

LASI World Skills: Making Good on Employment Promises

New Canadians unable to access their professions because of accreditation barriers can take some encouragement from a recently completed pilot project undertaken jointly by an Ontario university, a publicly funded school board and an immigrant services consortium. Supported by a forward-thinking manager at the City of Ottawa, the project is an example of what can happen when government, educational institutions, licensing bodies and immigrant service agencies work together to expedite the absorption of newly arrived, skilled immigrants into the Canadian workforce.

Responding to a 1999 municipal inquiry about the number of internationally trained teachers (ITTs) living in the national capital, Local Agencies Serving Immigrants (LASI) reported that more than 300 of these teachers were looking for work in Ottawa classrooms. With funding from the Maytree Foundation, LASI's World Skills initiative (a labour market assessment and skills matching project) had successfully placed some internationally trained teachers with private learning institutions. But many more were being turned away from publicly funded schools because they lacked the required provincial certification.

With the support of a former City of Ottawa General Manager of People Services, discussions were held between representatives of the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board and LASI to explore ways of helping internationally trained teachers access their profession. The two groups considered how to use the (then) Harris government's "Bridging Program" fund to allow these teachers to obtain an Ontario teaching certificate within a year. In 2001, they approached faculty members at Queen's University in Kingston to discuss the issue. The university agreed to act as the lead agency for what became known as the Alternative Teacher Accreditation Program for Teachers with International Experience (ATAPTIE).

ATAPTIE was intended for immigrant Canadians with landed immigrant status or Canadian citizenship who had international teaching experience, but who were unable to become certified as teachers in Ontario. Successful completion of the program would lead to a Bachelor of Education and a recommendation from Queen's University to the Ontario College of Teachers for the granting of a Certificate of Qualification, which permits the holder to teach in the province's publicly supported elementary and secondary schools.

In the fall of 2002, the program welcomed its first class of internationally trained teachers. Of those 26 participants, 19 (76 percent) now are working in their profession. ATAPTIE's second cohort of 27 teachers will graduate in the fall of 2004, and the final class of 30 will be recommended for certification in the fall of 2005.

Beyond the pilot project

As word of the ATAPTIE program spread, the number of Ottawa-area participants fell from 96 percent in the first year to 51 percent in the third; the remainder came to Kingston from southern and western Ontario. "This program clearly showed that people will go where they must to access their professions," says Mengistab Tsegaye, Program Director at LASI. "Now that the pilot project is in its final phase, the partners are discussing ways to sustain the program."

To that end, World Skills has forged a new partnership with the Ontario College of Teachers, the Ontario Teachers' Federation and Toronto-based Skills for Change (an immigrant services agency). The group is designing a bridging project, which will use funds from the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to prepare internationally trained teachers for employment in Ontario's public school system. Facilitation centres in Toronto and Ottawa will offer one-to-one counselling and information support to these teachers as they prepare for the licensing procedure as well as modular training programs for language upgrading and sector terminology.

Many internationally trained teachers apply directly to the Ontario College of Teachers for certification and are unknown to immigrant services agencies. As a result of LASI's work on the ATAPTIE project, the college now will refer unsuccessful applicants to LASI and Skills for

Change so that they may access training programs which are specific to their needs."

In the longer term, LASI employees hope to see ongoing training and upgrading opportunities at universities that match the needs of these professionals and which will continue to enhance their employability in the Ontario public school system."

While broadening its sphere of interest and influence at the provincial level, LASI recently incorporated its World Skills operations in order to allow it to access funding more easily for Ottawa-specific immigrant employment projects. World Skills has spent the last two years applying the lessons from ATAPTIE to entry programs for immigrants in four additional employment streams: accounting and finance, non-information technology engineering, health care and trades.

Known as the Career Access for New-comers (CAN) Program, World Skills helps new Canadians access jobs and careers that are appropriate to their experience and education. CAN provides information on labour market trends, licensing bodies, and accreditation and professional associations. After reviewing trends in the Canadian labour market, World Skills staff are available to help immigrants assess their options for education and training, and provide practical assistance with tasks such as document translation, accessing bridging programs and networking.

A model organization

From its inception, Local Agencies Serving Immigrants (LASI) has incorporated a collaborative approach to serving its clients. The organization has its roots in a 1994 provincial government initiative, which sought to improve immigrant uptake of settlement services by enhancing communication between the provincial

ministry of social services and immigrant services organizations. Even before this initiative was announced, Ottawa's Catholic Immigrant Centre, Jewish Family Services, Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization and the Ottawa Chinese Community Service Centre had held informal discussions on issues of common concern.

Because the province was releasing sufficient funds for only one position in the Ottawa area, the previous *ad hoc* arrangement was formalized, LASI was created and Mengistab Tsegaye was seconded from the Catholic Immigration Centre to carry out the social service/immigrant service liaison work.

Over the next three years, Mengistab had the opportunity to work inside both camps; he was given an office within social services and he maintained a work space at each of the five

immigrant service organization offices that were LASI members at that time – changing his agency location every three months to ensure that all partners felt fully involved in the project.

On many occasions, Mengistab was asked to provide assistance when social service employees ran into linguistic and cultural barriers with their clients. He would make the appropriate referrals and his input and agency information were soon recognized as valuable social services resources. “I organized numerous joint information sessions which helped to change an adversarial relationship to a mutually supportive one,” says Mengistab.

“The experience of my working so closely with the immigrant service and social service communities had the effect of bringing the two groups’ policies and goals into alignment. Before



Mengistab Tsegaye (fourth from the left, back row) and the World Skills staff. In May 2004, LASI World Skills received the United Way's Partnership of the Year Award for its work on behalf of new Canadians.

1994, social services staff saw their role as being separate from immigrant services work, but at the end of the project, I was able to clearly state that the number one concern of both groups was access to employment.” Mengistab is now LASI World Skills’ Program Director.

Since its original founding, LASI has been joined by Immigrant Women Services Ottawa and the Lebanese and Arab Social Services Association. Today, this nonprofit organization offers assistance to more than 2,500 immigrants each year through a variety of programs and services.

Beginning in 1997, funding from the federal Department of Citizenship and Immigration and the Trillium Foundation helped sponsor three-day World Skills job search workshops which led prospective job candidates through resumé preparation, the nuances of verbal and non-verbal communication and managing the complexities of the Canadian job interview. Because project funds were released to LASI, a collective organization, job search workshops were held at the agency which happened to be next in the scheduled lineup. This arrangement has helped to cement LASI’s collective approach to the work it undertakes.

“We have continued to operate our workshops on a rotating basis since 1997,” says Kelly McGahey, World Skills Special Initiatives Project Developer. “Rather than have to wait for their own community organization to sponsor a workshop, our clients can attend whichever one suits their schedule. This way, cross-cultural integration starts much earlier and people get a chance to network outside their communities right away.”

“Ultimately, all immigrant services organizations are assisting the same population and using funds from the same agencies,” says Kelly. “LASI is unique in Ontario, and perhaps

across the country, because rather than competing for funds for employment services, we are continuously involved in capacity-building between organizations. By joining forces and working toward the same goal, we provide better service to our clients. It takes a great deal of courage for people to leave their homes, come to a new country, learn the ropes and deal with barriers to employment. One of the key messages we convey to employers is that our clients are highly skilled, courageous risk-takers with much to give.”

Anne Makhoul

Anne Makhoul is the coordinator of the community stories series for the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

Mengistab Tsegaye, Program Director, LASI World Skills, can be reached by e-mail at: mengis@ottawa-worldskills.org or by phone at (613) 233-0453, extension 329.

Kelly McGahey, World Skills Project Developer, Special Initiatives, can be reached by e-mail at: kelly@ottawa-worldskills.org or by phone at (613) 233-0453, extension 313.

Endnote

1. New Canadians fall into three classes: economic class immigrants (skilled workers and business immigrants), refugees and family immigrants (family reunifications). Economic class immigrants and their dependents account for slightly more than half of the 250,346 immigrants allowed into Canada in 2001 (this figure has increased slightly over the two Census periods preceding 2001). Refugees generally are fleeing areas made dangerous by political instability or environmental disaster and they make up roughly one-fifth of new Canadians each year. Family immigrants, sponsored by close relatives who are already Canadian citizens, make up one-quarter of the immigrant population allowed into Canada each year.

Reference

Canadian Labour and Business Centre. (2003). "Tapping the Potential: A Statistical Profile of Ottawa's Immigrant Workforce." Ottawa: Canadian Labour Congress, World Skills and United Way Ottawa.

© 2004 by The Caledon Institute of Social Policy

1600 Scott Street, Suite 620
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
K1Y 4N7

Phone: (613) 729-3340 Fax: (613) 729-3896

e-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org

website: www.caledoninst.org

Caledon publications are available on our website.