

Executive Summary

Immigrant families come to Canada with high education levels, with the Greater Toronto Area a primary destination. Despite high education levels, their economic and social integration into Canada is often difficult, due in part to lack of recognition of foreign credentials and work experience, weak official-language skills, and insufficient cultural competencies. For the children in these families, the young immigrants, successful education outcomes set the stage for success in adulthood, both in the workplace and in further education, enabling them to better integrate into Canadian society and contribute to the Canadian economy. This study examined the pathways of immigrant youth, and the role of English-language proficiency and region of origin in these pathways, using a recently created database containing a number of linked data sources from Seneca College, a large multicultural college in Toronto. This longitudinal dataset enables us to track individual students from the beginning of high school through to graduation from college, and their eventual transition into the labour market or to further education.

The study's overall research question was: *In a large multicultural college, what is the role of immigrants' region of origin and English-language proficiency on academic and labour market outcomes?*

This question was addressed by inquiring into the following issues:

- Do immigrant students have different aspirations for after graduation from college in terms of further education or employment, compared with non-immigrant students?
- Do immigrant students differ from their Canadian-born peers in terms of academic performance and persistence to graduation?
- Of those who graduate from a college program, who continues on to further education in college or university?
- Is there a difference in satisfaction with the usefulness of their college education after graduation for immigrants versus non-immigrants?
- Of those immigrants who graduate and enter the workforce, what are the labour market outcomes across the spectrum of English-language proficiency and region of origin, and how do these outcomes differ from those of graduates who were born in Canada?
- What is the role of college foundational English-language courses in the labour market and academic outcomes of young immigrants?

Methodology

The sample consisted of students who entered a large Toronto college between 2010 and 2014, who were educated at an Ontario high school, were not international students, were under 23 years of age at entry, were not enrolled in a graduate certificate program, and had completed both the mandatory English-language placement test and the entering-student survey. The sample contained 18,466 college entrants of whom 29% were born outside of Canada: More than two-thirds originated from Asia, 14% were from the Americas (outside Canada), 11% were from Europe, and 6% were from Africa. Of these entrants, 2,366 had graduated within the four years under study. Both descriptive and regression techniques were used to estimate how English-language proficiency at entry and region of birth affect an individual's college performance and post-graduation prospects.

Results

The immigrant population, regardless of region of origin, was more likely than the Canadian-born population to have a parent with a university degree (33% vs. 20%). However, immigrants were more

likely to be from low-income neighbourhoods: 46% were in the bottom tercile compared with only 29% of non-immigrants. This trend held true across all regions of origin, although there was high variation. On average, Canadian and immigrant college students had similar levels of high school preparation, in terms of grades and course selection. However, students who came to college with the weakest academic background were from Central and South America and the Caribbean, whereas those with the strongest academic background originated from Southeast Asia.

Overall, immigrant students were more likely to choose three-year diplomas and four-year degrees and to enrol in business or engineering, and were less likely to enrol in community services or the arts than were Canadian-born students.

Seventy percent of students not born in Canada indicated English was not their first language, compared with 15% of those born in Canada. Vast differences existed in the language preparation of college entrants by region of birth. In high school, 38% of non-Canadian-born students were placed in an English-language learner (ELL) course. These students still required English-language support in college, with only 41% eligible to take college-level English compared with two-thirds of Canadian born students with English as a first language. As well, the English-language proficiency of immigrant students who entered an Ontario high school as adults was much more likely to be at below college-level English.

Grades in the student's required English course, cumulative college grade point average (GPA), and graduation rate were used to obtain a measure of language proficiency and academic success. Controlling for a variety of academic, program, language and sociodemographic characteristics, region of birth had only a minimal effect. Students who entered college with lower English-language proficiency were less likely to graduate and more likely to obtain lower grades than those who entered college testing at college level. As expected, having high grades and taking university preparatory courses in high school were quantitatively the largest predictor of student success in college. When controlling for academic background and program, however, lower-income students achieved lower grades, but were as likely to graduate as others; male students were less likely to graduate, and obtained lower grades.

Non-Canadian-born college entrants had higher aspirations for university after college compared with those who were Canadian-born (49% vs. 39%). Specifically, college students from Central and South America, Africa, West Central Asia and the Middle East, and South Asia were substantially and significantly more likely to aspire to go to university.

Non-Canadian-born graduates were more likely to transfer to university six months after graduation than their Canadian-born peers (17% vs. 13.6%). When controlling for a variety of background factors, this effect disappeared. Regression analysis showed that graduates were more likely to transfer if a parent had a degree, which may explain this lack of significance.

Graduates who were born in Canada had an unemployment rate of 14% compared with 25% for graduates born outside of Canada. This gap remained significant in the regression models. Also, independent of region of birth, graduates with lower language skills at college entry also had higher unemployment rates. Unemployment rates were not significantly affected by college GPA, first language, or any of the other academic or sociodemographic factors.

For employed graduates, being Canadian-born had no independent effect on job relatedness, overqualification rate or earnings. However, graduates with lower college-English grades and overall grades were less likely to be in a job related to their program of study, and more likely to be overqualified. In terms of earnings, independent of region of birth, graduates with lower language proficiency at college entry earned less, as did females and those from lower-income neighbourhoods. College grades did not have a significant effect on earnings.

Graduates are asked six months after graduation about their satisfaction with their college education. The descriptive results show that those born in Canada were more likely to report being “very satisfied” than were those born outside of Canada (31% vs. 25%), but the total satisfaction rate (“satisfied” and “very satisfied”) was similar. The regression models indicate that language, academic background, or region of birth were not significant factors. Those who were employed in a field related to their studies, or who were furthering their education, were the most satisfied with their college education.

Conclusions and policy implications

Seneca students who were born outside of Canada were more likely to have highly educated parents, but to live in lower-income neighbourhoods than were Canadian-born students. Although many of these immigrants had attended high school in Ontario, they came to Seneca with weak English-language skills, which hindered their success in college. Even for those who did graduate from college, insufficient language skills often continued to hamper them when they entered the labour market. Other immigrant groups whose English-language proficiency may not have been a barrier, also struggled academically, demonstrating that economic and social integration into Canada is often difficult to achieve. Despite these challenges, immigrant youth were more likely to aspire to university and to continue on after graduation. Job quality and earnings were similar for Canadian-born and immigrant graduates.