

Key Findings from the First Metropolis National Research Competition: The Labour Market Transitions of Newly Arrived Immigrant Youth: A Tri-Provincial Study

In 2007, University of Manitoba researcher Lori Wilkinson and a team of researchers from the University of British Columbia, McMaster University, and the University of Toronto were successful in the first cycle of the Metropolis National Research Competition. Their final report, which will be released next month, sheds light on the labour market transitions of newly arrived immigrant youth in Vancouver, Winnipeg and Hamilton. The mixed-methods study, which combined data from the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants in Canada (LSIC) with qualitative interviews of immigrant youth, focuses on youth aged 15-29 and provides insight into the barriers immigrant youth face in education and employment. The following paragraphs reveal some of the key findings from this study.

Though highly educated on arrival, 71% of newcomer youth are one or more years behind, compared to Canadian-born students, upon entry to Canadian high schools. Factors influencing the degree to which these students are behind include sex, area of origin and language proficiency. Some of these students, particularly females, will catch up. However, four years after arrival, only 55% of those aged 15 to 19 at arrival (now 19 to 23) will have finished high school, significantly lower than the 82% of similarly aged Canadian-born students. This has significant policy implications given that many school regions impose age caps on students allowed to obtain publicly funded education.

Qualitative interviews revealed that many immigrant youth experience difficulty in getting their secondary and post-secondary credentials recognized. Several university students interviewed were forced to return to high school for up to three years in order to gain entry to a Canadian university. In addition, according to the LSIC, one third of those with completed university degrees were in some sort of post-secondary training even four years after their arrival. Educational credential recognition was cited as a significant difficulty for immigrant youth to transition into the labour market.

The most significant challenges facing newcomer youth as they transition from school to work in Canada, however, are linguistic barriers and discrimination due to accent. Accent can affect their ability to secure employment and negatively influence some of the interactions they have with clients once employed. The ability to be understood by other Canadians was identified as one of the most frustrating experiences of integrating. In addition to accent, study participants suggested that racially motivated discrimination occurs at job interviews and in the workplace. Interestingly, the authors suggest that although many interview respondents could not point to direct incidents of racism, the perception that racism might have had a role in their not being hired for a job is a powerful force that influences a person's feeling of belonging in Canadian society.

In order to find work, many of the study participants indicated that they used government employment services and non-government immigrant serving organizations for assistance. While most were satisfied with these experiences, many felt that these services did not successfully deal with the unique needs of newcomers. In particular, campus employment services need to be more aware of the special needs of newcomers to better facilitate the transition from school to work. LSIC findings suggested that newcomers also rely heavily on family social networks to find full-time employment, although this reliance was downplayed in interviews with newcomer youth. These youth suggested that newcomer families often lack the social networks necessary to connect their youth with employment and that friendship networks were more important than family networks.

In order to smooth the transition from school to work, the authors recommend that more programs and services aimed at newcomer youth be implemented and that they focus on issues related to credential recognition, language and accent training, and information about how the Canadian school system and labour market works. In addition, mechanisms to share best practices among school boards need to be established to improve educational outcomes for immigrant youth. Immigrant serving agencies should work directly with school boards developing bridging programs to help immigrant youth with this difficult transition.

What is clear from this study is that there is no single 'pathway' from school-to-work. Just as the paths for Canadian-born youth are varied, so are the trajectories of newcomers. Their paths may be complicated in terms of the challenges of repeating schooling, having foreign credentials recognized, learning a new language and culture. They also have similarities with Canadian-born youth such as being frustrated about the difficulties of finding good employment and living through the recession. This study provides a deeper understanding of the difficulties faced by immigrant youth in finishing school and finding a job than we have seen to date and provides important suggestions for how we can try to make it easier.