

2022 Ontario Pre-Budget Consultations

Written Submission from World Education Services (WES) January 2022

World Education Services (WES) is a non-profit social enterprise dedicated to helping international students, immigrants, and refugees achieve their educational and career goals in Canada and the United States. For more than 45 years, WES has set the standard of excellence in the field of international academic credential evaluation. Through WES Global Talent Bridge, the organization joins with institutional partners, community-based organizations, and policymakers to help immigrants and refugees who hold international credentials fully utilize their talents and education to achieve their academic and professional goals. Its philanthropic arm, the WES Mariam Assefa Fund, supports catalytic leaders and organizations working to build inclusive economies and to ensure that immigrants and refugees can achieve their aspirations and thrive.

I. General Recommendations

- Mandate the collection of disaggregated data by race, gender, immigration status across provincial programs to inform the design and implementation of targeted policies/programs aimed at addressing socioeconomic, political, and health inequities.
- Take concrete measures to address persistent and rising xenophobia and racism inherent to the pandemic, including providing funding to community-based anti-racism and anti-hate initiatives.
- Provide an accessible pathway from temporary to permanent residency via the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program (OINP) to migrant workers as well as newcomers on work/study permits.
- Work with the federal government to pilot a naturalization program prioritizing individuals with skills/experience in high-demand sectors of the economy.

II. Jobs & the Economy

The pandemic has caused severe economic and labour market disruptions. Those hardest hit include immigrants, refugees, women, Indigenous persons, and youth, many of whom remain underemployed or unemployed while labour shortages persist in sectors such as health care, transportation, and the skilled trades. Roughly half of all new immigrants arrive in Ontario, and many are poised to make significant economic contributions. Ensuring all Ontario residents can equitably and meaningfully contribute to the workforce is key to supporting both short- and long-term economic and labour market stability in the province.

Recommendations for Ministry of Labour, Skills Training & Development

Skills-training and workforce development:

- Support predictive modelling initiatives, such as the Ontario Occupation Outlook from the Labour Market Information Council, to identify looming skills shortages, inform investments in reskilling/retraining programs, and provide evidence informing provincial and intergovernmental immigration policy decisions.
- Provide dedicated support for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which make up 97 percent of the Ontario private sector, to adopt inclusive recruitment strategies that incorporate immigrant and refugee talent, including competency-based assessment and hiring practices. Statistics Canada **data** shows that average annual net job growth per firm is higher among immigrant-owned firms than among firms with Canadian-born owners.
- Ontario's **long-term reports on the economy** consistently note population growth is immigrant-driven, and by extension so is labour force growth. This growing reliance and linkage to GDP, calls for the establishment of a permanent working group or task force to analyze the economic contributions immigrants (specifically youth, women, refugees, and international students) make to the provincial economy, and to make recommendations to improve labor force integration of immigrants into decent jobs in key sectors.
- Through the Municipal Act, promote the use of community benefit agreements (CBAs) and social procurement strategies that can drive local economies and provide economic benefits for all. The success of the **CBA** initiatives supported by WES have supported decent jobs to immigrants, refugees, women, and underrepresented groups in the construction sector. Amplifying such initiatives province-wide will lead to inclusive economic growth.

Income and employment supports:

- A 2021 **report** from the Public Policy Forum notes that immigrants are “over-represented in low paying sectors such as accommodation and food services, where they make up 35% of the labour force and where average pay is \$383/wk compared to \$976/wk across all industries.” Further, immigrants especially women and racialized individuals tend to work in occupations with a higher risk of COVID-19 exposure. We recommend the establishment of a ‘Wages and Working Conditions’ Provincial Commission tasked to research the economic, occupational health and safety, and social benefits associated with minimum wage versus living wage standards. It follows that legislating 10 paid sick days per year for all workers experiencing illness, injury, medical emergencies, or family emergencies, will provide important protections to the labour force, including immigrants who are at higher risk.

- Standardize eligibility criterion for provincial employment services through Employment Ontario to include all newcomers regardless of immigration status, and engage key stakeholders from the immigrant-serving/settlement sector to inform provincial rollout of the Service System Managers (SSM) model
- Advocate with the federal government for the removal of immigration status barriers associated with accessing all income supports.

III. Health Care

As the Finance Minister **noted** in the 2021 budget, “you can’t have a healthy economy without healthy people.” The pandemic continues to expose vulnerabilities and strain the health care workforce: 1 in 3 registered practical nurses in Ontario are considering leaving the profession due to the pandemic. The contributions of internationally educated health professionals (IEHPs) are vital to Ontario’s health systems, but many IEHPs (notably racialized, immigrant women) are underemployed or are underutilized. HealthForce Ontario has identified more than 8000 IEHPs who are seeking to re-enter their professions in the health sector.

Recommendations for Ministries of Health and Long-Term Care:

- Prioritize immigrant communities to receive public health information to overcome vaccine hesitancy and ensure that these communities have equitable access to public health and pandemic-related supports.
- Recruit eligible internationally educated health professionals (IEHPs) and leverage their linguistic and cultural competencies to contribute to public health and education initiatives.
- Provide funding to scale workplace-linked bridging models, such as the Supervised Practice Experience Program, to allow more internationally educated nurses to immediately contribute their training in clinical settings and fulfil professional registration requirements.
- Fund Ontario Health to implement the Practice-Ready Assessment model for internationally trained physicians (ITPs), streamlining the assessment, registration, and integration of trained and qualified physicians and enabling them to contribute to the Ontario physician workforce.
- Mandate an Ontario Health Human Resources (HHR) planning table to develop a comprehensive HHR plan, including an Ontario IEHP integration plan.
- Expand Bill 27 amendments to remove Canadian experience requirement for regulated health professions in Ontario.
- Repeal Bill 124 to help address the ongoing health care staffing crisis and the growing exodus of health care workers, including IEHPs. This would demonstrate respect and acknowledgment of the contributions of all public sector workers, including nurses and frontline health care workers.

IV. Education

The evolving pandemic context has created challenges for educational systems in Ontario, including challenges related to remote/virtual learning, ensuring adherence to health and safety protocols, and enabling thousands of international students enrolled at post-secondary institutions in the province to continue their studies uninterrupted despite travel restrictions and border closures.

Recommendations for the Ministry of Colleges & Universities:

- Fund PSIs to expand Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) opportunities for immigrant youth.
- Provide funding for PSIs to ensure international students have access to and are made aware of available supports offered through the post-secondary sector, including financial and health services.
- Develop principles and guidelines for PSIs receiving provincial funding to ensure that tuition structures are applied equitably for international students, ensuring affordability.
- Establish a task force to investigate the relationship between post-secondary institutions (PSIs) and international student recruiters; incentivize PSIs to adhere to principles of equitable inclusion and ethical recruitment practices.