

Stakeholder Summary

Postsecondary Institutions Not Meeting the Unique Needs of Recent Immigrant Adult Students

Postsecondary education (PSE) institutions play a vital role in helping recent immigrant adult students integrate into Canadian society. However, most colleges and universities are not identifying, or responding to, the specific needs of this unique group of learners.

A new study by the **Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)** found that many recent immigrant adult students face barriers to success including limited language proficiency, non-recognition of foreign credentials and experience, financial constraints and insufficient knowledge of the Canadian PSE system. The report also found that many of these barriers were not being addressed by colleges and universities, and the few programs that did exist to provide assistance were not being fully utilized.

Project Description

For the purposes of this study, recent immigrant adult students are identified as those who are 24 years or older, a resident in Canada for no longer than ten years, and either a landed immigrant, permanent resident or Canadian citizen. The report is based on information collected from surveys administered to students at five PSE institutions (two universities and three colleges) across Ontario in 2009/2010, as well as a series of focus groups. The study aimed to identify the unique challenges and needs of these students, as well as develop a system for measuring, and assessing the factors affecting, their engagement with their PSE program.

Findings

Most Canadian colleges and universities have well-established programs to serve the needs of international students, but not for recent immigrant adult students despite their increasing number. Institutions need to identify these learners as a distinct group and offer services to support their success. In particular, programs aimed at improving English language proficiency, engagement in the academic community and specialized academic support would be of greatest value. However, even when support programs are offered there is limited uptake because of lack of knowledge and limited ability to identify students in need of early interventions.

Because of the unique challenges faced by recent immigrant adult students, many of the standard measurements of student engagement, such as interaction with faculty and other students, are not effective at measuring if they are getting the full benefit of the PSE experience. As a result, institutions are not easily able to identify when these students are struggling, unless reflected in poor grades, and by that point it may be too late. Better identification at the point of enrollment would allow for improved tracking and outreach for student service programs.

The most effective way of connecting with these students is in the classroom. Many recent immigrant adult students live off campus and have little connection to institutional activities outside of class time, so many of the promotions for valuable programs are missed. Faculty are encouraged to partner with student services to make sure students are aware of specialized services offered. In addition, as limited English language skills can limit in-class participation, developing new teaching strategies to encourage diverse groups of students to work together can be extremely effective at improving student engagement.

Academic Engagement of Recent Immigrant Adult Students (RIAS) in Postsecondary Education: A Case Study of Ontario Colleges and Universities was prepared by Lillie Lum, Faculty of Health, York University and Sheldon Grabke, Office of the Registrar, Seneca College.