



ESDC Consultation on Strengthening the Canadian Workforce

Written Submission from World Education Services

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About WES

World Education Services (WES) is a non-profit social enterprise dedicated to helping international students, immigrants, and refugees achieve their educational and career goals in Canada and the United States. For more than 45 years, WES has set the standard of excellence in the field of international academic credential evaluation. Through WES Canada Programs team, the organization joins with institutional partners, community-based organizations, and policy makers to help immigrants and refugees who hold international credentials fully utilize their talents and education to achieve their academic and professional goals. Its philanthropic arm, the WES Mariam Assefa Fund, supports catalytic leaders and organizations working to build inclusive economies and to ensure that immigrants and refugees can achieve their aspirations and thrive. Since 2013, WES has been a designated provider of Educational Credential Assessments (ECAs) for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC).



WES is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the ESDC consultation of Fall 2024 on strengthening the Canadian workforce. Our submission provides recommendations with a focus on how ESDC can work to more effectively integrate newcomers into the labour market.

Our recommendations align with the Government of Canada's identified priorities which are as follows:

Priority One: Ensuring better alignment between workforce strategies, training institutions, labor groups, employers, and economic priorities.

Priority Two: Eliminating inefficiencies and barriers within Canadian labour markets.

Priority Three: Maximizing our productivity through strategic skills development and lifelong learning.

World Education Services is providing recommendations that are aligned with ESDC's goals for strengthening the Canadian workforce and ensuring that the experience and skills of highly skilled newcomers is fully realized.

Summary of Recommendations:

1. Establish a division within Privy Council to coordinate immigration and labour market objectives across key federal ministries like ESDC, IRCC, Health Canada, ISED, Global Affairs.
2. Leverage national and provincial data to identify sectors, occupations, and regions where it would be most impactful to focus interventions to support commensurate employment for newcomers.
3. Focus on eliminating structural barriers to credential and skills recognition.
4. Harmonize licensing standards to increase labour mobility.

A Coordinated Approach

WES believes that it is a priority to institute greater coordination across federal departments, across levels of government, and with non-governmental partners on objectives related to immigration (including permanent and temporary immigration), settlement, and the Canadian labour market.



Problems relating to workforce development are complex, and they affect and are affected by government and non-governmental actors in numerous ways. For this reason, Canada needs sophisticated solutions designed through deep multi-stakeholder engagement. Currently, actors operate with diverging goals and interests, risking work at cross-purposes or even work in opposition to one another. Malalignment ultimately undermines Canada's ability to achieve its immigration and labour market goals.

For example, category-based selection draws based on professional experience in chosen occupations may be a success in terms of identifying and inviting immigrants with certain backgrounds. But when IRCC prioritizes occupations that still have substantial credential recognition and licensure barriers in key areas like healthcare and trades, category-based selection may in fact lead to poor settlement and employment outcomes for those immigrants selected through the program while also failing to reduce the structural labour market shortages that category-based selection is presumably designed to meet. Instead, category-based selection may merely increase the number of newcomers unable to work in the fields they are selected for. It is important for ESDC and IRCC to work together, along with professional regulatory bodies, to identify clear labour market goals for economic immigration programs, particularly occupation-specific draws, and to design a program that can achieve those goals. Tracking must be put in place to ensure that category-based selection is in fact leading to successful labour market integration in the targeted occupations.

ESDC has participated in successful multi-party initiatives and can look to these for inspiration. The table convened by Health Canada to create a blueprint for advancing integration of Internationally Education Health Professionals brought together leaders from provincial and national regulatory bodies, professional associations, and other key players to develop collaborative solutions. These solutions were then funded by government. This mode of working across stakeholders and jurisdictions should be applied to other occupations, and ESDC can play a lead role in convening these kinds of tables. Coordinated efforts across government and stakeholders are essential to aligning immigration with labor market needs and creating a system that effectively supports both newcomers and Canada's workforce.

WES recommends that the Privy Council establish a division to coordinate immigration and labour market objectives across key federal ministries like ESDC, IRCC, Health Canada, ISED, Global Affairs, as well as provincial/territorial governments and non-governmental actors.



Data-Driven Strategy to Commensurate Employment

WES' mission is to help ensure that newcomers – across all three permanent immigration streams, as well as temporary residents – can be employed in roles commensurate with their education and experience. Recognizing and utilizing their skills effectively is key to driving [productivity and innovation](#). But highly-skilled newcomers are often [underutilized](#), and immigrants in low-wage sectors may be [overqualified](#). There is much work to be done to facilitate commensurate employment of newcomers. WES recommends a data-driven approach to determine which sectors, occupations, or regions should be the focus of ESDC's efforts.

ESDC can partner with IRCC, Statistics Canada, and provincial/territorial governments to identify which professional backgrounds or regions of settlement are most highly associated with underemployment or work outside their field of expertise. With this information, ESDC can target interventions, such as funding systemic initiatives or multi-party convening, where they can have the highest impact.

WES recommends that ESDC leverage national and provincial data to identify sectors, occupations, and regions where it would be most impactful to focus its work to eliminate structural barriers to commensurate employment.

Elimination of Structural Barriers to Credential and Skills Recognition

Newcomers need clear, affordable pathways to identify and fill skill gaps to work towards licensure. Structural barriers to credential recognition, licensing, and the transfer of skills prevent qualified newcomers from working in their fields of expertise. These barriers harm newcomers, and they undermine the potential of immigration to address structural labour shortages. Newcomers selected through category-based selection are as likely to face these barriers as those who come through other streams.

Structural barriers require structural solutions. For individuals, it is [challenging to upskill or retrain](#), whether to achieve licensure or to switch careers. ESDC can fund work towards [competency-based assessments](#) and [laddered licensure pathways](#) that allow professionals to contribute at appropriate levels while working toward full certification, reducing delays and unnecessary retraining.



Currently, a significant portion of ESDC's spending on foreign credential recognition funds initiatives that support individuals to navigate existing systems. For example, much of the funds announced in [Budget 2024](#) for foreign health care credential recognition go to assisting individuals, including navigational supports for existing credential recognition systems. Such assistance is invaluable for those who receive it, given that barriers to credential recognition persist. However, over and above these supports for the individual, systems level changes that lead to clear, efficient pathways to licensure are needed to ensure every individual trained abroad can work in their field of expertise. Once these pathways exist, ESDC can rebalance its focus, funding bridging programs for individuals who are close to licensure but need to increase competencies in specific areas.

The previously-mentioned example of category-based selection draws is instructive. Many of the occupations identified as priorities for category-based selection are licensed occupations, including in the healthcare sector, where [significant barriers](#) to licensing remain in place. Given these barriers, candidates in licensed occupations who are selected under category-based selection will not be able fill labour market shortages. If ESDC and IRCC collaborated with professional regulators to reduce barriers to licensing, then category-based selection would have a greater chance of leading to immigrant success and economic success.

The [competency model](#) developed by the Engineers and Geoscientists of British Columbia (EGBC) to assess internationally educated engineers serves as a good example. EGBC has been able to uphold its standards to entry of practice while also providing a fair, transparent, and accessible process that supports internationally trained applicants. They reviewed legislation and bylaws, as well as the competencies required for safe practice. EGBC now provides alternative processes to demonstrate mandatory competencies, as well as bridging programs to help people achieve the Canadian standard.

While the specific barriers vary from occupation to occupation, the process of bringing together the relevant partners to examine licensure processes from the perspective of newcomer inclusion is instructive.

WES recommends that ESDC focus its resources on initiatives that eliminate structural barriers to credential and skills recognition. ESDC should leverage not only the FCR funding resources but also its convening power to bring stakeholders together.



Harmonization of Licensing Procedures

Labour mobility is hindered by inconsistent licensing standards across provinces and territories. Harmonizing licensing requirements will enable workers, including immigrants, to move freely to regions with the highest demand.

Canada has ratified the [Lisbon Recognition Convention \(LRC\)](#) to facilitate the recognition of qualifications, including those earned in other countries. The LRC supports international mobility, but Canada can do more to facilitate mobility across provinces and territories for people in regulated professions. WES calls for harmonization and mutual recognition of licenses will enable workers, whether newcomers or established Canadians, to move to areas with greatest demand. ESDC can convene multi-party working groups and use funding to incentivize work in this area.

Provinces have advanced harmonization in recent years, and these efforts should continue. In the trades, the [Red Seal program](#) was effective at addressing mobility barriers. The recent memorandum of understanding between [Ontario and Alberta](#), as well as between [Ontario and Nova Scotia](#) – which facilitate collaboration among provinces on the creation of processes for licensure of internationally trained in specific occupations - are promising. While the processes and issues are different in other regulated professions, efforts at harmonization and mutual recognition can be adapted and expanded across occupations and jurisdictions.

WES recommends that ESDC provide support and incentives to multi-partner initiatives that harmonize licensing standards across provincial/territorial boundaries.

WES Initiatives and Leading Practices

WES can support ESDC by sharing insights from our ongoing efforts to streamline economic inclusion of immigrants. Additionally, our best practices from employer-focused initiatives offer strategies that could inform ESDC's work.

The [Refugee Hiring Event](#), an initiative of the [Refugee Jobs Agenda Roundtable](#), is an innovative approach to workforce development in the context of humanitarian immigration. The Refugee Hiring Events connect work-ready refugees to employers who are open to hiring them. Job candidates are pre-screened and supported to understand how to convey their qualifications in a job application and interview. In 2023, over 80% of the candidates at two



Refugee Hiring Events were either hired or moved to the next stage in the hiring process. ESDC can work together with the Refugee Jobs Agenda Roundtable on how to expand this initiative.

WES works with employers, including small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to help them better leverage immigrant talent. Newcomers may not know how to communicate their qualifications to employers as employers expect. This is even more complicated for refugees, who may not have been able to plan their arrival or bring evidence of their educational and professional qualifications. The [Employer Playbook](#) provides advice on a wide range of issues, for example writing job descriptions, assessing language ability, and running mentorship programs for newcomer employees. WES also contributed to the [Workforce Leading Practice Guides](#) by the Toronto Region Board of Trade, which includes practical guidance on how to address barriers immigrants face in being hired in roles for which they are qualified.