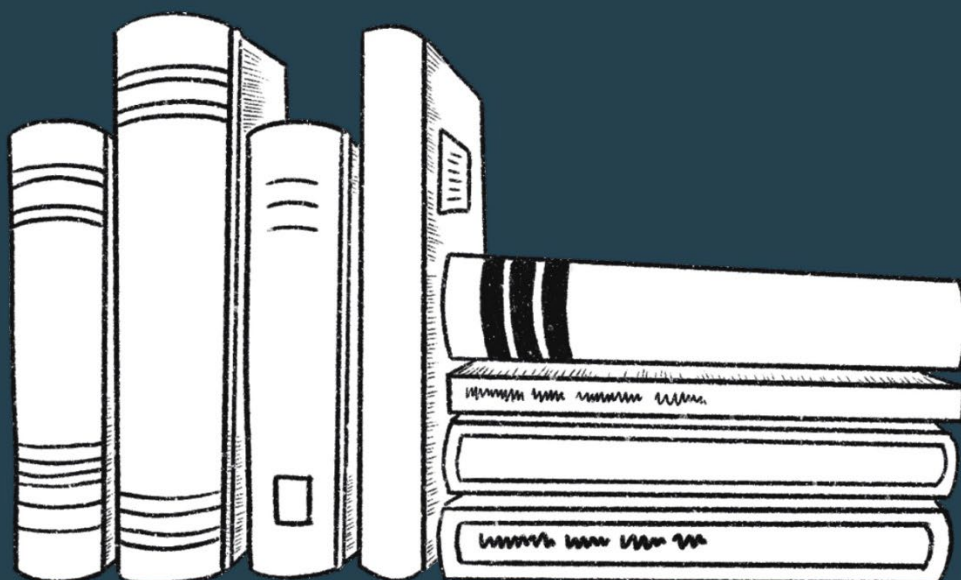


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Improving PSE Access and Experience for Refugees in Ontario

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Executive Summary

As climate crises and major conflicts force populations to flee their homes at extraordinary rates, Canada should expect to continue its important role as the “world leader in the resettlement of refugees” (UNHCR Canada, 2022b). Half of all refugees admitted to Canada come to Ontario, and as host, the province is required to ensure refugees have rights to gainful employment and education. Indeed, refugees who attend postsecondary education (PSE) in Ontario lead healthier lives — with better employment opportunities and stronger social networks — than those who do not (Ferede, 2018; Ma et al., 2022).

Unfortunately, only about 20% of refugees participate in PSE after they arrive in Canada (Prokopenko, 2018), and data reveal refugees tend to have poorer labour market outcomes than those who arrive through economic streams — in part due to reduced access to PSE (Kaida et al., 2020). Refugees arrive having fled danger or persecution with little information about PSE options or financial supports (Prokopenko, 2018; Bajwa et al., 2017; Shankar et al., 2016). They are often first-generation students (i.e., neither of their parents attended PSE); they frequently experience disruptions to their education and careers; and they often arrive missing documentation of prior learning (Ferede, 2018; Prokopenko, 2018). Once here, refugees also face challenges accessing information about PSE options — challenges that are sometimes exacerbated by low language proficiency (Bajwa et al., 2017; Ferede, 2018; Shakya et al., 2012) and psychological trauma (Kaida et al., 2020). If and when they do gain access, they tend to graduate with lower GPAs and take more semesters to complete than other groups (Bajwa et al., 2017).

Noting a gap in Canadian research on refugee students, the Newcomer Students’ Association (NSA) approached the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) in fall 2021 about a collaborative qualitative research project. Together, HEQCO and NSA worked to identify factors that contribute to refugee students’ success. We interviewed 19 Ontario refugee PSE students and recent graduates, recruited by NSA, who described how they overcame challenges with access and the factors that contributed to their persistence. HEQCO also analyzed Canadian census data to understand refugees’ postsecondary credential attainment and labour market outcomes, confirming that refugees who earn a PSE credential in Canada have improved labour market outcomes compared with those who do not.

Describing challenges with access, interviewees noted that the settlement support staff they encountered prioritized employment over PSE and lacked knowledge of PSE options and supports. Interviewees eventually found a friend, relative or someone in the community who could provide guidance on how to ‘crack in.’ Still, initial informational barriers they encountered delayed their entry, creating an immediate sense that they were behind their peers. That sense of needing to catch up continued once enrolled:

interviewees faced challenges with academic and social integration, struggling to form bonds with peers and understand academic expectations in Ontario. Competing responsibilities (including part-time work and family obligations), difficulties with language acquisition and experiences of discrimination added to their sense of being behind and outside. Interviewees also felt they lagged behind their peers in terms of skills and experiences, such as extracurriculars and work, which would prepare them to be competitive job applicants after graduation.

Most of our interviewees eventually built social networks and grew accustomed to Ontario PSE expectations, often with support from formal or informal mentor relationships. In many cases, these connections were formed late in students' PSE journeys. Interviewees who participated in work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities felt more competitive in their job searches. Those who did not access WIL during their PSE journeys considered themselves at a disadvantage.

To help more refugees access PSE and catch up with their domestic and international peers, HEQCO recommends the Ministry of Colleges and Universities (MCU) and Ontario PSE institutions work together to:

- Ensure information about postsecondary pathways, financial support and entry requirements are readily available.
- Communicate supports for refugee students at the outset of PSE.
- Facilitate additional opportunities for peer-to-peer connections and WIL.

Full recommendations can be found starting on [page 23](#).

Introduction

Millions of people around the world are displaced annually (UNHCR Canada, 2022b). In 2022, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees announced a sobering milestone: “100 million people were forced to flee conflict, violence, human rights violations and persecution for the first time on record, propelled by the war in Ukraine and other deadly conflicts.” This amounts to 1% of the global population (UNHCR, 2022).

Ontario has consistently welcomed the greatest number of refugees (nearly half) arriving in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2019). While the invitation to resettle is important, it is just the start of a host country’s obligations, which involve providing “acceptable conditions of stay” that include the right to education and gainful employment (UNHCR Cyprus, 2017). Recognizing postsecondary education (PSE) is a “critical link between learning and earning,” the UNHCR established a “15by30” goal to ensure 15% of young refugees access PSE by 2030 (UNHCR, n.d.; UNHCR, 2019). Beyond supporting improved labour market outcomes (Anisef et al., 2008), PSE helps refugees maintain hope for their futures and contribute to their new communities in positive ways (Ferede, 2018).

In Ontario, despite our province’s legal obligation to facilitate access to education and interest in supporting strong social and economic outcomes, less than 20% of refugees access PSE (Prokopenko, 2018). Refugees are distinct from other immigrant groups; they are not selected for immigration based on their skills or experience or admitted because they have family in Canada who can offer financial support (Prokopenko, 2018). Refugees’ educational pathways are often disrupted by the circumstances forcing them to flee (Shakya et al., 2012). While other immigrant students tend to leave their country by choice, and gain information about PSE options throughout high school and via established social networks, refugees are rarely able to investigate education or career pathways before they arrive (Bajwa et al., 2017; Shankar et al., 2016).

Data sources like the Canadian Census and the Longitudinal Immigration Database provide opportunities to explore rates of PSE access and outcomes, but they do not provide insights into *why* refugees lag behind their peers. A small number of Canadian studies do provide instructive, though limited, research. We draw on two in particular: one examines the educational aspirations of refugee youth (Shakya et al., 2012); the second is a multi-stage study that first explores the role informational barriers play in PSE access (Bajwa et. al, 2017) and then considers how a pilot program can help overcome barriers and support educational decisions of refugees in Canada (Bajwa et. al, 2018). Both studies note the gap in Canadian evidence to support PSE access and success.

In fall 2021, the Newcomer Students’ Association (NSA) approached the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), noting the ever-increasing numbers of refugees

arriving in Ontario and the lack of Canadian research. NSA is a non-profit organization that supports newcomers, immigrants and refugees attending Ontario postsecondary institutions. NSA staff proposed a project to document challenges that refugee students and graduates face in their pursuit of PSE and offer insight into factors that contribute to their persistence and graduation.

This report summarizes findings from interviews with 19 Ontario refugee postsecondary students and recent graduates, a review of existing literature and an analysis of Canadian census data — work that sheds light on a group of students often considered to be “invisible” (Stevenson & Baker, 2018). Participants recruited through NSA’s network had all gained access to Ontario PSE; interviews with this group allow us to focus on student persistence and success and enable us to explore the challenges that result in longer time-to-degree or program completion. We offer recommendations to inform policy and practical interventions for both government and institutions to support this unique and often misunderstood student population.

Context and Literature Review

According to the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is:

A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion is outside the country of his [their] nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail [themselves] of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of [their] former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (UNHCR, 2011).

There are two main refugee classifications in Canada: “Convention Refugees” and “Persons in Need of Protection.” ‘Convention Refugees’ are unable to return to their country of origin due to fear of persecution based on race, religion, political opinion, nationality or belonging to certain social groups. A ‘Person in Need of Protection’ is someone who cannot return to their country of origin due to the risk of imminent danger, such as torture, death, and cruel and unusual punishment (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2020).

In 2002, Canada enacted the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act*, increasing refugee sponsorship opportunities based on humanitarian grounds (Shakya et al., 2012). From 2002 to 2010, the main countries of origin for refugees resettling in Canada were Colombia, Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2015, the Government of Canada committed to welcoming Syrian refugees; between 2016 and 2021, more than 60,000 new Syrian-born

refugees arrived, accounting for over one-quarter of new refugees in the country. From 2016 to 2021, Iraq, Eritrea, Afghanistan and Pakistan were the other most common countries of origin for new refugees (Statistics Canada, 2022b). In total, over 30,000 refugees resettled in Canada in 2019 (UNHCR Canada, 2021).¹ Since then, the Government of Canada committed to welcoming up to 40,000 refugees from Afghanistan, over 17,000 of whom have arrived (Government of Canada, 2022b). Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in March 2022, Canada pledged to support “an unlimited number” of Ukrainians fleeing the war through a special immigration program (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada 2022a).² The Canadian Border Service Agency reports that 91,222 Ukrainians have arrived in Canada by land and air between January 1 and September 18, 2022, though this number includes Ukrainian citizens as well as returning Canadian permanent residents of Ukrainian origin (Government of Canada, 2022c).

Refugees can come to Canada via three settlement programs.³ The first, the Government-Assisted Refugee Program, offers refugees who are referred by the UNHCR or other partners a pathway into Canada and financial aid from the Canadian government for up to one year. The second program, the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program, allows individual Canadians and groups of Canadians (e.g., faith groups) to sponsor or resettle persons that qualify for refugee status. The third method of entry is the Blended Visa Office-Referred Program, which provides a pathway for refugees who are most at-risk in their home countries; for example, this may apply to women and girls who are victims or in danger of sexual violence, or survivors of torture and violence. In 2019, 64% of refugees arrived in Canada via private sponsorships, 33% via the Government-Assisted Refugee program, and 3% via the Blended Visa Office-Referred Program (UNHCR Canada, 2021).

From January to June 2022, Ontario accepted over 100,000 immigrants, and refugees accounted for almost 20% of this total (Thevenot et al., 2022). These numbers are projected to continue climbing given Canada’s ongoing commitments to resettle refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada 2022a, 2022b).

¹ Forty-three percent came from the Middle East, 42% came from Africa, 12% came from Asia, 0.5% came from the Americas and 0.08% from Europe. Males accounted for 54% of resettled refugees and females made up 46% (UNHCR Canada, 2021). Of this group, 61% were adults and 39% were children. In the same period, 30% of resettled refugees were victims of torture or violence, 29% has specific legal or physical protection needs, 18% were women who were at risk of violence, 10% were children at risk or reunited with their families, 7% lacked an alternative solution to resettlement (e.g., other countries would not accept their application for asylum), and 5% had significant medical needs that could not be addressed in their home countries (UNHCR Canada, 2021).

² This program allows Ukrainian refugees to stay in Canada as temporary residents for up to three years, with an open work permit or study permit for that period (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2022).

³ Asylum seekers are also included in these three settlement programs.

Refugee PSE Access

A large portion of refugees arrive in Canada without a high school education and little or no English or French language skills (Shakya et al., 2012; UNHCR Canada, 2022a). UNICEF estimates primary school-aged refugees are five times more likely to be out of school compared to other children; this is in part a reflection of barriers in conflict-afflicted zones (UNICEF, 2017). Globally, for the 2020-21 academic year, about 68% of refugees were enrolled in primary-level education, and the rate of access significantly decreases as children get older; 37% of refugee youth are enrolled in high school and only 6% are enrolled in tertiary education (UNHCR, 2022).

About 20% of refugees (aged 25 to 54 at the time of landing) participate in Canadian PSE training after they arrive — which is low compared to Economic-class immigrants (42%), and about the same as Family-class immigrants (i.e., spouses, children or grandparents of sponsors in Canada (21%). Refugees who pursue PSE also tend to do so after more years in Canada than Economic- and Family-class immigrants (Prokopenko, 2018). Our analysis of 2016 census data indicates refugees are more likely to not have a certificate, diploma or degree compared to immigrants and individuals born in Canada; 23% of refugees had no certificate, diploma or degree compared with 11% of immigrants and 10% of individuals born in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2017). Among refugees, women are less likely to participate in Canadian PSE than men (Prokopenko, 2018).

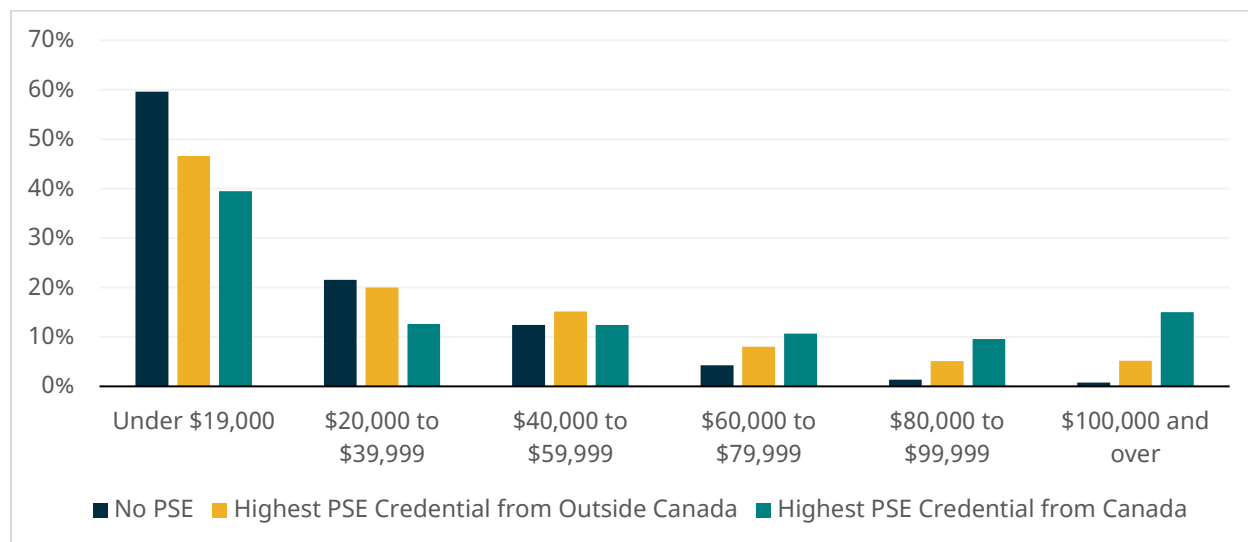
The Role of PSE in Resettlement

We know from existing Canadian research that postsecondary access improves labour market outcomes for newcomers (Anisef et al., 2008), including better odds of employment and higher earnings (Ferede, 2018; Prokopenko, 2018). Refugees arriving in any country tend to have poorer labour market outcomes than those who immigrate through economic streams, owing to a range of factors including trauma and career and education disruptions (Kaida et al., 2020).

Figure 1 depicts HEQCO's census data analysis: a higher proportion of refugees in Ontario who fall into the lowest income categories have no PSE (or their highest PSE) outside of Canada. Conversely, a higher proportion of refugees who fall into the highest income categories have earned their highest credential in Canada. In general, refugees who earn a PSE credential in Canada have better earnings outcomes compared to those with no PSE or PSE outside Canada.

Figure 1

Employment Income Groups of Refugees in Ontario



Note: This figure shows that a higher proportion of refugees in Ontario who fall into the lowest income categories have no PSE or their highest PSE credential outside of Canada. A higher proportion of refugees who fall into the highest income categories have earned their highest PSE credential in Canada. The figure includes refugees who were not in school and had employment income at the time of the census.

Postsecondary degrees are associated with healthier lifestyles and better integration into host countries; PSE is also shown to support positive mental health outcomes for refugees, many of whom arrive after exposure to prolonged violence and conflict, hazardous living conditions, poverty and family separation (Korntheuer et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2022; Ferede, 2018). Refugees’ identities are often negatively associated with narratives of loss, fear and war, and PSE can help provide a new identity (such as ‘student’ or ‘scholar’) associated with hope and possibility (Ferede, 2018; Shakya et al., 2012).

Barriers to Postsecondary Access and Success

Researchers have described refugee students in postsecondary education as the “invisible group” (Stevenson & Baker, 2018, p. 51). Ontario’s education sector does not collect student data related to pre-migration or immigration status (Anderson, 2020; Shakya et al., 2012). Instead, sector-level educational data tend to group refugee students, who are eligible for domestic tuition, with other categories, such as “foreign-born” or “immigrant” (Shakya et al., 2012). As such, refugees remain largely overlooked from policy and institutional perspectives, further cementing their ‘invisibility.’

Previous HEQCO research indicates that level of parental education is the strongest predictor of PSE access in Ontario (Chatoor et al., 2019). Notably, less than 15% of refugee fathers have university degrees, and in some countries, female participation in PSE is

largely discouraged, resulting in very limited or no access to PSE opportunities for refugee mothers (Anderson, 2020). Among refugee parents with PSE qualifications, many experience 'deskilling'⁴ of their credentials, which can force them into precarious employment and shift their focus from supporting their children's academic pursuits (Anderson, 2020). Even if refugees arrive in a host country with necessary documentation, their prior learning often needs to be evaluated to determine equivalency. This process can lead to loss of credits or credentials (Ferede, 2018).

One of the better-documented barriers refugee groups face in their pursuit of PSE is a lack of access to timely and accurate information (Bajwa et al., 2017; Ferede, 2018; Shakya et al., 2012). One study involving refugee students noted their confusion about how to apply for PSE and what criteria they needed to fulfill. Students in the study had difficulty differentiating between the private and public education sectors as well as between colleges and universities and understanding the labour market outcomes of these varied pathways. Without knowing where to begin their search, study participants gathered information through limited social connections. Although some students found the advice helpful, others noted that this left them particularly vulnerable to misinformation (Bajwa et al., 2017).

Information about financial aid and academic and social supports can also be difficult to access and understand (Bajwa et al., 2017). Refugees arriving in Ontario are eligible to pay domestic tuition and access financial assistance through the Ontario Student Assistance Program, or OSAP (MCU, 2022; Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2019). Unfortunately, this information is often not clearly communicated to nor understood by refugees. Bajwa et al. (2017) note that refugee students described feeling lost as to what sort of financial aid was available and how to access it. Participants felt frustrated, disappointed and overwhelmed.

For all students, success is associated with their integration into the academic and social fabric of PSE (Tinto, 1987). This integration is particularly critical for international students, including refugees (McKee et al., 2019). A 2013 United Nations report explains: "a student migrant who feels disoriented or unwelcome is likely to have difficulty learning and is more vulnerable to risks within a new community" (p. 69). One significant barrier to integration is language skills — refugees and their families are more likely to have limited or no official language capacity compared to other immigrant groups, making it difficult to obtain access to information about PSE (Anderson, 2020; Bajwa et al., 2017; Shayka et al., 2012; Stevenson & Baker, 2018). Refugee youth in one 2012 study indicated difficulty understanding concepts taught in high school and hesitation seeking clarification from

⁴ Deskilling is defined as "the non-recognition of immigrants' prior credentials and work experience" (Guo, 2009, pg. 38).

teachers or interacting with peers — all due to challenges with the English language and academic jargon. As a result, participants fell behind in their studies (Shayka et al., 2012). Refugees who gain access to postsecondary education tend to graduate with lower GPAs and take more semesters to complete their education than native English speakers (Bajwa et al., 2017). Refugees attending PSE can also find themselves with family responsibilities — as primary providers, interpreters and caretakers — which may compete with their academic priorities (Arar, 2021).

Trauma and a lack of supports to overcome it represent important barriers to PSE success. Not only must refugee students contend with traumatic memories, but they may also encounter peers or instructors in PSE who lack the knowledge or understanding to accurately interpret their behaviour or needs, which can exacerbate past traumatic experiences (Korntheuer et al., 2018). Refugee students often experience discrimination and social exclusion relating to their immigration status, race, culture, religion and/or accent (Korntheuer et al., 2018; McKee et al., 2019; Shakya et al., 2012). When refugee students experience discrimination in education contexts, it can have long-term negative consequences for their mental health and well-being (Korntheuer et al., 2018). The pilot project by Bajwa et al., 2018 illustrated the potential positive outcomes of creating safe spaces for students to engage with issues of racism and discrimination, including by sharing personal experiences, reactions and strategies).

Existing Interventions

In response to such barriers, some PSE institutions have implemented tailored programs to support access and success among refugee students. Examples include Western University's Afghan Student Refugee Scholarship,⁵ which covers tuition, fees and living expenses for refugees coming from Afghanistan; the University of Toronto Mississauga Refugee Pathway, which supports students without official documentation to access university (University of Toronto Mississauga, n.d.); and York University's Sanctuary Scholars program,⁶ which began as a partnership with the FCJ Refugee Centre, streamlines the application process for refugee students and provides specialized supports (Maric, 2018; Wiens, 2018). While exemplary, each of these programs support a relatively small number of students — generally between five and 15 per program.

Notably, World University Services of Canada (WUSC), a Canadian not-for-profit designed to improve educational and economic opportunities for youth, runs the Student Refugee

⁵ See Office of the Registrar, University of Western Ontario, "[Afghan Student Refugee Scholarship](#)."

⁶ See *The Charlatan*, "[Precarious status youth pursue degrees at York U.](#)" Limited information is publicly available about the Sanctuary Scholars Program. York University includes a [brief overview of the program](#) on a webpage that outlines several different student bursaries and opportunities for donors to provide financial support.

Program (SRP). The SRP connects refugees in need of resettlement with PSE opportunities thanks to funding from the federal government and Canadian postsecondary institutions — over 80 institutions, including 19 universities and 11 colleges from Ontario,⁷ have participated (Ghosh et al., 2019; Peterson, 2012; Wong & Yohani, 2016). The program launched in 1978 and now supports over 150 refugees per year by covering the cost of tuition for the first year of study while the host institution covers food and accommodations (WUSC, 2021). Thereafter, the institution is financially responsible for supporting students with tuition and textbooks as well (Wong & Yohani, 2016). While successful — the program boasts a 97% completion rate (WUSC, 2021) — the SRP is only available to refugees in countries of asylum outside of Canada at the time of application between the ages of 18 and 25 (WUSC, 2022). Participants must also demonstrate strong English or French language skills, have completed high school and possess documentation of prior academic achievement (McKee et al., 2019).

Two recent initiatives have been deployed to assist Ukrainian refugees specifically. In May 2022, Colleges and Institutes Canada (CICan) announced the launch of over 150 scholarships for Ukrainian students to relieve financial hardships; 14 Ontario colleges⁸ are listed as having committed their support by waiving tuition for at least one year. The Ontario government (via MCU) also plans to provide \$1.9 million in 2022-23 to establish the Ontario-Ukraine Solidarity Scholarship (Office of the Premier, 2022). Institutions will administer competitions and issue awards to enrolled students based on merit and financial need. This is particularly important because Ukrainians fleeing conflict and entering Canada will do so with three-year temporary resident visas — this policy will expedite entry but will mean, unlike other refugees, that this group is not eligible for OSAP.

One educational program at the elementary and secondary level also deserves mention: the Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS). SWIS provides newcomer families and students with specialized support navigating Ontario's education system and broader community. In communities across Ontario, dedicated SWIS workers at elementary and secondary schools help students access resources, services and guidance attuned to their needs and

⁷ Participating Ontario institutions are: Algoma University, Algonquin College, Brock University, Carleton University, Centennial College, College La Cité, Conestoga College, Confederation College, Georgian College, Humber College, Lakehead University, Laurentian University, McMaster University, Nipissing University, Ontario Tech University, Queen's University, Sault College, Seneca College, Sheridan College, Ryerson University (now Toronto Metropolitan University), Trent University, University of Guelph, University of Ottawa, University of Toronto, University of Waterloo, University of Windsor, Western University, Wilfrid Laurier University, York University (WUSC, 2019).

⁸ The 14 Ontario colleges are: Algonquin College, Canadore College, Centennial College, Durham College, Fanshawe College, Fleming College, Georgian College, Humber College, Lambton College, Loyalist College, Niagara College, Seneca College, Sheridan College and St Lawrence College (Colleges and Institutes Canada, 2022).

experiences as refugees. SWIS workshops and group activities also help introduce refugee students and their families to cultural norms and topics like housing and tenant rights, healthy eating and volunteerism (LUSO, 2020; Culture Link, n.d.; Immigrant Services Guelph-Wellington, 2023).

Research Questions and Methodology

This report explores the experiences of refugee students and recent graduates in Ontario PSE and offers evidence on access and success. Our core research questions were as follows:

- How do refugee students overcome challenges to PSE access and success?
- What are some of the factors — including provincial and institutional policies — that contribute to refugee students’ PSE access and persistence?

To address these questions, we reviewed existing literature and data sources and conducted key informant interviews.

Review of Literature and Data Sources

Both HEQCO and NSA contributed to the literature review, which informed the development of our interview guide and research questions. HEQCO also accessed Statistics Canada microdata from the 2016 Census. The census is one of few data sources that provides specific information about refugees’ postsecondary credential attainment and labour market outcomes.

Working with the census data,⁹ we grouped working-age adults (aged 25 to 64) living in Ontario who were not in school¹⁰ into three categories: those born in Canada (excluding those with Indigenous status),¹¹ immigrant (excluding refugees) and refugee. The immigrant category includes individuals who have ever been a landed immigrant or permanent resident. The refugee category includes those who had a successful refugee claim and obtained landed immigrant or permanent resident status. HEQCO conducted

⁹ The census data we used includes only the population in private households. This means that Canadian citizens living temporarily in other countries, full-time members of the Canadian Armed Forces stationed outside of Canada, persons living in institutional collective dwellings such as hospitals, nursing homes and penitentiaries, and persons living in non-institutional collective dwellings, such as work camps, hotels and motels, are not included in the reported proportions.

¹⁰ The OECD and Statistics Canada define the working age population as those aged 15 to 64 who produce most goods and services (OECD Data, 2022; Statistics Canada, 2022a). However, since our project focuses on PSE, we increased the lower end of this range to 25, as this is the average age at postsecondary graduation in Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2020).

¹¹ Indigenous people were not included in the “born in Canada” category, as the educational achievement gap between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous Canadians is well documented (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2021).

descriptive statistics using these groupings. We weighted all results to be representative of the general population using census weighting and bootstrap procedures outlined in the Statistics Canada User Guide.

Key Informant Interviews

With support from NSA, HEQCO conducted 19 interviews to inform this exploratory project. To participate, interviewees had to be a current PSE student or recent graduate who:

- arrived in Canada as a refugee in the last 10 years (during or after the year 2012);
- is a convention refugee, protected person or permanent resident; and
- is currently studying in a postsecondary program for a degree or diploma in Ontario that is at least one year long, OR have completed a postsecondary program (at least one year long) in Ontario in the last three years.¹²

Our research questions focus on PSE access, persistence, success and post-graduation outcomes, rather than on insurmountable challenges that prevent access altogether. Thus our study is limited to those who are currently enrolled in Ontario's PSE and/or who recently graduated from a PSE program in Ontario (i.e., we did not interview refugees who dropped out of their programs or who could not access PSE). NSA staff recruited participants by sharing the opportunity and participation criteria on their website and social media channels. NSA also sent email invitations to specific individuals who were part of their network and met the inclusion criteria.

HEQCO asked interested students or graduates to complete a short online form, which we used to confirm interested parties met our study criteria; ensure participants knew what to expect; obtain their consent to participate; and gather helpful background information, such as whether they were currently studying or working and whether they pursued a college or university program. Once they completed the form, eligible participants used a scheduling platform to select an interview time.

HEQCO and NSA collaborated on the development of a semi-structured interview guide; we designed interview questions to explore themes connected to the research questions. The full guide is included in Appendix 1. HEQCO provided questions to participants in advance and led interviews, conducted over Zoom and in English, with an option to use

¹² We have defined "recent graduate" consistent with others in the sector, including the National Graduate Survey (2007, 2013, 2018), the Ontario Internship Program (2021) and the Ontario University Graduate Survey (2015, 2018, 2019), who all define "recent graduates" as having completed their PSE credential within the last two to three years.

closed captioning. We offered those who participated a \$25 gift card as an honorarium for their time.

The 19 interviewees included a roughly even mix of: male- and female-identifying participants; those who were students at the time of the interview, and those who had recently graduated; and those who pursued college programs and university programs. Most interviewees indicated in the online form that they had accessed OSAP to help fund their education in Ontario. Most also indicated that they held a postsecondary certificate, degree or diploma from outside of Canada. After the interviews were complete, HEQCO developed a coding framework and analyzed the interview notes in NVivo. We used a comparative method to identify common themes and make connections between the interviews and our review of both the literature and publicly available data.

Findings and Discussion

Our interviewees seem to have possessed strong social and cultural capital — trusting relationships that helped them navigate Canadian systems, as well as English language skills — something we know can help refugees overcome barriers to accessing PSE (Morrice, 2013; Poteyeva, 2018). All of our interviewees also described themselves as strongly motivated to pursue PSE; for some, this was out of a passion for a subject or a desire to gain qualifications for a field of work. Others viewed education more broadly as a means of contributing to Canadian society and achieving a better life.

We found interviewees encountered a range of factors affecting their pursuit of PSE. Overall, the refugees we spoke with described a constant need to catch up with their peers (both domestic and international students). Specifically, they described having to catch up to their peers' level of knowledge of Ontario PSE opportunities and entrance requirements; understanding of Canadian culture and academic expectations; and skills and experiences (such as extracurriculars and work) that would prepare them to be competitive applicants for employment. Interviewees also noted institutional supports and government interventions that could help other refugee students make up for lost time.

Accessing Accurate and Timely Information about Ontario PSE

Our interviewees had difficulty accessing information about Ontario PSE options, which stalled their trajectories. We heard that a lack of accessible, official information led interviewees to consult unofficial information sources, as reflected in a Toronto-based study (Bajwa et al., 2017). Our interviewees spoke about having been “lucky” to find or know someone who could help them navigate the system. Still, even for the lucky, these initial difficulties accessing information delayed their entry to PSE, creating a strong sense that they were behind their peers. One interviewee described envying a younger sibling

who attended high school in Ontario and who gained helpful information about PSE, including information about basic subjects: “I knew nothing of sociology, psychology, philosophy, so I didn’t have a full grasp of the options available to me.”

Interviewees reported feeling initially preoccupied with finding employment opportunities rather than pursuing PSE, in part because settlement agencies advised them to direct their time and energy in this way. One interviewee commented that the support they received from a settlement agency was disproportionately geared toward short-term economic opportunities: “Yes, we can work and survive, but what about our dreams? We need direction on how to apply to universities and colleges. Most of these agencies focus on employment.” Another interviewee noted a lack of awareness among settlement support staff about available bridging programs.¹³ Several Ontario institutions have designed programs to support PSE access for refugees, but these programs are not accessible to those who are simply unaware of them.

Interviewees also described barriers to accessing information about financial assistance. Speaking both for themselves and another family member, one interviewee explained:

Nobody told us about OSAP. We found out from friends, but it took about two to three years to learn of resources like OSAP and bursaries. We hadn’t applied to college or university because we had the idea it was too expensive.

While that interviewee eventually accessed OSAP, making PSE financially manageable for them, others took out non-government loans to cover costs. One interviewee who secured a high-interest loan voiced that they did not receive adequate advice or support selecting their program. Their ‘catching up’ was both financial and program-related: they expressed regret for having selected what felt like a “random” program with few career prospects, leading to significant debt, saying they learned too late that institutions can provide free counselling to help prospective students decide on the right path.

Much as previous research highlights (Bajwa et al., 2017; Kingston & Karakas, 2022; Shakya et al., 2012; Stevenson & Baker, 2018), we found interviewees would have benefitted from more readily available information about educational pathways and supports, sooner and through more official channels. Directing refugees solely toward the labour market, rather than providing information about PSE options, has the long-term effect of directing them to lower-wage, lower-skilled jobs.

¹³ These programs are designed to bridge the gaps between a prospective student’s prior education and the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in an Ontario college or university program.

Adjusting to Canadian Culture and Academic Expectations

Once enrolled, our interviewees had difficulty integrating into the academic and social fabric of their campus communities. They highlighted challenges with forming bonds with peers and understanding Ontario academic expectations. Competing responsibilities, difficulties with language acquisition and discrimination further complicated both aspects of integration, adding to the sense of being behind and outside. Feelings of isolation and lagging added strains on interviewees' mental health and well-being, compounding the strains they experienced before and during settlement.

Academic Integration

Interviewees noted the intensity of their schooling, and that the sheer number of assignments was initially overwhelming. For others, it was the nature of the subjects and assignments that presented challenges. Several interviewees recall being confused, initially, over tasks that asked them to share their own views or interpretations (or what one interviewee called "expressive writing") — something they had not been asked to do previously.

Difficulty with language proficiency compounded their challenges adjusting to academic expectations. Even interviewees who felt they had a strong grasp of English said they felt unprepared for the "academic English" they encountered in their courses. Examples that interviewees shared mirror those raised in the literature (Anderson, 2020; Ghadban, 2018), including difficulty engaging in classroom discussions, producing scholarly assignments and understanding course expectations. One interviewee estimated they spent two hours on a task they might have completed in 15 minutes with better language proficiency; another interviewee recalled their confusion about assignment types:

One instructor asks us to write a critical paper and another asks us to write an informative research paper. I didn't know what these terms meant. I would go to Google to understand them because I didn't have the courage to ask the instructors what these [papers] were.

Additionally, interviewees did not know where to access or had difficulty accessing academic support. Participants mentioned that support systems are not widely advertised, creating confusion and frustration. Others noted scheduling conflicts interfered with their ability to access support; one participant explained the business hours of the writing centre conflicted with their course schedule. Though they did eventually access the centre, the experience left them frustrated and stressed. That frustration was magnified when students found the supports they received were not tailored to their needs. One participant also experienced discrimination when seeking support, echoing a finding from

a previous study that found high school teachers and administrators may hold negative stereotypes impacting refugees' academic experiences (Shakya et al., 2012).

Academic challenges were often compounded by competing responsibilities. One participant described the difficulty balancing dual roles of student and translator while a family member battled cancer:

I came with a big family — parents, siblings, and grandparents. I was the only one that spoke English. I was in charge of everything translation-wise since day one. This was a big challenge — if I have a class at 2 p.m. and my mom has a doctor's appointment [at the same time], I have to go with her. There is no translation service in healthcare unless you pay someone to go. I had to leave school to be with my mom. I skipped so many classes. It was very challenging, especially in the first year.

Interviewees also had to catch up financially, which led them to take on part- or full-time work. Often, work interfered with their studies, sometimes because of direct scheduling conflicts. In other cases, working part-time was a general distraction from studying, resulting in a lack of sleep and inhibiting participation in extracurriculars. One interviewee described: "Working full-time was just insane. I didn't want to miss out on that [campus] experience but I had to work. Balancing work life and school was the most challenging." Another interviewee, who worked part-time in construction, explained the stress of working in that industry: "You can be called any day, anytime. I'm studying during the night and morning. I'm so tired."

We also heard positive stories about finding support from institutions through writing workshops, for example. One interviewee described personalized support as being particularly beneficial, which includes faculty or staff who made them feel seen: "One professor acknowledged differences between the students in the class, international students and domestic students, which made me say 'thank god, she understands.'" Another praised a friend and lecturer who helped them find financial support: "I'm grateful for people like him who help identify the students who would benefit from grants."

Social Integration

Despite yearning to form friendships and catch up socially in their new PSE communities, interviewees described feeling too preoccupied to do so. Upon realizing they were behind their peers academically, rather than spend time forming friendships, they felt a need to build a portfolio. As one interviewee put it:

I struggled to make friends initially because I was so focused on studies and catching up with extracurriculars ... I see students gathering together to study and

I think 'I can't join you, I'm working.' I feel like I'm missing out on the community aspect of being a student.

If and when they had the time to socialize, interviewees noted difficulty forming bonds with their peers, often attributed to language proficiency. One interviewee noted difficulty understanding the slang that students used in small talk and said this prevented them from forming connections. Other interviewees were victims of discrimination, sensing they were being perceived as different or an outsider. One interviewee described the toll this took, noting feelings of fear and anxiety when socializing within their residence. The interviewee felt forced into introversion, saying: "I am Black, Muslim and a refugee — that was a burden to me."

Experiences of discrimination or being misunderstood by Canadian peers and faculty can compound the trauma many refugees experienced before beginning school (Korntheuer et al., 2018; McKee et al., 2019; Shakya et al., 2012). Our interviewees considered mental health support as essential. Many refugee students require support navigating the day-to-day challenges they encounter as they begin a new life. Without proper supports, such as culturally relevant counselling, the refugee students we spoke with struggled to overcome their isolation, especially at the outset of their PSE experiences.

Interviewees reported that peer relationships helped them begin to feel like part of their PSE communities; in particular, they pointed to the importance of formal and informal mentorship. In addition to providing social and emotional support, peer mentorship is widely recognized as enabling academic success and individual resilience (Arar, 2021; Ghosh et al., 2019; McKee et al., 2019; Wong & Yohani, 2016). For refugees specifically, peer mentorship can help them navigate educational and career pathways, understand cultural norms and adjust to Ontario's PSE expectations (Bajwa et al., 2017). By creating space for relationships to form between refugee students, institutions can help create conditions for healing and enhanced self-esteem (Bajwa et al., 2018). One interviewee reflected, "It feels less isolating having a person help you through things. [My mentor] helped me with a career plan, courses to pursue, resources I could use and opportunities I could apply for."

A study of the SRP program found student mentors helped refugees find jobs on campus, which in turn helped "build Canadian experience on students' resumés, improve their language skills, and connect them to other employment opportunities and networks" (McKee et al., 2019, p. 82). Our interviewees echoed these findings. In many cases, informal mentor relationships were facilitated by virtual platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. We heard several examples of students starting or joining virtual groups, where they posed and responded to questions and developed connections that helped them feel supported.

Prior research suggests refugee students who are empowered with information and resources are often inclined to take an active role in supporting and mentoring their friends and family through the education system (Shakya et al., 2012). One interviewee reflected on becoming an informal mentor themselves:

People were actually coming to me for help. As I started to accumulate resources about the process, I would connect them to external sources. There was an element of trust — they know I'm from the community and I have no ulterior motive.

We note that in many cases, these mentorship relationships were formed late in students' PSE journeys. Interviewees noted that earlier access to support networks would ease social and academic adjustment and help them make up for lost time planning their educational paths.

Preparing for the Workforce

Most of the PSE graduates we interviewed indicated being happy with their employment outcomes after graduation. Much as the employment data suggest, the graduates we spoke with felt their education helped them secure a better career than they would have had otherwise. Some specifically noted the importance of social capital built through their studies as they formed relationships with peers and faculty. Most current students anticipated positive outcomes and noted that their studies have helped clarify their career goals. As one interviewee described:

[When I arrived in Canada] I was not feeling confident about my career. I needed to add more skills, knowledge, and experience, and learn about Canadian culture. I had to take another step by going to PSE. The knowledge [I gained] has enabled me to successfully get a job in Canada. I feel confident with the education I got.

WIL arose often in our interviews. Those interviewees who had participated in WIL opportunities felt it helped them catch up and position them more evenly with peers in their job searches. Meanwhile, interviewees who did not access WIL as part of their programs considered themselves at a disadvantage. Indeed, some students felt that without practical experience, their education would be insufficient. One interviewee mentioned, "I am looking for any chance to volunteer in my area of interest so I won't be rejected from job offers because I don't have the experience." Another noted: "I would have appreciated it if I'd had co-ops through my program — something that makes it easier to access organizations [I'm interested in working for]."

WIL is valuable for all students — it facilitates skill development and helps smooth the transition into the labour market (Stirling et al., 2016). Refugee students stand to gain

particular value from workplace experiences. Our interviewees pointed to the importance of career service offices for advice about useful connections for job-seeking after graduation. Some mentioned specific services, such as support with resumé- and cover letter-writing or mock interviews, while others appreciated having access to a staff member who could direct them to work opportunities in their field.

Conclusions and Recommendations

We spoke to students who were highly motivated, with prior education and social connections who could offer them vital guidance — factors that help explain how they, against the odds, entered the Ontario postsecondary system. Once they accessed PSE, however, even these highly motivated students found themselves working to catch up socially, academically and financially. This work of catching up helps explain the fact that refugees often take longer to complete their PSE programs than other groups — a reality that increases the opportunity costs of PSE as it delays their entry into the labour market. For some students, catching up also means realizing that, with better information during their academic planning, they could have chosen a different program or professional pathway (one less arbitrary, more suited to interest or with better compensation). Of course, these were the successful students — those who are persisting and those who have graduated. These challenges will prove insurmountable for many other refugees — those who are unable to complete their programs or who can never access PSE in the first place.

The informational barriers we heard about are also likely magnified for Ukrainian refugees, who are entering Canada with three-year temporary resident visas. While this policy decision was made to expedite entry, it may create unintended complications for postsecondary access: students will have to apply as international students and seek exemptions or access to the Ontario-Ukraine Solidarity Scholarship, provided they are aware of it, and they will not be eligible for OSAP. Future research should focus on how these refugees navigate the pathways into PSE, as their transitions are marked by federal and provincial policies that will play out in local contexts.

Even though most of our interviewees described feeling integrated eventually, refugee students require supports that are tailored to their unique needs, especially early in their academic careers. By improving the availability and accessibility of information about PSE pathways, and ensuring refugees feel supported and included in PSE communities from the start, both the Ontario government and postsecondary institutions can contribute to a better settlement experience. In turn, refugees will make stronger contributions to communities and to the provincial economy.

The following recommendations aim to improve PSE access and support for refugees.

Government and institutions should improve access to information about postsecondary pathways, financial support and entry requirements for refugees settling in Ontario

- MCU should consolidate information about admissions and fees for refugee students into a dedicated page on the ministry website. The page should include a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section that covers expectations for PSE life, financial aid information (including scholarships) and supports available to refugee students (including that PSE institutions offer free consultations about program selection). The same information should appear on other important resources, such as 211 Ontario's "Newcomers"¹⁴ website.
- Immigration units at the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development should coordinate with MCU to help bridge the gap between settlement agencies and the PSE sector, ensuring information about PSE and work opportunities is available for refugees.
- Institutions should share this consolidated information on their own websites and include a contact person to whom prospective refugee students can direct questions.
- Re-settlement agencies should also consider employing dedicated staff (with knowledge of postsecondary pathways) to help direct prospective students to opportunities and services (analogous to the SWIS program).

Institutions should clearly communicate supports available and tailored to refugee students at the outset of PSE.

- Interviewees noted most barriers to PSE success were concentrated and magnified near the outset of their programs. With this in mind, colleges and universities should ensure incoming refugee students are aware of:
 - mental health services (including non-urgent and culturally relevant counselling services);
 - academic support services, including introduction to English for academic purposes and support acclimatizing to Ontario PSE academic expectations; and
 - resources and supports that can help refugees adjust to "culture shock" (e.g., information about student groups for newcomers and international students, as well as resources relevant to cultural, religious and sexual identities, such as prayer spaces).

¹⁴ This website is a [virtual helpline](#) that connects individuals to social services, programs and community supports.

Institutions should facilitate opportunities for peer-to-peer connections and WIL.

- Colleges and universities should engage student unions and other student groups to develop activities or events that are aimed at bringing diverse students together.
- Institutions should offer peer mentorship programs that employ refugee students in later years. Mentorship programs can help incoming students navigate challenges of PSE life and provide meaningful WIL experiences to later-year students.
- Institutions should also ensure refugee students have access to WIL opportunities that help prepare them for the labour market and catch up with their peers.

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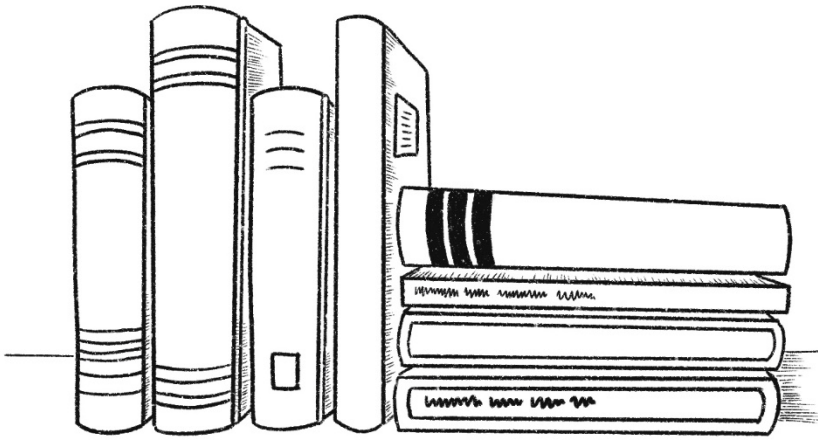
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Improving PSE Access and Experience for Refugees in Ontario

Appendices

Appendix 1

Interview Questions

1. What motivated you to pursue postsecondary education in Ontario?
 - a. *Follow-up question: How did you decide which school and program to pursue? Where or how did you get information on schools and programs?*
2. What has your experience as a postsecondary student in Ontario been like so far?
3. Have you experienced any difficulties in your postsecondary classes? Can you describe them?
4. Have you experienced any difficulties, outside of your postsecondary classes, that might have affected your studies? Can you describe them?
 - a. *Follow-up question: How did your settlement experience affect your postsecondary education studies?*
5. Have you accessed support for your learning from your institution or elsewhere within your community? What was your experience with that like?
6. What could your school do/have done to help you be more successful with your studies?
7. What do you wish you knew about Canadian universities and colleges before starting your education?

[For students who have not graduated]

8. What would you like to do after graduation?
 - a. *Follow-up: Do you think you will be in a good position to pursue that [line of work/goal] after you graduate from your program?*
 - b. *Follow-up: Do you think you'll utilize your campus career support services to assist with securing a job in your chosen line of work?*

[For students who have graduated]

8. Do you feel like your education made it easier to find a job after graduation?
9. In general, what has been your experience getting into the workforce after you graduated?
 - a. *Follow-up: What was/is your experience finding a job, applying to jobs, going through the interview/vetting process?*

- b. *Follow-up: Did you access campus career services to help with finding a job?*
- c. *Follow-up: What was/is your experience in the workplace?*