



# **Retention Barriers to Immigrant and Refugee Employment in Canada's SETT Sectors A Literature Review**

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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>Brief Context</b> .....	1
<b>Methodology</b> .....	1
<b>Structural/Systemic Barriers</b> .....	2
<b>Credential Recognition, Licensing Issues, and Skill Under-Utilization</b> .....	2
<b>Survival Jobs</b> .....	3
<b>Policy Gaps</b> .....	3
<b>Relational/Interpersonal Barriers</b> .....	4
<b>Employer Bias, Microaggressions and Workplace Discrimination</b> .....	4
<b>Exclusion from Professional Networks, Limited Mentorship, and Persistent De-Skilling</b>	4
<b>Individual Level Barriers</b> .....	5
<b>Language Proficiency</b> .....	5
<b>Mental Health and Caregiving Burdens</b> .....	5
<b>Gender Roles and Responsibilities</b> .....	5
<b>Lack of Familiarity with Canadian Workplace Culture</b> .....	5
<b>Early Pipeline and Education Access Barriers</b> .....	6
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	7
<b>Conclusions</b> .....	8
<b>References</b> .....	9

## **Introduction**

Immigration is central to Canada's strategy to meet labour shortages in Science, Engineering, Trades, and Technology (SETT). While many newcomers arrive in Canada with high qualifications and experience in SETT fields, there are a large number who struggle to secure employment in sectors that align with their level of training. This literature review investigates the barriers faced by immigrants in sustaining employment in SETT fields, highlighting how structural, relational, and individual-level obstacles persist, even after a newcomer's initial entry into the labour market. The research questions we explore include:

1. What are the barriers to ongoing/continued employment (retention) for immigrants in SETT fields in Canada?
2. How do structural/systemic, relational/interpersonal, and individual-level barriers affect retention?
3. What challenges arise in the transition from education to employment for immigrants in SETT?

## **Brief Context**

Canada's point-based immigration system attracts highly educated professionals, many of whom hold degrees in SETT disciplines. Yet evidence consistently shows that a large proportion of them experience underemployment, skill underutilization, and barriers to career progression (Blit et al., 2020; Boyd & Tian, 2017; Mahboubi & Zhang, 2024; Picot & Hou, 2018). For example, analyzing Canadian Census data, Boyd and Tian's (2017) findings reveal that compared to their Canadian-born counterparts, immigrant STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) graduates are significantly less likely to hold employment in STEM occupations. Even when immigrants manage to secure STEM employment, they tend to be in lower-level positions and earn lower wages than their Canadian-born counterparts. Data from the period of the COVID-19 pandemic showed that 12% of immigrants with a STEM education and background were over-qualified for their positions, a rate nearly twice that of non-immigrants (Mahboubi and Zhang, 2024).

Ultimately, the educational attainment of immigrants and the mismatch with their employment and level of earnings, suggests systemic issues in credential recognition, labour market integration policies, concerns about bias in hiring and promotion, and various individual-level factors that may be impeding reducing these gaps (Picot & Hou, 2018). The issue of retention—immigrants' ability to remain and thrive in jobs within their trained field—is increasingly recognized as a critical labour market failure with both human and economic costs.

## **Methodology**

This report draws on a purposive selection of scholarly articles, doctoral dissertations, government reports, and institutional publications. Grey literature was collected from national, international, and organizational sites from within and from outside Canada. Peer-reviewed and other scholarly literature was found through searches conducted on databases including OMNI, Sociological Abstracts, ABI/INFORM Global, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar.

**Inclusion criteria:** (1) Focus on immigrants/refugees/newcomers/migrants, (2) Focus on retention barriers faced in SETT work, (3) Canadian research, and (4) Published in the last 10 years.

**Searching for literature:**

Concept/key idea	Synonyms/other search terms
Immigrant	"immigrant" OR "migrant" OR "refugee" OR "immigration" OR "migration" OR "newcomer"
Retention	“Job retention” OR “work retention” OR “employment retention”
STEM/SETT	“STEM" OR "science" OR "engineering" OR "trades" OR "technology" OR "construction" OR "manufacturing”

### **Structural/Systemic Barriers**

Several studies point to deeply embedded systemic barriers that inhibit employment retention for immigrants and refugees. Barriers include (1) credential recognition, licensing issues, and skill under-utilization (2) survival jobs, and (3) policy gaps. We discuss each barrier in turn. Many of the barriers discussed here impact both recruitment and long-term retention in SETT, often in highly interrelated ways. Most studies focus on barriers to recruitment; however, ongoing structural barriers can also hinder the ability to sustain and grow within one’s profession, hindering long-term retention.

#### **Credential Recognition, Licensing Issues, and Skill Under-Utilization**

Challenges with credential recognition and licensing are repeatedly noted across the literature. These barriers are particularly pronounced in regulated fields, such as engineering, healthcare, education, and other areas, where obstacles are imposed through strict licensing and Canadian-experience requirements, further limiting opportunities (Finlayson & Globerman, 2023). The issues surrounding foreign credential recognition have repeatedly been shown to result in under-employment for immigrants, illustrating a key issue of under-recognition and under-utilization of skill and knowledge (Boyd & Tian, 2017; Finlayson & Globerman, 2023; Konnikov, 2023; Mahboubi & Zhang, 2024). Boyd and Tian (2017) show that even though immigrants are equipped with the “right” education by holding STEM-designated degrees, the non-recognition of foreign credentials prevents equitable opportunities for employment and retention outcomes.

Focusing specifically on engineers, Konnikov (2023) argues that international education and training are associated with two forms of occupational misalignment for immigrants. First, internationally trained engineers are less likely to enter their field upon arrival in the host country. This relates both to recruitment (they face SETT career entry barriers in Canada) and retention (overall loss of retention in SETT due to migration). Second, those who do achieve recruitment into engineering, are more likely to hold technical positions, signalling, “a more complex form of occupational disadvantage which can be interpreted as both match and mismatch, depending on the focus” (Konnikov, 2023, p.455). Technical positions may be more accessible, as they do not require an engineering license and offer the most available “occupational match”. However, Konnikov (2023) notes that immigrant engineers are often

relegated to these technical roles with little chance of upward career mobility. This contributes to reduced job satisfaction and long-term disengagement from the engineering field.

Moreover, Mahboubi and Zhang (2024) illustrate that even when immigrants obtain Canadian licenses, they may continue facing non-recognition of their pre-immigration credentials during job searches. Zhang et al. (2023) find that employers struggle to accurately evaluate foreign credentials and view them with skepticism. In 2013, the federal skilled worker program saw the introduction of the mandatory Educational Credential Assessment (ECA). The formal ECA was found to increase immigrants' employment rates and earnings (Banerjee et al., 2021). However, employer skepticism of foreign credentials remained strong despite the ECA (Banerjee et al., 2021), and hiring managers are often unfamiliar with and do not use ECA's (Zhang et al., 2023). While this greatly influences initial hiring, it also influences promotion and career mobility, thus, impacting retention.

Immigrants and refugees, specifically those educated outside of Western countries, often find themselves required to go through the process of re-credentialing (Mahboubi & Zhang, 2024). This is expensive and time-intensive, imposing further barriers to employment retention in SETT. Uppal (2022) found that for some immigrants, re-credentialing led to a change in career, potentially moving individuals out of SETT fields. The challenges of re-credentialing and obtaining licenses are discouraging and lead to potential disengagement from SETT careers.

### **Survival Jobs**

Possibly due to challenges of foreign credential recognition and the pursuit of gaining Canadian work experience, many immigrants take on "survival jobs" when they arrive in Canada, to provide for themselves and their families (Uppal, 2022). These are often unrelated to their field of training. Survival jobs can be detrimental to an immigrant's long-term career aspirations, as they can shift individuals away from their core skills, creating challenges to entering their desired field in the future (Uppal, 2022) and a loss of STEM capital (Caidi et al., 2024).

### **Policy Gaps**

There are studies on gaps that relate to immigration policies, integration systems, and employer expectations (Mahboubi & Zhang, 2024; Mining Industry Human Resources Council [MiHR], 2024; Uppal, 2022). First, Mahboubi and Zhang (2024) note that a disconnect exists between immigrant policies and employer expectations. This results in a weak alignment between immigrant selection and labour market needs, thereby contributing to newcomer underemployment. The Mining Industry Human Resources Council (MiHR) 2024 identifies concerns with fragmentation and structural inefficiencies with employment services for immigrants. There are concerns that most integration services are general and not tailored to the specific demands of the mining industry or other SETT fields. This suggests that immigrants may enter these sectors but struggle to remain there, due to the lack of culturally safe environments, unclear advancement pathways, and lack of effective navigation support from employment services. For Mahboubi and Zhang (2024), effectively integrating immigrants into SETT roles that align with their skills can improve individual well-being, as well as benefit national economic growth.

## **Relational/Interpersonal Barriers**

The literature highlights that relational dynamics workplace settings significantly affect employment retention for immigrants and refugees. Barriers fall within two broad categories, (1) employer bias, microaggressions and workplace discrimination, and (2) exclusion from professional networks and limited mentorship.

### **Employer Bias, Microaggressions and Workplace Discrimination**

Discrimination in the labour market and workplace is commonly cited as an employment retention barrier faced by immigrants. The literature portrays an emphasis on employer bias, microaggressions, and workplace discrimination, when it comes to recruitment, and alludes to similar factors affecting employment retention.

Mahboubi and Zhang (2024) highlight how employer bias and discrimination result in immigrants being overlooked for positions for which they are qualified. Uppal (2022) asserts that immigrants, even once hired, must continually prove their competence, throughout their employment, by participating in additional assessments. Moreover, immigrants have reported being told they wouldn't be considered for promotion to managerial jobs, despite their experience (Uppal, 2022). It is discriminatory to be denied a senior level position simply due to foreign experience or credentials.

Intungane et al. (2024) show that racialized immigrants often face workplace discrimination and microaggressions and have identified specific elements related to recruitment and retention. Bias and discrimination in the workplace can affect job satisfaction and retention rates (O'Rourke & McNamara, 2024). For example, both Intungane et al. (2024) and Kazmi (2022) illustrate how exclusionary workplace practices can result in immigrants being excluded from promotional opportunities. Kazmi (2022) highlights that advancement decisions often occur through informal channels or biased referrals, from which immigrants often remain excluded. Moreover, Intungane et al. (2024) illustrate how COVID-19 compounded inequalities in the Canadian labour market, as racialized immigrants were among the first to be laid off.

### **Exclusion from Professional Networks, Limited Mentorship, and Persistent De-Skilling**

As noted above, immigrants may face exclusion from mentorship opportunities and access to internal networks within workplaces, negatively influencing employment satisfaction, career mobility, and long-term retention (Kazmi, 2022). Racialized and immigrant women and youth in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) have reported experiences in common of such exclusion (Achev, 2023). This is particularly concerning in the context of SETT, a historically male-dominated field. As such, the discrimination and exclusion faced by women are more pronounced, illustrating the intersectional dynamics involved in retention barriers. Limited opportunities for mentorship and lack of access to professional networks create obstacles to professional growth and restrict career advancement opportunities (Boyd & Tian, 2017; Kazmi, 2022).

Exploring women's experiences in SETT, Caidi et al. (2024) highlight that even once women overcome the initial recruitment challenges and acquire a job in their chosen STEM field, they continue to face obstacles that influence retention. Women face persistent de-skilling, if they miss out on opportunities for specialized skill development or professional development.

Moreover, compared to men, women in STEM remain chronically underpaid (Drolet & Amini, 2023). Together, exclusionary experiences, de-skilling, and failure to advance may act as deterrents to retention in SETT, which can be detrimental to SETT more broadly (Caidi et al., 2024).

### **Individual Level Barriers**

Several studies reveal individual level barriers that influence employment retention for immigrants. These include: (1) language proficiency, (2) mental health and caregiving burdens, (3) gender roles and responsibilities, and (4) lack of familiarity with the Canadian workplace culture. It is important to note that these individual barriers often stem from or are exacerbated by structural and relational factors.

#### **Language Proficiency**

Several studies indicate that lack of proficiency in the host country language(s) plays a role in employment recruitment, retention, and long-term integration for immigrants (Boyd & Tian, 2017; Finlayson & Globerman, 2023; Konnikov, 2023; Mahboubi & Zhang, 2024). Finlayson and Globerman (2023) find that language proficiency is a stronger predictor of initial earnings for employment than education level or age. Mahboubi and Zhang (2024) further highlight that proficiency in the official language(s) of the host country are crucial for employment recruitment, navigation of the labour market, showcasing skills, and performing effectively once hired. Further, they illustrate how language proficiency can impact integration in professional networks and workplace culture, both of which are related to employment retention.

#### **Mental Health and Caregiving Burdens**

Mental health and caregiving burdens were raised as barriers, particularly among immigrant women, following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting job continuity (Miners et al., 2022). Moreover, related to mental health, immigrants may experience frustration, reduced confidence, or burnout, due to ongoing under-employment and/or lack of career progression, which too can influence retention (Ng & Gagnon, 2020). Intungane et al. (2024) document how racial microaggressions and a general lack of culturally responsive support in employment services can influence job satisfaction, mental health, and ultimately, long-term job retention.

#### **Gender Roles and Responsibilities**

Uppal (2022) highlights that for some immigrant women, gender roles imposed by their spouses may influence their ability to achieve career goals or educational commitments. Not having a supportive spouse or family system can result in women being pulled away from their careers, in SETT or other fields. In addition, immigrant women can face complexities and tensions, leading to career sacrifices related to maternity or caregiver leave. Women in Uppal's (2022) study spoke of making career sacrifices to return home to care for a loved one. These gendered dimensions can have a detrimental effect on career growth and remaining in one's chosen field.

#### **Lack of Familiarity with Canadian Workplace Culture**

The lack of familiarity with the norms of Canadian workplaces was raised as a key driver of immigrants' under-employment and lower earnings (Finlayson & Globerman, 2023; Mahboubi & Zhang, 2024; Miners et al, 2022). Mahboubi and Zhang (2024) highlight how lack of familiarity with Canadian workplace norms can contribute to early exits from SETT or

stagnation in career progression. Miners et al. (2022) reported that among immigrant and racialized women and youth in the GTA, a common sentiment was feeling invisible in the workplace culture that does not coincide with their lived experiences. Women immigrants in Uppal's (2022) study spoke of gaining an understanding of the Canadian labour system, the rights of workers, and where to find support to engage more confidently in the Canadian workplace environment.

### **Early Pipeline and Education Access Barriers**

The transition from education to employment is particularly problematic for immigrant graduates. Even immigrants with Canadian credentials struggle with employment alignment. Only a fraction of immigrant graduates in SETT secure jobs in their field, and wage gaps persist, even after controlling for education and experience (Boyd & Tian, 2017; Picot & Hou, 2018). For many immigrant and refugee youth, particularly those who are first-generation, or from racialized and low-income backgrounds, the pathway into SETT careers is obstructed by systemic inequalities in education access and support. Research by Duodu et al. (2017) and Uludüz and Çalik (2022) emphasized that these students frequently lack access to high-quality STEM programming, including advanced coursework, extracurricular STEM clubs, and specialized mentorship programs. These disparities are often linked to socioeconomic constraints, geographic location, and underfunded schools, particularly in immigrant-dense neighbourhoods. Without equitable early exposure to SETT fields, students may struggle to develop the confidence, interest, or academic foundation necessary to pursue related careers.

Alongside that, the absence of role models or educators who reflect the identities of immigrants and refugee students may contribute to a sense of alienation in STEM spaces. Representation matters. When youth do not see people like themselves succeeding within fields of science, engineering, technology, or skilled trades, they may internalize beliefs that these fields are not for them. Furthermore, families who are unfamiliar with the Canadian education system or labour market may be unable to provide the same level of guidance and advocacy as their non-immigrant peers, which can hinder informed decision making around course selection, program applications, or career planning (Duodo et al., 2017)

Moreover, even when immigrant youth successfully enter post-secondary SETT programs, they continue to face significant barriers in the transition to employment. Finnie and Childs (2018) found that first-generation immigrants participate in STEM education at high rates but are often under-supported when it comes to securing internships, co-op placements, or employment upon graduation. Contributing factors include a lack of culturally responsive career counselling, limited industry experience, and weak collaboration between universities and employers. As a result, many talented immigrant students face what researchers describe as a "leaky pipeline" which refers to a phenomenon where students fall out of the pathway to employment, due to insertional barriers rather than personal shortcomings. International students and recent graduates often face skepticism from employers about their experience and cultural fit (Fang et al., 2022). Intersectional disadvantages (gender, race, training, origin) further hinder labour market entry. Immigrant women engineers face compounded challenges due to their gender, foreign credentials, and visible minority status (Konnikov, 2023).

Addressing these early-stage recruitment/retention barriers require a comprehensive multi-sector approach. Educational institutions must implement culturally inclusive curricula, ensure access to STEM resources across school districts, and invest in mentorship initiatives that connect immigrant youth with professionals in their desired fields (Duodu et al., 2017). At the same time, stronger school-to-work transition programs including employer partnerships, job shadowing, and employment initiatives will bridge the gap between education and the workforce. (Uluduz and Çalik, 2022; Finnie & Childs, 2018). Without intentional, equity-focused interventions, early disparities will continue to ripple through the SETT pipeline, limiting the full participation of immigrant and refugee youth in Canada’s technical and professional workplace (Crea-Arsenio et al. 2022).

### **Recommendations**

Across the literature on barriers to employment retention among immigrants, several recommendations for system change have been made.

- To address the issue of immigrants being employed in positions for which they are overqualified, to better match immigrants’ qualifications with market needs, and to optimize immigrants’ economic contribution, the following are proposed:
  - Revise the Express Entry system to include stricter requirements for language proficiency (Finlayson & Globerman, 2023; Mahboubi & Zhang, 2024)
  - Ensure immigrants selected for entry have education that better aligns with labour market needs in Canada (Mahboubi & Zhang, 2024)
  - Enhance and expand language training programs for newcomers (Mahboubi & Zhang, 2024; O’Rourke & McNamara, 2024; Uppal, 2022)
  - Improve coordination between immigration and integration systems (Uppal, 2022)
  - Increase collaboration between immigration policymakers, regulatory authorities, and employers (Mahboubi & Zhang, 2024)
  - Reform licensing regimes to reduce unnecessary barriers and promote interprovincial mobility (Finlayson & Globerman, 2023)
  - Increase workplace-integration supports post-arrival that are tailored to specific fields (Finlayson & Globerman, 2023)
  - Strengthen and expand initiatives aimed at improving foreign credential recognition (O’Rourke & McNamara, 2024)
- To address workplace discrimination, employer bias, and microaggressions, the following have been recommended:
  - Develop and integrate policies related to equity and anti-discrimination in workplaces (O’Rourke & McNamara, 2024).
  - Train hiring teams and employees on issues related to discrimination, unconscious bias, and the need for diversity in workplaces (Intugane et al., 2024; O’Rourke & McNamara, 2024; Miners et al., 2022)
  - Prioritize efforts that address culture change (O’Rourke & McNamara, 2024)
- To increase mentoring opportunities and inclusion in professional networks, the following have been recommended:
  - Develop mentorship programs led by racialized peers (Miners et al., 2022)

- Increase upskilling opportunities available to immigrants (MIHR, 2024)
- Create mentorship and networking opportunities for high-skilled immigrants that can facilitate labour market integration and support them to build the necessary professional connections for career advancement (O'Rourke & McNamara, 2024)

### **Conclusions**

The evidence demonstrates that immigrant employment retention in Canada's SETT sectors is shaped by complex and intersecting barriers at structural, relational, and individual levels. Structural issues such as credential recognition, policy disconnects, and systemic bias, remain the most significant impediments, though they are compounded by relational exclusions and individual adaptation challenges. Effective policy and practice must go beyond recruitment and address these multifaceted retention challenges to ensure equitable and sustainable participation of immigrants in Canada's skilled workforce. Caidi et al. (2024) highlight that immigrants unable to get a job in their field or advance their career in SETT/STEM, consider immigrating to other countries, and "those other countries may ultimately be the beneficiaries of Canada's limited ability to integrate highly skilled newcomers" (pp. 956-957). The narrative of inclusion promoted by Canada is often unachieved, as both recruitment and retention in SETT are plagued with multi-level and multi-layered obstacles. Overall, as Caidi et al. (2024) succinctly note, the evidence disrupts the "narrative of Canada as a land of opportunity" (p.957).

Future research will benefit from adopting an intersectional approach to examining the barriers to SETT employment retention among immigrants. While some articles highlight how race, gender, language, and other social identities intersect to differentially affect employment experiences and retention outcomes, many studies do not integrate such a lens, limiting their understanding. As a result, SETT-skilled immigrants are viewed as a homogenous group, and policies and practices fall short of addressing critical issues. Further study is needed to explore best practices for policy change and to examine the role of employers, regulatory bodies, and other interest holders in addressing employment retention barriers, particularly around credentialism and bias.

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