

ECONOMIC ADJUSTMENT OF ADULT IMMIGRANTS AND THE ROLE OF POST-SECONDARY EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Paul Anisef, York University
Lucia Lo, York University
Robert Sweet, Lakehead University
David Walters, University of Guelph
Maria Adamuti-Trache, University of British Columbia
Kelli Phythian, University of Western Ontario
Sheldon Grabke, York University

*Report prepared by Sheldon Grabke

January 2009

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recent adult immigrants¹ arrive in Canada but some find difficulty obtaining jobs or attaining employment in their fields of expertise. This prompts a substantial number to attend post-secondary education (PSE) to improve their Canadian credentials, where they often face access and completion barriers. This synthetic review is divided into two parts. The first part consists of two quantitative analyses of the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants in Canada (LSIC); the first examines the economic integration of recent immigrants with respect to entry class, and the second provides an analysis of immigrant's PSE pathways as a means of locating employment that match their qualifications. The second qualitative section, examines the responsiveness of universities and colleges to recent immigrants that enter PSE to receive Canadian credentials and work experience.

Part 1: Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants in Canada (LSIC)

Despite its policy importance, research related to the economic integration of recent immigrants according to class of entry is sparse, focusing exclusively on earnings. Very little is known regarding the factors that contribute to the early employment situation of newcomers shortly after they arrive. Such research is needed to inform an expansive Canadian immigration policy designed to attract and incorporate large numbers of immigrants into the economy. It is generally taken for granted that immigrants screened on the basis of skills and experience will perform better in the labour market than unscreened immigrants, but there also is much speculation that family class immigrants, who have informal social networks in place upon arrival, have access to employment resources not available to others. Both arguments have strong merit, yet little empirical research is available to support either claim. The initial quantitative study utilizes data from the first wave of the LSIC to investigate the characteristics that influence the early employment prospects of new immigrants six months after they arrive, including entry class. The findings reveal differences in the employment status of immigrants of various entry classes. Policy implications of these findings are discussed.

Although immigrants are able to find employment soon after arrival, many have difficulty gaining employment in fields for which they are seemingly well-qualified. This

¹ 'Recent immigrants' are defined as arrivals to Canada within 5 years of a reference Census year. LSIC immigrants are 'recent immigrants' with respect to the latest 2006 Census.

situation may be attributed to difficulties in gaining recognition of academic credentials and work experience gained outside Canada. As a response, many adult immigrants, even the highly educated, have enrolled in post-secondary institutions in search of Canadian credentials that would improve their chances of employment. In the second analysis of LSIC, the antecedents and correlates of PSE participation by adult immigrants who arrived in Canada between 2000 and 2001 are examined. LSIC provides extensive information on immigrants' education, work experience and family situations for the two-year period following their arrival in Canada. Cross' model of adult education participation was adopted and relevant individual, situational, dispositional and immigrant-specific factors were identified. The analysis indicates that rates of participation in post-secondary education are largely determined by immigrants' prior level of education, which suggests that newcomers use existing human capital (knowledge and skills) and cultural capital (dispositions toward learning) to create new forms of human capital (Canadian credentials) as a strategy to improve employment opportunities.

Part Two: Post-Secondary Responsiveness to Recent Immigrants

While some immigrants land in Canada to seek a better life, a number of employers discount their foreign education and work experience. Recent immigrants respond by turning to postsecondary institutions to facilitate their effective transition into the Canadian labour force. Newcomers that participate in postsecondary institutions in Ontario face a number of barriers to access and persistence including: language fluency and its impact on limiting academic success; evaluation of foreign transcripts and prior work experience; financial constraints; lack of knowledge of Canadian higher education, financial aid, government and/or agency services; cultural barriers and social capital barriers.

This qualitative analysis examines the specific responses of universities and community colleges in Ontario to this non-traditional student clientele. This paper utilizes the social inclusion conceptual framework to discuss the varying responsiveness of post-secondary institutions as well as the engagement of recent adult immigrant students (RAIS). Information presented is based on 18 key informant interviews with administrators from three universities and two community colleges in Ontario. Key informants were asked to respond to a number of questions relating to the student experience of RAIS in their postsecondary institution, especially with respect to admissions, transfer credits, course load, interaction with faculty, interaction with

fellow students, use of campus services and attrition. Discussion centers on important institutional gaps in the responses by post-secondary institutions in meeting the needs and engagement of recent adult immigrant students. Summarizing these findings, likely the most important conclusion one could draw from this report is “that there is no one way to overcome the barriers immigrants face in gaining access to higher education” (Erisman, 2007, p. 42). The issues encountered by RAIS in post-secondary institutions are unique and distinguish them from international and mature students. Individual Ontario universities and colleges vary considerably in their response to RAIS. Ontario universities and colleges need to respond quickly to all RAIS as Ontario’s demography and economy rapidly change. This may require Ontario universities to determine if they should change their approach to immigrant students, be more open in admissions recognizing RAIS credentials, remove barriers to RAIS, respond to RAIS and bring social inclusion to RAIS. Policy implications relating to institutional responsiveness to and engagement of recent adult immigrants are raised.

This work was funded by a contribution from the Canadian Council on Learning. However, the opinions expressed herein are solely those of the authors. The Canadian Council on Learning bears no responsibility for its content.