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ARTICLE (REFEREED)

Cosmopolitan Paradox? The Labour Market Experiences of Newcomer Skilled Workers

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Abstract

Canada's national narratives gesture to cosmopolitan ideals by celebrating the country as open and inclusive through the working of its immigration policy. Indeed, it has been suggested that Canada may be oriented toward a form of 'rooted cosmopolitanism'. This vision stands at odds with the experiences of skilled migrants who often encounter hurdles in the labour market. In this paper, we probe the 'cosmopolitan paradox' and its implications. Through a qualitative case study of 36 skilled newcomers, we document their experiences as they attempt to enter the labour market encountering barriers that reassert national frames and 'Canadian standards'. We argue that if Canada is to live up to the promise of a cosmopolitan ideal, the stratifications and exclusions that mark the lives of newcomers need to be addressed. It is not enough to attract increasing numbers of immigrants if they cannot become full members of the Canadian national community.

Keywords

Skilled Immigrants; Canada; Economic Integration; Employment; Labour Markets; Rooted Cosmopolitanism

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Introduction

> The promise of Canada is a place where no matter who you are, where you come from, or what situation you were born into, you have every opportunity to live your life to its fullest potential. That promise makes our country such a great place to live and it's the reason so many people from around the world choose to come to Canada for a new life. (Trudeau 2017)

In 2022, Canada welcomed 431,645 new immigrants and expects to exceed that level in 2025 with projected numbers climbing to 500,000 (IRCC 2023a). Some pundits suggest that these record levels of immigration are part of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's 'unique brand of progressive cosmopolitanism' (Potter 2022). Trudeau's rhetoric around immigration is coupled with the deployment of his feminist credentials: 'I am a feminist'. While gender equity may indeed be a relatively recent addition to the repertoire, and is somewhat less entrenched, both gender equity and immigration currently occupy a unique place in Canada's national imaginary and the image the current Federal Government seeks to propagate at home and abroad.

Canada has relied on immigration to address its economic and demographic needs. Increasingly, from the 1990s onwards, Canada's migration policies have privileged the 'skilled' economic migrant over other categories, such as family and humanitarian streams. In doing so, the country has been at the forefront of efforts to attract the 'best and brightest' in what Shachar and Hirschl term 'the global race for talent' through which countries promote 'targeted and selective migration streams … as part of a long-term economic strategy for human-capital accretion that is seen as increasingly important for countries competing in a more globalized environment' (2013, p. 74). The emphasis on migrants' human capital investments is part of a broader neoliberal paradigm that emphasizes marketization and commodification of individual skills, talents, and abilities (Abu-Laban, Tungohan, & Gabriel 2023). In some ways, as Stephen Castles (2012) observes, this development resonates with a cosmopolitan dream of free mobility in a competitive labour market that is coupled with cultural openness and a growing acceptance of diversity. But as he points out, the experience of most of the world's migrants is far from this dream and human capital itself is not the only marker of differentiation. Social relations of gender, ethnicity/race, origin, language, and status also come into play (2012, p. 1850).

In this paper we examine how two contradictory impulses underpin the labour market experiences of recent skilled migrant women and men. On the one hand, Canadian national narratives extoll the country's openness towards immigrants from all parts of the world and espousal of gender equality. It may well be that Canada's sense of itself on a global stage, its apparent embrace of feminist credentials and diversity speak to a nascent cosmopolitan vision. But on the other hand, the labour market experiences of recent skilled migrants point towards a much more complicated story and one that varies both among and within migrant groups. As extensive research (Bauder 2003, George & Chaze 2009, Reitz, Curtis, & Elrick 2014) has shown, many of their encounters are marked by a robust reassertion of the 'particular' and 'national' in the form of employment related criteria – 'Canadian experience' and 'official' language capacity – that often adversely impact newcomers' ability to navigate the labour market and undermine attachments to the broader community. These on-the-ground experiences provide an important corrective to the discursive construction of Canada that has been promoted at home and abroad (see Foran 2017).

Canada's image as an open and inclusive society is being challenged. According to a 2023 report commissioned by the Institute for Canadian Citizenship (Dennler 2023), Canada may well be attracting immigrants but lacks a policy to *retain* them. Since the 1980s, the rate of onward migration – immigrants who leave after a few years of settling in the country – has been gradually rising; compared to the yearly historical average of 0.9%, the rates of onward migration increased, reaching peaks in 2017 (1.15%) and 2019 (1.18%). Even more, the report indicates that more recent cohorts (those carefully selected for

their human capital) are leaving at higher rates – likely due to not meeting personal and/or professional expectations – suggesting that Canada's reliance on immigration for demographic and economic growth may be at risk: 'ambitious immigration levels alone cannot meet Canada's policy goals. Retention is ultimately what drives population and economic growth' (Dennler 2023, p. 13). Although issues of newcomer economic integration are not new, these data underscore a significant policy challenge; growing numbers of immigrants prefer to leave Canada rather than face insurmountable challenges and shattered dreams, a trend likely to continue given rising numbers of migrant admissions.

We reflect on these dynamics through a qualitative study on the experiences of skilled newcomer men and women in the labour market in Ottawa-Gatineau, Canada's National Capital Region. In our analysis, we draw attention to the paradox between an apparently open and outward-facing immigration policy that focuses on the best and the brightest and the way the labour market, marked by various forms of closure, affects newcomers. In doing so, we focus on newcomers' individual efforts to navigate the labour market, but also underline the structural nature of the barriers they face. The employment trajectories of recent newcomers are critical since labour market attachments are often seen as a key measure of successful integration – and by extension the ability of newcomers to see themselves as members of an inclusive community – and are thus central to their lasting contribution to their new society. In turn, we explore avenues for structural change to support skilled newcomers' entry in the labour market and ensure their retention in Canada.

In the first section of the paper, we sketch how Canadian narratives of openness, diversity, and the embrace of immigration frame newcomer experiences and speak to the potential of a 'rooted cosmopolitan' project. Next, we outline Canada's settlement model and the specificity of the Ottawa-Gatineau labour market to contextualize our empirical study. We then present the findings of our qualitative case study where we draw on participant interviews and reflect on migrants' narratives about the challenges they faced in the Ottawa-Gatineau regional labour market. We argue that if Canada is to live up to the promise of a cosmopolitan ideal that its national narratives seemingly gesture to, the stratifications and hierarchies that mark the lives of many newcomers to Canada in the labour market need to be more directly addressed. In the last section we discuss the potential of equity-based initiatives and recent legislative measures meant to reduce, even remove discrimination to support newcomers' labour market entry and thus ultimately ensure their retention. We suggest these types of initiatives are an important step in the right direction – towards the cosmopolitan ideal that Canada promotes – and especially to foster immigrants' attachment to the country.

Part I – Migration, Cosmopolitanism, and Imagined Communities

> There is no core identity, no mainstream in Canada… There are shared values – openness, respect, compassion, willingness to work hard, to be there for each other, to search for equality and justice. Those qualities are what make us the first postnational state. (Trudeau quoted by Lawson 2015)

Post-nationalism may be a handy moniker to characterize what PM Trudeau believes is unique about Canada. To some extent, evidence can be used to support this aspiration including high rates of immigration and an apparent embrace of Official Multiculturalism policy. Canada is far from a 'post-national' ideal, but it may hold the potential to offer a different vision of cosmopolitanism. In this section, we draw the link between migration flows and cosmopolitanism. While the term cosmopolitanism takes a variety of forms and some variants are at odds with others, in general 'they share a worldview centred on empathy and compassion, and frequently (but not always) reject parochial institutions such as the nation-state' (Warf 2020, p. 419). Of interest to us is a variant of cosmopolitanism, 'rooted cosmopolitanism.'

MIGRATION FLOWS

Rising immigration rates have become the hallmark of Canadian immigration policy from the 1990s on. 'In 2021, more than 8.3 million people or almost one in four people (23.0%) are or have been a landed immigrant or permanent resident in Canada. This is the highest proportion on record since Confederation, topping the previous record of 22.3% in 1921' (Statistics Canada 2022). Whereas in the past Canada recruited immigrants from Great Britain and continental Europe, immigration flows today are increasingly diverse. For instance, India, the Philippines, and China figure prominently as the countries of birth for recent newcomers. It is not surprising that the Canadian Citizenship Guide advises newcomers seeking to become citizens 'that diversity enriches Canadians' lives, particularly in our cities' (IRCC 2021, p. 25).

Successive Canadian governments have emphasized the value of immigration to the Canadian economy, and this has been critical in engendering strong public support for immigration over the past 30 years (Banting & Soroka 2020). While Canadian immigration may be touted as 'open,' it is only open to some groups of people. Not surprisingly, and in line with broader neoliberal rationales, the state has developed a highly selective model of immigration that favours those deemed 'high skilled' while relegating those constructed as 'low-skilled' to temporary schemes with few paths to citizenship (Esses et. al 2021, p. 6). Significantly, it has been observed that since the 1990s there has been a tendency to cast immigrants as workers as opposed to potential citizens coupled with 'an overall expectation on the part of government funders that immigrants will settle quickly and into good jobs, even with a sluggish economy and labour market' (Lowe, Richmond, & Shields 2017, p. 24).

These developments and the changing face of migration prompt a consideration of cosmopolitanism. John Fossum and Espen Olsen (2021), for instance, draw a distinction between the 'outer' and 'inner' spaces of the migration field. The former, they argue, is characterized by concerns directed at state borders and territorial access. Here cosmopolitanism finds expression in the 'idea of the equal worth of all human beings creates an obligation of states towards foreigners' (2021, p. 71). Of greater concern for our discussion is their elaboration of the inner sphere, that is the encounters between newcomers occupying a variety of statuses and the receiving country.

> The migrant, then, encounters different kinds of expectations to integrate and take part in society, which is not always related to a universal rights status (…) but to different degrees of integration into the 'mores' of the host society, which can be addressed in different ways relating so some concept of the national (…). The potential 'mismatch' between ideas of rights based on universality and ideas of community based on particularity goes to the core of debates on cosmopolitanism and migration (2021, p. 73).

The very processes of integration, underpinned by both individual action and structural dimensions, speaks to a cosmopolitan debate.

CANADA AND ROOTED COSMOPOLITANISM

There are many understandings of cosmopolitanism both normative and empirical (Lejeune 2022). Some of these theories are grouped under the label 'rooted cosmopolitanism.' Here both local and global attachments are referenced. As Will Kymlicka and Kathryn Walker (2012, p. 3) put it:

> Rooted cosmopolitanism attempts to maintain the commitment to moral cosmopolitanism while, revising earlier commitments to a world state or a common global culture, and affirming instead the enduring reality and value of cultural diversity and local or national self-government.

In an important observation, they note individuals' particular rooted attachment may indeed contain the elements of universal commitments: 'people pursue cosmopolitan commitments because this is what their

particular attachments require of them' (2012, p. 4). Our interest in the concept of 'rooted cosmopolitanism' stems from Kymlicka and Walkers' assertion that Canada's unique features offer a 'test case' to examine how 'local attachments and identities… facilitate or impede cosmopolitan concerns' (p. 1). In making this claim Kymlicka and Walker acknowledge that national loyalties and national identities are certainly at play in Canada, but at the same time they observe: 'It is often said that Canadian national identities have always been permeable to more cosmopolitan concerns' (p. 12).

Not surprisingly, immigration and gender equality considerations were central to a narrative that proclaimed the country as a post-national ideal. Following its October 2015 election, Trudeau's Liberal government moved to distinguish itself from the previous Conservative administration. As Trudeau put it: 'To this country's friends all around the world. Many of you have worried that Canada has lost its compassionate and constructive voice in the world over the past ten years. Well, I have a simple message for you. On behalf of 35 million Canadians – we are back' (CTV News 2023). His administration then moved to signal that the country would welcome newcomers of all kinds and made good on the campaign promise to rapidly resettle 26,000 Syrian refugees (see Hamilton, Veronis, & Walton-Roberts 2020) and subsequently raised immigration targets – from under 300,000 in 2015 to over 400,000 in 2021, and 500,000 in 2025 (IRCC 2023a).

Additionally, the Trudeau administration 'brought gender politics back to the centre, seeking not only gender parity in cabinet but also to integrate gender and diversity considerations throughout the whole of government' (Paterson & Scala 2020, p. 48) and in short order moved to establish a feminist foreign policy agenda, increased the profile of Status of Women Canada (SWC) by making it a full department called the Department of Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) and increased its budget. Central to the Trudeau 'feminist' policy agenda was gender-based analysis plus (GBA+), which dates to the 1990s in Canada. GBA aimed to identify how policies differentially impact men and women (SWC 1995), but the approach changed over time.

In 2011, a GBA+ framework was adopted that was more sensitive to issues of intersectionality. 'Gender-based analysis plus takes GBA further and is defined as 'an analytical tool used to assess how diverse groups of women, men and gender diverse people may experience policies, program and initiatives' with the added 'plus' to signify that 'analysis goes beyond biological (sex) and socio-cultural (gender) differences' (Ashe 2020, p. 83, citing SWC 2018). It should be noted that Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (2002) requires that Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) includes a gender analysis in its annual report to Parliament. IRCC is the only department mandated to produce such an assessment, but the take up of GBA+ among other departments was decidedly uneven (see Office of the Auditor General 2015). The Liberal Government imposed a 2016 requirement that all department submissions before Cabinet demonstrate that a GBA+ assessment has been undertaken. Subsequent federal budgets also required that a GBA+ lens be used to consider proposals (Government of Canada 2023).

Within the Federal Budget 2018-2019, immigration and gender equality concerns came together when the government allocated $31.8 million (CAD) over a three-year period towards a new pilot program (discussed below) directed at the labour market outcomes of newcomer visible minority women. In doing so, it recognized that racialized women encounter multiple barriers when attempting to enter the labour market (see George & Chaze 2009) and funds were directed to improve employment outcomes by enhancing existing service provision (IRCC 2020, 30). The gender initiatives introduced by the Liberal government did prompt the OECD to observe that 'Canada scores well on several metrics of gender equality' (2018, p. 3). While there are clear gaps between policy and rhetoric over successive liberal administrations (Findlay 2022), Trudeau's embrace of feminism and his administration's espousal of gender equality also speak to Canada's role of a good citizen at home and abroad.

In addressing why being rooted in Canada might facilitate a cosmopolitan concern, Kymlicka and Walker (2012) draw attention to several factors. First, they highlight the country's diversity, but go further

than assertion speaking to how the country is the outcome of arrangements between Indigenous peoples, French, British, and more recently arrived immigrants. They point out that diversity finds expression in the continuous waves of immigrants that link people in Canada to other parts of the world (2012, p. 13). Second, Kymlicka and Walker underline Canada's status as a 'middle power' – highlighting how Canada is not a military superpower, but rather a nation state dependent on international rules and alliances. These factors lead them to assert that Canada may be a testing ground for forms of rooted cosmopolitanism (2012, p. 4).

In sum, Canadian national narratives frequently mobilize cosmopolitan tropes. But if local attachments can be mobilized toward a more robust project of advancing deeper cosmopolitan values, then we need to take into account forms of exclusion that are occurring at various scales. For this reason, it is important to examine the integration processes associated with the internal dimension of the migration field. The labour market is one site where attachments to a community form and how newcomers adapt. In official discourse, skilled migrants are often cast as *de facto* 'cosmopolitan' by virtue of their ethno-racial background, multiple attachments, linguistic skills, social capital, and various migration journeys, but their lived experience of navigating the job market, as we detail below, belies many of the claims associated with the ideal of a skilled migrant and thus challenges national narratives.

Part II – Contextual Frames: The Ottawa-Gatineau Region

In this section, we consider the broader context that frames our empirical study of newcomer skilled men and women's experiences as they navigate the local labour market of Ottawa-Gatineau. From July to September 2021, we conducted 36 semi-structured interviews with 21 women and 15 men who arrived as skilled workers and under the family reunification category and had been in Canada for five years or less. Of this group 25 were English-speaking and 11 were French-speaking. Twenty arrived before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and 16 just prior to or during – a period that was especially difficult for newcomers due to public health measures such as lockdowns and reduced activities that enabled in-person interactions. Their experiences, as we will illustrate, stand at odds with the cosmopolitan impulses that frame Canadian national narratives.

The Canadian immigration system is dominated by three major streams: humanitarian, family and economic. Since the 1980s the economic stream has come to predominate over the other two. Significantly, women are disproportionately represented in the family streams, however they also enter in greater numbers than in the past in the economic stream. Currently, the government is proposing record breaking admissions and central to these plans is an emphasis on economic skilled migrants. In 2021 a total of 62% (259,971) of all admissions were through the economic pathway. Of these 137,288 were men, 115,682 were women and one individual was identified Gender X (IRCC 2022, p. 52).

The majority of Canada's immigrants go to the Province of Ontario. Looking specifically at the Ottawa-Gatineau region and admission class, in 2016 economic immigrants accounted for 46%, sponsored family class for 29%, and refugees for 24% (Akbar, Ray, & Preston, 2018, p. 9). Asian immigrants constitute the largest group of immigrants across all categories in Ottawa-Gatineau, but in contrast to other metropolitan areas a large percentage of immigrants (19.6%) in the region are from Africa (Akbar, Ray, & Preston 2018, p. 12). Census data, for the Ottawa-Gatineau Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) also reveal principal applicants are men accounting for 61.7 per cent of all applicants (vs. 38.3 % women). Moreover, it should be noted that women predominated within the family sponsorship category at 60.2 percent (Akbar, Ray, & Preston 2018, p. 20).

There are a number of regional characteristics that make Ottawa-Gatineau somewhat unique and different from other CMAs. First, the region is demarcated by an interprovincial border between Ontario and Quebec, and it has been suggested that 'distinct policies, governance structures and practices in

immigration and settlement across this transborder city serve to reinforce the existence of a *dual* Canadian identity and citizenship' (Veronis 2013, p. 257). Second, the region's linguistic composition means that it is an important site of French and English language interaction: 'Ottawa is the larger of the two cities, is dominated by English speakers, and historically has received the lion's share of international migrants. In contrast Gatineau is about one-third the size of Ottawa, and French speakers are the numerical and social majority' (Ray & Gilbert 2020, p. 1489). But immigrants who arrive in the region increasingly shape the linguistic landscape. Although many migrants speak either English or French upon arrival, many are also keen to retain their mother tongue and desire their children also speak these languages fluently (2020, p. 1506). Lastly, the region has been characterized as a 'post-industrial economy' city because it has almost no manufacturing and most of its employment is found in the service sector (Ray 2021, p. 5).

Immigrants across all admission classes have strong labour force participation within the region (Ray 2021). But within this group the employment rate is lower than the labour force participation rate and there are differences between men and women. For instance, 'among recent immigrants, aged 25-54, the labour force participate rate for women is approximately 10 percent lower than men' (Ray 2021, p. 24). Within the region the largest industrial sector is public administration with the federal government being the largest employer: 'Among Canadian-born individuals aged 25-34, 18.3 % work in the federal civil service compared to 10.1 of recent immigrants (2011-2014)'. In terms of earnings, considerable variation exists between visible minority groups, with Chinese and South Asian immigrants out pacing Black and Arab immigrants (p. 4). But immigrant women's earning fall behind men whatever their education, admission category or ethno-racial status (p. 43).

Part III – The Reassertion National: Newcomers' Narratives of their Labour Market Experiences

Successive Canadian administrations have fine-tuned the country's selection model to target and recruit high skilled migrants. Yet newcomers' entry to the labour market is not necessarily smooth and many experience labour market disadvantage (Hou & Picot 2016). While numerous factors are at play, in this section we focus on the reassertion of the 'national frame' through the particularistic and exclusionary dynamics of what is termed 'Canadian Experience' and the demand for official language capacity that stand in stark contradiction to both the narrative of the country's openness to immigrants and discursive construction of migrants as 'cosmopolitan figures.'

We present a range of challenges and constraints that emerged in our qualitative interviews. In our analysis, we stress the structural nature of these barriers, but also their very Canadian and local specificity, which appear at odds with both the 'cosmopolitan' profile of our participants and the national narratives that seem to embrace cosmopolitan ideals. Moreover, many of our participants shared their interpretation of their labour market experiences and provided their own analysis of the dynamics at play; in a few instances, they themselves noted the contradictions and incongruences between Canada's immigration policies and discourses to attract highly skilled 'cosmopolitan' workers on the one hand, and their on-the-ground experiences and challenges on the other.

CANADIAN EXPERIENCE

Extensive literature exists on the question of 'Canadian experience' as a major barrier for newcomers in the labour market (Bauder 2003; George & Chaze 2009). Despite its use by various levels of government, employers, and community organizations, there is no standard or obvious definition (Conference Board of Canada 2022, p. 4). Nevertheless, a useful characterization draws a distinction between 'hard skills' and 'soft skills'. The former refers to 'technical abilities that can be quantified and enumerated on a resume', while the latter are 'culturally embedded, such as communication skills, working with others (teamwork), and conflict

resolution, and are demonstrated through interviews and other interactions' (Sakamoto, Chin, & Young 2010, p. 147). Our interviewees' experiences indicate the myriad ways in which Canadian Experience and other selective criteria act as barriers to their entry to the labour market and ability to secure employment commensurate with their training and background. These barriers are based on particularistic 'Canadian standards' – such as *Canadian* experience, *Canadian* equivalency of education, the preparation of *Canadian* CVs, and bilingualism requirements in *Canadian* official languages among others – that effectively serve to discriminate against skilled workers with foreign degrees and international experience. To illustrate, our participants said:

> **Many employers expect you to have Canadian experience when you just landed, so I don't know, what exactly are they looking for. And trying to apply for anything more than a minimum wage job usually is met with rejection. (EN11, Man)**

> **Unfortunately, […] I couldn't get the positions. Because sometimes the boundaries are quite clear that they need at least one-year Canadian working experience. And it takes longer progress during the pandemic. Things became slow. (EN-STEM5, Man)**

In these quotes, participants show they are aware of the contradiction of having to conform to certain Canadian standards and measures that they do not (and cannot) have since they are recent arrivals. This challenge was even more significant considering the COVID-19 pandemic context.

Next, participants mentioned the lack of recognition of their credentials and international experience, along with the requirement to be registered with professional orders and obtaining Canadian equivalency of their degrees, all of which were perceived as key barriers to accessing the labour market. One participant spoke of not receiving any calls because she did not fit certain requirements, in this case being registered with a professional order:

> **I got no answer at all. I tried. Every time, because there were conditions. For example, there was always 'be registered with the Order of Architects'. I am an architect, an urban planner, I have a PhD in regional planning. I told myself, perhaps my […] doctorate could make up for the lack of being registered with the Order of Architects… […]. I understand a little bit, sometimes, when there is no response, it's because I don't fill in the right boxes.' (FR3, Woman; translated from French)**

Interesting here is her interpretation of the conditions associated to job postings, and her hope that her multiple degrees would compensate for not being registered with the professional order; but in her attempt to make sense of the situation, she concludes, as a matter of fact, that it was because her profile did not match the requirements.

Others had been told that it was important to show *Canadian* equivalency of their degrees, a lengthy process, to qualify for jobs. Even though this participant had studied at an internationally renowned university, she was advised to have:

> **…a World Education Services translation of qualifications to the quick Canadian equivalency. And so, […] I made sure I did that, it was like a three-month process. Say, hey, even though I have a Master's from [university name], one of the world's top 10 universities, it doesn't matter in Canada. Canada doesn't recognize it. (EN9, Woman)**

This participant was surprised that 'Canada doesn't recognize' her degree from a top international university but was asked to provide a Canadian equivalency for it.

These narratives gesture to participants' process of learning how to navigate the Canadian labour market and the importance of meeting certain local standards and expectations – Canadian experience, registration with professional orders, Canadian equivalencies of education. These appear very specific to Canada and to

local labour market practices, and thus are quite at odds with the profiles of internationally educated and experienced skilled workers.

OFFICIAL LANGUAGE CAPACITY & BILINGUALISM

'National' language requirements have become the hallmark of Western European citizenship regimes in the 21st century. In this context, language competence is positioned within 'broader governing strategies that emphasize 'added value' and skills as key organizing and sifting mechanisms. Language fluency – along with other skills – indexes the integrability of migrants, and determines who enters, under what conditions, and who is eligible to stay' (Fortier 2022, p. 448). This trend also finds expression in Canada through the changing emphasis within immigration policy on language ability. Currently the Canadian selection model stresses official language capacity. The Express Entry application demands all principal applicants who wished to be considered in Federal Skilled Worker Category, the Canadian Experience Class, the Federal Skilled Trades Program, and some Provincial Nominee Programs take an official approved language test to determine eligibility (Xu & Hou 2023). Within the instrumentalization of language skills, as Haque (2017, p. 104) puts it, 'only certain levels of competence and certain 'employment-orientated language are valued as linguistic capacity' and 'all other aspects of a newcomer's identity and skills become secondary or are erased, so, e.g., language competences other than those in English or in French are discounted' (p. 105). In this respect a critical element that constructs newcomers as 'cosmopolitan' – language abilities – is effectively sidelined.

Within our research participants' accounts was a range of language requirements. English-French bilingualism, which is very specific to the Ottawa-Gatineau region, emerged as a structural constraint. While official language bilingualism (in all its variations – from fully bilingual to different levels of fluency in the second official language) is particular to the federal public service, it is extended to contractors that work for the government, as well as service jobs in the region. Thus, both English- and French-speaking participants spoke of bilingualism requirements as a major constraint in their job search. English-speaking participants shared:

> **My skill set matches more of a client facing role, so when I get jobs saying 'hey do you know French', and I'm like, 'Oh no, I've got no idea how to speak or understand French'. So it is a setback not knowing French […]; [being] bilingual really opens opportunities for you. (EN20, Woman)**

> **Many of the positions that I would have preferred working in require strict 'fluent French', like they're always asking for purely bilingual people. They don't really consider my CVs. […] I'm also currently taking French classes to improve my language a bit, maybe I'd be more qualified. […] The bilingual thing was really irritating. (EN11, Man)**

The first quote illustrates perceived labour market advantages linked to bilingualism, while the second quote underlines the precedence of bilingualism over other skills, which are basically 'erased' ('They don't really consider my CVs'). Although the participant is learning French in an effort to meet local expectations, he shared his frustration with the 'local' barrier of official bilingualism requirements.

Similarly, French-speaking participants said:

> **We live in Gatineau. But on the other side, it's Ottawa, so the [labour] market is bigger […]. And when we apply, we look at the opportunities we have in Ottawa, and then […], it was mainly English that was required. (FR10, Man; translated from French)**

> **The language, English. I think, for me, that's the biggest barrier that I'm starting to see […]. I understood that it was very important to acquire English. I have intermediate English, but it needs**

> to be much, much better. That too was an obstacle for me to get a job. (FR3, Woman; translated from French)

Taken together, these narratives illustrate the many requirements, all Canadian specific and local, that internationally trained and experienced professionals are to meet and conform to just to get called for an interview. Several participants commented on the contradictions between Canada's cosmopolitan discourse, and the very specific criteria and hiring practices they faced in the local labour market, as the following quote illustrates:

> From my perspective, […] it's disgusting. I studied so much, worked so hard, I think I can do better […]. But on the other side, I say to myself, 'What's going on? Why is it that Canada, which asked me for so many papers, so many CVs, so much study, […] to even get this famous residency, ultimately does not take advantage of my good experience?' (FR5, Man; translated from French)

The emotional toll these challenges and constraints had on our participants was palpable during the interviews. Even more, a few participants were considering leaving Canada because of the labour market barriers. This was the case of a French-speaking skilled worker who despite obtaining Canadian accreditation was denied a job for lacking a Canadian degree; he too explicitly noted the contradictions between official discourses and his on-the-ground experiences:

> […] if I have the opportunity to choose, in 5 years, I'd like to be outside Canada. […] I'm going to move to another country. […] this [issue] is what I was telling you, about job-related discrimination. […] It's nowhere in the texts I've read or in the legislation. […] That's not what I had in mind […] when I came here to Canada. So, yes, it's disillusioning. (FR4, Man; translated from French)

Our participants' reflections reveal that skilled newcomers are not duped by these contradictions and that they expect to achieve professional success. As admission targets for skilled immigrants are rising, many may thus opt for onward migration rather than staying in the face of unfulfilled expectations, with potentially significant impacts on Canada's economic and demographic wellbeing in the medium- to longer-term.

Part IV – Avenues for Structural Changes to Support Newcomer Labour Market Integration

Participants in our study spoke of resources and initiatives that supported them in their employment search, including a special pilot program for newcomer visible minority women and employer adjustments with language requirements. Moreover, the Province of Ontario announced legislative changes regarding the Canadian experience requirement. Here, we discuss equity and human rights-based approaches that can help address structural discrimination and pave the way to improved professional opportunities for skilled newcomers that can serve as potential models for retention policies.

CAREER PATHWAYS FOR RACIALIZED NEWCOMER WOMEN (CPRNW): A PILOT PROJECT

In 2018, the Government of Canada (2023) directed $31.9 million dollars (CAD) towards a three-year pilot (from 2018-2019 to 2021-2022, extended to 2022-23) to address racialized newcomer women's experience of labour market disadvantage. According to IRCC, the pilot 'supports Canada's efforts to achieve gender equality and reduce inequality through funding targeted employment-related settlement services, including work placements and employment counselling' (Government of Canada 2022, section 'Supplementary Messages', para. 6). The Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC), a non-profit research group, was commissioned to design, implement, and evaluate the pilot. It worked with eight service providers across Canada to develop four models, each involving a GBA+ lens (SRDC 2023, 3-4): '(a) partnering in workforce innovation, (b) navigating the Canadian labour market, (c) milestones to

employment, and (d) building Canadian work experience' to address labour market barriers. As such, the government was recognizing the importance of an intersectional approach in addressing the unique and specific labour market experiences of racialized newcomer women.

World Skills, an Ottawa based non-profit employment centre, participated in the national pilot. Together with Immigrant Women Services Ottawa, it developed an initiative called *'Empowering Visible Minority Newcomer Women to Succeed in the Canadian Labour Market'* targeting 1,300 – 1,500 racialized women (World Skills n.d.). The emphasis was on building participants' capacity and confidence through networking opportunities, working on essential skills and portfolio development, and providing 'opportunities to be matched with employers, access networking and coaching events, retention and self-leadership workshops' (World Skills n.d.). According to IRCC criteria, participants had to be permanent residents of Canada, protected persons, or refugees *and* 'only women who are also members of a visible minority group' (IRCC 2023b).

World Skills (n.d.) reports that 'over 50% of program participants secured employment within 3 months and 73% within 6 months of joining the program.' Indeed, some of our participants acknowledged the value of a targeted program:

> **I was referred to a program that's exclusively funded by IRCC […] that supports visible minority newcomer women in terms of securing employment. So, it provides them with training and the support to secure employment. […] after joining that program, I took all my learnings into practice. I put it into action. And that's how I got my first job. (EN21, Woman)**

> **I found the job thanks to a project done by World Skills, which is called 'Empowering Immigrant Women to succeed in the Canadian labour market'. I think that was the key for me to get this job, because before that, I didn't have any idea about the resume, about how things are done here, interviews. (EN15, Woman)**

A recent impact evaluation of the pilot's participants in models A and B found 'statistically significant increases for participants in both the likelihood of having employment commensurate with education and employment commensurate with experience and these increases are largest and most widespread 12 months after joining the pilot' (SRDC 2023, p. 11-12).

By design this pilot focused on providing *individualized supports* to recent newcomer women. Such supports, the report acknowledged, did not necessarily address systemic issues of racism and discrimination (SRDC 2023, 7). A key recommendation the study outlined was that 'solutions should focus on addressing systemic barriers to employment linked to discrimination and racism and not just on personal barriers newcomer women may have that affect their access to the labour market. This is important as the systems barrier are not the ones women can overcome through their own initiative or by increasing their own capacity' (Gurr & Park 2023, p. 23).

Equity concerns are increasingly permeating in a top-down fashion from the federal government to a variety of programs and services that they fund, including settlement services. While the outcomes of these programs are clearly positive, there are core limitations to the settlement model, most notably with regard to the funding available – such programs and pilot projects tend to be offered only once or a few times, and could be cancelled when a new government is elected.

EMPLOYERS' ROLE IN SUPPORTING SKILLED NEWCOMERS

Another potential avenue for more equitable approaches to newcomer economic integration puts the onus on employers. First, in addition to direct settlement services to newcomers, IRCC and provincial governments provide various supports to help employers 'attract, hire and retain skilled [internationally trained workers]' (IRCC 2017); these range from employer guides and tool kits (on foreign credentials,

international experience, language benchmarks, etc.) to indirect services that Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs; see Walton-Roberts et al. 2019) and Immigrant Employment Councils (IECs) put in place (e.g. job fairs, employer engagement activities), job-bridging programs (sector-specific skills and language training), cost-sharing grants to cover training costs for existing or new employees, and a variety of diversity and cross-cultural training programs (for hiring, team management, workplace inclusivity). Besides helping employers find the personnel they need, these resources are also meant to familiarize them with how to assess the skills of foreign-trained workers and to encourage them to hire skilled immigrants.

Next, IRCC developed the Federal Internship for Newcomers (FIN) Program in collaboration with stakeholders in the Ottawa-Gatineau region (HIO n.d.) with the purpose of providing skilled newcomers with relevant work experience while helping to address the barriers they face (IRCC 2017). Launched in 2010, it provides temporary contracts to newcomers in public service positions (after selective screening) and has since expanded to other cities with federal government offices (e.g., Halifax, Toronto, Victoria). The program outcomes appear to be positive: 'FIN interns say that the work experience, training and mentorship provided through the Program has helped them with their long-term career prospects; 64% found employment within three months […] and the majority of those employed agree that their jobs are commensurate with their skills, experience and education' (HIO n.d.). Moreover, it is suggested that the program can be easily adapted to other sectors and has been expanding to other organizations (HIO n.d.).

A third option is for employers to show flexibility and adjust a position or shift responsibilities within their team to accommodate a new hire. We heard from two participants in our study of such arrangements. While bilingualism requirements represented a major barrier for many participants in the Ottawa-Gatineau labour market, there were two exceptions where employers were willing to make changes to fit the candidates' language skills. In the first instance, after completing a 90-day contract, the participant was offered a full-time mid-management position with the federal government, which would normally require a certain level of bilingualism. Nevertheless, she explained that the requirements were modified – after consideration of the languages among team members – to match her skills:

> **…fully recognizing that I am new to Canada and recognizing that within the team, we have a number of other speakers who are predominantly French-speakers over English-speakers… I think that is part of the reason that they created the 'English essential' box for me. (EN9, Woman)**

The second case involved a large private company; although bilingualism was required for the position, the employer restructured the responsibilities within the team to accommodate the participant's language proficiency:

> **…they were basically looking for a bilingual person; so, I speak a little bit of French, not much. So, they decided, 'OK, so you will be responsible on the English-speaking side of the job, and they will hire someone who is bilingual to work more for […] Montreal and Quebec'. (EN19, Man)**

Language and other requirements for a position may be specific to a local context, occupation, or field of activity. While some employers (e.g., large companies and governments) may be willing and have the resources to adjust a position to mitigate requirements at the time of hiring, this is not necessarily the case for all employers (especially small and medium-sized businesses) and/or may not be possible depending on the context and position.

When it comes to employers' role in mitigating the barriers skilled immigrants face, a range of generous programs and supports are available to them, and a variety of promising equity-oriented approaches are being tested and implemented. But ultimately, the onus rests with employers – a group that is vastly diverse in terms of size, resources, operational constraints, etc. –, and the fact that they need to ensure their business stays viable. The question thus is about how to scale up the adoption of such practices by more employers to ensure more newcomers are offered opportunities commensurate with their expertise and experience.

CHALLENGES TO CANADIAN EXPERIENCE REQUIREMENTS

Canadian experience requirements, as we have argued, are one of the clearest examples of the assertion of the 'national' frame in terms of employment related criteria. And indeed, as one observer puts it 'the ask for 'Canadian experience' is unique to a country known as welcoming' insofar as a similar dynamic does not appear in other countries such as the United States (Guo 2023, para. 13). While this issue has been identified as a longstanding, entrenched problem, the responsibility has fallen on individual immigrants to meet the demands of these requirements by adapting to the needs of the Canadian marketplace through upgrading and improving skills. These actions are characterized as 'marketplace-adaptation' and it has been argued that such initiatives 'for workplace integration [have] had limited success in stopping, or even slowing, the labour market decline of racialized newcomers' (Foster 2015, p. 6). In other words, individualized remedies and supports are falling short. This issue is increasingly recognized, and steps are being taken to address Canadian experience as a systemic barrier.

In 2012, the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) surveyed job seekers, applicants to regulatory bodies, and employers in an effort to document how Canadian experience found expression during a job search. It reported that 'newcomers, employers and Canadian society at large suffer untold losses when people are not able to work at their full capacity' (OHRC 2013, section 'Best Practices', para. 10). It subsequently issued a policy position on the discriminatory nature of this requirement:

> **A strict requirement for 'Canadian experience' is discriminatory on its face and can only be used in limited circumstances. The onus will be on employers and regulatory bodies to show that a requirement for prior work experience in Canada is a *bona fide* requirement, based on the legal test set out in this policy. Employment and accreditation requirements should be clear, reasonable, genuine and directly related to performing the job. (OHRC 2013)**

Following this intervention, Lorne Foster noted, there was some evidence to suggest Canadian experience requirements were being removed from job sites and public advertisements in Ontario. But he also stressed, 'it is possible, for instance, that many of the so-called 'soft' skills … will still be interpreted by job interviewers from a dominant culture paradigm. In this circumstance, soft skills can become a euphemism for CE [Canadian Experience], utilized in the absence of offending language' (2015, p. 10).

In 2021, the Province of Ontario introduced changes to the Fair Access to Regulated Professions and Compulsory Trades Act, mandating 36 non-health regulated professions – including architecture, teaching, and social work – to eliminate the Canadian work experience requirement as a condition of their licensing criteria by December 2023. Non-compliance would result in up to $100,000 in fines (Keung 2023). The province was motivated by both fairness and the demands of the economy. Ontario's Labour Minister stated, 'We want to help lift immigrants up so that they could earn more money for themselves and their families and also fill labour shortages and grow our economy… There is going to be zero tolerance' (Keung 2023). In May 2023, the Professional Engineers Ontario (PEO), the licensing and regulatory body governing engineers, became the first regulatory body in the province to eliminate the Canadian experience condition from its application criteria (Robitaille 2023).

At the time of this writing (January 2024), the Province of Ontario is planning to introduce legislation that will ban employers from using Canadian work experience as a requirement in job ads or applications. If passed, it will mark the first time a province in Canada has included such a provision in its Employment Standards legislation (Province of Ontario 2023). The CEO of Achēv, a Toronto-based service organization, applauded this move and stated, 'removing discriminatory Canadian work experience requirements is a necessary step towards creating a more inclusive labour force' (cited by Province of Ontario 2023). While other groups such as the Toronto Regional Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) also hailed the announcement, they pointed out 'The 'Canadian experience' barrier runs deeper than publicly posted job ads.

It is covert and shows up at different stages of the hiring process. Employers, directly or through third-party recruiters, may screen out resumes based on the country where prior work or education was done, rather than on its relevance to the position' (TRIEC 2023).

These moves are a step in the right direction. While concerns can be raised about the individual and complaint-driven models that underpin both provincial human rights bodies and employment standards provision, such measures are nonetheless very important. Foster's observation about OHRC's position that the 'removal of the [Canadian experience requirements] provides a new depth perception to workplace dynamics; and a new measure of leverage to racialized newcomers throughout the province in their pursuit of gainful employment' (2015, p. 10) applies to the more recently introduced legislative provisions.

Our study findings underline participants' capabilities in terms of evaluating the range of constraints they face and using resources to maximize the labour market opportunities available to them. For the most part, these strategies are directed at improving newcomers' capacity to compete in a labour market and in this manner resonate with neoliberal rationales towards responsibilisation; they can also be seen as a way to adjust to the mores of a new society. For some this might be effective. But the focus on the individual newcomer not only sidelines the conditions, structures, and resources outside their control – notably the types of settlement services and employment programs available, which are shaped by what the federal and provincial governments favour and/or deem worthy of funding at a given time – but renders processes of systemic discrimination invisible. Thus, strategies that involve structural changes may offer more promising avenues to remove barriers and improving skilled immigrants' economic integration. Employers can play a role in this process, but uptake of more inclusive and equitable approaches to hiring may be uneven and slow. Meanwhile, key legislative changes appear more effective in terms of outcomes, albeit concerns relating to how these could be sidelined.

Conclusion

As a settler society Canada has historically depended on immigration for nation building, economic growth, and demographic challenges. Currently, it remains committed to admitting high numbers of immigrants. Canadian national narratives draw on immigration to suggest the country is open to the world, inclusive, and welcoming to diverse groups of people suggesting a potential orientation toward cosmopolitan concerns. Within these narratives immigrants are often *discursively* constructed as emblematic cosmopolitan figures because of their mobility, their ties to other countries, and transferable skills. What comes to the fore in this narrative is the possibility of a multiplicity of identities and attachments within specific places and through various networks.

In Canada, immigrants are potential citizens and as such are central to the link drawn between 'being Canadian and being a good citizen of the world' that characterizes much of the literature on Canada's place in the world (Kymlicka & Walker 2012, p. 12). In probing the contradiction between Canadian national narratives and the lived experience of skilled immigrants in the labour market we draw attention to the way in which rooted attachments and feelings of belonging are shaped by everyday experience. In this case, the labour market is a site of everyday engagement between 'us' and 'them'. While meaningful employment is but one indicator of attachment in a new context it is nevertheless an important one.

Through a small qualitative case study of newcomer skilled men and women's experiences in the transborder and bilingual region of Ottawa-Gatineau, we document some of the structural barriers that newcomers face in the labour market. These barriers reference a particular frame that reasserts an exclusionary national project through the valorization of Canadian experience and official language capacity. Our finding also underscore that newcomers are not duped and very much aware of the contradictions between what they were told or promised about the country – and thus the expectations they developed –

and their work experiences once they arrive in Canada. These contradictions are implicated in existing forms of national privilege and exclusion and thus belies a cosmopolitan imaginary.

Recent evidence suggests it may no longer be possible to ignore these longstanding barriers and their consequences, given the significant implications of this development for Canada's ability to attract and retain immigrants in the future. To some extent, there is a clear recognition that it is not enough to attract high numbers of immigrants to Canada if they cannot become full members of the community. As we detail there are some promising initiatives that address labour market disadvantage that many newcomers experience. These include the use of targeted programs, employer initiatives, human rights mechanisms and legislative options. Many of these initiatives deploy discourses of equity, fairness, and human rights. In sum, our case invites us to think about the broader question of what rooted cosmopolitanism looks like on the ground and the shifting connections between local/national spaces and global concerns.

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