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Presented by The Conference Board of Canada

The Future Skills Podcast

Season 5: Episode 2

Leveraging the Skills of Newcomers

In this episode of the *Future Skills Podcast*, host Jeremy Strachan dives into the critical topic of leveraging the skills of newcomers to Canada and its impact on economic and social success. Joined by Tricia Williams from the Future Skills Centre, Sharon McLennon from the Newfoundland and Labrador Workforce Innovation Centre, and Shamira Madhany from World Education Services, the discussion explores how Future Skills Centre-funded initiatives have shed light on newcomer retention and workforce integration. The episode highlights barriers such as credential recognition, workplace bias, and lack of professional networks while emphasizing solutions like targeted upskilling, wraparound supports, and cultural competency training. With insights into workforce development across Canada, this episode underscores how effectively integrating skilled immigrants is key to addressing labor shortages and boosting economic resilience.

Guests

Tricia Williams, PhD, Director of Research, Evaluation, and Knowledge Mobilization, Future Skills Centre

Sharon McLennon, Director, Newfoundland and Labrador Workforce Innovation Centre

Shamira Madhany, Managing Director and Deputy Executive Director, World Education Services

Host

Jeremy Strachan, Senior Research Associate, The Conference Board of Canada

Links

Future Skills Centre and Conference Board of Canada links, such as recommended articles and webpages, social media handles, etc.

Future Skills Centre Homepage: https://fsc-ccf.ca/
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The Conference Board of Canada Homepage: https://www.conferenceboard.ca/
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The Conference Board of Canada Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/ConferenceBoardofCanada/
Future Skills Centre State of Skills Report, Leveraging the Skills of Newcomers: English | French
Facilitating Access to Skilled Talent (FAST), Evaluation Report: English | French
Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council, Career Advancement for Immigrant Professionals report: English
NLWIC Regional Workforce Development Committees: English
World Education Services, #ImmigrantsWork: English

Transcript

Jeremy: Welcome to Season Five of the Future Skills Podcast, brought to you by the Future Skills Centre. I'm Jeremy Strachan, Senior Research Associate at The Conference Board of Canada, and your host for the season. On the Future Skills Podcast, we explore what matters most to Canadians when it comes to skills, training, and the ever-changing world of work.

Since 2019, the Future Skills Centre has been driving Canada's workforce transformation by funding innovative training solutions, cutting-edge research, and inclusive partnerships to ensure everyone has the skills to thrive in a changing economy.

In this episode, we're going to explore an issue crucial to Canada's economic and social success: leveraging the skills of newcomers. I speak with the Future Skills Centre's Tricia Williams about some of the work we're doing to better help newcomers find their way into the job market. Then we'll shine a spotlight on Atlantic Canada and hear from Sharon McLennon of the Newfoundland and Labrador Workforce Innovation Centre about regional strategies for newcomer integration. Finally, Shamira Madhany from World Education Services (WES) joins us to discuss what needs to be done to move the needle, to ensure that Canada fully benefits from its internationally trained talent.

Newcomers to Canada bring invaluable experience, education, and diverse perspectives that can strengthen our workforce. But many skilled newcomers face significant and unique barriers to employment: From credential and competency recognition, to employer bias, to lacking the professional connections and networks that are so key to finding work.

Canada's economic growth and innovation capacity depend on effectively recognizing and utilizing the skills of newcomers. Future Skills Centre research highlights that improved credential recognition, targeted upskilling programs, and employer engagement are key to bridging some of these gaps to creating more equitable opportunities. Leveraging these skills is going to be critical if we want to address Canada's growing labour shortages. Our population is aging. Our birth rates are declining. Skilled immigrants can bring much needed expertise to

sectors like healthcare, and engineering, and help fill gaps in facing talent shortages. We need to make sure their skills are effectively recognized and utilized if we want to boost productivity, innovation, and our overall economic resilience.

Up first on the podcast is Tricia Williams. She is the Director of Research, Evaluation, and Knowledge Mobilization at the Future Skills Centre. She's been on the podcast before, when I caught up with her at Cannexus25 in Ottawa in January 2025. You can hear that episode in Season 4.

Tricia, welcome back to the podcast.

Tricia: Thank you so much.

Jeremy: I'd like to start by asking you to tell us about some of the projects that the Future Skills Centre has supported in the area of newcomer workforce integration.

Tricia: It's really been an area that I think came out of some of the open calls that we issued to organizations working on skills development, the need for paying attention to newcomer integration and the ways that we do this.

One of them that I'd love to tell you a bit a bit more about is Facilitating Access to Skilled Talent with the Immigrant Employment Council of British Columbia, which is working with immigrant service providers across the country to think about the different upskilling opportunities that are needed at various points of the immigration journey, including even sometimes before immigrants arrive in Canada. So, you can do some workforce readiness preparations even before people land.

We've also done quite a bit of work with the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council, TRIEC, and what's been really interesting there is we've worked not necessarily with the immigrants themselves. But also thinking about: how do the employers react to newcomers? So, what is the workplace environment like that newcomers go into.

So, in the work we've done with TRIEC, it's really been about upskilling and training managers. How do you encourage people to indicate whether they're interested in promotions? So, a lot of times what managers would report hearing is, "Oh, we didn't necessarily think that this person was interested in promotion opportunities. They never said it." Meanwhile, the individual themselves is saying, "You know, I was just diligently working for years and years, and I see other people get promoted, and I didn't know I had to put my hand up and say, 'I'd like that opportunity, too.'" So, you have efforts that can be done on the company side, as we've done a lot of that work with TRIEC.

There's always a lot of interest in research as well. So, we've done quite a few research studies with the Diversity Institute, our partners, as well as with The Conference Board of Canada, and looking at different dimensions of the immigrant employment experience.

But I think most of the innovation has been harder to get to because there's so many organizations working on delivering services.

And so you have a sector that's funded to the tune of a billion dollars a year to help settle and integrate newcomers in Canada. So, sometimes there isn't as much ability to step out of that and say, "What is and isn't working here?"

Jeremy: Ok, so speaking of innovation, can you tell us more about the Facilitating Access to Skilled Talent program with the Immigrant Employment Council of British Columbia, the FAST program that you mentioned at the top?

Tricia: Yeah, it's one of the programs we've been very excited about because it represents, really, true innovation in the systems. And I like to describe this to people when we talk about systems as the default experience for a newcomer to Canada. So, imagine if you've arrived in Canada and you show up at your local immigrant support agency. They now have, the ones who participate, have access to this FAST program, which is a skills and credential assessment process, and it's targeted around certain sectors in different regions. So, in British Columbia, for instance, there was a pathway around digital tech workers, and they'd asses, okay, "What do you already know? What are some possible openings in the local labour market? Here's a little upskilling program we can give you that's delivered remotely—there you can complete some modules and then we'll even introduce you to some employers who we know are looking for talent in this area."

And one of the most surprising, to me, and interesting things that we found, was the course content that was most in-demand was understanding the Canadian workplace. Right? It seems so basic and fundamental, but this is overwhelmingly what people report is the most useful part to them. Just understanding little things: Is it important to show up on time? In some places that isn't so important, and you're still seen as a good worker.

In certain areas of Canada, these are cultural nuances that we kind of expect people to know without really telling them overtly. So, we've seen that the people who participated in this program have had—we've been very pleased with their job placement rates. It's kind of hard to know what would happen if they weren't in the program. We haven't been able to do that kind of controlled analysis.

But we've also been able to develop out sections of this program that are really targeted towards certain labour needs. So, for instance when we heard that there needed to be personal support workers in northern British Columbia, we were able to develop modules of this program to direct newcomers into obtaining the right credentials and certifications to become PSWs in northern British Columbia.

And, really excitingly, you also see with the FAST program, an example of diffusion of this innovation across the country and even leapfrogging over Ontario and Quebec. So, FAST, through the Immigrant Employment Council of British Columbia, which started the program, is now working with the New Brunswick Community College to integrate the FAST program in the New Brunswick community centres and career development professionals that are supporting immigrants and linking up with the community college to target it to the specific labour needs in New Brunswick.

Jeremy: Wow. That's such a great example of system-level innovation in action. And I love that there's an adaptability that can be scaled out to different jurisdictions. Okay, I want to pivot to

the State of Skills report on *Leveraging the Skills of Newcomers*, and listeners can find a link in the show notes. Tricia, what are we finding? What are the key takeaways from all this work?

Tricia: This is a great question. In terms of the supports for newcomers, Canada invests a lot of money in this already. And I think it's not necessarily about more funding, but it's about better directing that funding. So, for instance, we know that people need wraparound supports. They need a case manager. They need somebody to help them make their way through. We also know that blanket approaches of, "Here's an English class for everybody even if you have been in English language school is your whole life" – that doesn't make a lot of sense.

It's also about engaging employers and being more attuned to the supports we need to provide even in the workplace. So, one of the things I think that's going to be really key for us going forward is thinking about working with employers and how they hire and recognize newcomer talent. Whether it's the credentials or the degrees, but also just skills, right? And how you talk about the skills.

So, for instance, to make this very concrete: we tend to emphasize social and emotional skills in the Canadian workplace. It's really important. Our education system—from the time our children are little, are learning about collaboration and articulating the value of that. You might get a resume from somebody from a different background who isn't really highlighting their social and emotional skills. They don't really know about how to articulate that in the Canadian workplace, even though they may be very good at them.

So, we definitely have to involve employers more in the whole design of the immigration system and the supports that are provided and really smooth that transition.

In terms of supports for newcomers, I think this has to do with making sure that people are not only recruited for their abilities and talents and then they're left to fend and navigate the systems on their own. Whether that's a facilitation with accessing a job, but not just any job. But is it a job that's tailored to their skills and credentials and abilities?

So, one of the investments that we're looking to be making very soon at Future Skills Centre is with a program that's specifically helping internationally trained nurses: Assess their skills, assess their qualifications, and complete the certifications and the testing—skills-based, knowledge-based testing—and then being able to have a pathway to practice as a nurse. It doesn't help us if all of the people who come in as foreign health care professionals are then working as personal support workers. We actually need them to use their skills at their skilled ability.

It's going to be a little bit more tricky in the coming years if we do indeed restrict some of our immigration numbers. This has been the engine of growth in the Canadian economy for the last number of years, and I think employers have been a little bit used to this too, that there's kind of the steady pipeline of newcomer talent, and we're going to have to become a little bit better at recognizing maybe the talent that isn't as obvious. And that includes both Canadian-born talent, but also newcomer talent, where maybe it isn't as clear how they might help our business or organization, but looking to find people who may be otherwise [have] been passed by for opportunities.

Jeremy: Definitely. Tricia, thank you so much for the conversation today.

Tricia: Thank you so much.

Jeremy: My discussion with Tricia gave me a better idea about the complexity of matching newcomer talent with the right opportunities, and that also involves keeping skilled immigrants from moving on, out of province or territory. I want to introduce Sharon McLennon, Director of the Newfoundland and Labrador Workforce Innovation Centre, or NLWIC, who has been leading a number of initiatives to strengthen and diversify the province's workforce. Established by the province in 2017, NLWIC is administered by the College of the North Atlantic, and is funded under the Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Labour Market Development Agreement.

With the support of the Future Skills Centre, NLWIC led a project to evaluate ten Regional Workforce Development Committees to better understand the unique labour market needs across the province. Check out links in the show notes. Today, Sharon's going to give us the perspective from Atlantic Canada on newcomer integration and retention and tell us about some of the outcomes of their Future Skills Centre-funded work.

Sharon, welcome to the podcast. Thanks so much for being here.

Sharon: Pleasure, Jeremy. Nice to see you.

Jeremy: Wonderful. So, let's get right into it. Sharon, what are some of the unique challenges to newcomer integration in Newfoundland and Labrador?

Sharon: Well, first of all, what we've heard from our stakeholder engagement activities from our Regional Workforce Development Committees, and just from the research that we've done, we've learned that there's a number of unique challenges—and some not so unique—to our province. We know that it's really important that people have jobs. I mean, it's the social determinants of health: employment is key.

But also, there's language barriers and I don't think that's unique, but it is important and is unique to Newfoundland and Labrador right now, for sure. I think, understanding and navigating the immigration ecosystem.

Another one, which is really important, is the lack of cultural communities. So, if it's Ukrainians, for example—how many Ukrainians are here in Newfoundland and Labrador? If it's persons from India or whatever. So having those cultural connections is really a unique challenge and making sure that we do that.

I think the rural and remote environments in Newfoundland and Labrador is another one. And then, of course, the recent federal changes to immigration, including international students, has really put pressure on newcomers and the integration of those in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Jeremy: Aside from integration, I understand that newcomer retention was a particular challenge in the province. Why do you believe that is, and what sorts of responses to that challenge do you think are needed?

Sharon: We believe that to be the case because of evidence and data that we have seen, in StatsCan data, and that continues to get updated, of course. But in the media, [the] Future Skills Centre, the work they've been doing, and others have been doing, we know that it is an issue, and even through the Regional Workforce Development Committees, it became an issue, that

retention wasn't where it should be, and we need it to be. Also, the province has, as a priority, increasing the recruitment and retention of newcomers. So, it's really public and government policy to do that. In fact, we're right now working with the Department of Immigration, Population, Growth, and Skills, [on] the establishment of an Economic Immigration Ideas Lab dedicated within NLWIC just to do that—to increase recruitment and retention of newcomers to the province.

So, some of the responses, I guess, [are] really things like increasing the capacity of employers to really deal with the recruitment and retention issues. It means intercultural education and training for themselves and for their employees. It includes HR practices that need to make sure that there's no unconscious bias. We see this both within College of the North Atlantic, who administers us, but also other training providers. They're looking at how they can address newcomers' skills, if they're lacking, through pre-employment programs and employment programs, and that's happening quite a bit.

One other response that I wanted to point out is that the province of Newfoundland and Labrador are doing a number of innovative things around newcomer retention. And it's interesting: I call it the Ukrainian model. Right now, the retention rate of Ukrainians, according to the Ukrainian Association, is 80%. But why was that? In a news release by the Minister of Immigration, Population, Growth and Skills, [it] said it's because of a couple of factors. They had a family support office. But one of the key issues was that they actually built relationships and determined their needs in advance before they actually came to Newfoundland and Labrador, and that made a huge difference so that they're not moving. So, they're building relationships. They're coming with other family members and friends and relatives and they're staying because of that. So, it's a really interesting model.

Jeremy, a final example, a response to the issue of newcomer integration, newcomer retention: I'd like to refer to the entrepreneurs in the province that are really making a contribution and by responding to the challenges around this. One, in particular, is Constanza Safatle. And, she's the CEO for Newbornlander, which is a really exciting company in Newfoundland and Labrador. And it's set up as a social enterprise, but it employs newcomers as seamstresses who are sewing her products, which [are] baby clothes or young children's clothes. And in fact, she's been successful in receiving a number of awards, but, very recently, the Dragon's Den, she received recognition and support because of the exciting work she's doing around newcomer recruitment, retention, and integration.

Jeremy: Can you discuss how or why newcomer integration will be important for the region's workforce development in the coming years?

Sharon: Yes, I'd be happy to do that because it is going to be very important. We have an aging population, and then again, that's not unique only to Newfoundland and Labrador, but it is a key issue for our province. We will need a skilled, diversified workforce, and [be] able to meet the current and future projected demand. Particularly with a number of major projects coming on side in new areas, it's really interesting that we have a lot of growth expected now and into the future. So, it's really critical that we have newcomers and we're able to integrate newcomers into the population.

But also, there's been a lot of research that says why it's so important to have a diversified workforce, and newcomers in your community and province. It enriches the community, and the activities and the understanding, mutual understanding. But it also works for increasing the bottom line of companies and how they perform and how they can sustain themselves and grow and prosper. So, I guess we feel that it's important because we need the workforce. We need to do the right thing, which is the humanitarian piece. And we need to make sure that we grow and prosper into the future with a growing population.

Jeremy: Sharon, thanks so much for joining me on the Future Skills Podcast. It's been my pleasure to talk with you today.

Sharon: It's been a pleasure to talk with you. Thank you so much, Jeremy, for this initiative.

Jeremy: My last guest on the episode is someone who been a leader in shaping Canada's immigration and workforce integration policies—Shamira Madhany. As Managing Director for Canada and Deputy Executive Director at World Education Services, or WES, she has led initiatives to improve newcomer credential recognition, enhance immigrant employment outcomes, and promote equitable workforce opportunities. Prior to joining WES in 2018, Shamira spent two decades in government service in Ontario, where her last position was Assistant Deputy Minister for Health, Education and Social Policy in the Cabinet Office.

Shamira, welcome to the podcast. Thank you so much for being here.

Shamira: And thank you for having me, Jeremy.

Jeremy: Shamira, my first question to you is around how the situation for newcomers has changed. In the last year, Canada's made significant changes to its immigration policy, but could you talk about what the state of newcomer integration is in Canada, at the moment?

Shamira: So, as you say, Jeremy, Canada has implemented significant changes to its immigration policies and workforce development policies in the past year. And I just want to set the context a little bit because the context becomes really important in terms of where Canada is situated. In 2024, migration continued to surge. Over 300 million people live outside their country of origin. Over 120 million people—this is over and above the 300 million—have been forcibly displaced. And there are over six million international students studying around the world. So, at the same time as you see these numbers of individuals who are leaving their countries, we are seeing migration politicized, and a rise in anti-immigration sentiment and rhetoric in many countries across the world.

And so, Canada is now being subject to many of these similar global forces, and it's intensifying. Until recently, Jeremy, there's been a consensus about the key role that immigrants play in our economies and our communities. And there was a lot of support for immigrants and the benefits of immigrants and immigration, writ large. And then, as you've seen unfortunately, that has turned around. Immigrants basically impact our housing affordability, our cost of living, et cetera. So, right now we are sort of in this national and global momentum which is fraught with nuance and complexity.

Let's add to that, the 25% tariffs that the US has brought in. The industries that are being impacted are the ones where you have a significant number of immigrants who are working

there. And why are they working in these industries? It's because they came in as highly skilled immigrants and you know, they couldn't find commensurate work. And so, they went into the service industry, hospitality, accommodation, manufacturing. And so, these are the same industries that are going to be impacted because of the tariffs. And then you have a situation of 'last in, first out,' and so the unemployment rate will go up.

And so, what this means for newcomers is that, not only did they start struggling with the whole issue of anti-immigration and immigrant sentiment, they're now going to be impacted because of the tariffs, and they're in survival jobs—many—and now what does that mean in terms of what's going to happen, as this continues?

And when I think about the work that we do at World Education Services, that's what we are doing on the social impact side. We work with partners, and we just want to make sure that we can try and mitigate the impact.

Jeremy: Ok, so given all that context, what can employers do to better support newcomer integration in today's workforce?

Shamira: You know, Jeremy, the work that we do at WES, where we see 500,000 applicants a year, we know what their background is. [The] majority have their Masters programs done, completed, and PhD, so they're highly qualified. And so, I asked myself, "What is wrong with this picture?" You have employers saying, "I don't have individuals who can work. I'll hire them now." And you have, you know, workforce development organizations saying, you know, "These individuals can't find jobs."

So, the question you're asking me is, "What can employers do?" And I have some very concrete suggestions. One, is that basically we need to think about the biases that have come into play in the HR world with respect to how we are assessing applications coming in. Because we are using AI; we are using word search; we are not basically doing a human-to-human interaction.

I'm not suggesting we go back to that place, but what are the biases and algorithms that one puts into place to decide which applications you pull up? Are we putting in things like, you have to have studied in a Canadian institution or a Canadian company? I don't know. I just put that out there. So, what are basically the mechanisms we are using to bring people in, even for the first interview?

Secondly, how are we assessing that somebody has the necessary skills and knowledge and experience, without saying that it's based on duration—if you're working, you know, somewhere for 10 years, then you're highly experienced. Because we know that employers know that if somebody has just graduated from university, their level of understanding and experience is very different than, you know, somebody who's been in the job 10 or 15 years. So, you know, how is it that they're taking the resumes of newcomers and just looking at their academic experience and then everything else they don't know? So, the other thing that employers could do is, could they, through their national associations, or through, you know, some pilot projects, think about developing tools that are standardized.

And it doesn't have to be for every single occupation. Let's start with where the labour market shortages [are] and say, "Could we get together with a local university/college and look at what

are the tools in place that are being used to assess competencies?" So, there's a fair process to be able to do those skills matching.

The third is that in Canada we know that we are mostly SMEs—small, medium sized enterprises—but we are not looking at, you know, a lot of capacity and the ability to bring somebody in and train them up and if it doesn't work out. So, is there a mechanism to have regional hubs? For example, you have the #ImmigrantsWork program, and that's a very powerful program. It's in three regions across the country, basically rural areas and the cities, et cetera. So, this is where we do have groups coming in together and having a joint conversation.

Jeremy: So, I want to end by asking you what is your advice to decision makers and policy makers to move the conversation forward on leveraging the skills of newcomers?

Shamira: Great question. So, Jeremy, I've been in this area for a very long time and the questions keep on coming up around, "What's taking so long? And whose responsibility is it?" And my answer to that is: It's everybody's responsibility. My best advice to government is have a pan-Canadian approach, similar to what we are doing for internationally educated professionals. They are already in our country. They're basically waiting to go through a process. As the regulators are opening up the regulations, take a look at those who have already started the process in their own provinces so that these individuals can also choose to move to another province. And the process continues rather than they continue to shop. That's my first advice around leveraging the work that we are already doing.

The second is that I believe that the federal government should basically have a pan-Canadian table that is not siloed. If we want our country to remain economically sustainable and we want our productivity to go up we don't want to impact our GDP, we need a pan-Canadian table to look at two very important issues: immigration and workforce development. This should not be seen as a one ministry issue, and that's my recommendation.

Jeremy: Wow. Thank you, Shamira, for joining me today on the podcast. It's been a great pleasure and privilege to talk to you about this.

Shamira: And, and thank you for having me, Jeremy. You know, it's the Future Skills Centre and we are talking about the future. So hopefully, you know, the conversation we have had will lead to a better future for newcomers who choose to come to Canada, and who choose to want to belong, and hopefully with what other stakeholders are doing in the conversation, we can move the needle forward.

Jeremy: In this episode, we've heard that more than ever, Canada needs to find better ways to integrate newcomer talent into our workforce. It's going to have to be a coordinated effort—from policy makers at all levels of government, from employers, and from all Canadians to recognize the importance that skilled immigrants play in our economy.

Thanks again for joining us on the Future Skills Podcast, brought to you by the Future Skills Centre. I'd like to thank my guests, Tricia Williams from the Future Skills Centre, Sharon McLennon from the Newfoundland and Labrador Workforce Innovation Centre, and Shamira Madhany from World Education Services. You can hear all five seasons of the Future Skills Podcast on your favorite podcast app. Give us a follow if you haven't, and stay tuned for the rest

of the season. This episode was produced, edited, and hosted by me, Jeremy Strachan. Sound design also by yours truly. Thanks for listening.

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