

Executive Summary

Canada makes a cogent argument for immigrant skills being necessary to tap into global markets and for Canada to be globally competitive. However, the reality on the ground in Ontario is in stark contrast – the majority of immigrants with professional backgrounds (IPBs) are severely under or unemployed. In order to quicken their entry into the Ontario labour market, these professionals are offered ‘bridge training programs’. This paper seeks to undertake an initial, exploratory review of bridge training programs in Ontario through the compilation and analysis of the first publicly available inventory of these programs. The review is two pronged – it examines program content and or profession specificities as well as policy processes that guide the development of bridge training programs – based on an equity framework developed by PROMPT.

The methodology for data collection and analysis is included: focus groups, individual and key informant interviews covering a broad range of stakeholders i.e. IPBs, program providers and funding bodies are conducted so that they may flesh out issues raised by the secondary source review.

A review of Canada’s Innovation Strategy, the points system, the labour force imperative and the labour market integration and underutilization of IPB skills and experience issues is included. It reviews the responses of different stakeholders: the government, regulators, employers and IPBs themselves. Gaps and challenges are discussed; followed by the historical context of bridge training programs and their evolution. There has been a conscious effort to separate out the literature review and the historical context review as the first is based on available literature around labour market integration of IPBs in particular (with a focus, where possible, on bridge training programs) whereas the latter is an excerpted analysis of how bridge training for IPBs came into being.

This is followed by the program perspectives – detailed findings from the IPB focus groups and interviews that are organized by program specificities, process issues, evaluation and impact mechanisms, and IPB needs and expectations. This ends with interesting quotes regarding bridge training programs garnered from IPBs that really drives the point home – responses to bridge training programs are mixed and they seem to have limited success according to respondents. They don’t always guarantee the work component that IPBs feel is the most crucial for labour market integration.

Stakeholder policy perspectives are then discussed, supported by analyses of the budget documents of the Government of Ontario and the process for the administration of bridge training programs; we share our observations of the underlying assumptions of different stakeholders and end with a critique of programs – that they do not generally pass the test of equity. Further, we find that program frameworks do not seem to be based on the capacity or competency of providers to deliver projected outcomes and that return on investment (ROI) issues need to be researched more thoroughly.

The suggestion is made that disconnects between different stakeholders’ intentions, initiatives and program designs exist. We suggest that the concept of bridge training needs to be reworked and redesigned so that it can meet the test of equity. Many more resources need to be dedicated to employer engagement, commitment and bridging their knowledge gaps. We also suggest that ‘bridge to work’ programs aimed at labour market integration should be renamed ‘Employment and Career Programs for IPBs’ and that they need to be redesigned with gap analysis based on research and the development of content and the engagement of employers such that these programs lead to IPBs gaining jobs that are commensurate with their skills. If indeed bridge training programs are to be designed at all, they must fulfil equity requirements both in policy and programming aspects. Finally, PROMPT shares its ideas for further research.