



SUMMARY REPORT

MAPPING REFUGEE SKILLS AND EMPLOYER NEEDS IN SURREY AND ABBOTSFORD

IMMIGRANT
EMPLOYMENT
COUNCIL OF BC **IEC**BC
Connecting Employers
to Immigrant Talent

FUNDED BY:

Canada



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is funded by the Government of Canada and
the Province of British Columbia.

Acknowledgements


We wish to express our sincere gratitude to all those who have contributed their time, guidance and expertise to the successful completion of the *Mapping Refugee Skills and Employer Needs in Surrey and Abbotsford* project. The information contained in this study is largely based on a consultative research with participation of employers in Surrey and Abbotsford. Without their support for the project's objectives, and their genuine interest in helping connect refugees with job opportunities in their communities, this project would not have been possible.

Coordinating local employer participation in the consultations was the responsibility of the Surrey Board of Trade (Anita Huberman, Chief Executive Officer) and the Abbotsford Chamber of Commerce (Allan Asaph, Executive Director). As members of the Project Steering Committee, Anita, Allan and members of their staff were instrumental in recruiting local employer participants in the consultations, organizing and hosting focus group workshops and, perhaps most importantly, providing indispensable feedback throughout all the phases of the research project.

The immigrant serving community was represented by DIVERSEcity Community Resources Society in Surrey (Tahzeem Kassam, Chief Operating Officer) and Abbotsford Community Services (Manpreet Grewal, Director of Multicultural & Immigrant Integration Services). Tahzeem and Manpreet served on the Project Steering Committee, providing vital perspective on the challenges of integrating refugees and other immigrants into the provincial workforce. It is through these organizations and their relationships with the employer communities that programs and services are provided to help connect refugees with job opportunities in Surrey and Abbotsford.

We wish to acknowledge the contribution of the following individuals: Kelly Pollack (former IEC-BC Chief Executive Officer) for her leadership in championing and initiating the project; Patrick McDonough (Principal, LMI Insight Inc) and Kerry Jothen (Principal, Human Capital Strategies) for their professionalism in leading the employer research and their dedication to the fulfillment of the project objectives.

Finally, we wish to thank the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction for funding this important initiative and for the ongoing support we received from program staff throughout the project.



Patrick MacKenzie, CEO, IEC-BC

BACKGROUND

As part of Canada’s response to the crisis in Syria, BC is expected to receive a total of 4,700 refugees, with Surrey expected to become home to an estimated 50% of these numbers and Abbotsford another 10%.

Integration of newcomers into the BC labour force is critical to both their personal success and the province’s long-term economic performance. There is very little empirical evidence about refugee employment challenges and opportunities in BC. To address this, in November 2016, the Immigrant Employment Council of BC (IEC-BC) launched the research project – *Mapping Refugee Skills and Employer Needs in Surrey and Abbotsford* – to help connect refugee talent with employers in these two communities.

Working with employers in Surrey and Abbotsford, the project endeavoured to:

- gain a better understanding of workforce requirements by “key” economic sector;
- identify the barriers faced by employers when recruiting and retaining refugee talent;
- coordinate the collection of skill profile information on “job-ready” refugees; and
- develop targeted strategies to connect employers to this talent pool.

This project is based on a combination of primary and secondary research.

This project was supported by the following project partners:

ROLE	PARTNERS & RESOURCES
Business Partners	Surrey Board of Trade (SBOT) Abbotsford Chamber of Commerce (ACC)
Service Partners	DIVERSEcity Community Resources Society (DCRS) Abbotsford Community Services (ACS)
Consultants	LMI Insight Human Capital Strategies

KEY ECONOMIC SECTORS

A Literature Review was undertaken to identify key sectors of the Surrey and Abbotsford economies where employers may be experiencing skill shortages and where future job openings are anticipated. With the exception of agriculture, the key sectors identified below have experienced strong employment growth over the last five years – in Surrey, Abbotsford, as well as across the Lower Mainland.

The agriculture sector is included given the backgrounds and work experience of recent refugee arrivals to BC. It should be noted that while these sectors are of importance to both Surrey and Abbotsford, their relative size varies for each community. For example, the agriculture industry in Abbotsford represents a more significant share of its economy than it does in Surrey.

Table 1: Key Economic Sectors

SERVICES SECTOR	GOODS SECTOR
Health Care (support services)	Construction
Professional & Scientific	Manufacturing
Transportation & Warehousing	Agriculture
Accommodation & Food	
Business, Building & Other Services	

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

BC is expecting almost one million job openings between 2015 and 2025, of which more than two-thirds will be to replace existing workers and one-third will be due to economic growth. Close to 600,000 job openings are projected in the Mainland/Southwest region – 60,000 annually over the 10-year outlook period.¹ Based on their share of regional employment, the Surrey economy could expect upwards of 100,000 job openings, and the Abbotsford economy close to 30,000 job openings over the 10-year outlook period.

Developing an understanding of the backgrounds of incoming refugees, in terms of their education, English language ability, and Canadian cultural awareness remains an important challenge. Another challenge is where, in their communities, they might find suitable employment. To this end, IEC-BC and partner organizations are in the process of collecting and organizing profile information to assist the matching of talent with available job opportunities in the respective communities. Understanding these attributes and the perspectives of refugees in the job market is vital to addressing the workforce integration challenge. New and innovative efforts are in development, including the launch of IEC-BC's *BC JobConnect* in February 2017 – an online portal to support and connect job-ready refugees and other newcomers to BC with employment opportunities.² Additionally, IEC-BC's *FAST* program includes Canadian workplace preparation modules that help newcomers better understand the expectations of employers when hiring workers.

¹ BC Ministry of Jobs, Tourism and Skills Training. British Columbia 2025 Labour Market Outlook (2016)

² From August 2017, the *BC Refugees JobConnect* portal has been expanded to encompass all newcomers to BC and rebranded as *BC JobConnect*.

BARRIERS TO HIRING AND RETAINING REFUGEE TALENT AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

This project was informed by substantive input from 42 employer representatives in Abbotsford and Surrey and contributed new empirical knowledge to a limited existing base of evidence on connecting employers and refugees in BC and Canada. The findings and strategies presented here can benefit other immigrant serving organizations (ISOs), as well as business/employer associations throughout BC, particularly those in the Lower Mainland, Fraser Valley and Greater Victoria areas.

Employers identified three primary challenges limiting their ability to recruit and retain refugee workers:

- knowing how and where to connect with “job-ready” refugee talent;
- refugees’ understanding of Canadian workplace culture and norms; and
- refugees’ ability to effectively communicate in English as required for the Canadian workplace.

A number of key priority areas and recommended strategies emerged while discussing these challenges with employers. Recommended strategies have been built around the key priority areas for connecting refugee talent with employment opportunities in Surrey, Abbotsford and other communities throughout British Columbia. Some of the recommendations reinforce the need to continue the development of existing tools, such as *BC JobConnect* and *Onboarding Refugees: A Toolkit for BC Employers*, while others speak to the need for strengthening the relationships between employers and ISOs, and building the capacity of job seekers and employers to navigate a diverse and complex workplace.

PRIORITY AREA: Connecting Refugee Talent with Job Opportunities

Employers generally are interested in the refugee talent pool. About two-thirds of Abbotsford employers indicated they were currently experiencing skill shortages, and more than half of Surrey employers reported similar workforce challenges. The majority of employers in both communities have had experience employing immigrants, while a much smaller number have had direct experience employing refugees. In Surrey, employers’ concerns centred more on the challenge of matching available skill sets with job requirements and the broader “structural” challenges within the Surrey labour force. Employers are interested in tools that facilitate the refugee recruitment process. Employers also felt more could be done to encourage refugee employment through employer incentives, on-site orientations, exploratory internships and additional pre-employment training.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

- 1 Use online matching tools (e.g. IEC-BC’s *BC JobConnect*) while enhancing the quality of skill profile information to ensure refugee talent is “job-ready” and available for work.
- 2 Coordinate recruitment activities (e.g. job fairs) to facilitate face-to-face interaction between employers and refugee talent.
- 3 Implement physical job boards in community gathering places (e.g. ISOs, mosques, community centres), and translate postings into source country languages.

PRIORITY AREA: Managing Employment Expectations of Refugees

Employers in both communities were in agreement that managing expectations of both refugees and other immigrant workers is a critical factor in the recruitment and employment process. Some employers expressed concern that expectations of refugee workers could not be met because of a lack of understanding of the Canadian workplace. Others cited unrealistic wage expectations of some workers and their unwillingness to accept low pay and/or low skill starting positions.

Employers emphasized the importance of informing and educating refugee candidates about the expectations and requirements of the Canadian workplace prior to employment. Developing an information tool with employers on this theme could significantly enhance the workforce integration process.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

- 1** Coordinate the development and access to pre-employment programming, including English language training and cultural workplace education.
- 2** Institute site visits with employers to help promote suitability and understanding of the workplace.
- 3** Examine opportunities for short term internships, so candidates can demonstrate their abilities and suitability.
- 4** Review provincial employer incentive programs with a view to refining their elements and promoting such programs better for use by employers to hire and retain refugees.

PRIORITY AREA: Establishing a Stronger Relationship between Employers and Immigrant Serving Organizations

The recent wave of refugees to BC has reinforced the challenges ISOs face in their efforts to help integrate refugee workers into the provincial workforce. ISOs are increasingly reaching out to employers to facilitate the hiring of job-ready refugees. The experience to date underlines that employers generally (at least in Abbotsford and Surrey) do not have a broad level of awareness of ISOs and ways in which they can facilitate connections with refugee workers.

Employer consultations have demonstrated a willingness to develop a stronger and more supportive relationship with local ISOs to achieve successful employment outcomes for refugee workers.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

- 1** In coordination with business partners, develop an ongoing employer outreach campaign to promote awareness of ISO programs and supports.
- 2** Establish a structure, whereby a designated community ISO serves as the “hub” responsible for centralizing programs and services and communicating directly with business partners and employers.
- 3** Institute a “one-stop” service venue where employers can directly interact with ISO staff and meet with refugee talent face-to-face.

PRIORITY AREA: Integrating New Canadians into the Workplace

As newcomers to British Columbia constitute a growing share of the provincial workforce, the integration of workers from diverse backgrounds is becoming increasingly complex.

This can sometimes lead to tensions among different linguistic groups, as well as tensions between male workers from countries that have limited female participation in the work force and female workers. Male workers from cultures that have little experience (if any) reporting to a female supervisor have to learn to adjust their behaviours.

In workplaces that include different linguistic minorities, tensions can emerge when individual groups choose to speak in their own language rather than English. Employers recognize they must be sensitive to these realities to help promote a healthy workplace, while workers must learn to appreciate that the Canadian workplace may be quite different from what they have been accustomed to.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

- 1** In cooperation with business partners, continue the development of online and print-based refugee onboarding tools (e.g. IEC-BC's *Onboarding Refugees: A Toolkit for BC Employers*), including practical advice to employers, supervisors and employees about cross-cultural awareness and Canadian workplace practices.
- 2** In cooperation with business partners, develop cultural awareness tools (e.g. PowerPoints, online seminars) for both management and workers.
- 3** ISOs to provide follow-up support and communication with refugee workers to help promote long-term employment attachment.

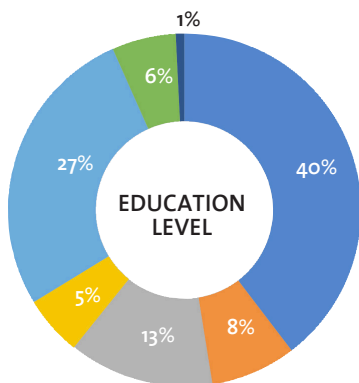
All these strategies aim to strengthen the linkages between ISOs and the employer community in support of refugee recruitment and retention in Abbotsford and Surrey. They also aim to continually improve the long-term prospects of refugee integration into the provincial workforce.

MAPPING REFUGEES' SKILLS: SURREY AND ABBOTSFORD

Through this project, community partners DIVERSEcity Community Resources Society and Abbotsford Community Services assessed the employment-readiness of 124 refugee clients (80 in Surrey and 44 in Abbotsford). Skills and occupation profiles of these candidates were gathered using the BC JobConnect online talent portal.

Below are the highlights of the profiles of refugees gathered through this project:

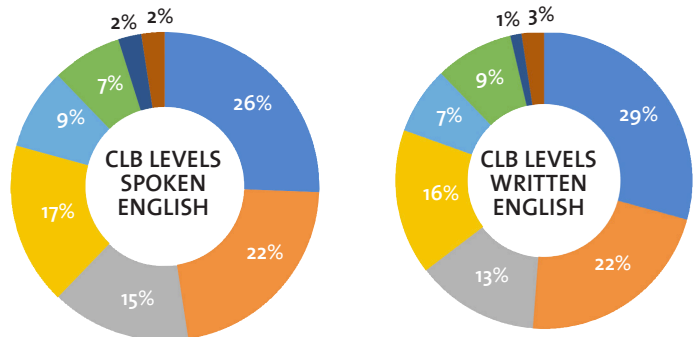
Education: The majority of the candidates (79%) provided information about their education. Approximately 55% had some level of post-secondary education (college diploma or above), 40% indicated their highest level of education as a High School Diploma, with the remaining 5% having Trades/Apprenticeship qualification. Given the high proportion of candidates with some post-secondary education, this is an opportunity for BC employers to tap into these skills.



Language Proficiency: The majority of clients in both communities have low to basic English language skills, with over 60% having language proficiency at Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) 1 to 3. Most employers have indicated that language proficiency below CLB 4 makes it very challenging for employers to hire and retain workers. Further investment in English language for the workplace is needed to ensure that refugees find suitable employment commensurate to their skills.

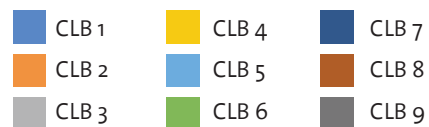
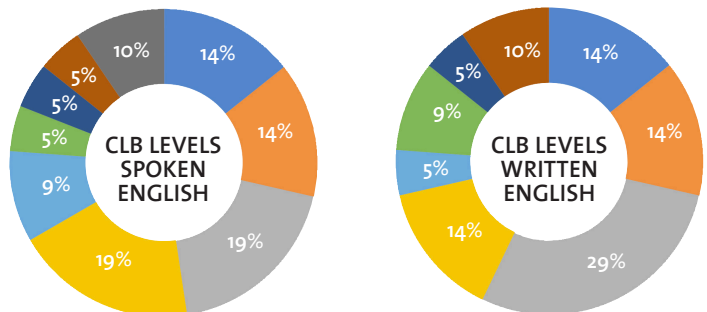
LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY: SURREY*

*75 out of 80 candidates have had formal language assessment



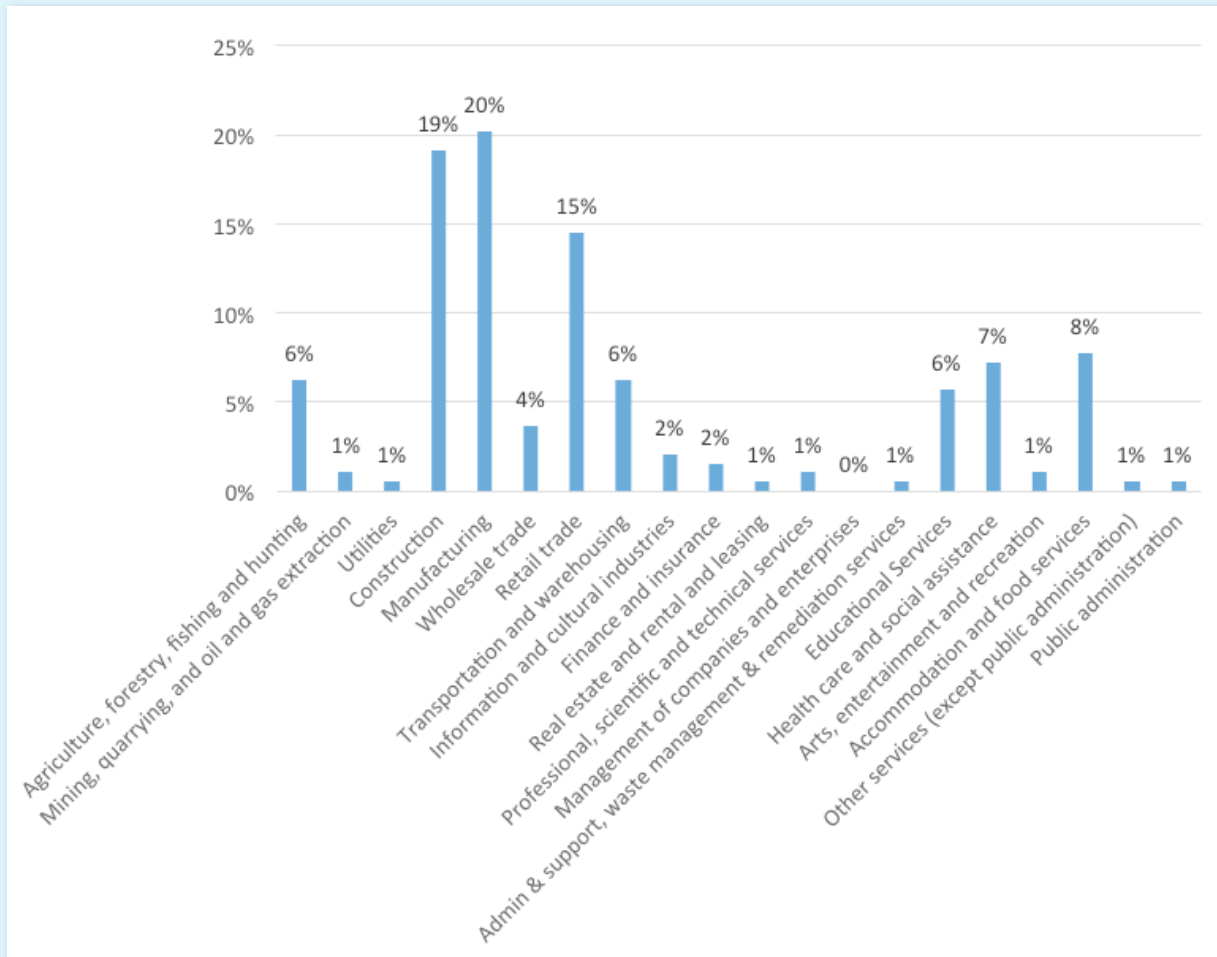
LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY: ABBOTSFORD*

*20 out of 44 candidates have had formal language assessment

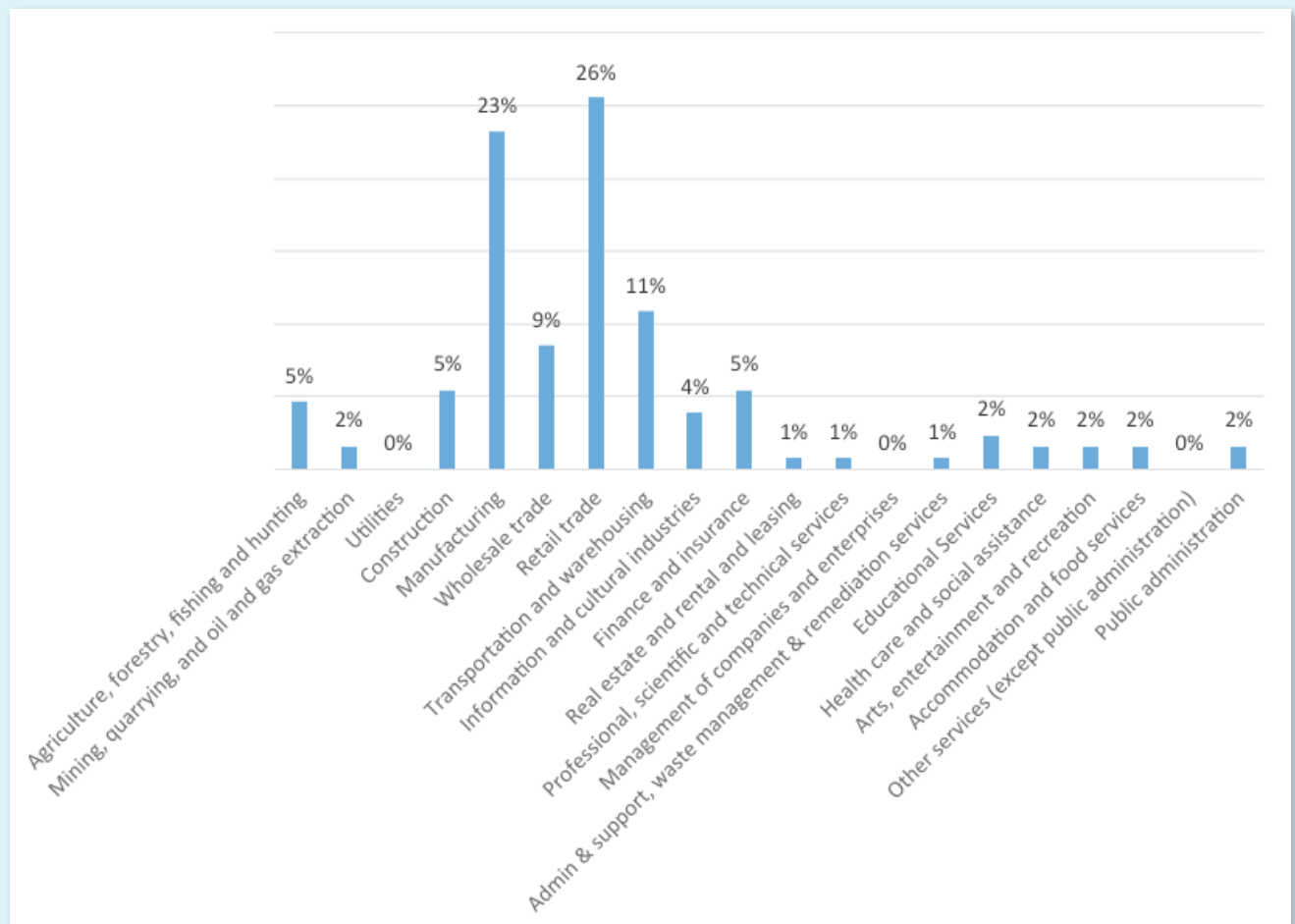


Industry Sectors of Interest: Candidates were asked to list the industry sectors where they had previous experience and that would be of interest for them in finding jobs. In Surrey, Construction and Manufacturing were the sectors that most candidates indicated an interest in, followed by Retail Trade. In Abbotsford, the highest interest was in Retail Trade, followed by Manufacturing and Transportation and Warehousing.

INDUSTRY SECTORS OF INTEREST: SURREY



INDUSTRY SECTORS OF INTEREST: ABBOTSFORD





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