



Concept Paper Low Job Market Integration of Skilled Immigrants in Canada: The Implication for Social Integration and Mental Well-Being

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Abstract: Skilled immigrants are critical assets to the social and economic dynamism of Canada. However, they are less likely to find employment matching their skillset due to a lack of inclusive post-immigration professional integration policies and support. They generally earn less and often live below the low-income cutoff relative to their Canadian-born counterparts. This paper aims to review the current situation of low job market integration (LJMI) of skilled immigrants in Canada and its implications on their social integration and mental well-being. Skilled immigrants continue to face disparities in getting desired jobs, despite having sufficient skills and credentials similar if not superior to that of Canadian-borns. Based on the existing literature, this study demonstrates that low job market integration limits skilled immigrants' productivity, and they experience a lower level of social integration and deteriorated mental well-being. Therefore, initiatives from multidisciplinary and multisector stakeholders are necessary to improve skilled immigrants' mental well-being by providing equal opportunities devoid of social exclusion and marginalization.

Keywords: high-skilled immigrant; Canadian job market; low job market integration; mental wellbeing; mental health & well-being

1. Introduction

Canada has attracted large numbers of skilled workers through its immigration policy to address workforce shortages due to the country's ageing population and decreasing birthrates [1]. Canada admits immigrants as skilled workers, reunited family members, protected persons such as refugees, and economic contributors [2,3]. Many highly educated and skilled immigrants migrate to Canada with permanent residency status under the Federal Skilled Workers Program [4]. According to the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) data, the Government of Canada accepted about a million skilled workers to enter Canada between 2002 to 2014 through the Federal Skilled Workers Program [5]. The number of immigrants admitted through the skilled migration programs has been rising continuously, and in 2021, Canada admitted 139,460 skilled immigrants through these programs, comprising nearly 34% of all immigration in that year [6]. Also, by 2023-25, Canada has set a multiyear plan to recruit millions of immigrants, among which approximately 50%, 51%, and 53% will be skilled workers from the economic category in 2023, 2024, and 2025, respectively [7]. Thus, skilled immigrants from developing nations are becoming increasingly important in the Canadian labour market [8].

Notably, immigration policies in Canada consider skilled immigrants as a valuable resource for the socio-economic growth of the country [3]. However, compared to their Canadian-born counterparts, these immigrants earn less, live below the standard, and are less likely to find employment matching their skills [2,9–11]. Statistics Canada's report shows that the unemployment rate of landed immigrants is 7.9%, whereas the rate among



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Copyright: © 2023 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https:// creativecommons.org/licenses/by/ 4.0/). Canadian-borns with similar degrees is 3.1% [12]. In 2014, the gap between the employment rate of immigrants and Canadian-borns, both with university degrees, was 11.1% [12]. In 2016, the census data showed a 16% national-level wage gap between newcomers and people born in Canada, whereas this gap was about 12.6% in the 2006 census data [13]. In addition, skilled immigrants, especially those who were in regulated fields such as healthcare or law, may need to choose alternative careers after coming to Canada to secure their livelihood [14,15]. Highly skilled immigrants with foreign university degrees frequently end up taking jobs requiring less than a university degree [16,17]. For example, many foreign-trained pharmacists work only as pharmacy assistants, and many foreign-trained nurses take jobs as healthcare aides [18,19]. Similarly, many foreign-trained physicians are pushed to take non-health career paths to support their families, thus losing their professional identity [15]. There is a lack of systematic approach and support for skilled immigrants to find employment in their area of expertise or suitable alternative careers where they can employ their skills to a certain extent [20,21]. Therefore, the individuals struggle to identify alternative jobs by themselves, have difficulty obtaining the required diploma/certifications, and struggle to convince employers of the rationale for their career switch to a position requiring a different skill set than their prior work area [21]. Thus, compared with Canadian-born counterparts, immigrants with the same qualifications suffer more to find a suitable job, making them prone to entering the workforce through undesirable jobs and leading to low economic integration [22] and underemployment [23].

These challenges that skilled immigrants encounter in Canada while attempting to integrate into the labour market lead to worse mental health outcomes. Chen et al., after analyzing a longitudinal survey of immigrants to Canada, reported that after four years of arrival over half of the immigrants with post-secondary education (58%) were underemployed, resulting in the decline of their mental health [24]. This paper aims to review the current situation of low job market integration (LJMI) of skilled immigrants. This article describes how individual-level or external factors, such as systematic barriers and racism, likely contribute to LJMI in the Canadian labour market. The conventional meaning of immigrants' integration in the host country suggests that immigrants and their ethnic group should bear the responsibility for their situation (such as integration and/or disintegration) [25]. We assume, however, that integrating into a new society is not a one-way journey where one group is responsible for their actions; rather, both groups (newcomers and host country) need to help each other and create positive outcomes for all. This article, therefore, intends to discuss the implication of job market integration on the social integration and mental well-being of high-skilled immigrants.

2. Reasons for Low Job Market Integration

Despite the fact that Canada has one of the most diversified populations in the world, exclusionary practice based on racism is still present in Canada [26]. The Supreme Court of Canada (2005) also agrees that racism is an unavoidable and well-known social truth in Canada [27]. According to recent studies, there is a lot of evidence of racial inequality in daily institutional practices in Canadian society [28,29]. Research also shows that discrimination against immigrants manifests in the screening stage where an employer's call for an interview depends on the racial identity of the immigrant [30]. Although officially Canadian policy supports the deracialization of immigrants, in practice, a complete deracialization is not seen [27]. Therefore, due to discrimination and racial practices among many employers, skilled immigrants encounter obstacles in obtaining desired jobs in Canada.

Canada admits skilled immigrants based on higher educational qualifications and experiences in related fields; however, after arrival, skilled immigrants face difficulties in the settlement-to-integration process in the host country [8,31–33]. Research shows that immigrants face barriers when entering the Canadian labour market [34–36]. Many factors are responsible for the extent to which skilled immigrants integrate into the Canadian job market. Some factors are related to individuals' socio-demographic characteristics, including age, sex, education, and skills [37]. In contrast, other factors are related to

the system and preferences encountered in the host country, such as racism, colonial integration policies, and/or systematic discrimination [37]. According to Weiner, the devaluation of foreign degrees and work experience, a lack of communication skills, implicit discrimination, and a lack of work experience in Canada are among the significant reasons that prevent skilled immigrants from entering the labour market or from getting a desired job [38]. In the following section, we will describe the various reasons under the four broad categories that impede skilled immigrants' entry into the Canadian labour market. A comprehensive list of factors that might help evaluate a newcomer's low level of job market integration and mental well-being are presented in Figure 1.

- (a) Individual-level factors;
- (b) Employer-level factors;
- (c) System-level factors;
- (d) Societal-level factors;

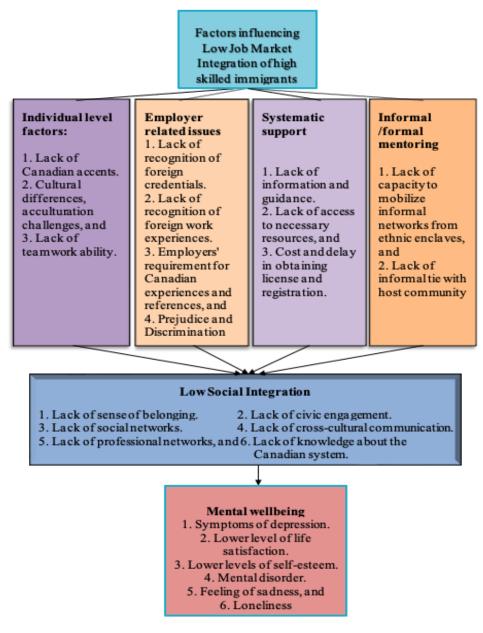


Figure 1. Low level of job market integration (LJMI); lower levels of social integration and mental well-being.

2.1. Individual-Level Factors

Barriers that impede skilled immigrants' labour market integration in Canada are widely documented [32]. As discussed above, although skilled immigrants are highly qualified, professionally trained, and economically motivated, they face individual-level challenges after arriving in Canada that restrain them from successfully integrating into the labour market. Racism can manifest itself in the exclusion of eligible immigrants from getting job opportunities because of their accents, body language, and other individual characteristics. The most vital factors may be a lack of language skills, acculturation challenges, and teamwork ability. These individual-level challenges may interact with other local contexts to trap skilled immigrants in low-skill survival jobs, resulting in negative outcomes in the labour market [32].

English-language skills are among the most critical factors in immigrants getting jobs in Canada [8]. Skilled immigrants must show minimum language requirements in listening, speaking, reading, and writing modules for the Express Entry program [39]; however, most of the time, employers consider their English-language skills insufficient for effective employment communication [40]. A study shows that employers predict applicants' language skills based on the name or country of origin on a resume [41]. Lacking a Canadian accent and expressions, and lacking knowledge about specific language skills, also affects skilled immigrants' employment outcomes [42]. A lack of linguistic skills prevents cross-cultural communication, thereby hindering adequate access to the host culture, hindering learning the expected standard behaviour in the workplace and soft skills, and delaying job market integration [8,40,43,44]. Improved language ability is likely a necessary condition for skilled immigrants to be successfully integrated into the labour market [45]. Racialized immigrants are discriminated against because of their non-native accents, which serve as a marker that establishes the White English/French accent as superior. This practice reveals the colonial mentality of the employers, where they want to reduce, rectify, and normalize the non-native voices of immigrants because non-native accents seem defensive and confrontational [46]. The non-nativity of their accents makes skilled immigrants' employability incompetent, according to the employer. Therefore, it is vital to eliminate prejudices and negative mentalities that marginalize skilled immigrants and instead devote greater resources to improving English accents in order to help them with better labour market integration.

A lack of understanding of workplace culture, lack of teamwork ability, and acculturation challenges also impose significant barriers to immigrants getting their desired jobs. These factors are essential, as understanding cultural differences in the workplace, teamwork capability, and successful acculturation may play a vital role for newcomers in attaining Canadian work experiences. A study shows that many immigrants do not know North American concepts of speaking well, selling themselves for work, and maintaining eye contact during a job interview—all of which are very important in the Canadian workplace culture [47]. Petri (2010) showed that to be integrated into Canadian society, newcomers should speak the way Canadians do and learn how Canadian-born people approach different situations using different manners [48]. However, research shows that Asian-named people with similar qualifications receive fewer calls from the employer when applying for a job [30]. Even though diversity in hiring is promoted in Canada, in reality, there is still discrimination against skilled immigrants that manifests on a personal level, preventing their integration into the labour market. Therefore, the government should work to ensure the practice of anti-racist policies among employers and encourage them to hire skilled immigrants if they meet all the required criteria. Also, skilled immigrants should raise their voices and mobilize available resources in improving their necessary skill sets to be hired, to dismantle racialized practices in the Canadian job market.

2.2. Employer-Level Factors

There are many likely reasons why skilled immigrants' labour market outcomes differ from Canadian-born people. Employers, particularly those with latent prejudices about

foreign credentials, training, or experiences, practice discrimination and devalue skilled immigrants' foreign skills. Studies show that immigrants face barriers to entering the job market despite having foreign credentials and work experience, due to a lack of Canadian work experience and references [8,10,11,38,40,49,50]. Research on the experiences of skilled immigrants' labour market discrimination has examined discrimination based on the devaluation of foreign credentials, work experiences, and training [51]. Research also shows that employers exploit skilled immigrants by seeking Canadian experience and Canadian references, and thereby obtain from immigrants free and low-wage labour [4]. Immigrants are victims of local institutions that do not accept foreign degrees and experiences due to prejudice and racism [52–54]. According to Desjardins and Cornelson [55], it is noticeable that compared to their Canadian counterparts, skilled immigrants have a higher unemployment rate and receive lower wages, which accounts for their lower job market integration in Canada. Therefore, discounting foreign skills due to prejudice against foreign experience impedes skilled immigrants' socio-economic integration [56].

Anti-immigrant biases also hinder immigrants' success in the Canadian labour force and discriminate against their entry into the workforce. A study describes that when immigrants' skills become a threat to local applicants, they face anti-immigrant biases [51]. Anti-immigrant biases also happen due to inter-sectional identities, including the sociodemographic statuses of the under-represented groups [57]. The evidence thus suggests that employers are not accepting the overseas expertise and credentials of skilled immigrants in cases where those credentials were used to get the immigrants into the economic immigration category. That is, skilled immigrants are being negatively impacted by openly practiced racist and exclusionary principles in the employment recruiting process, even though they immigrated to Canada with the hope of living a better life. As Canada needs more skilled immigrants, not only government initiatives but also individual- and community-level anti-racist initiatives are needed to attract more skilled people and for the social integration of skilled immigrants in Canada.

2.3. System-Level Factors

Immigrants' success in professional integration in the host country may be determined by several systematic support-related factors, such as information and guidance, adequate access to necessary resources and neutral services, etc. However, the information that immigrants receive before arrival is often unreliable and more optimistic [58], which gives them the illusion of abundant economic and employment opportunities compared to their home country. The real scenario in Canada is different. For example, relevant websites do not provide sufficient information for understanding the difficulties associated with entering into regulated professions, which delays skilled immigrants' access to desired regulated occupations [59]. There is also a lack of written and authentic immigration-related resources available based on which immigrants could perform a cost-benefit analysis before migrating to Canada [42]. Studies show that skilled immigrants would have been better prepared for the Canadian system of preferences or would have taken qualification accreditation exams if they had received practical guidance before and/or after arriving in Canada [8,60,61].

The requirement for money to pay for several prerequisite exams or further study is another issue that forces immigrants to work in survival occupations. The potential cost and delay in obtaining license and registration forces skilled immigrants to work lower-paid jobs until they obtain registration and authorization to work [62]. Sometimes immigrants need to study further to get their foreign credentials accredited and work experiences recognized, which mostly leaves them in a frustrating situation [11]. Research shows that new immigrants can overcome their problems by participating in additional formal education after arriving in Canada [63]. That is, despite their higher levels of credentials, skilled immigrants need to invest time and money to become eligible to find work in the field related to their previous experience and education [64]. Systemic racism may also be observed when employers systematically deprive immigrants and/or racialized people of equitable job opportunities based on certain rules, policies, and practices at the institutional or structural level [27]. Evidence shows that although many immigrants arrive in Canada with high expectations, they frequently experience racial and ethnic discrimination once they are here [65]. Even if the foreign professional experience meets the Canadian standard, skilled immigrants are sometimes not recognized by the licensing body and/or employer [66]. Evidence also shows that

not recognized by the licensing body and/or employer [66]. Evidence also shows that employers have allegedly turned down Chinese women immigrants who obtained licenses based on their prior work as nurses or engineers in their countries, claiming that the quality of their country experiences was insufficient [67]. Therefore, a racist mentality of employers undervaluing the skills of immigrants creates a barrier to them pursuing their desired career, which in turn creates difficulty integrating into the Canadian way of life.

2.4. Societal-Level Factors

A fourth reason that may influence immigrants' LJMI is their formal or informal networks at the societal level and their capacity to mobilize these networks. Networks within ethnic enclaves are likely to assist skilled immigrants in finding a survival-level job immediately after arriving in Canada and managing their vital livelihood needs [68]. However, a study shows that networks within ethnic enclaves are rarely effective for skilled immigrants in finding desired employment respective to their skills and credentials [69]. Also, a tie to the host community may help skilled immigrants to get to know a common culture, norms of the host community, and available job opportunities. A lack of this knowledge, on the other hand, prevents newly arrived skilled immigrants from job opportunities and learning the expected standard of behaviour in their desired professions in Canada [70].

3. Low Job Market Integration and Low Social Integration

Social integration refers to the cohesion among community members, where people at least to an extent—feel part of the larger community [71]. Immigrants' social integration is vital for inclusive social and economic growth and for enhancing their ability to become productive members of society [72]. Indicators that allow immigrants to be integrated into the host communities are their local networks, transnational networks, civic engagement, citizenship participation, and political engagement [37]. Immigrants' employment and labour market integration are often considered essential factors for their social networks and social relationships, thereby enhancing social integration by promoting active participation in social activities and community networks [73]. Job and income are essential resources that help immigrants secure accommodation, interact with fellow employees, and achieve language skills for cross-cultural communication, thereby helping them find a place in the new society [72]. Although these factors help newcomers integrate with the host community and understand ethnic and cultural diversities within the community, their LJMI may reduce skilled immigrants' ability to socially integrate.

Employment and labour market integration promote social networks with various people and subsequently influence newly arrived immigrants' social integration. A study shows that Canadian mechanisms for the economic integration of skilled immigrants systematically deprive them of having similar credentials as their Canadian counterparts, which in turn lowers their self-esteem, and hinders skilled immigrants' social integration [68]. Therefore, we see recent immigrants expressing a lower level of sense of belong-ingness to Canadian society [74]. "A sense of belonging refers to the process through which people belonging to the community develop emotional ties among each other and is a process that imbues them with feelings of autonomy, environmental mastery, and purpose in life" [75] (93–94). In 2015, the Institute for Canadian Citizenship (ICC) published a report where respondents identified a lack of information about the Canadian system as a significant barrier for newcomers to civic participation, volunteer activities, and political engagement [76]. Civic engagement means community involvement, such as involvement with volunteer organizations [37]. Skilled immigrants also have limited opportunities

to create professional networks, and face challenges in cross-cultural connection with Canadian-born people, which is critical for integration in the job market and their social integration [77].

The above discussion shows that skilled immigrants face an unexpected situation in the Canadian job market system which forces them to struggle to manage their everyday lives after arriving in Canada [78]. Although they have similar education and foreign experience as their Canadian counterparts, they are rarely hired for jobs that match their skills. Exclusion based on double-standard exclusionary policies is invisible and generally goes unnoticed, leading newly arrived immigrants to depend on their ethnic groups. They also experience a lack of information and knowledge about Canadian culture, professional norms, and English language proficiency, which excludes them from building helpful social networks with the community. Thus, skilled immigrants experience social exclusion due to both systematic discrimination and individual-level limitations that alienate them from the mainstream social system and relationships. Access to such relationships may have enabled them to participate in the host society actively, allowing them to benefit from broader networks of solidarity and support.

If it is assumed that immigrants' social conditions account for their lack of social integration and/or job market integration, the issue may not receive the attention it deserves. The LJMI can involve being a new immigrant, not having enough language proficiency, or having training that is insufficient for the demands of Canadian employment. These factors can be explained as legitimate from the inequality lens, but racism and prejudice-related discrimination should not be ignored if we want to see skilled immigrants in a better position in Canada, where the number of racialized people is increasing rapidly every year [79]. To recognize systemic issues with major effects on the LJMI and the mental health of skilled immigrants, we should approach problem-solving from an anti-racist perspective.

4. Low Social Integration and Mental Well-Being

The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC), which deals with preventing mental disease and promoting all Canadians' well-being, considers mental health an essential public health issue [80]. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health can be defined as a "state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and contribute to the community (p.1, [81])". Mental health is influenced by various social factors such as community area, level of income and education, employment, minority culture, relationships with friends and family, etc. [82,83]. Migration is seen as one of the significant determinants of individual health because migrants may be affected by existing social inequalities and discrimination and may subsequently face poverty, social exclusion, a lack of accessibility, and a lack of acceptability in the host country [84]. As noted above, many of these determinants are likely to affect immigrants 'social integration, which may contribute to their adverse mental health outcomes.

Although after arrival in Canada immigrants' health status has been seen as better than the Canadian-born population, their self-reported health starts to decline over time [85–87] and they suffer more from chronic diseases and mental illness than Canadianborn populations [88,89]. It has been recognized that socio-economic inequalities that exclude immigrants from mainstream society result in their poor long-term mental health outcomes [90]. Research shows that a lack of opportunities in employment hinders the acculturation process and social integration, affecting immigrants' mental well-being [91,92]. Thus, evidence shows that systematic exclusion from the job market creates a lack of social integration that negatively influences skilled immigrants' mental well-being.

Immigrants confront unexpected difficulties in getting jobs after arriving in Canada, which may increase their risk of developing negative mental health outcomes such as stress and symptoms of depression [84,93,94]. Research reveals that a lack of opportunities to get desired jobs based on the level of academic training affects skilled immigrants' mental health, including high levels of stress [95]. A study shows that people who are overqualified

for their current job are more likely to experience adverse mental well-being [96]. Therefore, evidence demonstrates that skilled immigrants' low job market integration affects their mental health outcomes.

Post-immigration barriers that skilled immigrants face may negatively impact their overall mental health. As a result, skilled immigrants experience sadness, depression, and loneliness [95]. The discounting of immigrants' skills by employers leads to a lower economic status where they feel depressed [91], lower levels of life satisfaction [97], and lower levels of self-esteem [98]. Skilled immigrants engaged in low-skill jobs earn less money, which also increases the risk of psychiatric disorders [99]. Research shows that in Nova Scotia, immigrant populations are more likely to have a higher rate of mental health disorders [100]. After arriving in Canada, immigrants' health started to decline over time due to various factors, including environmental, economic, and socio-cultural factors and factors involved with integration into the host society [101,102].

5. Conclusions

Skilled immigrants continue to face disparities in getting their desired jobs despite having similar foreign skills and credentials compared to their Canadian-born counterparts. Based on the existing literature, this study demonstrates that barriers to navigating the Canadian job market with foreign training limit skilled immigrants' productivity [93], and they experience a lower level of social integration and deteriorated mental well-being. Anti-racist initiatives from multidisciplinary and multisector stakeholders are necessary to improve skilled immigrants' mental health by providing equal opportunities to avoid social exclusion. At the same time, it is crucial to ensure that national policies and laws are anti-racist and respect the rights of skilled immigrants. Culturally sensitive, anti-racist, and inclusive social integration interventions must be developed and implemented to ensure cultural awareness and competence among skilled immigrants to decrease discrimination and marginalization of immigrant populations.

Anti-racist and inclusive perspectives enrich social integration and the mental wellbeing of newcomers. Anti-racist strategies and interventions ensure the participation of racialized people, the adoption of policies from government efforts with/without participation from various institutions, and the establishment of open systems [103]. Policies that are anti-racist and inclusive have been seen to help skilled immigrants to be integrated into the job market after arrival in the host country. Government policies and initiatives to aid in the professional integration of immigrants have a significant impact on the career paths of international medical graduates (IMGs) [104]. For instance, despite the fact that the licensing procedure is governed by provincial law, a number of institutional bodies from the para-governmental and private or community sectors have joined forces in Quebec to assist IMGs in clarifying the steps and eligibility requirements for obtaining a practice permit [16]. This initiative is an important example of an inclusive practice where all people, irrespective of their positions, take responsibility for helping the newcomer to be integrated into the host society. Evidence shows that immigrant men working in non-ethnic enclave settings are likely to earn more than those working in settings where most of the coworkers are from the same ethnic background [105]. Research also recognizes that better financial performance and business outcomes can be attained by a diverse and inclusive workforce [106]. There is also evidence that implementing inclusive workplace policies within businesses, community service groups, and immigrant workers enhances access to better social determinants of health for immigrants as well as their integration into the community [107]. Therefore, anti-racist policies should be implemented to enhance the social integration of newcomers and/or skilled immigrants in Canada as well as to improve their mental well-being.

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