



**LEVEL**

YOUTH POLICY PROGRAM

The Barriers of  
“Canadian Work Experience”  
for Refugees and Migrants

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The LEVEL Youth Policy Program takes place on the traditional and unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓ əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), & səliilwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Coast Salish peoples.

## ABOUT THE LEVEL INITIATIVE

LEVEL is a youth-engagement initiative of Vancouver Foundation that aims to address racial inequity. We do this by investing in the leadership capacity of Indigenous, racialized, immigrant, and refugee youth to create more opportunities throughout the non-profit and charitable sector.

Despite being the fastest-growing youth population in British Columbia, Indigenous, immigrant, and refugee youth don't have the same opportunities as other young people. Race continues to be a factor that hinders their ability to have a say in decisions that impact their lives.

LEVEL empowers these youth by building their capacity to challenge and change those systems that hinder their ability to build a more just world.

LEVEL CONSISTS OF  
THREE PILLARS OF  
WORK TO ADVANCE  
RACIAL EQUITY:



### ABOUT THE LEVEL YOUTH POLICY PROGRAM

The LEVEL Youth Policy Program (LEVEL YPP) brings together young people between the ages of 19 and 29 from across British Columbia who identify as being Indigenous or racialized immigrants or refugees. Indigenous and racialized Newcomer youth are disproportionately impacted by certain public policies and are rarely included in the development and implementation of public policy process. The LEVEL YPP aims to provide these youth with equitable training and leadership opportunities to better navigate the public policy landscape, and to develop new tools and skills to influence, shape, and advocate for policy changes that are relevant in their own communities. Having young people directly involved in shaping policies that impact their lives is essential to creating systemic, meaningful change. The LEVEL YPP's training is grounded from and within Indigenous peoples' worldviews, which the program acknowledges, could vary from person-to-person or nation-to-nation. Indigenous worldviews place a large emphasis on connections to the land. This perspective views the land as sacred; where everything and everyone is related and connected; where the quality of the relationships formed are key in life; where what matters is the success and well-being of the community, and where there can be many truths as they are based on individual lived experiences.<sup>1</sup> As such, an important premise of this training is to centre and place a particular focus on the fact that the work that has gone into developing this training, as well as the training itself, has taken and will take place on unceded (never given away/stolen) territories of the hən̓d̓əmin̓əm̓-speaking Musqueam peoples, of the Halkomelem-speaking Tsleil-Waututh peoples, and of the sn̓íchim-speaking Skwx\_wú7mesh (Squamish) peoples.

1 <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/indigenous-peoples-worldviews-vs-western-worldviews>



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The arbitrary requirement for "Canadian work experience" is one of the main challenges Newcomers face in regards to accessing meaningful employment. Indeed many Newcomers resort to "survival" jobs as the process to obtain a job that matches their experiences, credentials, and education can be lengthy. The need to acquire "Canadian experience" has arguably become a norm in society, although there isn't truly a common understanding/agreement of why this criterion exists.

In 2013, the Ontario Human Rights Commission deemed strict requirements for Canadian experience as discriminatory based on the Ontario Human Rights Code. With a newly hired Human Rights Commissioner, British Columbia has an opportunity to follow suit. There are also opportunities for employers to incorporate unconscious bias training and create assessment models based on skills and competencies. However, these recommendations are only possible first steps.

In order to have recommendations on policy and policy implementation, we need to incorporate the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, while centering the voices and experiences of people with lived-migration experience who have faced the barriers because of the requirement for Canadian experience. By mapping systematic barriers that different stakeholders face, by unpacking the different components of foreign experience and credential devaluation, and by applying a human rights and anti-oppression framework in dialogues, we may be able to better identify challenges for all stakeholders involved, as well as identify innovative opportunities for change.

# BACKGROUND

## BARRIERS OF REQUIRING CANADIAN WORK EXPERIENCE

Requirements for Canadian work experience and a devaluing of foreign credentials and education are some of the challenges that migrants face in BC. Many migrants often have to resort to survival jobs, as finding a job that aligns with their experiences, interests, education and credentials can take a long time. Often times, Newcomers are advised to seek these survival jobs and/or even volunteer to acquire Canadian work experience (personal communication). Unfortunately, this process has arguably become a norm. In other words, many stakeholders including employers, government, migrants, service providers, and others advise, as well as creating and implementing programming and initiatives that are based on the assumption that newcomers need to acquire Canadian experience before being able to work in a role that aligns with their previous experiences and expertise. Credential, education, and experience recognition are multifaceted issues. The main focus of this policy piece is the requirement for Canadian experience in unregulated professions, although other issues will also be briefly mentioned.

## STATISTICS

In June of 2019, Vancity (Vancouver City Savings Credit Union) released a report that highlights some key statistics in regards to credential and experience recognition. These statistics, along with many others, explain that a devaluing of foreign experience and credentials is truly having an impact on the livelihoods of migrants.

- Seventy percent of Newcomers surveyed highlighted that their work experience is valued less than “Canadians” with similar experience.
- Sixty-two percent of Newcomers surveyed highlighted that they had to “overcome racism in order to land a job” (pg. 1).
- Third-plus generation Canadians earn 18% more than migrants in Metro-Vancouver.
- Newcomer women in BC “are paid 4% less than third-plus generation women, and 40% less than third-plus generation men” (pg.6).
- Migrants from the United States and Europe earned more than the third-plus generation equivalents, whereas immigrants from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and South America earned less than their third-plus generation equivalents.
- Although second-generation immigrants have higher average earnings than their third-plus generation equivalents, those from certain visible minority groups earn less than their white third-plus generation counterparts.

In addition to impacts on migrants, the devaluing of foreign experience and the misalignment of experiences with jobs has a salient impact on the economy.

## ECONOMIC IMPACTS

It is estimated that BC “loses nearly \$4.7 billion in economic activity and \$616 million in provincial tax revenue, due to the misalignment of education and skills that businesses need” (Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of BC ((AMSSA)) report, pg. 25). Additionally, it is estimated that there will be approximately 903,000 job openings in BC between 2018 and 2028. In order for the province to continue its economic growth, “27% of these vacancies will need to be filled by 24,300 immigrants each year” (AMSSA report, pg. 16). Yet, according to the Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC), hiring Newcomers is the least likely tactic that small-and medium-sized businesses will use to address labour shortages. Further research is needed to understand why some employers do not hire more Newcomers to address labour shortages, even though their business could benefit from it. Nevertheless, regardless of the impact on the economy, Newcomers should have access to meaningful and equitable employment.

## WHY CANADIAN EXPERIENCE?

There may be different reasons as to why employers may hire someone based on their Canadian experience, including but not limited to racism, bias, and a lack of understanding/selection process based on skills and competencies. Dr. Izumi Sakamoto, whose research has informed a policy in Ontario on barriers of requiring Canadian experience highlights that “the ‘Canadian experience’ implied by employers is often not about professional standards, but cultural ones: immigrant workers have no experience at ‘being Canadian,’ and don’t ‘fit in’ in the workplace.” Her research further highlights that when people refer to Canadian experience they are often referring to “‘soft skills’ (as opposed to ‘hard skills’ such as education and credentials) – the abilities to work seamlessly in the given Canadian workplace culture. However, these ‘skills’ are ill-defined, so as the ‘Canadian workplace culture,’ leaving immigrants feeling stuck” (University of Toronto News).

Whether the reasoning behind requiring Canadian experience is based on racism, Canadian exceptionalism, or misinformation about the ability of migrants to work in Canadian workplaces, we need to highlight the discriminatory nature of such a practice first before we can start taking action to change the practice.

## HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK

In 2013, the Ontario Human Rights Commission Policy on Removing the “Canadian experience” barrier deemed “strict requirements” for Canadian work experience as discriminatory and highlighted that it “can only be used in very limited circumstances” (pg. 3). This decision is based on the Ontario Human Rights Code. This policy highlights that “a distinction based on where a person acquired their work experience may indirectly discriminate based on the Ontario Human Rights Code grounds such as race, ancestry, colour, place of origin, and ethnic origin” (pg. 8). Indeed the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario has had several cases focusing on this issue, however many have been dismissed (Canadian Legal Information Institute). Hence, further analysis is needed on the application and implementation of the policy.



Similar to Ontario, the BC Human Rights Code (HRC) has several policies focusing on employment. For instance, the Code states that “a person must not publish or cause to be published an advertisement in connection with employment or prospective employment that expresses a limitation, specification, or preference as to race, colour, ancestry, place of origin, political belief, religion, marital status, family status, physical or mental disability, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or age unless the limitation, specification or preference is based on a bona fide occupational requirement” (HRC, section 11). Furthermore, it highlights “a person must not refuse to employ or refuse to continue to employ a person, or discriminate against a person regarding employment or any term or condition of employment because of the race, colour, ancestry, place of origin, political belief, religion, marital status, family status, physical or mental disability, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or age of that person or because that person has been convicted of a criminal or summary conviction offence that is unrelated to the employment or to the intended employment of that person” (HRC, section 13). Similar to Ontario, one can argue that requiring Canadian experience in BC is in violation of the Code as it discriminates based on “race, colour, ancestry, and place of origin” and hence it is a discriminatory practice.

## RECOMMENDATION AND NEXT STEPS

There are some initial steps that the newly appointed BC Human Rights Commissioner and employers can take to start addressing the Canadian experience barrier in BC:

- BC Human Rights Commissioner:
  - Examine the barriers and implications of requiring Canadian work experience in BC.
  - Deem requirements for Canadian experience as a discriminatory practice.
- Employers:
  - Incorporate unconscious bias training in your workplace (Immigrant Employment Council of BC ((IECBC)), 2018).
  - Create a selection process based on skills and competencies (IECBC, 2018).

These suggestions are for the non-regulated professions that do not have a formal recognition process controlled by regulatory bodies. There are other first steps that different stakeholders can take to address the challenges associated with credential recognition in regulated professions and education. However, given the limited scope of this project and the complexity of the topic, they will not be addressed in this brief. The aforementioned suggestions are only starting points and do not address implementation and accountability. There isn't one particular solution that will be able to address all of the challenges and concerns of all stakeholders involved.

Indeed, there are also risks of writing a set of recommendations without incorporating the perspectives of different stakeholders. One way to have more inclusive and reflective policy recommendations is through convening dialogues. In order to move beyond the aforementioned discriminatory practice, we will need to unpack and address the root causes. Furthermore, in order to have systematic change, we need to have a clear action plan for implementation that centres the voices of migrants and at the same time incorporates perspectives from key stakeholders involved, such as employers, government, regulatory bodies, and service providers. Additionally, we need to examine the systematic barriers that all of the aforementioned stakeholders face in order to have a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities. There are many different components related to credential and experience recognition, and each component needs to be unpacked.

In order to map the system, such dialogues should be based in a social justice, anti-oppression, and human rights framework (although at times these frameworks may have tensions). Additionally, we need to apply an intersectional lens. Instead of viewing the issues as Canadian experience versus non-Canadian experience, we need to have a more holistic view of power and privilege and then incorporate and examine other factors that influence power dynamics, such as sex, gender, sexuality, ability, age, ethnicity, language, literacy, religion, etc. Furthermore, we need to acknowledge that migrants are not a homogenous group, and consider the implications of discriminatory employment practices on different communities.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the devaluing of non-Canadian experiences and credentials is a very complex and multifaceted issue that impacts the livelihoods of migrants. We are often looking for solutions that help migrants acquire Canadian experience, provide trainings on interview processes in Canada, support with resume writing, and identify related entry-level jobs. Nevertheless, we need to start shifting the focus from what migrants can do to acquire Canadian experience or learn Canadian workplace culture and start focusing on how we can change the employment system to make it equitable. Through convening dialogues with stakeholders, we can start mapping the system as whole and identify action points that all stakeholders can be responsible for.

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## ABOUT VANCOUVER FOUNDATION

Vancouver Foundation is Community Inspired. We are a community foundation that connects the generosity of donors with the energy, ideas, and time of people in the community. Together, we've been making meaningful and lasting impacts in neighborhoods and communities since 1943. We work with individuals, corporations, and charitable agencies to create permanent endowment funds and then use the income to support thousands of charities. We recognize that communities are complex and that collaboration between multiple stakeholders is needed to help everyone thrive and evolve. Vancouver Foundation brings together donors, non-profits and charities, government, media and academic institutions, local leaders, and passionate individuals to build meaningful and lasting change in the province of British Columbia. We see young people, their voices and experiences as part of that vision to building meaningful change.



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