

Immigrant skills wasted

Waterloo Region study finds newcomers to Canada unemployed or work part time

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Author: FRANK ETHERINGTON

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A survey of about 200 highly trained and educated immigrants living in Waterloo Region shows that 88 per cent of their trade and professional skills are being wasted.

Among the barriers faced by the immigrants were ignorance, discrimination and overt forms of racism exhibited by some employers, regulatory bodies and Canadian society, researchers noted.

Authors of the one-year study examined experiences of male and female immigrants between the ages of 25 and 54 living in Waterloo Region who were told, before leaving their home countries, that their job skills matched those required in Canada.

Instead, in a region that has the fifth highest per capita immigrant population of all Canadian urban areas, 68 per cent are unemployed and many work part time.

Among those employed, the survey found that 45 per cent have jobs unrelated to their educational and professional backgrounds.

The survey was prepared by the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services, a non-profit social research organization located in downtown Kitchener.

A committee of immigrants, business people, politicians and officials from employment agencies also took part in the project.

"We have found (immigrants) get incomplete information about employment . . . they're misinformed when they go to get their immigration papers at a foreign embassy," senior researcher Rich Janzen said this week. "There's an inference there will be employment and a moment of surprise when they arrive . . . and jobs are not there."

The survey, which includes similar immigrant interviews from London and Brantford, noted that 22 per cent of Waterloo Region's population is foreign born and, by 2011, Canada's entire labour- force growth is expected to come from immigration.

In Waterloo Region, Janzen said, researchers scrutinized the cases of 29 people with training and experience in medical and other professions identified as the top 10 in demand.

Research revealed that, prior to coming to Canada, more than half had completed bachelor's degrees and 32 per cent had either a master's or doctoral degree.

The \$100,000 study financed by Heritage Canada noted only one of the 29 immigrants is working in an appropriate professional area.

Despite additional training and classes in Canada, the remaining 28 were either unemployed or working part time in a different profession.

The study showed immigrants faced high retraining costs while some ended up doing low-pay, survival jobs where they cleaned up garbage, stocked shelves or, in a few cases, were forced to accept welfare.

"We know Waterloo Region has . . . skill shortages, particularly in the health-care field (and) we also know many skills brought by recent immigrants match the professions and trades most needed within our region," the survey authors said.

"Unfortunately, the provincial trend of under-utilizing immigrant skills is reflected in Waterloo Region."

Janzen said even though the problem has been well identified in recent years, change is slow to happen because of a lack of co-ordination among different ministries and levels of government as well as lack of public accountability by regulatory bodies that influence the lives of immigrants.

He urged people to attend a Nov. 12 public forum planned in Kitchener and sign a document calling for action by governments and regulatory bodies to eliminate employment barriers faced by immigrants.

Details about the survey, forum and public meeting are available on the centre's Website at www.crehs.on.ca or by calling 741-1318.

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