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Labour Market Barriers and Solutions for Internationally Educated Researchers in Canada: Social and Health Implications

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Abstract

Canada is home to a large immigrant and refugee population. Current information confirms the underemployment of the internationally educated professionals. The overall process and journey of migration can have a large and negative impact on financial, social and mental health. With a limited number of first-hand research studies on the experience and effect of immigration on Internationally Educated Researchers (IERS), this study aims at generating evidence around the challenges faced by the IERS to find suitable professional employment, and recommends solutions to improve the current situation.

Based on a grounded theory approach, data for this qualitative study was collected by conducting Focus Group Discussion (FGD) sessions with 22 IERS from different backgrounds and 11 key informant (KI) interviews with directors, executives, human resources administrators, scientists, and researchers from a diverse group of organizations working with IERS. A collaborative data analysis method was practiced for coding, development of categories/subcategories, and creating themes, facilitated by using the NVivo 12 Plus qualitative data analysis software.

Discrimination, systemic racism, and xenophobia were identified by some of the participants as the critical root causes behind the barriers that IERS face in their quest to find a decent job. The current situation of the research labour market in Canada, which is a result of the so-called “gig economy” and job cutbacks, was mentioned as another root cause of the problem. Financial stresses were described as a challenge by some IERS during their transition into the Canadian labour market. Further, deterioration of mental health was common among the participants whose mental problems including depression and anxiety increased as time passed.

The findings of this project can be utilized to pilot strategic interventions and advocate for policy/system solutions that will enable IERS to gain a productive career in Canada.

Keywords: *International Credential; Labour Market Challenges; Mental Health; Immigrant Researcher*

Introduction

A Labour Force Survey from Statistics Canada estimates that recent skilled immigrants with a university degree had an unemployment rate more than four times higher than their Canadian-born peers in 2013 [1]. A 2010 Ontario study of 2,442 respondents across 37

regulated professions, found that 76% of domestically trained individuals were employed in their profession, while only 44% of internationally trained individuals were employed in their field. A separate report mentioned that three times as many internationally trained individuals (37%) were unemployed or were employed in an unrelated field, as compared to those trained in Canada (11%) [2].

According to Statistics Canada, in 2017, highly-educated recent immigrants who had a university degree and were landed in Canada within the past 5 years, had an unemployment rate 3.3 times higher than their Canadian-born counterparts (9.7% vs. 2.9%). Interestingly, the unemployment rate of the recent immigrants who had a post-secondary certificate or diploma has been continuously lower than those with a university degree since 2010 [1].

Based on 2006 Census data, if immigrants' observable skills were rewarded in a manner similar to that of Canadian-born workers (namely in the form of earnings and unemployment rates), this would result in \$30.7 billion in increased incomes for immigrants, equivalent to 2.1% of the Canadian 2006 GDP [3].

Rationale

The opportunity to immigrate to Canada using the Permanent Resident Program: Economic Classes, particularly the Federal Skilled Worker program, resulted in a huge influx of highly educated professionals including internationally educated researchers (IERS) - newcomer immigrants with research/analyst training and experience before coming to Canada. However, a large proportion of these internationally educated professionals remain unemployed or underemployed, with their skills largely underutilized. Previous studies have shown that underutilization of skills of internationally trained immigrants, also known as "brain-waste", is a well-known phenomenon with a significant adverse impact on the Canadian economy. While the broad Canadian evidence on labour market barriers facing immigrants to Canada is strong, there is very little research on the experiences of IERS. To generate in-depth insight around this important issue, Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services (Access Alliance) conducted a study to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the labour market barriers and challenges faced by IERS in securing decent work in their field?
2. How do these barriers and challenges impact them in terms of health and socio-economic wellbeing?
3. What are the potential solutions and resources to support the IERS in finding meaningful decent work in research related fields in the Canadian labour market?

Results from this study will inform designing meaningful support strategies for IERS at the organization level, and elaborating policy as well as advocating system-level solutions for promoting successful labour market integration conducive to the health and social wellbeing of IERS.

Methodology

Study design

This qualitative research included FGD sessions with IERS and key informant interviews (KIIs) with researchers, scientists, directors, and HR officers and administrators based at research institutes who worked closely with IERS. Three focus groups were conducted with IERS who were struggling to find decent jobs in research or research-related fields in Canada. One FGD was conducted with IERS who had already managed to work in stable employment within the research sector in Canada at the time of conducting the FGD.

Eligibility criteria

The inclusion criteria for participation in the FGD sessions were: 1) being a newcomer immigrant (moved to Canada within the last 7 years); 2) belonging to the core working-age group (between 25 to 54 years old); 3) having at least a 2-year experience of working in research related field before coming to Canada. Newcomers who have been in Canada for less than six months were excluded because that length of residency in Canada was not considered sufficient for newcomers to fully participate in the labour market and reflect on the experiences in this study. Study participants were legally allowed to work in Canada.

Sampling and recruitment

Study participants for FGDs were recruited using a heterogeneous purposive sampling technique [4] to ensure diversity and equity in participation, which included posting and/or sharing recruitment flyers to members of the Immigrant Researchers Support Network (IRSN), referrals from community agency partners who worked closely with newcomers, making in-person presentations about the study to existing programs for newcomers, posting on social media channels commonly used by newcomers, and snowball recruitment from other FGD participants.

Key informants were recruited using purposeful sampling from HR managers and employers/decision makers in research institutes who worked closely with internationally educated professionals.

Data collection

Data was collected through four FGs from 22 IERs (four to seven participants in each group- $N = 22$, $n_1 = 6$, $n_2 = 4$, $n_3 = 5$, $n_4 = 7$), and through KIIs from 11 researchers, employers, and human resources administrators who were with research institutions and organizations working with IERs in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) region between September 26th and December 11th of 2018. The FGDs took place at Access Alliance. The KI interviews were conducted face-to-face at locations preferred by the participants, or by using phone or Skype.

No personally identifiable information (e.g. name, address, date of birth, etc.) was collected from any of the participants. At the beginning of the FGD sessions, after informed consent, the study participants completed a basic demographic questionnaire (race/ethnicity, country of origin, years in Canada, the highest level of education, etc).

Data analysis

Data was transcribed verbatim, coded and analyzed using NVivo 12 Plus (QSR International, Melbourne, Australia) software. Collaborative Data Analysis [5] with a grounded theory (GT) approach allowed for capturing emergent and latent patterns/findings through constant comparison and seamless bridging of ideas [6-8]. A preliminary coding framework was developed by reviewing a representative sample of transcripts to identify key themes and codes. Then, all transcripts were systematically coded based on the coding framework, using a constant comparative technique and the iterative refinement process of the coding framework. Check in meetings were conducted to review additional themes/codes identified during the coding process, and back coding done if relevant. Coded summaries were thoroughly reviewed to build a robust, reflexive thematic analysis of findings.

Findings

Participants' profile

FG participants were immigrants from 11 South Asian and Middle Eastern countries. Demographic data of the FGD participants has been summarized in Table 1. The majority of FGD participants (77.3%) arrived in Canada as Federal Skilled Workers with a permanent

resident (PR) status. At the time of conducting the FGDs, they had been in Canada on average for about 3.4 (range: 0.5 - 7.0) years. They had diverse educational backgrounds and research experience. Ten (45.5%) of them had PhD degrees or were pursuing one and six mentioned a Masters as their highest academic degree. Most of them had the experience of living and working in at least one country other than their home country or Canada.

Variable	n (%)
Gender	
Female	13 (59.1)
Male	9 (40.9)
Age group (Years)	
25 - 44	15 (68.2)
45 - 64	7 (31.8)
Duration of living in Canada (Years)	
< 5	3 (13.7)
1 - 5	16 (72.6)
> 5	3 (13.7)
Region of home country (n, %)	
South Asia	13 (59.1)
Middle East	9 (40.9)

Table 1: Demographic data and background education information of the FGD participants (N = 22).

Key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with 11 participants who had a diverse background with regard to the agencies they worked with, their positions, and experience. Seven of them were researchers/scientists and the four of them were executives or human resources (HR) administrators.

Internationally educated researchers’ path model to find a decent job in the Canadian research market

Based on the in-depth data analysis, a model (Figure 1) was developed to show the thematic relationships between different categories.

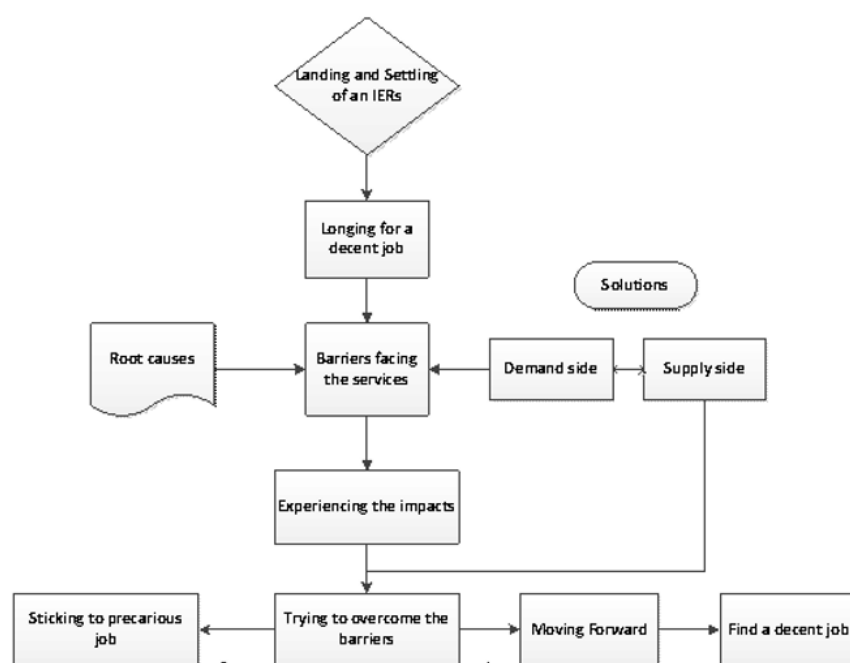


Figure 1: IERs’ Path model to find a decent job in the Canadian research market.

As depicted in the illustration, after landing in Canada, IERs began to “long for a decent job in their field” and began searching using various strategies. Unfortunately, in almost all cases IERs faced one or multiple labour market barriers due to the “root causes” identified in this report. “Facing the barriers” resulted in “experiencing the impacts”. The IERs tried to “overcome the barriers” through the potential “solutions”. The solutions were considered as supply-side, if they were supposed to be employed at an individual level, or as demand-side if they were at a policy level, requiring implementation by authorities. Demand-side solutions were intended to address barriers and root causes; supply-side solutions focused on personal challenges. If IERs could overcome the barriers and tackle the challenges, they succeeded in finding a decent job in their research field. Otherwise, these people ended up in unemployment or underemployment with precarious work. In the latter scenario, the IER entered a vicious cycle of being stuck in a precarious job, which was associated with an increase in experiencing the impacts of the original barriers to suitable professional employment. Consequently, the burden of the impacts and the challenges that came with them would prevent the IER from finding a decent job, and the vicious cycle continued.

Job search experience by IERs

Job search strategies included searching and applying to posted jobs, using employment agencies’ services, networking, volunteering, and cold calling (Table 2). One of the KIs also suggested informational interviews as a search strategy.

	Settlement Service Advice	IERs’ Experience	Remarks
IERs’ Employment Opportunity	Online job search and application	Not effective	AI screening of resumes for hiring
	Employment agencies	Unsatisfactory	Services too generic to serve the IERs
	Networking	Limited to closed groups Benefit is doubtful	Entering into a meaningful network is not easy
	Cold calling	Effective for certain ethnic groups	Language and accents are challenges
	Volunteering	Limited opportunity	Opportunity or exploitation

Table 2: Job search experience by IERs.

Searching and applying to posted jobs

FGD participants’ experience was negative with searching and applying to the online or printed job postings. They found this strategy futile, and their main concern was that they had never heard back after applying for a job: “These online jobs are like black hole. And you use application, and nothing comes back. That is what has happened with many of the people. I have a few friends... who actually warned me about this before that here the practice is different. If you think that you are applying for 100 jobs online so it’s not like that you will hear from even 10 back” (An unemployed IER with a PhD).

One KI shared some of the utter dissatisfaction of IERs regarding online applications and explained the way that the online applications were handled, as discussed later under the title “Employers’ practices”.

Using employment agencies’ services

The majority of FGD participants had used employment services that were provided by various settlement and/or employment agencies. They described their experiences as unsatisfactory in most instances. Factors identified as contributing to IERs’ dissatisfaction with the employment agencies’ services were inadequate generic service provision and inability to provide useful information.

Networking (as a job search strategy)

A common viewpoint among the participants in FGDs was the importance of networking as a job search strategy. While most IERs use the term “networking”, some of them used alternative terms such as “lobbying”, “relationship”, “knowing someone in the field”, and “connection”, although each of those words has a distinctly different meaning in the Canadian context. Almost all of the participants considered networking as an important strategy to enter into the labour market and some of them stated that getting into a job without having a professional network was not possible.

Several of the FGD participants said that they started to build their own professional network. A few of them stated that they considered professional online networks such as LinkedIn as an appropriate search strategy to find the job they were looking for. Other IERs preferred to have a real network instead of a virtual one. According to IERs, the main mechanism through which networking was successful was in finding someone in the research labour market who supported them to break into that market either directly or indirectly, i.e. via introducing them to someone else in their network.

Volunteering-opportunity or exploitation

One of the most frequently-mentioned job search strategies by both the IERs and the KIs was volunteering. IERs considered volunteering as the first and the most important step to find a job. Viewpoints on volunteering were diverse, for a variety of reasons. One important factor was whether the IERs volunteered in a field related to their research; in such cases, the volunteering experience was generally positive: On the other hand, some IERs mentioned that they volunteered for jobs that were not directly related to research, e.g. some FGD participants volunteered at hospitals to add volunteering experience to their resume in order to find a job in clinical medicine. In several of those cases, the volunteering experience was not considered satisfactory. While some of the FGD participants and KIs considered volunteering as a proven job search strategy, others found volunteering opportunities simply to be work exploitation.

Cold calling

As a job search strategy, cold calling was mentioned by one IER and one KI. The KI’s viewpoint was that email communication works better than traditional phone calls because most people do not answer a phone call from a number they do not recognize. In most cases, IERs cannot pass through reception acting as the gatekeeper. Informational interview as a job search strategy was suggested by one KI.

Research labour market barriers

This broad theme comprises subthemes such as system barriers, non-recognition of international credentials and experience, information and service gaps, employers’ practices, Canadian workplace experience, number of job opportunities in the research sector, specific program for hiring IERs, and language barriers.

Key systemic barriers

Non-recognition of international credentials and experience

Participants in all FGDs as well as several KIs considered “non-recognition of international credentials and experience” as a key barrier to finding a decent job in the research sector. The contributing factors include: different higher education systems (e.g. annual versus

semester evaluations, different grading systems, etc.), perceived higher standards of education in Canada, evaluation of credentials, and poor understanding of the quality of higher education in developing countries (Table 3). The process of credential validation in Canada was described by participants as lengthy, difficult, and expensive.

- | |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-recognition of credentials and experiences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different education system • Perceived standard of international education • Evaluation of credentials • Employers’ poor knowledge about international credentials • Information and service gaps • Employers’ practice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback to IER • Online application and ATS • Internal hiring • Systemic barriers having no program for hiring IERs • Personal challenges perceived by IERs and the KIs |
|--|

Table 3: Barriers for meaningful employment of the IERs.

Employers’ lack of understanding about the quality of education in countries other than North America, was reflected in data from KI and FGDs participants: “The lack of knowledge about academic systems in foreign countries is definitely a structural barrier. Like the lack of knowledge and understanding about, and I feel like in Canada there are popular conceptions about good quality education in the US and the UK. But beyond that people for the most part are fairly ignorant to the quality and nature of post-secondary education anywhere else in the world” (Scientist, a research institute).

Lack of Canadian experience was the most frequently cited barrier perceived by the FGD participants, one they could not overcome because of current employment policies and practices. Lack of Canadian education was also commonly seen as a labour market barrier. However, a few participants did not find that having Canadian education was a facilitating factor for finding jobs in the research sector in Canada. Several FGD participants also mentioned a perceived need for providing Canadian references as a barrier.

Several KIs considered qualifications as the most important factor for hiring IERs. By qualification, they meant skills that were needed for a certain job and relevant experience, which sometimes refer to language and credentials. They said that they only looked for qualified candidates and did not differentiate between the immigrants and Canadian born.

Information and service gaps

Despite their different viewpoints, participants considered lack of sufficient information and services related to the labour market as a key barrier to find suitable employment. The FGD participants mentioned the unfamiliarity of IERs with the application process and the

unavailability of required information. Some participant IERs were coming to believe there is a “hidden job market”, mainly related to internal job posting. KIs were more concerned about the IERs’ essential information concerning employment opportunities for researchers.

Participants found the services of the employment agencies as too general, such as helping the clients with generic resume writing, rather than providing tailored advice on finding a research job.

Employers’ practices

There were some concerns about employers’ practices, including how they responded and provided feedback to IERs. The majority of FGD participants mentioned that when they applied for a job, they never heard anything from the potential employers, which they found frustrating. This issue might be the result of a cultural misinterpretation by IERs of routine hiring practices in Canada; while in many posted jobs the employers clearly mentioned that they would only contact those candidates who they would invite for interviews, some IERs expected to receive feedback even if they were not shortlisted for interviews. Receiving no feedback from the potential employer(s) was identified as a barrier in terms of understanding IER’s own preparation, and improving their resumes, cover letters, and other application documents. It also results in depression, reduced self-confidence, and decreased motivation among IERs, which adversely impacts their job search.

An online application and the Applicant Tracking System (ATS) used by major hiring organizations in the research sector in Canada was found by KIs to be another potential barrier.

Several FGD participants perceived the practice of hiring internal candidates at research organizations as another barrier, in that it deprives the broader community of employment opportunities. Again, competition with internal candidates was not very effective.

The perception of one participant was that during the screening process, employers rejected the resume of an IER, who had no Canadian work experience. She also mentioned that most organizations did not invite IERs for interviews.

Limited number of job opportunities in the research sector

Most of the FGD participants agreed that the number of research jobs was limited and even getting into an entry-level job was difficult. However, one of the participants believed that there were enough vacant positions in the research labour market. This person believed that the “hidden job market” might have contributed problems. Several KIs considered the main barriers to finding a research job were the decreased number of job opportunities because of cutbacks, current “gig economy” conditions, government transition, and a large number of job-seekers versus a smaller number of available jobs. One KI mentioned that this reduced number of job opportunities affected both Canadian-born and IERs in a similar manner.

No specific program for hiring IERs exists

The majority of the KIs were not aware of any systemic barrier which prevented IERs finding a decent job in the research sector; however, they agreed that there was no specific program in their institutions to enhance the hiring of IERs. They were also not aware of any specific governmental program in this regard.

Personal challenges

Canadian workplace etiquette

Several FGD participants and KIs found that understanding Canadian workplace culture and social norms were important for their success in finding jobs in the research sector. They also mentioned that most IERs lack this knowledge, which they perceived as a barrier to finding a job.

Language

Some FGD participants and KIs consider lack of language skills as a barrier for IERs to break into the research labour market in Canada. A KI who was an executive director of an international non-profit, non-governmental health organization mentioned how important language skills were for working in the research sector: “I think language is one barrier. Because being able to write strong English is important for proposal writing for example and report writing. So, I think language can be a barrier” (Executive Director, an international non-profit, non-governmental organization).

Hard skill gaps and barriers

Few FGD participants and KIs mentioned IERs’ lack of hard skills as a challenge to securing jobs in the research sector. An FGD participant provided his viewpoint on the mismatch between the skills that were demanded in Canada and the skills IERs had. However, he also pointed out that there should be some opportunities for IERs, so they could improve their skills.

Participants in one of the FGDs perceived the differences in the educational systems (curriculum and grading) between their home country and Canada as a barrier. Some of the differences they mentioned were rote learning in their home county versus a problem-solving approach in Canada and generally higher standards of education in Canada.

Two FGD participants mentioned that they perceived overqualification as a barrier to get into the research labour market in Canada. One FGD participant, who migrated to Canada as a Refugee Claimant, mentioned that legal barriers such as lack of a work permit could be important challenges.

Impacts

Economic impacts

IER Participants experienced financial insecurity after moving to Canada. They shared their experiences of being stuck in survival and/or precarious jobs.

Financial insecurity

Several FGD participants mentioned that having no or low income resulted in feeling financial insecurity and in some cases dependence on their spouses’ income. They were concerned about the diminishing financial resources they had such as the savings brought from their home countries. Financial insecurity could result in an inability to eat nutritious food and the obligation to live in substandard housing.

Ending up in survival/precarious jobs or a second career

Several FGD participants mentioned that they experienced ending up in precarious jobs including underpaid and part-time, short-term, and contract-based jobs. A few of them had to choose a survival job such as working night shifts at a gas station or as a construction labourer to support their families.

A common viewpoint was that switching to a new job was not an easy option. They said that although the websites related to second careers were quite promising, the actual process of successful application was associated with several obstacles mainly because of the eligibility criteria to receive the necessary funding.

Health impacts

The challenges associated with finding a decent job in the research sector in Canada impacted the physical, mental, and social health of IERs.

Physical health

Some FGD participants mentioned that they also experienced some physical symptoms, but with the exception of two participants who pointed out to fatigue and insomnia, there was no further elaboration on what were the adverse physical health impacts of job searching on IERs.

Mental health

IERs' experiences of mental health impacts were common and diverse. They described the effects of searching for a job in terms of stress, anxiety, depression, frustration, feeling disappointed, losing motivation, uncertainty, the inability to plan for future, losing self-confidence, and desperation.

One IER who was stuck in two part-time contract-based research projects described how the impact of sticking in precarious jobs could cause significant mental problems for IERs to the degree that they needed medical therapy for their conditions: "I faced a lot of anxiety here and I had to take psychiatric medicine for that.... I am somebody who went through mental health issues and sufferings in Canada. Like so we faced a lot of constraints, anxiety you know during the struggle you know. So accessing a psychiatrist is one of the biggest challenges I think here" (An IER working on two contract-based research jobs).

Social health

Several FGD participants shared their experiences around the social and familial impacts of challenges they faced while they were trying to find a job in the research sector in Canada. They included: having no time for children, reduced chances for getting married, downward movement in social status and living standards including substandard and unsafe housing and feeling disrespect and loss of dignity.

Root causes

Discriminations, systemic racism, and xenophobia

Some FGD participants and KIs mentioned their concerns about different types of discrimination that might cause key professional barriers for IERs. Racism/xenophobia, language, particularly, accent, and names that were not Western or typically "Canadian", were some

of the examples mentioned frequently by both FGD participants and KIs. A KI mentioned that not only internationally trained immigrants, but also Canadian-born visible minorities were subject to racism and racial discrimination.

Several FGD participants also found the general approach of the potential employers to be discriminatory because their credentials and international experiences were ignored.

Two KIs said that there could be discrimination when the employers face potential candidates who had non-white Canadian names. There was no further elaboration on this viewpoint. A few FGD participants mentioned that they were discriminated against because of being old.

Current research market situation

The general view expressed is that already described as key labour market barriers: “limited number of job opportunities in the research sector”.

Solutions

Personal level (supply side)

Scaling up

Some FGD participants and KIs considered learning new skills or strengthening existing skills as important success factors for finding a job in the research sector in Canada. They considered further education, participation in certificate programs, bridging programs, co-op programs, internships, practicum placements and getting new university degrees at master or PhD levels or post-doc fellowships as helpful for “getting a foot in the door”. However, there were some concerns about the associated expenses as well as the possibility of being accepted in those programs. Getting a university degree also was believed to eliminate the perceived barrier of lacking Canadian education.

Networking

Participants considered networking as a key success factor for finding a job in the research labour market. However, networking is also seen as an unfair recruitment procedure - a reflection of the culture of origin. From the KIs' viewpoints however, networking was not even close to corruption or an illegal relationship. They believed that networking increased job seekers' chance of employment as a result of better exposure of their skills and qualifications to different stakeholders and potential employers.

Mentorship and informal coaching

Receiving guidance and support from someone who was working in the same field of interest of the IER, whether this support was provided through formal mentorship programs or informal coaching, was considered as a key success factor in finding a job.

Determination and persistence

Some FGD participants and KIs emphasized the importance of determination, persistence, volunteering and active searching in finding a decent job in the research sector.

tives for hiring would improve the hiring rates of IERs. These incentives could be in the form of financial support for hiring organizations and institutions, or some other forms of support like tax rebates. One suggestion was to motivate potential employers to hire IERs by developing specific capacity building programs to help potential employers understand the skills of the IERs and also find their gaps with regard to hiring IERs and how they could eliminate those gaps.

A common viewpoint among participating IERs and KIs was the importance of finding the first job or as described by an FGD participant “getting your foot in the door”. Both groups mentioned that strengthening the skills of IERs would help them to enter the labour market. They said it could be achieved by developing robust policies and programs to facilitate IERs’ hiring. Suggested solutions included: development of targeted programs for IERs, like co-op programs, bridging programs, and volunteering. There were some interesting ideas about how IERs could be engaged proactively in improving their condition by establishing a community of interest to raise the voice of the IERs.

Implementation and modification of existing policies

A few FGD participants and several KIs mentioned that the existing policies were good, but the problem was that they were not implemented. According to them, any organization which had discriminated between researchers with international credentials and experience and those with Canadian education and experience had to be punished, which might improve the implementation of the existing policy of fair employment.

Increasing governmental support for research

One KI mentioned the government had to invest more in the research sector to improve the current situation of research, which would consequently improve the research labour market and increase the integration of IERs into this sector.

Developing evidence-based immigration policies

One KI suggested that the determination of the number of the immigrants in each occupation should be evidence-based to avoid overloading the labour market for both IERs and Canadian-born citizens.

Discussion

During the past decade, several studies have been conducted on the labour market barriers and challenges faced by different groups of internationally educated professionals and how these challenges reduce productivity in the Canadian economy, and limit opportunities for economic integration and social inclusion for many of Canada’s newcomers [3,9-12]. Data from the Labour Force Survey on quality of employment in the Canadian labour market found that more than 40% of new immigrants have to make a downward shift in their career upon arrival in Canada [11,13]. In 2015, the immigrant unemployment rate was almost 30% higher than the Canadian-born rate (6.9% vs. 5.4%), while very recent immigrants were 2 times more likely to be unemployed (10.9% vs. 5.4%) [1]. In 1981, the unemployment rate for both immigrants and Canadian-born workers was approximately 8% [11]. The number of recent immigrants in temporary positions is nearly double the number of Canadian-born counterparts. Canadian labour force data show that, as of 2008, 16% of recent immigrants worked in temporary positions compared to 8.3% of their Canadian-born counterparts [14]. Immigrants are more likely to be working for minimum wage. In 2011, 19.1% of recent immigrants were working at minimum wage—more than twice that of all employees [15].

Our findings demonstrated that IERs used different strategies to break into the research labour market in Canada. They used employment agencies services, searched and applied to online and/or printed job-postings, tried to build their professional networks, volunteered, and did cold-calls. Unfortunately, almost in all cases, their experiences were not positive (Figure 3).

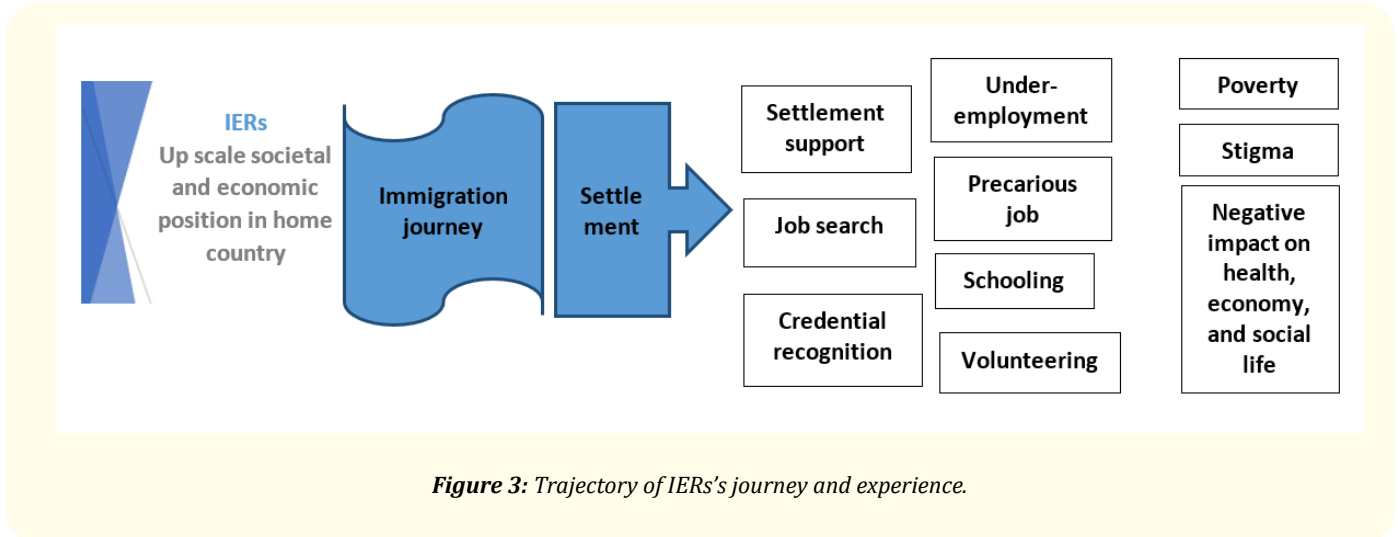


Figure 3: Trajectory of IERs's journey and experience.

The main systemic barrier identified by almost all participants in this study was that international education, qualifications and experiences of the IERs were not recognized in Canada (Figure 3). Other barriers that they experienced were lack of information and/or services they need to find a decent job in their field, employers' practices such as preference for hiring those applicants they already know, limited research job opportunities, and lack of robust programs that facilitate the hiring of IERs. Participants mentioned understanding the culture of workplaces in Canada, language skills and hard skills as common personal challenges.

We found two groups of potential solutions to support IERs finding decent jobs in research-related work in the Canadian labour market. The first group consisted of those solutions that supposed to be used by the individual IERs to increase their possibility of finding a job in their field: for example learning new skills, strengthening skills that IERs had already learned, finding a mentor who could support them through the process of breaking into labour market, having persistence and determination, preparing appropriate job application documents, and building professional networking.

The second group of solutions should be considered at policy-making levels: for instance, developing policy and programs that help with hiring IERs; implementing some existing policies such as those that support inclusiveness, diversity and equity; increasing governmental support for research; and developing immigration policies in coordination with regulating bodies.

Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted with IERs who resided in Ontario, most commonly in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Due to the characteristics of the GTA and its labour market, the transferability of the findings of this study to other contexts should be done only when it is appropriate. Demographically some groups of IERs were less represented as the study samples. For example, while Filipino and Chinese nationals constitute the largest number of recent immigrants to Canada (> 26.2% in 2016), there were no participants from these groups in the present study. The study was also lacking participants from Africa, Europe, or Central and South America. Participants with a health-care background were over-represented.

Conclusion

The present study identified and documented a number of barriers and challenges that prevent IERs from finding a decent job in their research field. IERs faced similar barriers and challenges experienced by other highly-educated immigrants. In addition, there were some barriers specifically pertinent to IERs: the nature of research jobs, which are usually short-term, contract-based; the weakness of current research on labour market trends and opportunities; and lack of robust governmental support for research.

Finally, it must be emphasized that IERs are a specific group of immigrants needing specific and tailored services to be successful in finding a suitable professional employment. Reducing the brain-waste in Canada through improving the employment of immigrants, including IERs, should be a win-win opportunity. Improved employment will enhance the economy of Canada by billions of dollars each year, and properly-employed immigrants will not face the economic, health and socio-familial impacts of unemployment, underemployment, or precarious work.

Recommendations

To tackle the aforementioned barriers and challenges, we suggest that: (i) selected employment and settlement agencies develop programs to provide customized services for IERs; (ii) IERs improve their hard and soft skills gaps, as well as their language skills and their ability to prepare appropriate resumes and cover letters; (iii) IERs build their professional networks, for example, by becoming members of professional organizations and attending conferences and meetings that are held in Canada in their field; (iv) employers stop discrimination and systemic racism, change their hiring practices, and develop strategies to increase the hiring and retention of IERs; and (v) regulatory bodies, educational institutions and employers recognize international credentials and experience of IERs. The finding of this project can be utilized to pilot strategic interventions and advocate for policy/system solutions that will enable IERs to gain a productive career in Canada.

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