

BBOT POLICY BULLETIN

ADDRESSING LABOUR SHORTAGES THROUGH THE INTEGRATION OF NEWCOMERS VIA BETTER LANGUAGE TRAINING SUPPORTS

Opening Statement

English is the language of business in BC, and to fully participate in our economy people need the ability to read, write and speak comfortably in English. However, newcomers to BC and Canada may not, understandably, be proficient in English and this may undercut their integration into the community and delay their success in the workforce. Language training programs are effective methods of helping newcomers improve their language skills, however government programs are often over-subscribed causing newcomers to wait until space is available. In addition, only some program providers offer free childcare or childminding services, a critical element that allows newcomers, especially women, to avail themselves of this service.

Background

The business community is already facing a labour shortage and the number of job vacancies is only expected to rise. According to the BC Chamber's Mindreader Report – Labour Market Issues in British Columbia “2/3 of BC businesses report having had positions that were difficult-to-fill in the past year” and “employers in most regions and industries of the province are challenged with recruiting.”¹ And in the BC Chamber of Commerce's 2018 Collective Perspective Survey, 61% of businesses say that the availability of workers has only worsened over the past year.² As for job openings, the 2018 BC Labour Market Outlook forecasts that “there will be 903,000 job openings over the next 10 years” which cannot be filled simply with domestic labour joining the workforce.³

Immigration is and will be a pivotal solution in addressing our labour needs, and therefore it is imperative that all newcomers be given the tools to fully participate in our economy, starting with language skills. In BC, English is the language of business and a lack of proficiency in English can hold newcomers back economically. For example, in a review of recent census data, Associate Professor of Economics with the University of Calgary Arvind Magesan found that while the wage gap between native-born Canadians and newcomers is 16%, it is only 5.8% for newcomers who speak English at home (a good measure of English proficiency) and fully 27.3% for those who do not.⁴

The Government of Canada funds the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program throughout the country, and it is delivered locally by various settlement services providers. LINC Classes are fully funded so are provided free of charge to permanent residents or convention refugees, 17 years of age or older. LINC classes provide basic language training that will help newcomers with daily activities and also with finding employment.

¹ BC Chamber of Commerce Mindreader Report – Labour Market Issues in British Columbia, The British Columbia Chamber of Commerce, 2018. Accessed online:

<http://www.bcchamber.org/sites/default/files/Final%20MindReader%20Labour%20Market%20Report%2008.21.2018.pdf>

² 2018/19 BC Chamber of Commerce Collective Perspective Survey, The British Columbia Chamber of Commerce, 2018. Accessed online: <http://www.bcchamber.org/sites/default/files/BC%20Chamber%20CP%202018%20FINAL.pdf>

³ British Columbia Labour Market Outlook: 2018 Edition, Government of British Columbia, 2018. Accessed online:

https://www.workbc.ca/getmedia/1dce90f9-f2f9-4eca-b9e5-c19de9598f32/BC_Labour_Market_Outlook_2018_English.pdf.aspx

⁴ Closing the immigrant wage gap: Is speaking English important?, Arvind Magesan, The Conversation. October 25, 2017. Accessed online: <https://theconversation.com/closing-the-immigrant-wage-gap-is-speaking-english-important-84891>

However, settlement services providers report continued and regular waits of several months for LINC classes, which delay the ability for newcomers to access this language training. If newcomers are forced to wait months to even begin language training, this unnecessarily delays their ability to join the workforce, and can cause undue economic hardship as those newcomers are unable to access employment and generate income for a longer period of time.

In addition, there is an exacerbating element which further prevents women from accessing LINC classes: childcare. For many newcomers, particularly women, they will require childcare services to be able to take advantage of LINC classes. And while some program providers do offer free childcare alongside the classes, it is limited to certain sites or certain hours of operation, and the waits for these programs are reported by service providers as significantly longer. This lack of childcare means that women, who are in many instances the caregivers for children, are sometimes unable to take LINC classes and thus have greater difficulty integrating and joining the workforce.

Therefore, the Burnaby Board of Trade recommends that, in light of the economic imperative of fully and quickly integrating newcomers into the workforce to address ongoing labour shortages, the Federal Government:

1. Prioritize additional funding for the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada program and similar language training programs to reduce and eliminate waits.
2. Prioritize additional funding for childcare and childminding services offered in conjunction with language training to allow more equal opportunities for women to avail themselves of these language supports.