

# Prince George Local Immigration Partnership Project

Immigrant and Multicultural Services Society

## 2014 - 2015



In late 2014 and early 2015, IMSS conducted a series of consultations with Employers, Newcomers, and other community stakeholders to gather input into a strategic plan to coordinate services that facilitate immigrant settlement and integration in Prince George. Five key themes emerged from the Focus Groups: Qualifications and Credentials; Networking Support for Employers; Social Support Networks for Newcomers; Information and Paperwork Supports for Employers; and Interpersonal Communication Skills and Cultural Competency. This report contains the information and feedback from those consultations.

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Thank you to everyone who participated in the Focus Groups and Surveys.  
And a very special thank you to the members of our Partnership Council!



Citizenship and Immigration Canada      Citoyenneté et Immigration Canada

This project was made possible with support from Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

## Introduction

In 2014 the Immigrant and Multicultural Services Society (IMSS) received funding from Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) for a Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs) project.

Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs) are community-based partnerships that aim to:

- Foster local engagement of service providers and other institutions in newcomers' integration process;
- Support community-based knowledge-sharing and local strategic planning; and,
- Improve coordination of services that facilitate immigrant settlement and integration.

An inclusive partnership council was formed which represented a broad spectrum of the community, including representatives from industry, the college and university, other community service providers, the Chamber of Commerce and the City of Prince George. (For a full listing of the Partnership Council, see Appendix A.) The next step was to conduct research on the needs of newcomers and of the community in welcoming newcomers. A series of surveys was developed, with three target audiences: newcomers, employers, and community service providers. In addition to the surveys, eight focus groups were held between October 2013 and March 2014. An independent contractor, Zelda Craig with JAZ Training & Facilitation, was hired to facilitate these sessions, assist with the development of the surveys and creation of a final report. In these focus groups, we engaged in conversations designed to tap into the experience of newcomers, including settling in to the community, finding their first job, and their experiences in their places of employment. An unanticipated benefit of the Employer and Service Provider focus groups is that when people shared their experiences and knowledge, awareness of the issues were also raised as well as increasing awareness of the services and resources available to newcomers and employers in Prince George.

The final stage of this project will be to convene the Partnership Council, review the findings from the surveys and focus groups to develop a local settlement strategy identifying key priorities for the community.

### Why Prince George?

The college and university play a pivotal role in bringing Newcomers to Prince George. Many Newcomers state they came here to attend school; others state they were working at UNBC, and others had family members who were studying here. Those that didn't have a direct connection to the university or college indicated they thought that it was desirable to have post-secondary institutions in the community.

Many Newcomers indicated they came to Prince George because they married someone from here. Other frequently cited reasons for coming to Prince George were the affordable cost of housing, the surrounding forests, mountains and lakes, and a relaxed lifestyle.

## Benefits of Hiring Newcomers

Employers, Newcomers, and stakeholders agree that there are specific benefits to hiring Newcomers, and other employers could benefit from learning about this. Any job matching or employment service should market the following benefits to other employers:

- Retention and loyalty higher with newcomers
- Sometimes they bring additional skills that will benefit employers
- Will support future newcomers (reducing investment of time required by employer)
- “Overqualified” employees bring a lot of benefit to employers and still demonstrate loyalty
- Employers gain a global perspective
- Opportunity to find a student employee and know them for 1-2 years before hiring permanently.
- Promotes expansion of customer base, as services can be provided in a number of languages
- Different ways of looking at things
- Gaining international business expertise

Five key themes emerged from the Focus Groups. Programs and services should be designed to address these five themes:

1. Qualifications and Credentials
2. Networking Support for Employers
3. Social Support Networks for Newcomers
4. Information and Paperwork Supports for Employers
5. Interpersonal Communication Skills and Cultural Competency

## Five Themes for Consideration When Planning Programs and Services

### 1. Qualifications and Credentials

Employers are having difficulty recruiting for skilled occupations; it is difficult to hire Newcomers for these positions due to the difficulty in ensuring that Newcomers have Canadian credentials, or their credentials are recognized by local trades and professional associations. In the trades, some employers have gotten around the credential piece by hiring individuals at a lower classification, but with a shortage of journeymen there is the problem about supervision and oversight. On the Employer Survey, 60% of employers indicated that recruiting workers who have a specific certification, credential or professional designation was one of their greatest recruitment challenges.

The current system of evaluating credentials on a case by case basis is inefficient, time consuming and expensive. Several employers indicated that they hire a third party to check references and qualifications. There are three credentialing services that employers work with to evaluate educational background, as well as trades and professional associations. Many or most skilled workers must have their credentials recognized by a governing body or professional association. It can take quite a bit of time to determine whether their training and experience will be recognized.

53% of respondents to the Employer Survey indicated that Experience is the most important quality that they look for in a potential candidate, and 64% indicated they had concerns about checking references from employers in other countries. In the Focus Groups, Employers also discussed the challenges with conducting international reference checks. Some employers contracted this to a third party; other employers dispensed with reference checks altogether, preferring to hire someone on a probationary basis after a more extensive interview.

Some employers have concerns about hiring someone who may be “overqualified” for a job, and that these employees may become bored, frustrated, or a “know it all” at work. Newcomers want employers to understand that because of issues with credentials, they will often apply for jobs for which they are overqualified, but they are genuinely happy to be working in these positions and don’t necessarily view them as short-term stepping stones.

## 2. Networking Support for Employers

Employers indicated a desire to attend networking events with other employers who hire newcomers, in order to share information, knowledge and experiences with each other. They found that attending the Focus Groups provided a valuable opportunity to network and learn about different services available in the community.

## 3. Social Support Network for Newcomers

Employers indicate they are having difficulty with high rates of turn-over and retention issues in the retail and hospitality sectors. Shift work is an issue in both hospitality and trades, due to lack of availability of transportation and child care. Newcomers often don’t have family supports in place to provide a network of support, making these challenges even more difficult to overcome. Some Newcomers view part-time work as very stressful, when they are already under stress trying to establish a home and life in a new country. They also note that accepting temporary or seasonal work is scary, as they don’t have anyone to rely on for help once the job ends.

Employers recruit through the internet, recruitment agencies, career fairs, and Service Canada, but many also indicate that they hire through employee referrals, word of mouth and networking. This was supported by the Employer Survey, where 21% of Employers indicated “other” for their recruitment method, and specified “word of mouth”. These employers indicate they get a better quality of applicant through these methods, and it can be more successful for hiring. These latter forms of recruitment create the “hidden job market” that newcomers without networks and connections find difficult to tap into. In contrast, 37% of the Newcomers who responded to the survey indicated that they were not attached to any local organizations – including sport, cultural, volunteer or religious organizations.

Stakeholders and Newcomers thought that having programs or services that would facilitate connections in the community – like mentorships, buddies or host families – would help newcomers get settled faster and establish a support network that would help them connect with employers and overcome some of the daily challenges around integrating, raising children, and starting a new job. 71% of Employers who completed the Employer Survey indicated that they believed that having a local mentor or buddy would help integrate Newcomers into the new work environment.

Newcomers and Employers indicated a desire to have more cultural events and gatherings, so that Newcomers can get connected with other people from the same region in order to reduce feelings of social isolation. Also, there are many different organizations providing services to Newcomers, and most employers, stakeholders and Newcomers were not aware of the wide variety of programs and services. All three groups suggested that the services be mapped and develop a network with a central referring agency, like IMSS. Representatives in the network should come together periodically to share information about their programs and promote cross-referrals.

#### **4. Information and Paperwork Supports for Employers**

Employers also indicated a need for more support around immigration, work and changing government policies and programs. One of the major challenges with hiring newcomers is the paperwork. Tracking expiry dates for work permits, completing applications for Temporary Foreign Workers, are issues. Employers seem to view the TFW program as a stepping stone towards becoming a Permanent Resident. Some employers have found things like eligibility for coverage under MSP and employer benefits confusing, as well. In addition to local supports, Employers would be interested in being able to subscribe to “Immigration Updates” from the CIC, covering changes to employment and programs.

Employers discussed the value of ongoing workshops / presentations, being able to subscribe to program updates, and having a centralized service to track and monitor things like work permits.

#### **5. Interpersonal Communication Skills and Cultural Competency**

On the Employer Survey, 53% of Employers indicated that Communication Skills and Interpersonal Skills were two of the most important skills they look for in new employees. 40% of respondents indicated that self-confidence was one of the most important skills. And 46% of Employers indicated that “Lack of English language skills” was the greatest barrier to hiring Newcomers. In the focus groups, one of the major areas of concern with hiring Newcomers was Interpersonal Communication skills. This includes Basic English, but also understanding of slang, jargon, Canadian cultural references and pop culture in order to understand Canadian humour and improve customer service. Newcomers also identify this as an issue, and discussed how isolating it feels to have everyone laughing at a joke that they don’t understand. One Newcomer recalled being asked for shirt with a “Dallas Star” on it, but he was unable to assist because he didn’t know that this was a logo representing a sports team. Our relationship with time, ethics, gender roles and other unwritten rules should also be included in a workshop designed to accelerate understanding of Canadian culture. 57% of Employers who responded to the survey indicated that they expected to encounter challenges around different professional standards or practices when hiring a Newcomer, and 42% indicated concerns with Newcomers being familiar with Canadian workplace culture. Employers, stakeholders and newcomers all identified that it would be beneficial to have advanced language classes.

Canadians may not understand our own culture, taking our ways of doing and saying things for granted. Employers and Newcomers thought it would be interesting to have Canadian culture classes available not just for newcomers, but also for their Canadian counterparts as a way of recognizing where there may be differences in culture. This could include discussions on thinking styles and problem solving and decision making model, expectations around working styles, etc. All groups discussed the importance of preparing workplaces for a more diverse workforce. Employers also discussed the benefit of attending a networking event to discuss their challenges and share their experiences with employing Newcomers with each other.

Employers prefer to hire knowledgeable, experienced workers who dress and conduct themselves professionally, and can communicate and get along well with others. They perceive that highly introverted or shy individuals will be unable to bridge the cultural divide and integrate into the workplace. On the Employer Survey, 75% of Employers indicated that “Finding applicants who are work-ready (professional appearance and behaviour, literacy, and time management skills) was their greatest challenge.

When employers do hire newcomers, they recommend screening for personality, as this is a major determining factor on the success of the hire. They look for someone who is nice and will get along with others, who is willing to learn and ask questions, able to speak English, and has a good work ethic. For their part, employers indicate that it’s important to create a welcoming environment, prepare the team with workshops etc. about different cultures / backgrounds, help the new hire get settled in the community and develop social connections at work and in community.

## Appendix Two: Monthly Summaries from Focus Groups

### Monthly Report – January 2015.

In January, we held two focus groups: one for employers, and one for stakeholders and service providers.

#### **Stakeholders' Focus Group, January 13, 2015**

14 individuals attended this event, representing 11 organizations. Representatives attended from a wide variety of organizations, including other not-for-profits, representatives from the banking industry, the RCMP, and the religious community.

Participants indicated that they would like newcomers to feel welcomed to Prince George right from the first contact at the airport. They discussed having mentors or homestay families working with newcomers to help them get settled and cross the cultural divide; this would also provide newcomers with the opportunity to network and improve their language skills.

Barriers to getting settled in Prince George include getting their educational credentials acknowledged, difficulties with transportation (Prince George has a limited transit system, and it can be difficult for some newcomers to get a driving license), access to the medical system, and lack of connection to a social support network. They also discussed the importance of everyone in the family unit getting attached and connected in the community; sometimes stay-at-home family members do not develop their English language skills, which can increase their sense of isolation. One of the greatest barriers is a lack of information about the services available, particularly for individuals unaware of the services offered by the Immigrant and Multicultural Services Society (IMSS).

Participants indicated that their top two priorities would be for professional associations and credentialing agencies to develop “Block transfer” agreements, rather than assessing qualifications on a one-off basis. They would also like to see some sort of bridging programs become available, that could bridge the knowledge gap between the requirements of their home country and Canada, rather than requiring individuals to completely re-take their entire program of study.

Other high priorities included developing a local phone app to help newcomers get connected in Prince George, and a volunteer program to be a “buddy” or mentor to newcomers.

#### **Employers' Focus Group, January 14, 2015**

12 individuals attended this event, representing 10 organizations. Representatives attended from a wide variety of organizations, including HR from City of Prince George, retail, pharmacy, car rental, etc. Employers indicated that their greatest recruitment challenges include a tight labour market that results in high levels of turnover in retail and hospitality, difficulty finding people willing to work part-time or seasonally, finding skilled tradespersons, and finding employees in retail who are knowledgeable about the products. For example, with the boom in construction, it is difficult to recruit employees for a hardware store who have knowledge about the products and who can provide a high level of service and advice to do-it-yourself home owners. When asked what they are looking for, they indicated that they want to find reliable people who are mature, respectful, dress appropriately and communicate well. When asked what made the hire of a newcomer successful, they agreed that success seemed to depend

on the personality of the employee. Having a positive attitude, being liked by their colleagues, demonstrating a strong work ethic, being willing to learn and ask questions were seen as key indicators of success. They found that sometimes being too quiet or shy could be an issue in employment. They also thought that hiring newcomers could bring other strengths – loyalty, less turnover, ability to serve a diversity of customers in multiple languages, a different perspective in problem solving and creative thinking, and a positive attitude.

When hiring, most of them indicated that they post vacancies in a variety of places, and engage in outreach activities (job fairs, going to the local college and university). Some of them indicated that they use word of mouth, networking, and referrals from current employees. This is notable in that this is a common recruitment strategy in Prince George, and can make it difficult for newcomers to “break in” to a place of employment unless they already know someone who works there.

Employers indicated some of the issues in the worksite had to do with stereotypes, not understanding cultural differences, challenges with visas and length of work permits, and advanced language skills (jargon, slang, Canadian humour).

Employers indicated that they are helping their employees with their paperwork, and would find it helpful to have an immigration office in Prince George or an agency that will assist newcomers with their paperwork. They also discussed the benefit they got from simply attending this focus group, in that they were able to share their struggles and their successes, and thought that networking events for employers to specifically discuss their experiences with newcomers would be helpful. But they thought the highest priority would be to have local outreach worker connect with employers and assist with placements, referrals and ongoing supports, as well as a service or events where their newcomer employees could go to meet people with a similar cultural background, in order to reduce their social isolation.

## Monthly Report – February 2015.

In February, we held two focus groups: one for employers, and one for stakeholders.

### **Stakeholders’ Focus Group, February 3, 2015**

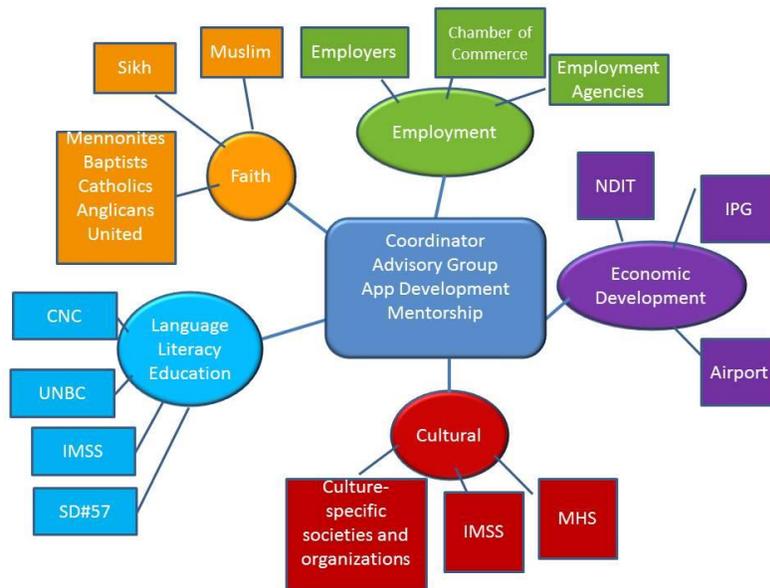
12 individuals attended this event, representing 11 organizations. Representatives attended from a wide variety of organizations, including a local church that sponsors refugees, the public library, an agency that provides supports for entrepreneurs, the Chamber of Commerce, and financial services agencies.

Stakeholders identified that the community integration process begins before newcomers reach Prince George. Some of the activities include getting started with getting their credentials evaluated, connecting with a person or family who can greet them and show them around the city, and pre-departure orientations so that they know what to expect when they arrive.

Once the newcomers arrive in Prince George, stakeholders thought there were a number of things that could help newcomers and their families get settled. They suggested that a welcome kit with free passes to local attractions, parks, activities and museums would encourage newcomers to try on the “Prince George lifestyle”, and programs for adults like “learn to fish” or “learn to camp” might be interesting. An orientation session where they learn local cultural norms and cultural differences, mentorship programs,

social opportunities to interact with locals to grow their personal networks while perhaps also practicing social conversational skills, a referral network and safe places to socialize with their family would be helpful. For employers, the stakeholders thought that finding a way to tap into the hidden job market and making it more visible would really help newcomers get a “foot in the door”, education on transferrable skills, getting employers to re-think mandatory criteria as well as the concept of being “overqualified”, and a bridging program would be helpful.

The highest priority identified by the Stakeholder group is to hire a coordinator to build a community network, tapping into existing networks. Use the network and social media to promote public awareness, welcome tours, refer newcomers for services, etc. A centralized connector with key contacts within the network, and an overall working group. This group could also aid in growing mentors, leveraging their contacts in community.



### Employers’ Focus Group, February 3, 2015

10 individuals attended this event, representing 6 organizations. Representatives attended from a wide variety of organizations, including bank, food and services, RCMP, retail.

Employers indicated that their greatest recruitment challenges include factors that limit availability for shift work, including finding people available for shift work, workers with access to transportation, availability of child care spaces for their employees. They noted the challenges of recruiting skilled tradespersons, but also the high turnover in the service industry. There was also an extensive discussion on the challenges of hiring newcomers, and the additional administrative burden on employers in tracking work permits, keeping up with changing government policies, difficulty with SIN numbers, wait times with the Provincial Nominee Program.

When hiring, most of them indicated that they would either hire a 3<sup>rd</sup> party to check foreign credentials, or just hire them on a temporary / probationary basis to see if they would work out. Access to Canadian skills and qualifications are a challenge – in addition to trades certificates, professional qualifications, even banks require employees to be licensed through a 3 month course as a financial advisor. Hospitality industry requires Foodsafe certification and other locations require WHMIS and First Aid,

although they acknowledged that in most cases, employers will provide this training so it doesn't necessarily factor into hiring decisions.

Employers indicated some of the issues in the worksite when they have hired newcomers relate to communication skills – understanding slang, ways of phrasing things and expressions, in addition to humour, reading body language, and cultural differences in comfort level around asking questions. Employers perceive that it takes time for newcomers to adjust, and have concerns about the length of time. In some cases, newcomers will speak their own language in the workplace instead of practicing their English language skills. This creates negative perceptions with the other workers.

Employers indicated employers need to be prepared for it to take longer to train the newcomer, and accept the additional expense. They need to be able to help their other employees empathize with the newcomer, and be prepared to discuss different cultural expectations around working styles. They think it would be helpful to have orientations and safety training available in different languages, in worksites where fluency isn't required for the job but is critical for creating a safe workplace. They also talked about the social isolation of newcomers and the need to assign them an in-house mentor or buddy.

Employers recognize several benefits of hiring newcomers, including greater loyalty and retention, knowledge and credentials that may be higher than their Canadian employees, and a more global perspective. They mentioned the benefits of hiring someone who is studying in Canada, as this gives employers 1 – 2 years to get to know someone before making a decision to hire permanently.

When asked what their highest priorities were to support employers, they indicated that they'd like a place on CIC's website where they could subscribe to updates regarding legislation and programs. They'd also like to see information sessions for employers, and connections to cultural groups. They also mentioned a desire for ongoing information sessions about CIC programs and paperwork, assistance managing expiring work permits, networking opportunities for employers to share ideas and best practices, workshops for newcomers on workplace behaviours and expectations, and advanced English classes available on weekends or evenings for their employees.

## Monthly Report – March 2015

In March, we held one focus group for Newcomers. Four newcomers attended, along with two spouses.

### **Newcomers' Focus Group, March 10, 2015**

#### **Thoughts about Prince George**

We asked why the Newcomers chose Prince George when they came to Canada. One of them was recruited by a local employer, another married someone from Prince George, and two others indicated that a family member had come to Prince George to attend the university, and recommended it. Even though that family member has since moved on, the others chose to remain here.

When asked why Prince George is a good place to live, they indicated that because the majority of the population speaks English, it's a great place to come to practice and learn English. They also discussed the affordable housing, friendly, polite and helpful people who live here, the relaxed lifestyle, the proximity to nature, and that Prince George is a clean, well-organized city with lots of outdoor activities.

The drawbacks to living here include air quality, limited shopping opportunities, lack of transportation, social issues, and the length of the winter season.

### **Challenges Finding Work**

When asked about the challenges to finding their first job, they indicated there is no problem finding low-skilled, low wage jobs but finding other work is problematic. Many jobs are not posted, so unless you have a network of relationships in Prince George it can be difficult to find a good position. The graduated licensing program makes it difficult to get a driver's license, and the fact that most good jobs seem to require tickets and certificates. They discussed not having their education and credentials recognized in Canada, including one participant who had an Engineering degree in China, completed her PhD research in Canada, but still doesn't have her qualifications recognized. Another individual indicated she was repeating her entire degree – which is expensive, time consuming, and tedious.

### **Existing Supports**

All of the individuals were familiar with the services offered by IMSS, and had accessed some of their services including English classes, daycare, job information, and assistance with immigration paperwork. They also discussed going to the MP's office for assistance with immigration, receiving supports from religious organizations, accessing the Service Canada office, Work BC office, and Service BC office for assistance with their BCID and MSP. They felt that the services offered by Work BC were very basic and not overly helpful in overcoming their unique challenges. One person noted that even the Resume writing services were geared towards an entry-level service position and not appropriate for a professional position.

### **Programs and Services Needed**

Participants indicated that they would like to attend workshops that would help them learn about and adapt to the Canadian working environment, including workplace ethics, information on Canadian culture (humour, social norms, values, expectations, unwritten rules, slang, sports), information on Canadian labour laws, immigration processes and regulations, resume writing, and interviewing skills workshops.