



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

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Workers Educated Abroad: Seduction and Abandonment

François Lamontagne
Canadian Labour and Business Centre



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Canadian Career Development Foundation
119 Ross Avenue, Suite 202
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Recently, the media bombarded us with news items focusing on the problems faced by immigrants – let's call them *new Canadians* – looking for work. We were told that the image of someone with a PhD driving a taxi or welcoming us to the neighbourhood McDonalds may well reflect reality. Some observers find this situation ironic since these problems encountered by new Canadians contrast sharply with forecasts of shortages of qualified labour in a growing number of companies and industries.

Some have described Canada's efforts to attract qualified workers trained abroad as *seduction and abandonment*. These people are lured with promises of jobs and a quality of life that draw heavily on Canada's reputation in other countries, but once they arrive, they are left to their own devices. Given this situation, there is good reason to question the validity of pre-arrival perceptions and the role that career development professionals can play in making any necessary adjustments.

The contribution of immigrants to Canada's economy

Immigration has formed an integral part of Canada's economic growth and has always represented an important, if not essential, component of our work force. Furthermore, the contribution of immigrants to labour force growth has increased in recent years. Data from the latest census (2001) show that the labour force grew by 1.4 million people between 1991 and 2001, and that 70 percent of this growth is attributable to immigration. It is estimated that in 2011, all – 100 percent – of the growth in the labour force could depend on immigration.

This contribution by immigrants to the labour pool takes on even greater importance when we consider two major labour market trends: aging of the workforce on the one hand and slowing growth of the labour force on the other. In the first instance, the phenomenon of aging suggests that we might face an unprecedented wave of retirements in the next 10 years, which would further aggravate the imbalance or even shortage of workers. In the second case, we know that the number of young people born in Canada (19-34 years old) who joined the labour market between 1991 and 2001 declined in both absolute and relative terms. This group therefore is slowing the growth of the labour force. In light of these trends, reliance on skilled workers trained abroad becomes very important.

The contribution of new Canadians to the economy is not limited strictly to their numbers. On average, they are also better educated than people born in Canada. In 2001, 40.7 percent of immigrants who had entered Canada since 1991 held a university degree, while the Canadian average was 22.2 percent for the same year. In a city such as Ottawa, the numbers speak even louder: the number of immigrants who arrived there in 2001 with a doctorate exceeded the number of doctoral graduates from *both local universities* that same year!

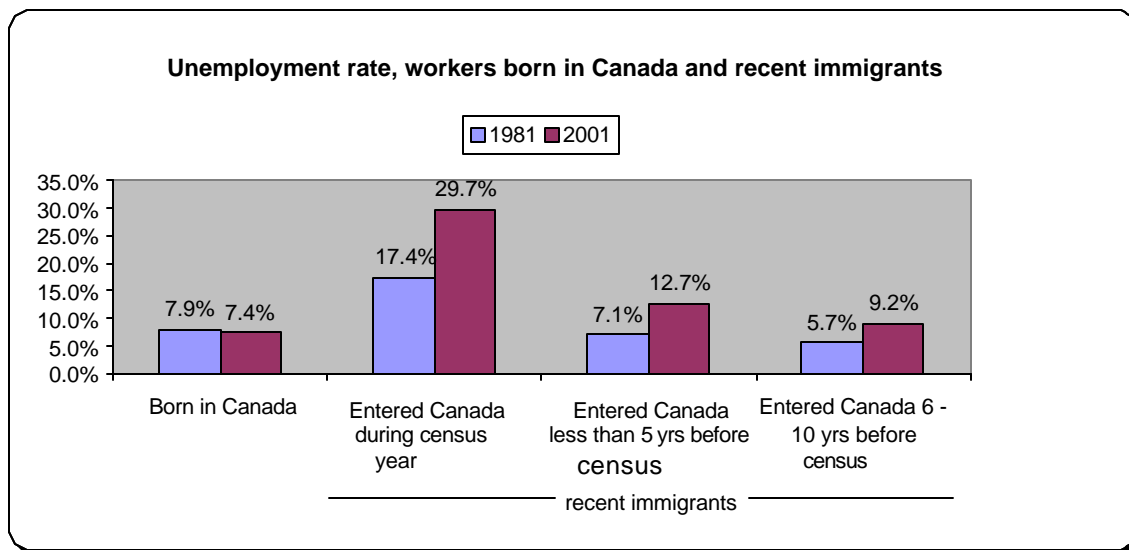


New Canadians are under-employed...

While there is agreement that immigration is a vital—and growing—component of the workforce and that newcomers generally are highly educated, this still is not reflected in their labour market performance. New Canadians, especially recent arrivals, face huge challenges landing a job and this situation appears to be getting worse.

Chart 1 below clearly shows the poor performance of new Canadians in finding a job. The chart shows that the relative performance of recent immigrants, as reflected in the unemployment rate, has consistently lagged behind that of workers born in Canada. In 1981, for example, the unemployment rate among immigrants who entered Canada that same year was 17.4 percent, twice the level of workers born in Canada (7.9 percent). For immigrants that same year who had been in Canada for five years, the unemployment rate had fallen just below that for workers born in Canada.

Chart 1



The chart shows that in 2001, the situation was much worse. Workers who entered Canada that year had an unemployment rate of almost 30 percent, compared with 7.4 percent for workers born in Canada. Those who had arrived during the five previous years still had a rate of 12.7 percent, far above the average for workers born in Canada. These statistics clearly show that the “transition penalty”¹ increased for all workers born outside Canada. This is a disturbing trend because it suggests growing under-utilization of the workforce and skills.

... and over-qualified

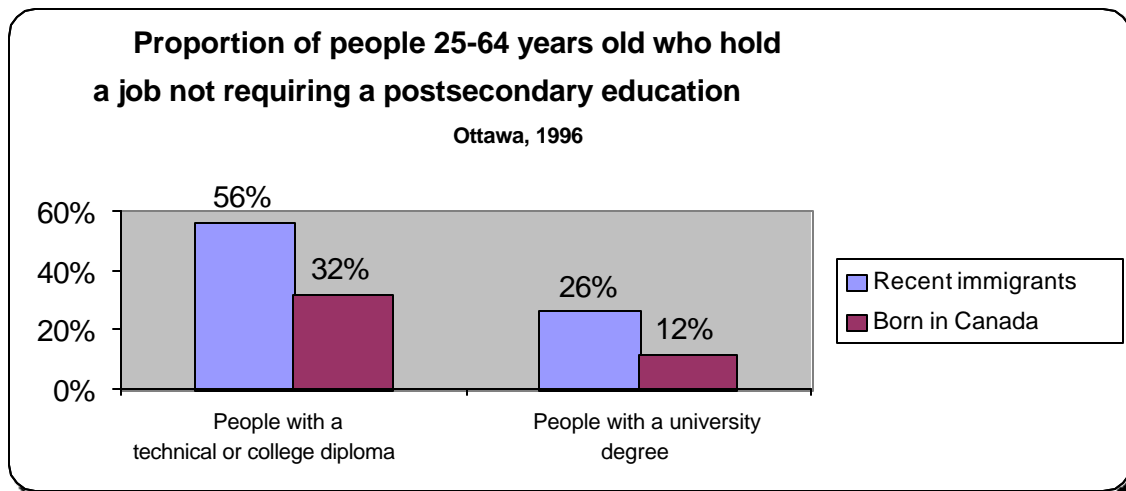
The portrait that can be drawn of new Canadians becomes even gloomier when we look at the situation of those with a job. The chances of a worker trained abroad landing a job consistent with his skills and education are generally much poorer than for a worker born in Canada. For example, data for the greater Ottawa area show that in 1996, 26 percent of recent immigrants with a university degree held a job that did not require a post-secondary education. The proportion of workers born in Canada who were in the same situation was 12

¹ The term used in a recent publication by the Canadian Labour and Business Centre, *The Transition Penalty: Unemployment among Recent Immigrants to Canada*, by Clarence Lochhead, July 2003.



percent (Chart 2). These data reinforce the claim by many that new Canadians with a university degree are over-represented in low-skill jobs.

Chart 2



The situation is just as disturbing when we consider training delivered in the workplace. Using data from Statistics Canada's *Workplace and Employee Survey*, the Canadian Labour and Business Centre estimated the probability of obtaining training from an employer based on immigrant status. The findings indicate that this probability is lower for workers with immigrant status than for workers born in Canada. Within the immigrant workers category, those recent arrivals are less likely to obtain training from an employer than those living in Canada for a long time. These results are especially significant since they reflect differences between the groups in age, gender and level of education (factors known to influence participation in training).

A challenge for career and workforce development

In light of the foregoing, we can question why new Canadians perform so poorly in entering the labour market. Many studies on this issue cite a host of barriers faced by new Canadians as well as members of visible minorities, especially:

- Lack of recognition of prior experience and qualifications;
- Less proficiency in the language of work, especially in the first year following migration;
- Poor knowledge of practices and standards in the work world;
- Cultural barriers, including discrimination; and
- Poor knowledge of programs and sources of financial assistance and training.

There are many barriers to employment and training, therefore, and these reflect the scope of the challenge facing career development professionals and anyone else working to facilitate the entry of new Canadians and members of visible minorities into the labour market.



Avenues for intervention

If there is one area of intervention where career development professionals could play a key role, it may well be recognition of prior experience and qualifications. A consensus now appears to be emerging that lack of prior learning assessment and recognition poses the main barrier to employment for highly skilled workers trained abroad. The last international conference on prior learning assessment and recognition was held in Winnipeg in October 2003. That event highlighted the importance of this issue and especially the increase in progress on this problem in Canada. However, as the many surveys and statistical analyses cited here indicate, much remains to be done.

It is increasingly clear that the barriers to employment are so numerous and complex that it would be futile to think that simple or universal solutions can eliminate them. One promising approach may be local partnerships to provide assistance for entering the labour market. These partnerships are best suited to our major cities, where 90 percent of new Canadians live. Experiments now being conducted in Vancouver, Toronto and Ottawa suggest that pooling the resources and expertise of all three levels of government, educational institutions, immigrant aid organizations, accrediting bodies and other socio-economic partners can produce solutions adapted to the local context and to the specific needs of this large pool of workers. Career development professionals definitely have a role to play, although their contribution must be more clearly defined.

