

# Showcasing Immigrant Voices: Calling for a Paradigm Shift



by

**Hongfu Aaron Luo, PhD**

Researcher and Project Specialist

Winning Inclusive Solutions (WINS)

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Contact us: [winstoronto@hituhrsolutions.com](mailto:winstoronto@hituhrsolutions.com)

Connect with us: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/wins-diversity-is-strength>

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

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Immigration is a crucial part of Canada's economic policy and identity as a nation. Immigrants make substantial contribution to the economy and cultural diversity of Canada. However, there has been speculations about visible and invisible discrimination of immigrant newcomers in their employment opportunities, especially based on their race and gender.

Winning Inclusive Solutions (WINS) is a not-for-profit founded in 2018 by Dr. Hitu Sood.

### **Our Vision**

WINS is a not-for-profit that promotes inclusive policies and programs in Canada's workforce. We are committed to advocate and help take steps towards ensuring the creation of more equitable workplaces in which diverse members of our society can flourish.

### **Our Mission**

We bring a growth mindset to diversity issues. The key to equity is a paradigm shift that sees all members of Canadian society including the new members that is, immigrants being accepted and valued for their distinctive strengths. This shift can be brought about only by questioning the status quo. WINS is committed to being part of such advocacy.

We intend to achieve this through three main initiatives as follows.

Our 'Road to Success' initiative highlights diverse professionals' skills and strengths in a variety of ways. We provide a public platform for diverse professionals as speakers. We offer an embracing community of support in which diverse professionals can learn and network with like-minded others. In addition, we offer consulting to employers, government service providers and other not-for-profits which aim to empower diverse professionals towards success. Through all this, we are finding proactive ways to bring employers, diverse professionals, and policy makers together to forge a novel, growth-driven approach that benefits all.

The 'Diversity Forum' initiative is our newsletter under the editorship of Mark Lovewell, the Chair of WINS. It has been established to promote dialogue and discussion with the broader community to highlight a range of views on issues affecting under-represented groups in Canadian society.

Finally, our ‘Showcasing Diverse Voices’ initiative that uses community research which may involve interviews, questionnaires, surveys, case studies and focus groups to examine the unique challenges of the groups we are representing. As part of this initiative on February 22, 2021 WINS launched an online survey to understand the view points and unique challenges of skilled immigrants.

This survey is part of our on-going campaign to understand and create awareness of the employment issues faced by immigrants.

This report showcases the key findings and makes several policy recommendations based on the results.

## **2. BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE**

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Canada has historically been one of the largest immigrant countries in the world (United Nations, 2020). Economic immigration is one of the main sources of newcomers alongside family reunions and refugees.

Canada’s emphasis on immigration is mainly driven by the need for population growth and economic stimulus (Reitz, 2012). Major political parties in Canada all have demonstrated strong interest in use of immigration policy for economic growth (Conservative Party of Canada, 2019; New Democratic Party of Canada, 2021). Canada’s geographic isolation acts as a natural barrier to irregular migration, allowing the government to prioritize economic considerations in its immigration policy (Costigan, Lehr, & Miao, 2016). The Liberal government announced plans to welcome 401,000 new permanent residents in 2021, 411,000 in 2022, and 421,000 in 2023 (IRCC, 2020), growing yearly despite preliminary data suggesting a GDP contraction of 5.1% in 2020 (Statistics Canada, 2021a) due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Reports suggest immigration is a net benefit to Canada’s economy. In 2017 and 2018, immigration accounted for 80% of Canada’s population growth, compensating for the increasing aging population (Statistics Canada, 2019). Immigrants fill in the gaps in job vacancies and help to respond to fluctuations on the labor market (Canadian Federation of Independent Business, 2020). Immigrants create jobs. As of 2016, there are 600,000 self-employed immigrants employing over 260,000 Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2018). A survey (The Environics Institute for Survey Research, 2020) conducted

recently shows public opinion regarding immigration in Canada remains highly positive throughout the pandemic: 84% of respondents consider economic impact of immigration to be positive in September 2020, continuing a steady climb since October 2018. Study (Akbari & Haider, 2018) shows that immigrants of all educational levels have positive and statistically significant effects on economic growth of Canada.

As a historically immigrant country, protecting and promoting multiculturalism became an official policy through the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988. Studies have shown that multiculturalism contributes to creativity (Leung & Chiu, 2010), cognitive benefits (Valentine, Prentice, Torres, & Arellano, 2012), and positive relationships (Chang, Denson, Saenz, & Misa, 2006) in a society. Research (Costigan et al., 2016) indicates that immigrants are well-positioned to integrate into the Canadian society while still upholding meaningful beliefs and practices of their heritage, contributing to Canada's multiculturalism values.

Despite the economic and cultural benefits immigrants bring to Canada, there have been wide claims of discrimination of immigrants in their employment opportunities, especially based on their ethnic background and gender. Anecdotal stories of difficulty in job searches among immigrant communities are not uncommon. Studies found that immigrants typically earn less than Canadian-born workers with the same amount of education and work experience due to their previous professional experiences not being recognized or simple discrimination (Statistics Canada, 2008). Another report shows that among immigrants, both the top and bottom earners were first-generation immigrants, with white Anglophone/Francophone men at the top and women of color working in a non-native language at the bottom, mounting to about \$10,000 annual pay gap between them (Fitzsimmons, 2020). Data also suggests immigrant women in Canada face greater employment barriers and earn less money than both male immigrants and Canadian-born women (Wright, 2018). Census data in 2016 shows (Catalyst, 2020) that Canadian women of color earn 79.7% of what Canadian men of color earn, based on median total income for full-time workers, while Canadian women of color earn 56.7% of what all men earn, among which Korean and West Asian women had the highest pay gaps earning 41.5% and 42.7% respectively of what all men earn.

The government of Canada has an interest in promoting integration and equality of immigrants. For instance, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) conducts regular online surveys of its applicant clients, whose results are integrated in its annual report to the Parliament. However, despite these efforts, an understanding of these issues is still lacking. On the other hand, there are various organizations that are dedicated to assisting new immigrants with starting their new life in Canada, including job search, healthcare, housing, and so on. However, more needs to be done in particular to address discrimination and inequality issues in employment.

This survey report as part of our ‘Showcasing Diverse Voices’ initiative demonstrates the key findings and makes several policy recommendations based on the results.

### **3. METHODS**

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To investigate these issues discussed above, the survey focuses on finding out immigrants’ experiences with employment and their backgrounds including age, gender, ethnic origin, education and professional experiences. The questions are presented as multiple choices and open-ended text input to participants. The survey was written using SurveyMonkey’s online service, and disseminated through social media and personal contacts of the team members. Respondents were not allowed to skip most multiple-choice answers, while open-ended questions were optional. Analysis was done through SurveyMonkey’s online interface. Data from incomplete responses are included in the final result.

### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

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From Feb 22 to April 3, a total of 285 responses were collected at an average completion rate of 75%. Participants spent on average 5 minutes on the survey.

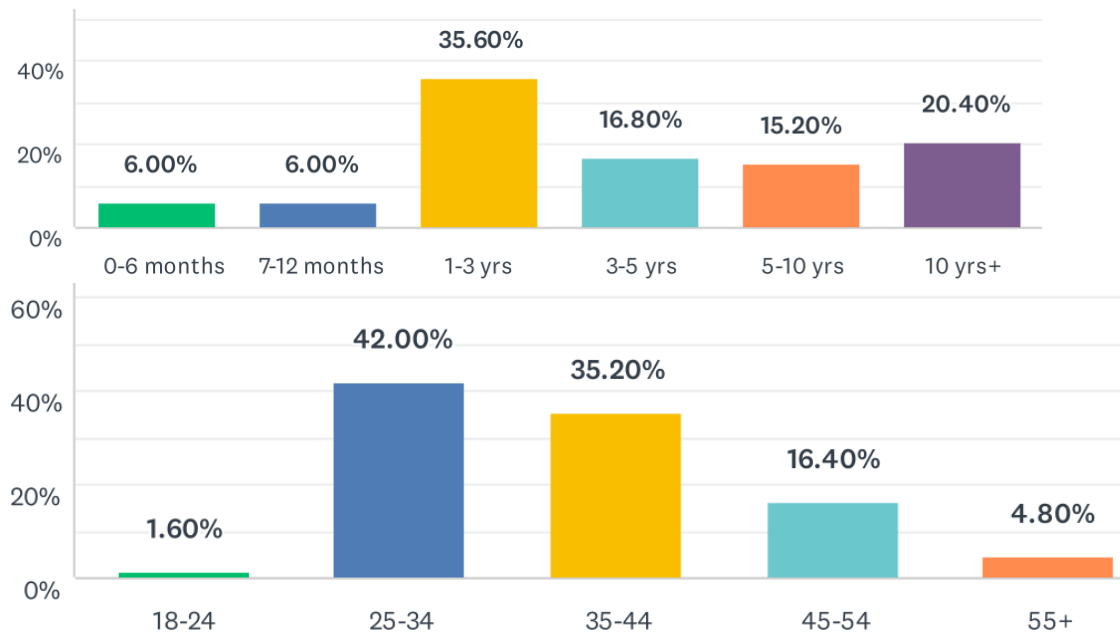


Figure 1 Years spent in Canada (top) and age (bottom)

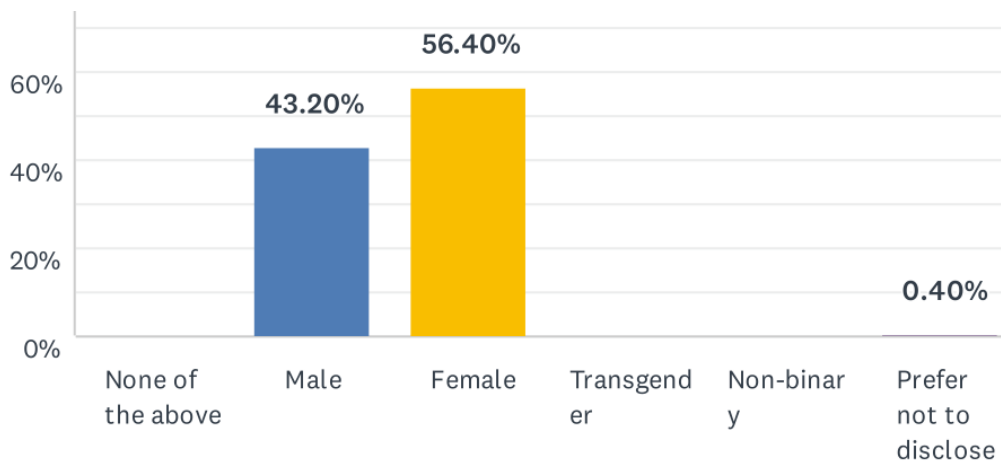


Figure 2 Gender identity

Overall, the majority of our respondents have spent more than 1 year in Canada, while over half have spent more than 3 years in this country (Figure 1). The majority are over the age of 35, most likely having completed advanced degrees with several years of working experience. This means participants have enough time and professional background to experience the issues we’re trying to investigate if they do exist. All respondents identify as cisgender (Figure 2), with female being slightly higher than male. Demographically (Figure 3), over 80% of respondents are of visible minority ethnic origin, with

the largest group being South Asian, followed by East and Southeast Asian and Latin American, suitable for investigating possible discrimination based on racial backgrounds. Better life, job opportunities, and work life balance are top reasons for immigrating to Canada (Figure 4). A majority of respondents are permanent residents (Figure 5), meaning they should face no legal difference compared with non-immigrant job seekers, with only possible exceptions in which the position requires citizenship. Over 26% respondents completed an undergraduate degree while over 61% have a masters or higher before moving to Canada (Figure 6). Around 28% applied to study in Canada and are currently in progress to obtain their degree, among which 50% enrolled in business and 20% are in a STEM field. On the other hand, 83% respondents are in a middle or above position in their previous career before moving to Canada. Thus, a majority of respondents are well equipped and qualified in both their educational and professional background to pursue a career in Canada.



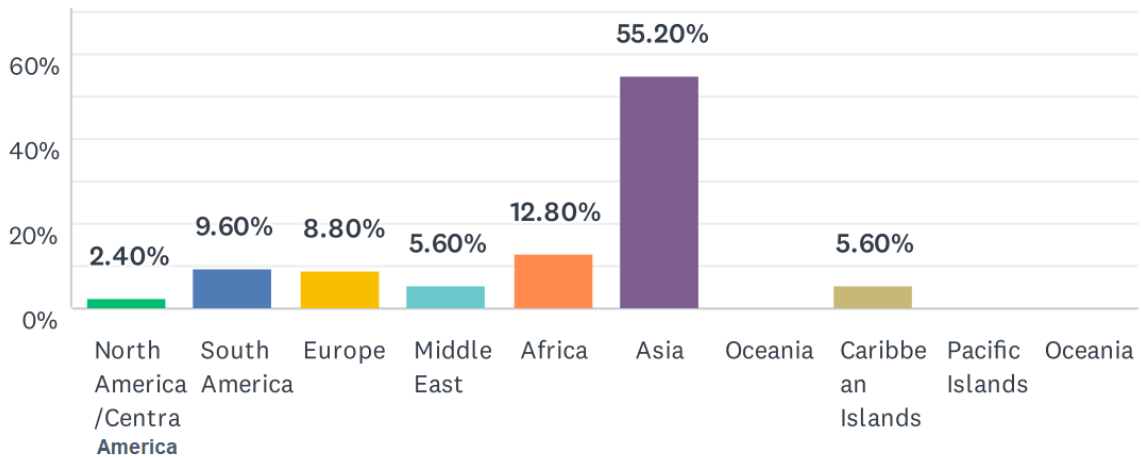
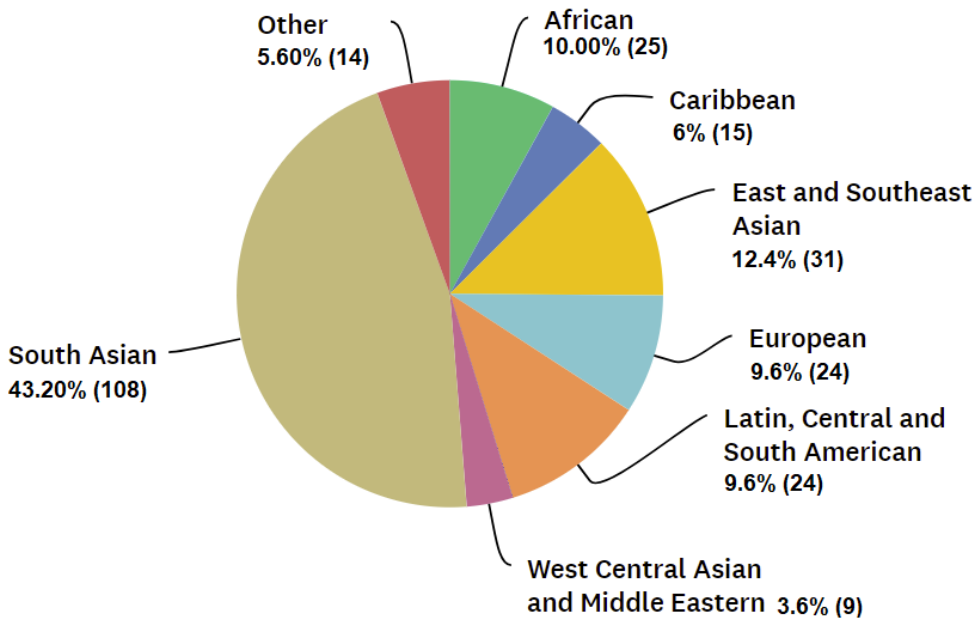


Figure 3 Ethnic origin (top) and region of birth (bottom)

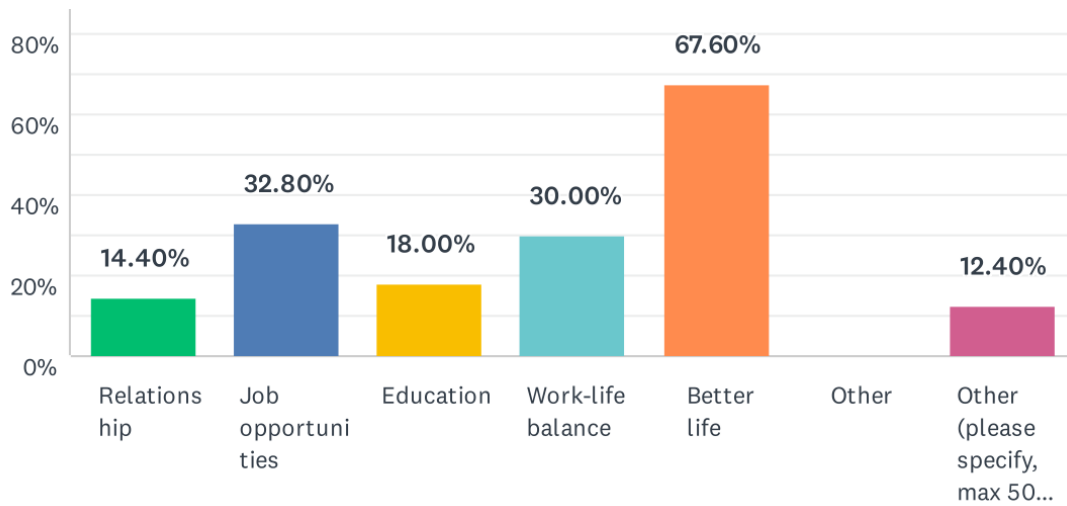


Figure 4 What prompted you to immigrate to Canada?

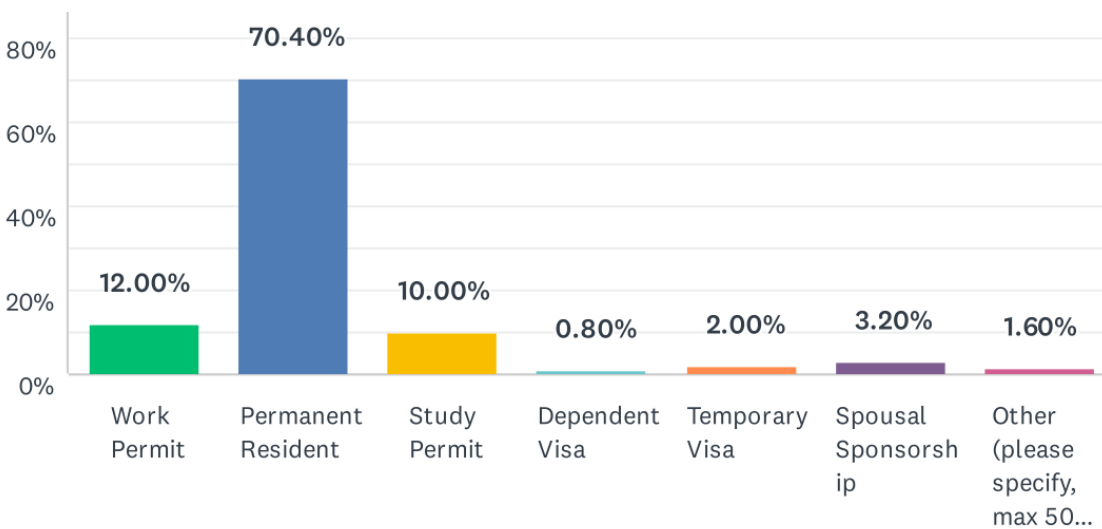


Figure 5 Legal status in Canada

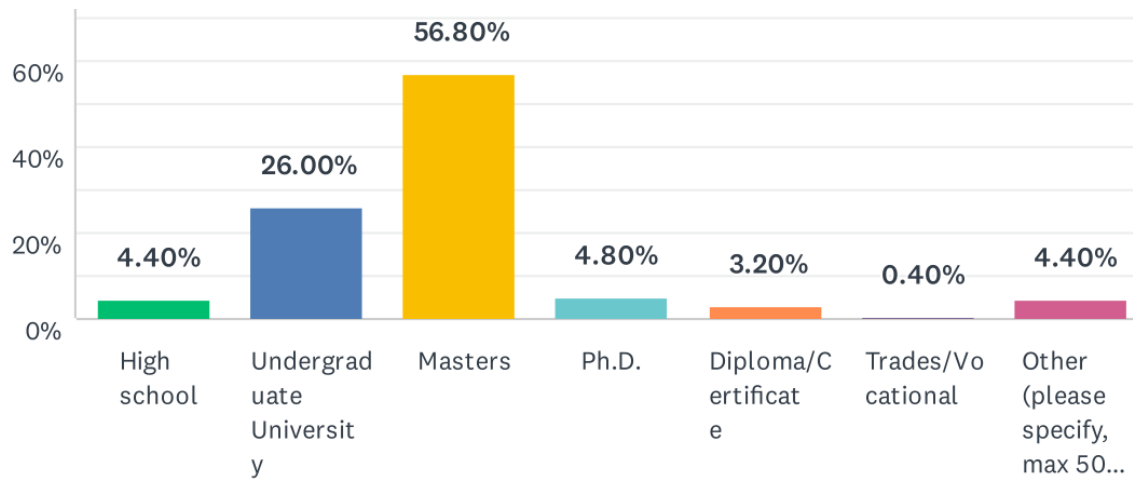


Figure 6 Education background pre-migration

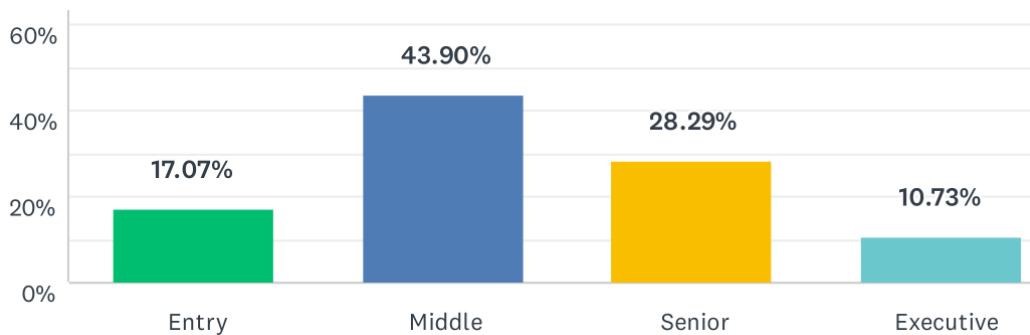


Figure 7 Level of position pre-migration

Overall, 78% of respondents are currently employed, with 60% being full time employment, while 16% are unemployed and looking (Figure 8). This is almost double the unemployment of the Canadian general population which is 9.4% in January 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2021b). The coronavirus pandemic has largely halted overseas immigrants from moving to Canada, and caused a drastic loss of jobs. It is safe to assume that the majority of immigrants currently in Canada have already migrated here before the pandemic. This analysis shows that immigrants have been disproportionately impacted by the current condition of the labor market, which is in line with the fact that visible minorities are more likely to work in industries worst affected by the pandemic (Statistics Canada, 2020).

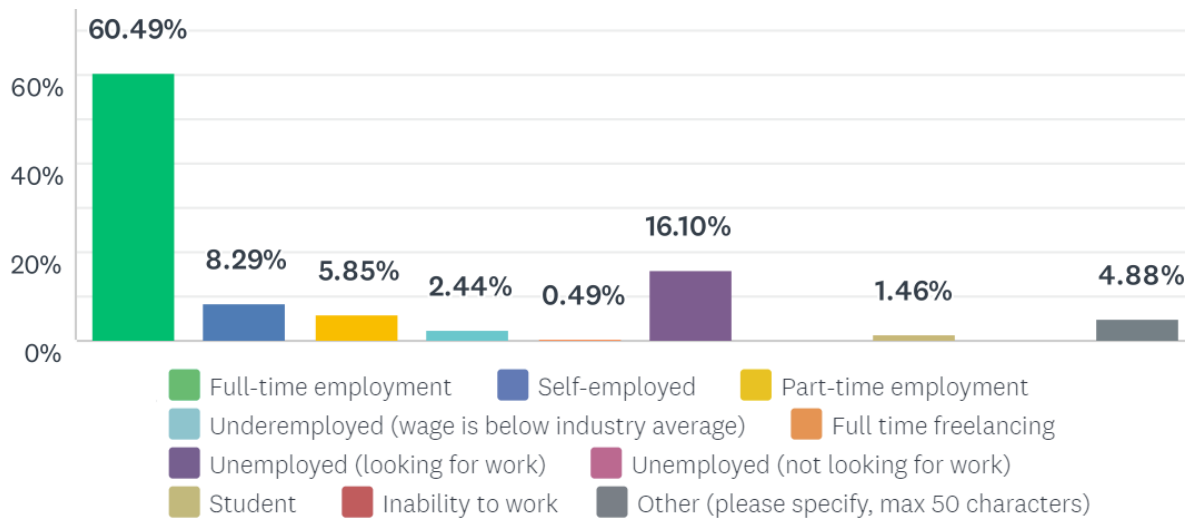


Figure 8 Current employment status

Our data shows that 71% of respondents' first position is entry level while 24% middle level, and 19% advanced above senior level later (Figure 9). Among those who are employed, 27% are not currently working in a field related to their previous professional experience. Over 54% found their first position within 6 months after moving to Canada, while only 43% found a position that uses their previous professional experience within the same time frame (Figure 10). This indicates that the majority of immigrants were either unemployed or working in an unrelated field, most likely a survival job within 6 months of migration. In fact, over a fifth couldn't find a job in a related field in 1.5 years and 13% couldn't find any job at all. This is a major concern that prompts intervention, especially when a global pandemic has exacerbated the situation and disproportionately impacted immigrants. Action also needs to be taken to address recognition of immigrants' previous professional experience so that these highly-skilled workers can make the best use of their talent to contribute to Canada's economy instead of being forced to get by from one survival job to another.

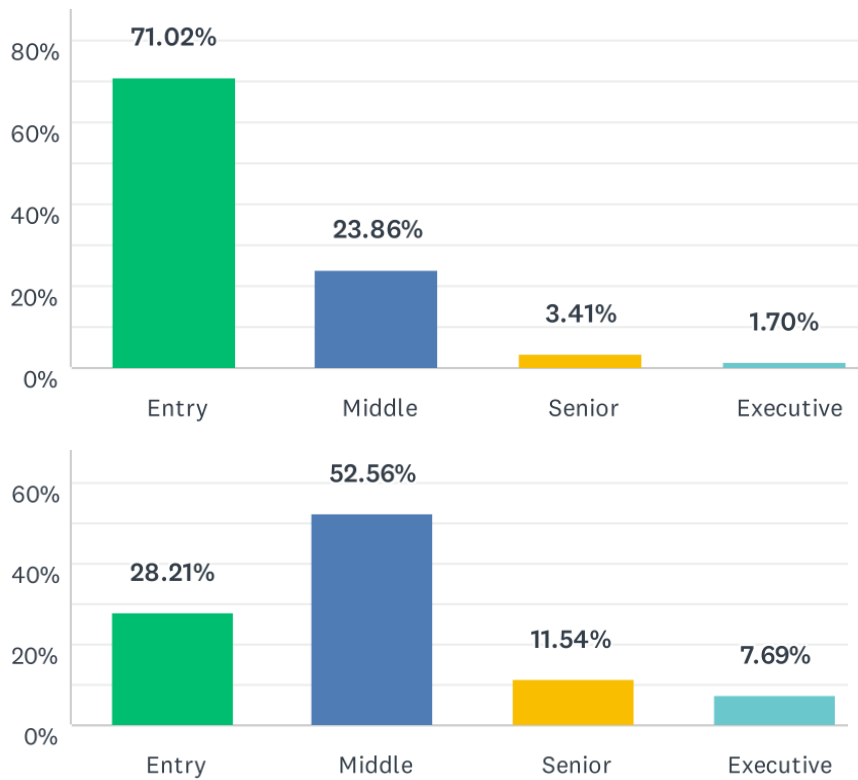


Figure 9 Level of first (top) and current (bottom) position in Canada

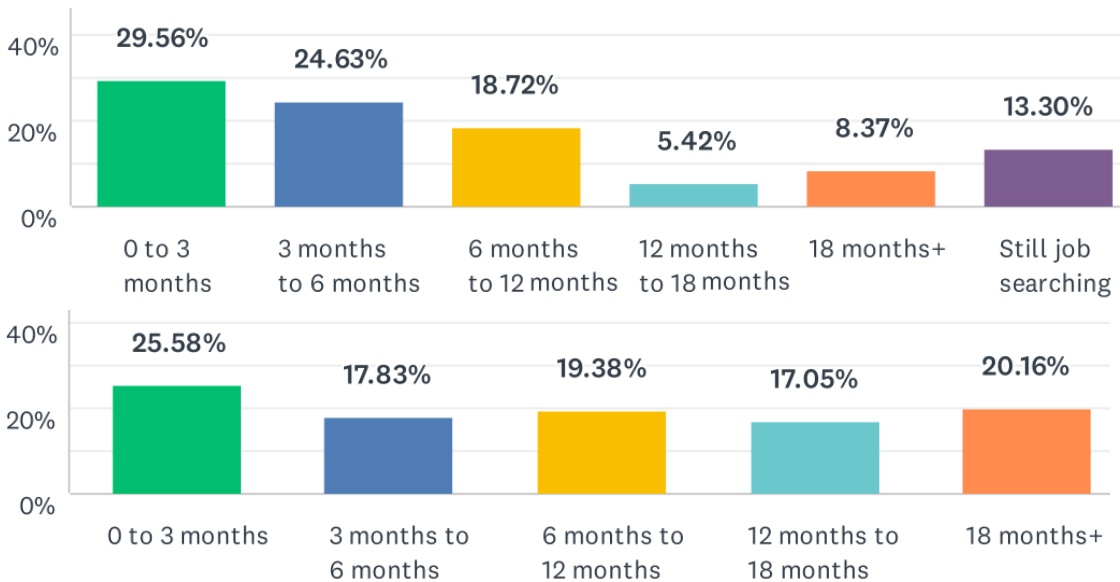


Figure 10 Time taken to find any first position (top) and first position that uses previous professional experience (bottom) post-migration

Difficulty in job search (Figure 11) and barriers in career (Table 1) are strongly reflected in our survey. Only a quarter reported job searching experience to be easier than or as expected, while 47% had significant difficulty. In particular, 71% suffered from lack of Canadian work experience and networking, which is likely the major culprit of difficulty of finding employment. We've shown above that the absolute majority of immigrants possess adequate educational and professional experience and are mostly well employed before moving to Canada. The lack of "Canadian experience" in a broader sense can be thus construed as a distrust of "outsiders" that are new to this country. Alarming, 39% reported disparity in compensation compared with equally qualified Canadian counterpart, and 36% reported discrimination in the hiring process.

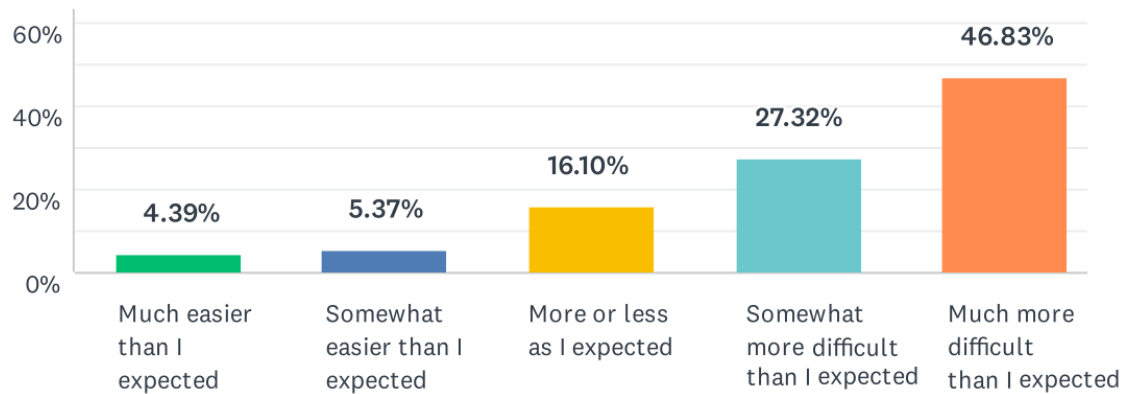


Figure 11 How would you describe your experience seeking employment?

Lack of Canadian work experience	71.14%	143
Lack of network or referrals for job opportunities	69.15%	139
Lack of career progression opportunities	41.29%	83
Salary disparity compared to equally qualified Canadian counterpart	39.30%	79
Underemployment	38.31%	77
Discrimination in the hiring process	35.82%	72
Devaluation of academic credentials	33.83%	68
Unemployment	31.84%	64
Language	9.95%	20
Other (please specify, max 50 characters)	9.95%	20
Child care	8.96%	18

Table 1 Barriers faced in career post-migration

*People say "you lack Canadian experience and won't understand the work culture here" - well, my question is that how would I gain experience if I'm not given a chance? And I reached a senior level at my previous in another well-known country after a lot of hard-work, why ignore my achievements and capabilities I gained from there*

*when I am absolutely comfortable with the language, work-culture and most importantly, the job role?*

*Canadian employers are extremely conservative. They see us as a cheap labor and expect you to continue with the entry level job till you serve. You leave and there is another immigrant/refugee waiting to replace you at much lesser pay. Family owned who have grown as corporates still continue to behave as struggling startups. You don't stand a chance even in entry positions if you are career transitioning. One can work to prove himself, but somebody should open the door to listen.*

*Networking is given more importance than skill. This is so different from other developed and developing economies.*

*I tried reaching out to all the recruiters, all the HR associates, my network. I was told it is important to either have Canadian experience or reference in the company. That will help you enter the company. And unfortunately, I had none while seeking opportunities first time in Canada.*

*In order to use my academic training and experience, I had to enter self-employment where I still struggle to find work opportunities based on being a foreigner, being brown and being female. I am highly skilled and once I am given the opportunity to show what I can do, clients do realize that I can add value but they are often reluctant to take the chance and try me out because of the barriers I mentioned earlier.*

*It's exhausting during the pandemic, there is a very high competition for a few job openings. Hiring managers try to take the advantage of the situation by hiring more experienced candidates at a lower salary.*

These findings are outright contradictory to Canada's value of multiculturalism and inclusion as a country built by immigrants and need to be urgently addressed. Successful integration of immigrants not only relies on the newcomers' adaptation to their new home, but also on the acceptance and open-mindedness of this nation's people. The government and various organizations have put in substantial efforts in helping immigrants integrate,



but the latter point has been largely missed or ignored to this day. The coronavirus pandemic as a crisis has exacerbated immigrants' employment inequalities, but at the same time also presents an unprecedented opportunity to recognize and redress these longstanding issues and “build back better”, as called for in the latest Throne Speech (Governor General of Canada, 2020). It is our hope, through our efforts, to raise awareness of these issues among the public, and urge governments and relevant organizations to take meaningful actions to address them.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND FUTURE WORK**

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We conclude that from our analysis, immigrants are well equipped in both their educational and professional background to start their career in Canada. However, immigrants have suffered disproportionately in their employment opportunities due to the coronavirus pandemic. Additionally, a significant number have difficulties with job search due to their previous professional experiences not being properly recognized and lack of Canadian experience. An alarming proportion of immigrants also faced discrimination in the hiring process and disparity in compensation compared with their equally qualified Canadian counterparts.

Based on these findings, we make the following recommendations. The government should:

- Shift funds from re-educating immigrants towards employment programs to help immigrants find jobs that they already qualify for
- Institute stricter regulation against discrimination based on Canadian experience
- Train employers to understand transferrable skills and immigrants' contribution, and
- Adjust the Federal Skilled Worker occupation list to better suit the demand of the labor market.

To employers, we suggest that HR professionals should develop a diversity-inclusive practice and reexamine the existent underemployed immigrant talents in Canada by shifting their focus away from immigrants' lack of Canadian experience to better appreciating their qualifications. Immigrants'

dissatisfaction due to such discriminatory hiring practices can be detrimental to their organization's productivity and performance, while empowering them based on their transferrable skills and experiences the opposite.

Finally, as a society we need to better understand and empathize with these challenges that immigrants face. For immigrants to be an essential part of an inclusive society, their professional experiences should be fairly valued so that their true potential is not hindered by these artificial barriers. Immigrants' sense of patriotism and belonging can be better realized when their contribution to our society is properly recognized.

WINS will continue to bring changes through three main initiatives. 'Road to Success', the 'Diversity Forum' and 'Showcasing Diverse Voices'.

The empirical results of our survey 'Showcasing Immigrant Voices' will help WINS develop programs that advance and enable immigrants on their professional paths and will allow us to advocate for more equitable policies in an informed manner.

## **6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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The Team behind WINS 'Showcasing Immigrant Voices' Survey:

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- Safaa Albashiti - HR Specialist
- Aaron Luo, PhD - Researcher & Project Specialist
- Bharti Dhar - Recruitment Lead
- Bhagyashree "Shree" Chouhan - IT & Infrastructure Lead
- Dr. Hitu Sood – Founder & Executive Director

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