Immigration Matters in Vancouver

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Introduction

Over the past several decades, Vancouver has gone through enormous changes. During the years between welcoming the world to attend Expo ’86 and hosting the 2010 Olympic Winter Games, Vancouver evolved into a world-class city that is consistently ranked as one of the most desirable places to live. What makes Vancouver stand out is the presence of diverse communities and people. Diversity colours the landscape, enriches the texture of everyday life and strengthens the city’s position in an increasingly globalized world.

Today, Vancouver is home to one of the largest immigrant populations in Canada. Immigrants contribute to all facets of social, cultural and economic life in the city. They bring with them skills, talents and ambitions in hopes of making better lives for themselves and their families.

However, research suggests there is an ongoing and troubling gap between immigrants’ hopes and dreams and their actual experiences living in the city. Recent reports indicate that many newcomers do not have broad social networks, often experience loneliness and lack a sense of belonging. Newcomers also have more difficulty finding jobs that recognize their educational or work credentials compared to Canadian-born residents.

As Vancouver grows, we need to ensure that the city continues to be a welcoming and inclusive place for all. As a first step towards understanding these issues and challenges, this backgrounder explores how well immigrants are faring in making ends meet, accessing the support and services they need in the settlement process, and in participating in their new communities and neighbourhoods.
Many immigrants move to Vancouver with advanced education credentials, excited by the prospect of new economic opportunities. But research suggests that the types of opportunities open to them do not fulfill the aspirations Vancouver’s newcomers bring to their new home.

Of the 36,000 new immigrants who arrived in British Columbia in 2013, about half held a university degree or post-secondary certification. More than half of all new immigrants to BC that year were economic immigrants selected for their skills and ability to contribute to Canada’s economy. This group included skilled workers, business people and provincial nominees1. But more immigrants find themselves unemployed, or underemployed2, despite bringing considerable educational, professional and financial experience to their new home.

Many recent immigrants who have been in Canada for less than five years report that they experience acute economic strain. According to the 2011 National Household Survey, the proportion of recent immigrants in Vancouver with incomes below the low-income cut-off is greater (34 per cent) than residents who are Canadian-born (17 per cent). The survey also showed that immigrants faced almost double the unemployment rate of their Canadian-born counterparts.

Newcomers with specialized professional skills and high educational credentials — what many would assume to be the tickets to gainful employment — often have trouble landing jobs in Vancouver. They may lack information about business processes and practices or have misinformation about credential assessment and recognition processes that will allow them to work in their chosen fields. Being an immigrant can also mean they lack local Canadian work experience, and many prospective employers don’t give international work experience the same weight as local work experience. For newcomers whose native language falls outside Canada’s two official languages, low English proficiency in Vancouver can also prove detrimental to finding work. So, too, can gaps in technical knowledge required for certain industries.
The intersecting barriers newcomers face to successfully put down roots in Canada should not be theirs to shoulder alone. Meaningful, sustainable work is the cornerstone of an individual’s capacity to contribute to society. Without immediate action to address the barriers immigrants face in finding, securing, and maintaining work, Canada will continue to underutilize the full potential of its human capital.

Many newcomers end up in low-paying jobs, which fail to reflect their specialized skills, education or experiences. Some newcomers struggle financially and find it difficult to provide for their family and children. These stresses can contribute to poor physical health, mental health concerns, and low self-esteem. Some immigrants report that they have faced discrimination in the workplace due to language and cultural barriers. And those realities are for the lucky ones who manage to land a job; hiring processes are riddled with systemic concerns that are disproportionately punitive to newcomers. Studies suggest immigrants with non-English sounding names and international experience are more likely to be discriminated against during the hiring process than people with English-sounding names and local work experience.

Employers looking for needed skills and talents also face challenges and barriers. Without the resources to adequately assess applicants’ education and work experience outside of Canada, employers often find it difficult to hire newcomers. This is especially true for many small and medium-sized businesses, as they have limited human resources capacity for hiring and training new employees.

Many regulatory organizations that establish licensing requirements and administer licensing processes also experience challenges in evaluating foreign credentials and work experience. Lack of resources and capacity to conduct research on foreign credentials or lack of information about educational institutions in foreign countries, are recurring challenges for these agencies.
Support for Newcomers

The anticipated influx of 279,100 new immigrants to Canada in 2015, combined with recent changes in federal immigration policy, present new questions about the types of support that will benefit Vancouver’s newcomers. Settlement services and programs are widely available to immigrants across the city, yet some immigrants still face multiple barriers in accessing these services and programs due to a lack of knowledge about their availability. This is especially true for newcomers who have language barriers.

Many newcomers lack awareness and understanding of Canada’s social support systems and the community resources available to them. Being new to the country, they’re processing a heavy volume of information about their new surroundings. Newcomers are often understandably overwhelmed with the information they need to absorb from various sources. As a result, information on how to access social and community supports is often lost on the very people these services are designed to assist.

Settlement services in BC are designed to support newcomers in the many facets of settling and integrating into a new life in Canada, including general information, referral, employment support, housing resources and language training services. In 2013 and 2014, more than 60,000 immigrants accessed settlement information and orientation services in BC. More than 20,000 immigrants in BC accessed English language training services in 2013 and 2014.

Recent federal policy changes have shifted the landscape of services for newcomers in Canada. In 2014, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) amended eligibility criteria for settlement services to be made available only to permanent residents. Under the new criteria, some people previously eligible for, and in need of, settlement services are no longer eligible to receive them. This group includes naturalized Canadian citizens and non-permanent residents.
In January 2015, the federal government introduced a new Express Entry system that reduces application processing time for skilled foreign workers and, notably, pre-assesses potential immigrants’ qualifications. Pre-assessing potential qualifications allows prospective newcomers to find jobs through a Job Bank that matches them with Canadian employers prior to their arrival in Canada. The Express Entry helps prospective immigrants to secure a job before they arrive, changing the need for, and the type of, employment and settlement support upon their arrival. An increase in skilled workers applying for immigration to Canada under this system is expected in the coming years.

Given the intersecting language and social barriers that prohibit some newcomers from accessing settlement and integration services, there is a continuing need for service agencies to provide information about services and programs in different ways, including the availability of publications in multiple languages that are responsive to the changing needs of newcomers.
Diversity in Our Neighbourhoods

While Vancouver’s diversity has benefited its residents by helping them learn from many cultures, immigrants, especially recent newcomers, continue to have challenges learning about their communities. According to recent studies, new immigrants reported a lower sense of belonging and higher experience of loneliness than Canadian-born residents.

For many recent immigrants, a lack of social networks and low English language proficiency hinders their sense of belonging and prevents them from getting involved in the community. With eight percent of Vancouver’s population unable to converse in English or French, language is still one of the major barriers for immigrants living in Vancouver.

Volunteering is an opportunity for newcomers to expand their social circles and become involved in the community. Recent immigrants (39 per cent) volunteered at charitable or non-profit organizations almost as much as immigrants who had been living in Canada for a longer period (42 per cent). However, studies show that a lack of spare time, low English language proficiency, economic hardship and cultural issues can prohibit newcomers from volunteering.

In addition to facing barriers to access settlement services information, newcomers also experience challenges in accessing information about volunteer opportunities. Despite these challenges there are high returns for those who do volunteer. Volunteering can provide newcomers with unique social, educational, and cultural opportunities to interact with, and learn from others.

An important avenue for creating greater newcomer community engagement has been through participation of local neighbourhood houses. Neighbourhood houses, found in communities across Vancouver, are welcoming places where people of all ages, ethnicities and abilities can attend, participate, belong, lead and learn through programs, services and community building. Volunteering or spending time at neighbourhood houses can broaden horizons and social circles. One study showed that 82 per cent of newcomers reported that their involvement with local neighbourhood houses helped them make ties with people from other ethnic backgrounds. Social capital is important for integrating newcomers into the community. Neighbourhood houses also support immigrants in the settlement and integration process by providing non-commercial, non-judgmental, anti-oppressive spaces for people to get involved in their communities and meet their neighbours.

Increased awareness of the social opportunities available to newcomers is essential. Through meaningful participation in local community organizations and events, and opportunities to meet new friends and neighbours, newcomers can be successful on their paths towards integration in their new city.
Immigrant integration involves the shared work of making communities welcoming and inclusive for newcomers. To make integration work, more efforts must be made through multi-faceted social supports and opportunities for meaningful employment, community engagement and celebration of diversity. Integration speaks to how people relate to each other and demonstrate one-to-one kindness, compassion, and inclusivity.

Vancouver is uniquely positioned to innovate and demonstrate practical ways to make newcomers’ integration work. The City is currently implementing a Healthy City Strategy, which has distinct goals for creating a healthy city for all, based on a holistic understanding of health and well-being of people, communities and the environments. The Healthy City Strategy, together with the Greenest City Action Plan and the Vancouver Economic Action Strategy, are the three pillars of long-term sustainability planning for Vancouver.

In terms of supporting newcomers’ integration, the city has undertaken numerous initiatives: implementing the Equal Employment Opportunity program and providing training for staff on diversity-related issues; providing financial support to non-profit organizations for social and cultural inclusion programs and activities; co-hosting the Immigrant Employment Summit; and establishing a Newcomer’s Mentorship Program connecting City staff with immigrants with professional designations to address workplace and employment issues.

A Healthy City for All
Further, the City launched a digital newcomer’s guide in 2014 and currently offers 3-1-1 Telephone Information and Referral Services in 175 different languages. The Vancouver Public Library undertakes special initiatives such as the Skilled Immigrant Info Centre that offers employment and career advice for newcomers, and is also a partner in the NewToBC program that provides newcomers with settlement information and resources. In collaboration with diverse organizations, the City also implemented the Welcoming Communities Project in 2013/14. This project involved building Community Action Circles comprised of new immigrants and long-term residents, initiating ‘Diversity in the Workplace’ projects with small and medium sized businesses, and promoting stronger relations between immigrants and Aboriginal communities.

To continue to address immigration and settlement issues, the City of Vancouver, in collaboration with diverse community partners, businesses, educational institutions, and other levels of government, is undertaking a new initiative called the Vancouver Immigration Partnership (VIP). VIP, which received funding support from Citizenship and Immigration Canada, will develop an Immigrant Settlement and Integration Strategy to foster a welcoming and inclusive city. Key VIP focus areas including human services, welcoming workplaces and civic engagement will be integrated with the Healthy City Strategy.

Through VIP, the City of Vancouver, its community partners, and immigrants themselves are collectively addressing the challenges faced by immigrants in the city. VIP will help ensure that Vancouver will continue to be a city of choice for immigrants to Canada and a place they can be proud to call home.
1 Citizenship and Immigration Canada. Immigrants to Canada by destination. 2013.

2 BC Stats. 2014.


8 Citizenship and Immigration Canada. 2015 Immigration Levels Plan.


10 Citizenship Immigration Canada. Express Entry.


http://www.vancouverfoundation.ca.


24 Vancouver Public Library.


26 Welcoming Communities Summit Program. 2014.