

Immigrants' skills wanted but wasted

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Javed Shah is a new immigrant with a university education who has not found work in his field.

"When I came, I was expecting a lot of things from the Canadian system," says Shah, a social worker from Pakistan. "I was not expecting this."

He's puzzled that Canada recruits accomplished immigrants but fails to use them best. "They are very highly educated people. They have rich skills. The economy is losing all these things," says Shah.

Studies suggest that the disconnect between immigrants' skills and jobs wastes economic potential.

It highlights integration barriers in the economy, analysts say, and may also reflect Canada overselling itself to prospective immigrants.

"They are being seduced, and once they come to Canada, they are abandoned. That's kind of how some people are articulating it," says Rich Janzen, a local researcher who's leading a call for immigration reform.

Shah, 41, has 11 years experience in "high positions" in Pakistan, and claims an education equal to a Canadian bachelor's degree.

He expected some challenges when he moved with his wife and three children to Mississauga in 2001, seeking a better life in a multicultural country.

"When you move from one region to another region," Shah says, "you will find some problems."

But he saw it as a sign of thoroughness that Canada took nearly four years to assess him for immigration.

Surely this means Canada knows what it wants from its immigrants, he thought.

He expected to find a job in social work within a year.

But as his savings ran out, he was compelled to take a job as a labourer in a rock-crushing factory.

It strained his body so much his arms still ache, years later.

Today, he has put factory jobs on hold to resurrect his career.

Get a Canadian education and work experience, he was regularly advised, so this is what he is doing.

Shah, now a father of four, has relocated his growing family to Cambridge, after a friend here told him he could rent a bigger home for less.

He has enrolled in a Kitchener vocational school, seeking a diploma in social services. Last week, to complete his diploma, he began an unpaid job-training placement in Cambridge.

"I am very hopeful," he says. "Now I am on track."

But it has taken four years, with government help, and his prospects remain uncertain.

"Sometimes we become (very) frustrated," Shah says.

There's nothing unusual about his struggle to resume his career.

Today's immigrants are better educated than past immigrants and better educated than people born here.

Yet a 2001 survey by Statistics Canada found that only 40 per cent of new immigrants with jobs had found work in their fields. Most were working in jobs unrelated to their backgrounds.

Immigrants with university educations did no better in resuming their occupations than those with less than high school.

New immigrants are far more likely to be unemployed than residents born here, and far more likely to be living on incomes considered below the poverty line, the 2001 census found.

Among immigrants who came to Waterloo Region between 1991 and 1999 and found jobs by 2000, almost half were working in lower- skill occupations requiring high school or no formal education, the census found.

These are jobs such as data clerks, delivery drivers, retail sales clerks, or cashiers, janitors and labourers.

On the upside, the local economy may be doing a better job than some other economies in utilizing immigrant skills.

Here, almost 25 per cent of recent immigrants with university degrees work in moderate or low-skilled occupations. This is twice the comparable rate for Canadian-born university graduates.

However, it's the second-best outcome for recent immigrants among 13 leading cities. Only Ottawa-Hull does better -- about 17 per cent of its recent immigrants with university degrees are underemployed.

Sadaf Ahmad worries that chronic underemployment will undermine the new life she and her husband are building in Cambridge.

"This is one of the things that is really frustrating for me, and for him as well -- to find a good job," Ahmad says.

Her husband Nisar Ahmad was college-educated in Pakistan but works factory jobs here to pay the bills.

Sadaf, 25, was doing post-graduate training in clinical psychology in Pakistan before Nisar, already in Canada, sponsored her as an immigrant after their arranged marriage last year.

She knows of immigrants who resume their occupations in Canada. But they are few. It seems to her most immigrants don't get the same kinds of jobs they had back home.

"You have to come down a level, in order to pay the bills," she says.

Ahmad, confident and well-spoken, has fared better than some. While she's had no response to some job inquiries, a volunteer position led to temporary employment helping immigrant children prepare for kindergarten.

It's a job that uses her psychology training and has given her Canadian experience.

Her goal now is to be accepted as a graduate student at Wilfrid Laurier University. Eventually, she sees herself earning a doctorate, becoming a professor, possibly practising.

"I am determined. I know my field and I want to work in my field," Ahmad says. "I just don't want to waste my education."

Studies show that immigrants in past decades also started out with jobs and wages generally below people born in Canada. Eventually they caught up.

There's concern, however, that new immigrants may never catch up, because census findings show they are starting from farther behind despite their better educations.

"They're not catching up as quickly as they have in the past," says Janzen, of the Kitchener-based Centre for Research and Education in Human Services. "This is particularly troublesome, given that our immigration policy is geared to selecting those who we think are most likely to catch up the fastest."

The disconnection between jobs and skills is happening when immigrants are increasingly critical to the Canadian economy.

A falling birthrate suggests immigrants will be needed to support all job growth after 2011 as the native-born workforce levels off.

"We need immigrants, and we need their skills, to use them for our economic prosperity," Janzen says. "Already, businesses are concerned about lack of labour and skill shortages."

Janzen offers several reasons why new immigrants are struggling. Among them:

- s Before they get here, Canada does not give immigrants enough detailed information on the labour market, relating to their specific profession and occupation.

- s Immigrants need better language training in Canada, in particular for language that's used in their specific occupations.

- s Canada does a poor job assessing international credentials.

"This is a pretty big nut to crack," Janzen says. "It's a real patchwork we've got going right now."

Spokeswoman Maria Iadonardi says the federal government has launched new programs to help immigrants find good jobs. This includes better job-related language training.

"We recognize some of the barriers," said Iadonardi, of Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

Immigrants are warned before they arrive that finding a job here is a challenge, she said, but they are also told the government is working to improve their integration into the labour force.

"We don't go out there and start saying 'Come on over here,' " Iadonardi said. "We're telling them, 'Listen, it could be a challenge.' "

Immigrants are frustrated that employers often discount their educations and work experience.

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