



Policy Roundtable Mobilizing Professions and Trades

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Towards A Comprehensive Labour Market Strategy for Immigrants

Executive Summary

PROMPT was created to offer research-based policy recommendations leading to the full social and workplace integration of immigrant professionals and tradespeople in Canada. *Towards A Comprehensive Labour Market Strategy for Immigrants*, while dealing primarily with the situation in Ontario, is aimed at solving the continuing nation-wide breakdown between the need for skilled immigrant labour and the reality of hampered immigrant participation. The recommendations are made in two parts. The first sets out a vision and founding principles for the labour market participation of immigrants. The second provides an assessment and a forward-looking strategy for the public funding of employment supports for immigrant participation in the workforce.

Today's immigrants to Canada strive to become partners in nation building, which includes meeting both individual and community economic aspirations, as well as strengthening social institutions. The reality is they are increasingly under-employed or unemployed because of the mainstream community's disconnect with skilled and educated immigrants. As a result, Canada is unwittingly creating a social underclass of excluded and marginalized people whom it assumes to be integrating. In order to reverse a trend which has high individual and social costs, Canadian society must internalize key principles with the end goal of transforming the normative frameworks of every institution. PROMPT envisions a Canada in the near future that supports and encourages the aspirations of all its citizens, taking its progressive strategies to the global stage, with the promotion of an international labour mobility agreement.

Essentially, immigrants' global education and experience, their exposure to different societies and schools of thought, must be understood as value-added, economic and social assets to Canada. A system-wide commitment is needed, with focus placed on reforming governance in the workplace and labour market, rather than continuing the current practice of reforming the immigrant to fit the "system". This requires a commitment among Canadian leaders to moving toward a governance framework within which universal principles are adopted, internalized, and insulated from fluctuating partisan allegiances and interests. The values of equity, diversity, and multiculturalism would be realized by the recognition and respect of the attributes and differences of peoples from all over the world, represented by Canada's immigrants. Employment integration programs must be made

mainstream and coherent, offering choice and investment in potential and advancement for immigrants. Governments must also be accountable for the success or failure of programs, and develop them in collaboration with bodies representing immigrants, which should be included as participants in the process.

The aim of PROMPT's examination of public investment was intended to build the case for a new approach to funding and implementing programs that would better facilitate the participation of immigrants in Ontario's labour market. In order to do this, PROMPT sought answers to two questions: 1) What is the existing environment for funding and implementing employment initiatives for immigrants in Ontario? 2) What are the necessary elements of a new approach to funding and implementing employment initiatives that would better facilitate the participation of immigrants into Ontario's labour market? Consultation and reporting on the opinions of different stakeholder groups who offered their critical analysis of the present context arrived at the answers to these questions, and the recommendations that resulted.

PROMPT's analysis of the present situation regarding funding for immigrant and employer supports found:

- The present system of immigrant employment initiatives is poorly designed, confusing and fragmented, with unstable and inadequate funding sources.
- While immigrant employment is part of broader labour market integration issues, there exists no concerted labour market strategy.
- Employment initiatives that are designed to support immigrants in finding work are outdated and do not reflect employer needs.
- There is no across the board strategy to engage and support employers and few practical programs for employers and other stakeholder groups.
- The immigrant voice advocating on behalf of immigrant professionals and tradespeople has been uncoordinated and fragmented.

Stakeholder consultation and reporting also produced a list of six areas that research participants suggested would need to be addressed in order to improve on immigrant employment programs.

PROMPT's recommendations for future directions identified the following as necessary steps for a labour market strategy to ensure meaningful immigrant participation:

- A commitment across and within levels of government to an agreement upon guiding principles for the funding of immigrant employment initiatives. These include being comprehensive, effective and accountable, among eleven identified principles in all.

- A new, coordinated and integrated funding strategy within and among existing government departments, possibly including: 1) the creation of a new, lateral structure within government, 2) the creation of new funding stream dedicated to immigrants, and 3) the accommodation of a new, coordinated funding strategy within the current funding structure;
- A new implementation strategy that provides a continuum of employment-related interventions, including their expansion to the pre-immigration stage, and the creation of an independent body to hear immigrant grievances against employers;
- A different understanding by government funders of the outcomes that immigrant employment initiatives are expected to produce, including a requirement for assessment of and accountability for public spending on programs;
- Funding and facilitation by the various levels of government of stakeholder groups (employers, educational institutions, occupational regulatory bodies) to support the participation of immigrants in the labour market;
- An increased and on-going role played by immigrants in ensuring the effective implementation of these suggestions.

PROMPT's recommendations presuppose strong government leadership. Leadership is needed first, for a transformation of governance to continually integrate new founding principles, and second, toward developing a new approach to funding and implementing immigrant employment initiatives. This leadership requires political will, clear vision and long-term commitment. By working in collaboration with stakeholder groups, particularly those representing the immigrant voice, PROMPT believes that such leadership can improve how our province, and Canada, facilitates the participation of immigrants in the labour market. Our common economic and social future requires that immigrants be treated no different than the Canadian born population, both in the way they are allowed to contribute to society and in the way they are fundamentally acknowledged as nation-building partners.