



Economic integration

“Tapping into immigrant talent so that everybody in Ottawa benefits is what we are after; and the biggest capital we have at our table is engagement.”

Economic Integration Sector Table member

Strategic overview

Economic success is a key measure of immigrant integration and an important determinant of social and civic inclusion. For this reason, immigrants coming to Canada are highly motivated to quickly find jobs commensurate with their skills and education. They also seek out entrepreneurial opportunities that will reward their abilities and dispositions.

Ensuring that newcomers are successful economically is equally important for the host population. Indeed, Canada’s system of immigrant selection and admissions is premised on the notion that newcomers will make an economic contribution to the country. This would suggest not only an ethical imperative for helping immigrants to be successful, but also a practical one, based on self-interest.

Notwithstanding these congruent interests, research suggests that since the 1980’s, successive cohorts of immigrants have not had the same economic success as similarly endowed native born Canadians. Many factors appear to be at play: weak language skills relative to the demands of the labour market; a lack of ‘soft (culture of work) skills’; resistance and risk averse behaviour by Canadian employers who systematically undervalue education and work credentials acquired abroad; a lack of access by newcomers to social networks; and outright discrimination. Some of these factors can be associated with the depressed prospects that have affected all new entrants; however others, disproportionately, impact newcomers, blighting not only their lives, but also those of their children.

Because of the declining prospects facing newcomers, recent federal, and to a lesser extent provincial, policy changes have further emphasized the pre-eminence of economic immigration: economic categories have assumed a larger proportion of overall immigration; and points have

been reconfigured to elevate the importance of language and other factors correlated with economic success. At the same time, the institutional arrangements that govern newcomer selection have been altered to assign a larger role to employers and to educational institutions.

To address the changing economic environment and the shifts in policy, the Ottawa community will need to enhance the welcome it extends to newcomers, with a particular focus on improving economic opportunities. This is the domain of the Economic Sector Table.

The Sector Table has identified five strategic priorities:

1. Improving the strategic alignment among institutions and initiatives concerned with newcomer economic integration
2. Helping immigrants navigate towards employment
3. Reducing barriers that impede small and medium-sized enterprises from hiring immigrants
4. Promoting and supporting entrepreneurship among newcomers
5. Enhancing Ottawa's ability to project itself as a welcoming, cosmopolitan metropolis, receptive to skilled immigrants and international students

Three subgroups have been established to implement the strategic priorities: An Employer Engagement Subgroup; an Entrepreneurship Subgroup; and a Service Capacity and Coordination Subgroup. The members of the Subgroups, and of the Sector Table, are nearly all representatives of institutional intermediaries that help bridge newcomers with employment, either directly or through assistive services.

To date, this Sector Table has leveraged close to \$400,000 – much of it in connection with its trades initiative. The Table has also enlisted the support of 39 institutional partners to help power its numerous activities. Many of these activities, though promising, are still at a developmental stage. This is evident in the activity assessments gathered from project stakeholders, a mix of optimism and caution: Half the respondents who were surveyed indicated that their initiatives were successful in terms of meeting their intended goals and outcomes; the other half felt that it was still too early to establish success. This is elaborated in the descriptions that follow.

Activities

This section presents the activities that are underway to address the Sector Table's priorities. The depiction is not exhaustive. Key actions have been highlighted in order to 'explain' the challenges and potential remedies that the Sector Table feels show promise.

Priority 1: Improving the strategic alignment among institutions and initiatives

concerned with newcomer economic integration

Action 1: Merge the Internationally Trained Workers' Partnership with OLIP's Economic Integration Sector Table

The advent of OLIP and the subsequent launch of the Ottawa Immigration Strategy created a significant overlap between the work of the OLIP Economic Integration Sector Table and the pre-existing, Internationally Trained Workers' Partnership (ITWP). Both the priorities and the membership of the two organizations overlapped leading to a duplication of effort. As a result, the ITWP was dissolved and the membership of the two organizations merged into the OLIP Economic Integration Sector Table.

Action 2: Establish a mechanism for Ottawa settlement service providers to collaborate on new business and service opportunities

In December 2013, OLIP convened a meeting of the LASI coalition (Local Agencies Serving Immigrants) to discuss the changing policy context (favouring high skilled migration) and associated opportunity landscape facing settlement service providers. This led to a study, supported by the United Way and the Mitacs program, of potential interest by local employers and educational institutions in purchasing services from LASI. The study seeks to establish a mechanism – in the form of a partnership, memorandum of understanding, or some other approach – to steer LASI investments in product development and to allocate the provision of services (to prospective clients) among LASI member agencies. A final report and recommendations relating to this project will be submitted in July 2015.

Priority 2: Helping immigrants navigate towards employment

Action 1: Develop information about how to access trade jobs

The City of Ottawa has collaborated with the YMCA-YWCA to create a guide that discusses working in regulated and recognized trades, as well as re-certification and apprenticeship opportunities. In addition, ten videos have been produced containing interviews with immigrant tradespeople talking about their pathways to work in the trades, providing employer viewpoints, and offering other perspectives on certification and employment in the trades in Ottawa. This information is available on the City's immigration portal.

Action 2: Establish paid internships for immigrants

The paid internship initiative builds on the successful federal internship program. Its goals are to help immigrants obtain better work and to encourage employers to tap into immigrant talent. Two separate internship programs have been launched. One places interns in the Ottawa Carleton District School Board (described in the section dealing with the Education Sector Table) and the other seeks out placements with the City of Ottawa under the Municipal Work Experience Program. The connection between the Board and the City was made by OLIP.

This latter program places immigrant interns in jobs that are temporarily vacant and ultimately offers them opportunities to compete for the positions. To date, seven individuals have been hired through the program for a total of 14 terms. A number of these internships have matured into full time work.

Action 3: Provide immigrants with access to training loans

Drawing on information shared at the Economic Integration Sector Table, the Ottawa Community Loan Fund (OCLF) concluded that its product mix did not fully address the needs of newcomers. OCLF's emphasis was on business loans, but newcomers need support to access professional development training. This led the OCLF to re-introduce professional

development loans – which cover training and student fees.

"The initiative has been received well, because OCLF is working with the community partners [with] the client's best interest in mind... Those newcomers who are granted a loan are very happy that they are either able to start their business or access training they otherwise would not have been able to access. "

To help reach immigrant

Program lead & member of Economic Integration Sector Table

communities in Ottawa, OCLF hired multilingual outreach workers. Initially, communications were limited to English, French, Farsi and Spanish but they have since expanded to take in Mandarin, Arabic and Hindi.

To deliver the loan program, OCLF has worked closely with community partners who provide employment counselling in instances where OCLF determines that a client's career plans are too weak in their current form to merit support. To date, over 80 percent of participants in the various programs have expressed satisfaction with the assistance they have received. Because of this success, OCLF is expanding the model to include more community partners.

Priority 3: Reducing barriers that impede small and medium-sized enterprises from hiring immigrants

Action 1: Acquaint employers with the use of Canadian Language Benchmarks

This initiative is described in the section on the Language Sector Table. Its aim is to acquaint small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with information about Language Benchmarks and how they can be used to assess the language skills of job applicants, matching them against job requirements. The project also helps build connections between SMEs and organizations involved in language training, language assessment and interpretation.

Priority 4: Promoting and supporting entrepreneurship among newcomers

Action 1: Promote access to business loans

This project is linked to the provision of training loans by the Ottawa Community Loan Fund (OCLF). It was introduced in 2014 in response to an apparent need for very small business loans - Primer Loans – which amount to less than \$1,000. This will be bolstered by a planned pilot project to create lending circles (planned for 2015).

As a result of its work with the Sector Table – currently co-chaired by the OCLF executive director – the agency also expanded its outreach capacity by hiring ‘Smart Outreach Ambassadors’ with a diverse set of language skills. This was very well received and client evaluations have been nearly unanimous in their praise. Newcomers who have received loans to start a business have expressed satisfaction with the support they received.

Action 2: Implement Immigrant Entrepreneurship Awards

The Entrepreneurship Awards recognize the achievements of immigrant entrepreneurs in Ottawa. The goal is to showcase the fact that immigrants create jobs, connect Ottawa to global markets, and demonstrate innovation. The awards ceremony, which has a high profile and is well attended by Ottawa’s business community, also aims to provide immigrant entrepreneurs with better access to business networks. The first ceremony was initiated in 2012 during Ottawa’s initial Immigration Forum, an annual event.

Priority 5: Enhancing Ottawa’s ability to project itself as a welcoming, cosmopolitan metropolis, receptive to skilled immigrants and international students

Action 1: Develop and promote Welcoming Ottawa Week (WOW)

Welcoming Ottawa Week (WOW), an annual celebration of diversity and immigration in Ottawa, is intended – among other things – to enhance Ottawa’s reputation as a cosmopolitan and welcoming community. WOW is discussed in greater detail in the report on the Settlement and Integration Capacity Development Sector Table.

Action 2: Collaborate with the City of Gatineau to develop a shared approach to attracting, informing, and retaining newcomers

Ottawa and Gatineau form a single labour market with many people commuting from homes on one side of the Ottawa River to work on the other. Despite the (more or less) free inter-provincial movement of workers – excepting in certain professional and skilled trades which are provincially regulated - jurisdictional and regulatory divides affect the delivery of both federal and provincial immigration and labour market programs and services. This presents a significant obstacle to shared action.

This project is still at an early stage of development, though it has the ‘blessing’ of both Ottawa and Gatineau municipalities. The aim is to identify common ground where the two cities and local immigrant serving organizations from both provinces might collaborate around objectives such as the preparation and dissemination of information to newcomers to encourage them to come and to settle in the Ottawa-Gatineau region. Several meetings have already taken place among the heads of immigrant serving organizations. These will now be expanded to include city administrative and political leaders. The meetings have focused on identifying topics of common interest and charting a course forward.

Action 3: Redevelop the Ottawa Immigration Portal

The City of Ottawa, with the assistance of OLIP, has extensively revised its immigration and international student portal with a view to strengthening Ottawa’s ability to attract and retain newcomers. The portal now provides extensive information about working, learning, and living in Ottawa along with information about why newcomers should make Ottawa their home. There is also material to assist students and internationally trained workers. OLIP helped to organize the background research and to assemble and coordinate the various contributors and reviewers.

Action 4: Welcome and support international students

The City of Ottawa hosted a welcoming event for international students in collaboration with partners from the Economic and Education Sector Tables. The aim is to provide students with information to help connect them with local newcomer communities and to assist those who would like to remain in Ottawa to immediately find the supports they need in order to facilitate this process. It has not yet been decided whether the

student welcome will become an annual event.

Achievements, challenges and future directions

Achievements

Perhaps OLIP's biggest accomplishment in the domain addressed by the Economic Integration Sector Table has been to serve as a catalyst.

"Some of what happened, [was] OLIP-inspired and partners got involved and did it, and some of what happened, partners were interested in - and partners found each other at the OLIP table and it was loosely connected to OLIP but it was somehow in the OLIP universe."

By convening the numerous stakeholders who are active in

Economic Integration Sector Table member

different facets of economic integration and working aggressively to initiate pilots, to transfer knowledge from one project to another, and to offer assistance to any ideas that flared to life, OLIP has begun to make changes that have an impact not only at the level of programs but also influence systemic change. This can be seen, for example, in the internship programs which began before OLIP and the Sector Table; but it was OLIP who "picked up the cause and facilitated a discussion with the school board and the City", as one member put it, both of which are now sponsoring internship projects.

The Economic Integration Sector Table has also been successful in integrating or achieving a measure of coordination among significant planning processes and participants. These include the OLIP process, as well as the planning machinery utilized by the City of Ottawa, and the Internationally Trained Workers' Partnership, which the Sector Table incorporated and whose members joined the Table. These measures are expected to yield benefits over time through improved coordination and systematic amplification of each others' interests.

In terms of specific projects, the Economic Sector Table has a large number of innovative underway that could, if successful, be scaled up into larger programs with the potential to make a difference. This would include the internship programs, the efforts to stimulate entrepreneurs and small business development, and the projects that are directed to making Ottawa a more attracting destination for newcomers.

The various celebratory initiatives – ranging from the Welcoming Ottawa Week, through the student welcome and the immigrant entrepreneurial awards all create momentum for a shift in how Ottawa is perceived. They also provide an armature around which additional efforts can be strung once the initial successes (and participants) are locked down. Early signs are positive.

Challenges

The main challenges facing the Sector Table have to do with maintaining momentum. This, in turn, requires finding the resources and support that will be needed to transition from innovative pilot projects to mainstream programs. In effecting this transformation, the Sector Table may need to identify new financing models and new funding sources for its initiatives. These might include the private sector as well as immigrants and students. Whatever approach is ultimately followed, the Sector Table will be challenged as it tries to scale up its current projects.

Another challenge that the Table will likely need to confront as it grows its initiatives will come from institutions with competing interests. The internship programs, which are deemed promising, focus on the trades and on securing placements in schools and the City. These are both unionized environments, subject to collective agreements. Program size will matter as numbers increase and competition (or perceived competition) for jobs ensues. This has not yet been a major issue because the pilots have been small.

There is also a strong structural component to the challenges that face the Economic Integration Table. Employment growth in the public sector appears unlikely. Nor is Ottawa likely to see the sort of growth in large high-tech companies that occurred during the early years of technology growth in the city. Indeed, the most likely source of jobs and economic development will be in small and medium sized enterprises where it has been most difficult to demonstrate the value proposition associated with immigrant employment. Reaching small employers who do not have HR departments and do not have the capacity, or incentive, to invest in training will slow Ottawa's momentum unless a breakthrough of sorts is achieved with SMEs.

The final challenge that will need to be dealt with concerns interagency competition for grants and recognition. OLIP and the Sector Table have made major strides in aligning planning frameworks and inducing closer inter-organizational cooperation. This compact is, however, still fragile and will be tested according to the Table's success in converting ideas into programs and resources.

Future directions for discussion

As with other Tables, future directions will be determined by the challenges that face the Sector, by members' interests, and by the Table's ambitions. Starting with the need to respond to challenges, the Table's efforts will likely centre on efforts to scale up some of the more promising practices. The most likely areas for further investment are the internship programs, support for entrepreneurs, and business and career educational

financing (including peer lending). The struggle to secure financing for these projects will undoubtedly consume a great deal of the Table's efforts... though not all.

There are numerous ideas that have been generated by the Sector Table's sub-groups. These have not yet 'come to market', but can be expected to get the Table's attention. To illustrate, the entrepreneurship subgroup identified four actions that it would like the Sector to explore. These include: youth entrepreneurship; customized workshops for entrepreneurs;

entrepreneurial mentorship; and the role of innovative social finance.

Another area that will see more activity in the future concerns efforts to engage small and medium-sized

"As a member of the economic sector table AND the education sector table, the OCSDB has expanded their relationships with a variety of partners. As a result, they have increased the understanding of the diversity of players who are exploring and expanding opportunities for Ottawa's economic growth in the 21st century, including ensuring that they are fully tapping into and integrating the wealth of resources that internationally trained professionals bring to the city."

OCSDB representative at both Economic & Education Sector Tables

enterprises. This engagement could take the form of customized services for small employers and efforts to connect with the institutional base that engages and serves small employers. Further discussions will be pursued to refine these ideas.

It also appears likely that the Economic and Integration Sector Table will want to get involved in several cross-sectoral issues. Collaboration with the Health, Education and Language Sectors is already underway. Since problems tend not to respect jurisdictions, it seems likely that the boundaries between Tables will erode as project activity continues to increase.

In addition to the above items, there is considerable support at the Sector Table for greater Francophone involvement. The developing links between

"...[this OLIP sector table] gives La Cité the opportunity to explain our Francophone reality in a bilingual market, as well as our challenges and opportunities as a francophone college institution in Ottawa. La Cité appreciates all the opportunities that are discussed to attract and retain francophone immigrants in learning and living in a French-language community. "

Ottawa and Gatineau may also add impetus to Francophone-related projects.

The final item to be flagged is the Table's desire for recent, timely, granular and dynamic economic and employment data concerning recent immigrants to Ottawa. The Sector Table will likely want to invest in acquiring better information to guide its decisions and to evaluate Sector outcomes.

