.

<sup>3</sup> A total of 1,000 respondents in this survey were in the 30 years and under category.

These restrictions may include age (available to youth 17 to 24 years of age but not those who are older); immigration status (for example, only available to permanent residents); requirement to be enrollment in secondary or post-secondary education; sector-specific limitations (such as technology-related or entrepreneur programs); and employment status (for example, youth must be unemployed or can only be employed part time). Such restrictions may be due to factors such as funding requirements, organizational scope, or capacity, but the result is that many immigrant youth must navigate finding employment with little or no support.

Additionally, depending on the region of settlement (urban or rural), the resources available to support employment and career development vary depending on the area. Consequently, immigrant youth may access general employment services that are geared to newcomer adults with professional experience rather than focused on the diverse range of immigrant youth and their needs, such as skills development and the school-to-work transition.

## Educational credential recognition

WES evaluates academic credentials from more than 48,000 institutions in 203 countries and territories around the world. Over 2,500 educational institutions, licensing bodies, government agencies, and others recognize WES credential evaluation reports. Although the majority of WES educational assessments are for post-secondary education and higher, a small portion of individuals who use WES services to evaluate high school credentials.

The recognition of credentials acquired abroad is a key success factor for both education and employment. Without it, immigrant youth may have to repeat courses they have already completed or return to secondary school to obtain admission to Canadian post-secondary institutions. Consequently, immigrant youth seeking employment may have to find work in lower-paid and often precarious jobs, like many of their adult immigrant counterparts (Nichols, Ha, and Tyyskä, 2020; Shakya et al. 2012).



[The WES Gateway Program](#) assesses the educational credentials of individuals who, because of adverse circumstances in the country where they were educated, have limited proof of their academic achievements. The program was launched in Canada in 2018; it is now being piloted in the U.S. through a limited number of designated partner organizations.

WES works with partners in Canada and the U.S. to identify qualified individuals educated in Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Ukraine, and Venezuela to participate in the Gateway Program.

Data from the WES Gateway Program between 2019 and 2021 indicate that most applicants age 18 to 29 requested a credential evaluation to pursue education or employment. Nearly 70 percent of these applicants intended to use their Gateway reports to apply for further education, and among this group, 66 percent had completed at least an undergraduate degree. Thirty-seven (37) percent of all applicants also included their secondary school transcripts for evaluation because they felt it was important to have all their studies evaluated, suggesting the perceived value of recognition of high school-level credentials.

## National Townhall: What We Heard



“I’ve come across a lot of refugee youth who have finished college or high school in their home countries, but due to war or natural disaster, they are unable to prove it, so even positions asking for high school education aren’t accessible”

– Career services provider, private college

## Compounding Mental Health Challenges

Mental health can dramatically affect an individual’s ability to maximize their potential in the workforce. Discussing mental health is taboo in some cultures, fostering reluctance to address concerns or seek care. When seeking help to overcome crises and challenges is met with potential bias and stigma, immigrant youth may be unwilling to access available support. This may negatively impact their sustained inclusion in the labour market.

For refugee youth in particular, the transition from survival to settlement in a new country poses many risks to mental health and well-being (Shakya, Khanlou, and Gonsalves 2010). Symptoms such as prolonged fear of authority, trust issues, depression, and anxiety may develop (Canadian Council for Refugees 2016). Trauma, combined with a new cultural, linguistic, and educational landscape, can profoundly impact a young person’s employment journey and career success.

In 2020, COVID-19 lockdowns brought an abrupt shift to daily life. The WES COVID-19 Impact Survey found that immigrant youth were particularly affected by the uncertainty of the pandemic, coupled with employment insecurity and public health risks (WES 2020). Among respondents age 30 and younger, 74 percent reported mental health impacts, including increased anxiety or depression and social isolation.

Twenty-two (22) percent of that same group reported that, as essential workers, they still had to report to their jobs in person; 14 percent lost a job because of COVID-19; 12 percent had to work hours at reduced pay; and 35 percent had difficulty searching or interviewing for jobs. Meanwhile, services and resources traditionally available in person were paused or delivered online.

## National Townhall: What We Heard



“Refugee youth may have to navigate race issues and going from a majority group in their country of origin to a minority group in Canada which affects their mental health”

– Immigrant youth

## Discrimination in education and employment

Many studies show that immigrant youth frequently encounter discrimination in the education system. In examining the school experiences of immigrant youth, Shields and Lujan (2018) identified key differences in how ethnic and linguistic minorities experienced discrimination. Turkish and Chinese immigrant youth, for example, felt excluded by the Eurocentric curriculum in Canada. Caribbean immigrant youth were more likely to encounter racism in school, and Francophone immigrant youth tended to experience exclusion based on language. In each case, the resulting discrimination negatively affected academic outcomes (Shields and Lujan 2018).

The cumulative disadvantages that many immigrant youth face often shape this population’s short and long-term life trajectories (Kamanzi and Collins 2021). Children of immigrants are 2.2 times more likely to come from low-income families (Public Health Agency of Canada 2019), they are more likely to be placed in the “essentials” academic stream, and they are more likely to face discrimination in the labour market.

The Greater Toronto CivicAction Alliance, also known as CivicAction, has reported that newcomer youth frequently encounter discrimination and racism in applying for, interviewing for, and securing jobs. Many employers believe that youth who are racialized, in poverty, or in the criminal justice system, among other factors, “lack work ethic [and] motivation to do entry level jobs” (CivicAction 2014: 6). Kamanzi and Collins (2021) stress that, behind the settlement journey and academic success of youth with immigrant backgrounds, those with racialized backgrounds experience hidden systemic discrimination more intensely.



This discrimination may explain why immigrant youth of African, Caribbean, and Latin American backgrounds are more often employed in lower-skilled work in the accommodation and food services industry than immigrant youth of other backgrounds. While these jobs are often used to gain “Canadian work experience,” this strategy may push racialized immigrant youth – who may have prior professional experience – into employment with limited career development opportunities (Hou and Bonikowska 2016; Lauer et al. 2012; Shields and Lujan 2019).

## National Townhall: What We Heard



Respondents in the Youth Only session flagged various examples of discrimination, including name bias, location bias (“postal code bias”), as well as prejudice against accents and lack of “Canadian experience.”

One youth highlighted the importance of “Canadian experience” without actually understanding what it is. Several youth have arrived in Canada with post-secondary education earned abroad that is dismissed by potential employers, leaving many discouraged and in search of “Canadian experience.”

## 3.0 – GOING THE DISTANCE

As noted in the second section of this report, immigrant youth from a wide variety of backgrounds pursue post-secondary education at significantly higher rates than their Canadian counterparts.

Their academic achievements, however, are not translating into success in the job market. Immigrant youth still experience higher levels of unemployment and lower rates of sustained labour market integration than their Canadian-born counterparts (Shields and Lujan, 2018).

Why?

Lack of social capital is one key factor.

### National Townhall: What We Heard



“Not everyone knows where to find the jobs. Businesses should connect further with immigrant/refugee youth organizations to help connect individuals with employment opportunities. And more than just entry-level experience ... [to take into account] those older youth who may have international experience.”

– Immigrant youth

### Building social capital and labour market inclusion

Social capital refers to how an individual’s social connections, like friends and communities, function as resources that can be converted into other social benefits such as better health and enhanced education and employment opportunities (Evra and Kazemipur 2019). The concept offers a helpful framework for understanding the economic experiences of immigrants who are new arrivals to Canada. In many cases, these newcomers leave many (and, at times, all) of their social ties behind in their home countries (Evra and Kazemipur 2019).

Whether newcomers themselves, or the children of newcomer parents, immigrant youth frequently lack the social capital that could help bridge their transition into the labour force. Their social capital may be limited by a range of factors, including the age at which they arrived in Canada and their immigration class (for example, as economic migrants, as refugees, or via family reunification programs).

Immigrant youth may rely on informal networks for a range of assistance such as help in securing their first jobs in Canada (Lauer et al. 2012). In many cases, these informal networks, while supportive, have limited connection to the broader social networks that might help immigrant youth more successfully navigate job opportunities and the path to economic inclusion.

## National Townhall: What We Heard



“Some barriers we face is that we’re unsure where the jobs are and how to network”

– Immigrant Youth

“Networking is one of the biggest challenges international students are facing”

– Higher education provider

Family friends, for instance, can be a significant source of job assistance; however, 70 to 75 percent of immigrant youth report that their families’ friends belong to the same ethnic group, which limits the reach of their influence and places constraints on employment outcomes (Yan et al. 2009). Similarly, many first-generation immigrant parents are themselves navigating their own employment journey and struggling to forge their own social connections. The result may be that a family’s social capital remains limited (Yan et al. 2009:18).

The right services and support can mitigate this situation. Refugees have reported that social integration and meeting new people outside their families helped them significantly with language acquisition, employment, income levels, and stable, affordable housing (Vukojevic 2018).

While social capital is not the only contributor to labour market success, it does appear to play a role. This is particularly evident when we consider the high education attainment rates of immigrant youth. However, academic achievement alone may not be enough to ensure that immigrant youth can surmount the barriers imposed by limited social capital. Many youth may struggle to launch careers because they do not have the social capital to link them to greater opportunities within the Canadian labour market.

## Work-integrated learning (WIL) programs: Opportunities to build workplace skills

Strategies to overcome the barrier of limited, or nonexistent, social capital exist. Work-integrated learning (WIL) gives students an opportunity to make employment connections, explore career options, and get hands-on work experience while they pursue post-secondary education.

Several post-secondary institutions, community agencies, employers, and other stakeholders provide a range of programs that include internships, co-op placements, apprenticeships and other opportunities for students to complement their studies with relevant employment experiences. WIL programs can provide students the benefits of workplace-related skills training and connections to employers (Choi, Hou, and Chan 2021), as well as access to resources, support, and networks that can build a bridge between school and sustained employment (Stirling et al. 2020).

WIL programs also allow students to develop soft skills - like communication skills, critical thinking and decision making - that employers typically value, as well as local employment experience that complement their fields of study (Martin and Rouleau 2020). Many of these opportunities are paid and serve as a buffer between their educational and financial commitments.

### National Townhall: What We Heard



“[One] impact of COVID-19 ... [is that] a lot of volunteer orgs have not been able to offer opportunities to gain experience/references.”

– Career services professional

For many immigrant youth, WIL programs provide the first step in securing Canadian employment experience. However, these programs are not a panacea. Those new to the Canadian educational system may overlook the benefits of WIL or may find themselves too burdened with additional responsibilities to participate in them. Furthermore, since the onset of the pandemic, students reported that many WIL opportunities had been cancelled or paused (Statistics Canada 2020). While some have since resumed, students may continue to experience difficulty accessing these opportunities.

## 4.0 – PICKING UP THE PACE

Higher education typically leads to higher rates of employment, higher earning potential, and improved health and well-being (Rae 2018). Yet, as this report has illustrated, many immigrant youth do not experience these benefits. Despite overcoming a range of challenges to achieve greater academic success than their Canadian-born counterparts, they remain stalled in their efforts to access and retain rewarding work.

Given the fact that Canada faces a growing skilled labour shortage, and the country is increasingly dependent on the talent, training, and skills of immigrants, we cannot afford to waste the potential of immigrant youth.

It is critical, therefore, that we find new and better ways to support and transition immigrant youth from school to the workforce, and to ensure that they are prepared to succeed in the labour market. Many questions remain about how immigrant youth are faring in the job market, what their career trajectories look like, and how the lack of social capital affects their labour market outcomes. It is important that researchers, policymakers, service providers, and additional stakeholders partner to collect and analyze data about how immigrant youth have fared, what has contributed to these outcomes, and what must be done to support them more effectively.

Immigrant youth consistently demonstrate considerable perseverance and resilience when faced with adversity. Removing or reducing the main barriers to success they currently encounter is the first step to helping them navigate thrive in the labour market.

This section proposes areas of focus for future research, investment, policy, and programming that will help pave the way for immigrant youth to fully succeed and prosper in Canada's workforce. These recommendations are drawn from available data and supported by the experiences and ideas shared in the National Roundtable and Town Hall:

### **Conduct research to better understand:**

- the labour market outcomes experienced by immigrant youth during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the early pandemic recovery period
- the barriers that impede many immigrant youth from successfully navigating the school-to-work transition

**Collect and analyze disaggregated data on intersecting factors that influence employment outcomes for immigrant youth.** Such data may include race, gender, country of origin, and immigration status. Current available data tend to focus on the outcomes of principal applicants to Canada (that is, parents) and overlooks the outcomes of many immigrant youth. Further insights in this arena would be beneficial to informing programs and interventions needed to provide holistic support.

**Design policy and programmatic interventions that respond to the unique and disproportionate challenges faced by immigrant youth in the educational system and labour market.** Examine current practices related to language levels and academic streaming as they intersect with and influence the outcomes of immigrant youth.

**Co-create policy interventions with youth themselves to identify solutions that align with their needs and experiences.** Such initiatives should compensate youth for their time and expertise, and should be viewed as an opportunity to foster social capital and create opportunities to gain work experience.

**Invest in employment-specific programs targeted and designed for and with immigrant youth.** Existing services for this group are mostly focused on social, cultural, and recreational domains. Further support is needed to facilitate career exploration and development in the school-to-work transition period.

**Invest in proven initiatives like WIL opportunities that build the social capital critical in the school-to-work transition.** These may include paid learning placements and professional mentorship opportunities. Internships, job shadowing, mentorship, and other workplace learning options are crucial opportunities that may allow immigrant youth to explore and discover career pathways.

**Cultivate employer practices that mitigate bias and discrimination against immigrant youth applicants based on their racial, ethnic, linguistic, academic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.** Employers are uniquely positioned to initiate youth-inclusive policies and champion a diverse and equitable workforce.

**Ensure recognition of educational credentials and international work experience.**

## National Townhall: What We Heard

When asked about solutions, youth at the National Town Hall on Immigrant Youth Workforce Development suggested:

- “Change the narrative – help organizations see the value that immigrant youth bring. Immigrant youth are an asset, not a favour.”
- “Paid training opportunities.”
- “Incentivize government to subsidize wages for immigrant youth.”
- “Use social media platforms to get information across to immigrant youth.”
- “Include Black, immigrant, Indigenous and people of colour youth on staff and make it visible to young people building their careers.”
- “We need more policies that focus on immigrant and refugee youth specifically.”



# APPENDIX A: NATIONAL ROUNDTABLE ON WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT FOR IMMIGRANT YOUTH

Since January 2021, World Education Services (WES) and the Canadian Council on Youth Prosperity (CCYP) have co-convened the National Roundtable on Workforce Development for Immigrant Youth to drive change and support positive long-term employment outcomes and economic empowerment of immigrant youth.

The roundtable has brought together leaders in advocacy, settlement, education, research, policy development, and business. These are stakeholders who provide services to interact with or influence policy that has an impact on immigrant youth.

## Roundtable members:

- **Brookfield Institute for Innovation + Entrepreneurship (Toronto Metropolitan University)**
- **Calgary Catholic Immigration Society (CCIS)**
- **Canadian Council for Youth Prosperity (CCYP)**
- **Career Foundation**
- **City of Toronto**
- **Concordia University**
- **The Co-operators**
- **COSTI Immigrant Services**
- **Immigrant Employment Council of British Columbia (IEC-BC)**
- **Labour Market Information Council (LMIC)**
- **Magnet Canada**
- **NPower Canada**
- **Opportunities for All Youth (O4AY)**
- **The Ontario Tourism Education Corporation**
- **Peel Newcomer Strategy Group**
- **S.U.C.C.E.S.S.**
- **Ted Rogers School of Management (Toronto Metropolitan University)**
- **Toronto's Workforce Funder Collaborative**
- **Venture for Canada**
- **World Education Services (WES)**
- **World University Service of Canada (WUSC)**

## APPENDIX B: NATIONAL TOWN HALL ON IMMIGRANT YOUTH WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

WES and CCYP co-hosted the National Town Hall on Immigrant Youth Workforce Development on February 8 and 9, 2022. During this two-day event, over 100 participants from across Canada exchanged insights on advancing the sustained labour market inclusion of immigrant youth.

Day 1 of the event was a “youth in camera” (youth-only) event that allowed young people to voice their experiences, concerns, and ideas with the aim of developing strategies that would facilitate their long-term labour market integration.

Day 2 of the event featured panel discussions with leading advocates, employers, service providers, post-secondary institutions, and policymakers (some of whom are youth themselves), to build on existing innovations in education and employment strategies and enhance the employment outcomes of this talent pool.

Convening key stakeholders that serve, hire, and advocate on behalf of immigrant youth, the event facilitated knowledge sharing and coalition development to improve the employment outcomes for young people in this demographic. Youth were able to participate in critical solutions-oriented dialogue as agents of change and emerging young professionals.



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