



NEWCOMER SKILLS AT WORK: A PROPOSAL FOR PAID INTERNSHIPS

The Mennonite New Life Centre works to support the settlement and integration of newcomers through holistic services and community engagement. In 2008, the New Life Centre launched an employment advocacy project entitled “Newcomer Skills at Work: Refusing to Settle for Less.” This project combines civic engagement and mentoring strategies to promote fair and meaningful work for newcomers.

In 2009, the Newcomer Skills initiative launched a participatory action research project designed to engage newcomers in collective analysis of employment barriers and in formulating policy recommendations to improve labour market integration. Forty-five newcomers from a variety of cultural and professional backgrounds participated in seven in-depth focus groups. These focus groups echoed the now familiar story of immigrant underemployment and broken dreams. Of 45 research participants, 37% were unemployed and 60% were not working in their field of study. 53% of participants had an annual income below \$20,000 and 55% believed that their situation had deteriorated since arrival in Canada.

Newcomers spoke at length of the barriers and discrimination they faced during the hiring process. In particular, they spoke of facing a double bind: they can’t get a job because they do not yet have Canadian experience, but they can’t get Canadian experience because no one will give them a job. In effect, they have no opportunity to demonstrate competency. To address this widespread and systemic barrier, research participants proposed a combination of legislative imperatives and employer incentives. They felt that offering economic incentives to employers to hire immigrants would support job creation, give newcomers an opportunity to demonstrate their skills and experience, and contribute to positive public perception of newcomer contributions.

The purpose of this brief is to make the case for a comprehensive program of paid internships that would offer newcomers a first job in their field of expertise. We believe that government leadership, support and funding for such a program would create an effective bridge to permanent employment for newcomers, while also allowing for better utilization of currently untapped talents, to the benefit of the larger economy.

EXISTING LABOUR MARKET INCENTIVE PROGRAMS

There currently exist a variety of job creation and internship programs designed to support variously disadvantaged groups such as welfare recipients, students and internationally trained professionals with overcoming barriers to labour market integration. Funded by different levels of government, or through public-private partnerships, these programs allow participants to gain career related experience, adding to their resumes and professional networks. Both participants and employers benefit from the investment in training: it is not uncommon for employers to offer permanent employment to successful interns.

One of the greatest limitations of internships programs is eligibility. While there currently exist a variety of paid internship programs that benefit subsets of the newcomer population, many internationally trained workers find themselves excluded. Below, we describe a sample of the existing patchwork of programs, together with their respective eligibility criteria.

Public-private partnership: The Career Bridge Program

Assisted by start up funding from the province of Ontario, the Career Bridge Program was launched in 2003 to secure paid internships for internationally educated and trained professionals lacking work experience in Canada. Career Bridge internships are employer paid professional positions that last 4, 6, 9 or 12 months and are available in specific non-regulated sectors including finance, human resources, marketing, IT and engineering. Career Bridge partners with both private and public sector employers.

Federal: Canada Summer Jobs

The Canada Summer Jobs program is a federal initiative that helps students gain work experiences in areas related to their interests and field of study. The government provides participating employers with wage subsidies, which allow them to hire students for the summer. Employers must guarantee minimum wage, and demonstrate compliance with health and safety standards. They are also encouraged to give priority to youth facing multiple barriers, including newcomer students. While this program helps newcomer youth, it is of limited benefit to adult newcomers, since eligibility is restricted to those who are full-time students up to age 30.

Provincial: Ontario Public Service Internship Program for Internationally Trained Individuals

In partnership with Career Bridge, this program offers coveted six month internships in the public service to internationally trained individuals who have immigrated within the last three years and have a minimum of three years international experience in their field. Candidates must be able to demonstrate university education equivalent to a bachelor's degree in Canada, as recognized by an approved credentialing agency. The restricted eligibility criteria and number of available positions limit participation. Designed to provide 70 positions, the program regularly receives ten times this number of applicants, illustrating the need for expanded internship opportunities for newcomers.

Municipal: Investing in Neighbourhoods Fund

Toronto Employment and Social Services' *Investing in Neighbourhoods Fund* is an employment program in partnership with community non-profit organizations. The program targets recipients of Ontario Works and ODSP. The fund encourages employer participation by covering salary costs (up to a specified cap) for part or full positions lasting up to a full year. Refugee and immigrant serving agencies have successfully used this program to offer jobs to newcomers, while enhancing services to the newcomer community. However, the program's eligibility criteria are quite restrictive. It does not specifically cater to newcomers, nor does it require employers to offer career track employment.

BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS OF EXISTING PROGRAMS

The full potential of internationally trained workers has yet to be liberated. In November 2009, Stats Canada reported that a discouraging two thirds of university educated newcomers are underemployed. In this context, paid internships hold great promise as a bridge to full labour market integration. Typically, internship participants have much higher rates of employment than non-participants. To offer just one example from the popular Career Bridge Program, nearly 80% of internationally trained interns subsequently found full-time employment in their field of expertise, compared to only 33% in the immigrant population as a whole.

In addition to paid internship programs, many educational institutions and bridge training programs offer student placements, boasting high rates of employment for program graduates. To give just one example, the Ryerson Internationally Educated Social Work Professionals Bridging Program reports a full 90% of program graduates professionally employed within six months of graduation. Yet program staff report serious concerns about eligibility: program participants must find the means to pay academic fees and support their families during a one year program, with the internship component unpaid.

In sum, paid and unpaid internships are a promising route to employment for the internationally educated and trained. Access, however, is a serious concern, given the eligibility restrictions attached to existing paid internship programs, and the economic hardship of supporting a family while participating in an unpaid placement. Access to childcare is also a limiting factor for many potential participants with small children. At the same time, the quality of internships is a concern, since not all employers provide meaningful work experiences or understand the many skills newcomers offer. More work is needed to expand the range and ensure the quality of internship opportunities through new funding, effective employer engagement and a focused strategy for the internationally trained.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION: ESTABLISH A COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAM OF PAID INTERNSHIPS FOR THE INTERNATIONALLY TRAINED

Internship programs are clearly an effective strategy for opening doors to employment. Our research shows that newcomers are looking to government to invest in our collective future by supporting the development of a comprehensive program of paid internships specifically designed to offer internationally trained individuals a first job in their field. All levels of government can show leadership by participating as an employer, issuing a call to action to the private sector, and providing funding for non-profits wishing to offer internships for internationally trained individuals.

The Career Bridge experience shows that many private and public sector employers can and will fund their own professional internships, recognizing the tremendous benefits of tapping into international talent, and taking ownership of the process of diversifying their work force. Non-profits can also play an important role in providing social sector internships, but require financial support in order to do so. For all employers, internships represent a win-win situation. By tapping otherwise wasted skills and expertise, internships benefit not only newcomers, but their employers, and the larger economy.

The proposed internship program would be specially designed to fit the needs and abilities of the internationally trained. At the same time, it would build on best practices of existing programs. We would like to suggest the following best practices as a foundation for program design:

- **Internships are paid at a rate that respects the level of skill and experience brought to the job by the intern.** In the case of funded internships, funding covers at least minimum wage, so as to allow non-profit employers to participate and enhance services to the community. Best practice from the *Investing in Neighbourhoods Fund* involves covering full salary costs up to a specified maximum per position, with wages determined by the employer, as appropriate to the position and required qualifications.
- **Internships are six months to one year in length**, with time frames adjusted to the learning needs and the complexity of the role. For successful bridging to permanent employment,

participants need adequate time to learn the job and workplace culture, demonstrate knowledge and skills, and build professional networks.

- **Internships provide career related experience.** Best practice from the Canada Summer Jobs program involves requiring participating employers to state in their application form how the proposed job will contribute to career development.
- **Participating employers offer mentoring, feedback and evaluation.** Best practice from the *Investing in Neighbourhoods Fund* involves requiring participating employers to name supervisors on their application forms and commit to providing regular feedback to facilitate on the job learning. In this case, the funder also follows up with the intern to monitor satisfaction with the internship experience.
- **Employers receive education and support, learning how to hire and retain diverse talent.** Best practice from Career Bridge and the Ryerson Internationally Educated Social Work Professionals Bridging Program involves offering diversity training workshops and individualized supports to employers, in order to support organizational learning and sustainable change in employment practices.
- **Funding application processes are relatively simple, while ensuring commitment to the above principles and respect of employment standards.** Best practice from the Canada Summer Jobs program involves information sessions for employers and a simple on-line form. The less red tape, the higher employer participation.
- **Internship opportunities are publicized on a central website.** Best practice from the Canada Summer Jobs program involves encouraging employers to advertise positions through a central website of student summer job opportunities. Doing the same for this program would allow newcomers to easily access a complete list of internship opportunities, while helping employers to reach out to a broad pool of applicants.

The success of such an internship program relies on effective employer engagement. One promising avenue to explore would be linking this initiative to bridge training programs, particularly for regulated professions where internationally trained professionals face additional challenges and barriers related to certification, and a less structured approach to internships may be less successful. Bridge Training Programs have the sector specific knowledge and relationships to effectively engage employers. They are already involved in educating and engaging employers to offer workplace experience to internationally trained individuals. Bridge training programs would become more accessible and effective by helping participants connect with paid internship opportunities, while interns would be more likely to meet employer expectations if they had received the additional training and occupation specific language supports available through bridge training programs. The Ontario government has given strong priority to bridge training, and could enhance these programs by adding funding for paid internships.

BENEFITS OF IMPLEMENTATION

Canada applies a rigorous points system to the selection of skilled workers for immigration, screening for high levels of education and work experience. Newcomers of all immigration categories bring a wealth of skills and knowledge essential to a globalized economy – technical skills and professional expertise; international work experience under a broad range of socio-economic and geo-climatic conditions; cross-cultural communication abilities and contacts. In return, newcomers ask only for the opportunity to put these skills to work – for themselves and for Canada. When their skills are underutilized, it is to the detriment of all parties.

While Canada is a nation that prides in itself on multiculturalism, internationally trained workers continue to face significant barriers to labour market integration. A comprehensive program of paid internships for the internationally trained would open doors to employment that utilizes their skills and experience, benefiting not only newcomers but the economy as a whole.

The anticipated benefits of the proposed internship program are many:

- More newcomers would find stable and fairly paid employment in their field of expertise, increasing household income and improving individual/family well-being. Financial security and self-reliance has further implications for the psychological health of newcomer families and their successful integration into the wider community.
- The Canadian work force would benefit from the human capital, skills and experience of newcomers. International experience lends itself to creativity, innovation, and global connections. Improved employment opportunities for newcomers diversifies the workforce, lending skills and perspectives that better prepare us for global endeavours.
- Small centres could benefit from using paid internships as an immigrant attraction and retention strategy, resulting in population growth and economic vitality.
- Parental employment success increases the opportunities for future generations to be successful. Underemployment can contribute to a cycle of poverty and marginalization for newcomer families, together with a forced reliance on social services. Increasing opportunities for employment success results in expanded horizons for youth and decreased costs for social services.
- Paid internships would help newcomers get their “foot in the door,” demonstrating their knowledge and expertise. Ultimately, employers and co-workers would develop greater awareness of the skills and experience of newcomers, reducing cultural stereotyping with regards to the types of employment believed to “best fit” newcomers. It would thus contribute to the broader goals of multiculturalism and social integration.
- Increased income means that newcomers will contribute more to the economy and increase the tax base for essential government functions. Furthermore, they will be able to contribute to pension plans in a way that guarantees their long term well-being and self-reliance, rather than being forced to turn to government assistance in their old age.

In sum, the proposed internship program will not only prepare newcomers to meet the demands of the labour market, but also create a diverse and dynamic workforce, to the collective benefit of the whole country. When newcomers succeed, we all benefit from stronger and healthier communities, increased multicultural understanding and social cohesion.

CONCLUSION

Our research suggests the need for a comprehensive program of paid internships for internationally trained individuals, offering them a first job in their field of expertise. Both internships and student placements have proven highly effective as labour market integration strategies, consistently resulting in higher employment rates for participants than non-participants. While newcomers already access a patchwork of existing programs, eligibility restrictions exclude all too many. There is therefore a need to expand opportunities by creating a program specially targeted to the needs and skills of internationally trained workers.

The federal government currently supports a broad based national program for another group of “newcomers” to the labour market – namely students. There is a recognition that students, as “newcomers” to the job market, need extra support to gain career related experience, especially in times of recession. As part of the Economic Action Plan, the government is increasing funding for Canada Summer Jobs by \$10 million per year in 2010. We believe that the same kind of broad based strategy and strong funding commitment is needed to support newcomers in gaining career track employment experience. All levels of government can show leadership by participating as employers, issuing a call to action to the private sector, and providing funding for non-profits wishing to offer internships for internationally trained individuals.

In the end, we all stand to benefit from a program that helps newcomers contribute their skills and experience to the labour force. International experience lends itself to out of the box thinking, fostering creativity and innovation. Tapping the skills of internationally trained individuals diversifies the workplace and makes us a more effective player in the global economy. Both newcomers and the labour market will benefit from such an investment in our collective future.

References

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