

Labour Market Integration of Syrian Refugees in the GTA

A survey of employment support programs in the GTA and the challenges Syrian refugees face in accessing them.

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1. Introduction

Mustafa (pseudonym) worked as an engineer for nine years back home in Syria before the civil war broke out. In early 2016, he was given the opportunity to leave Syria and come to Toronto, Canada as a privately-sponsored refugee. Mustafa wanted nothing more than to find a job so that he could support his wife and two young children, but one year later, and after countless applications and interviews, he had not a single job offer, and a great deal of frustration. Just as he was losing all hope, a friend of his put him in touch with a grassroots employment initiative for Syrian refugees in Toronto where he was able to connect with other Arab-Canadian engineers who provided him with advice on his resume, mentorship on how to approach organizations, and most importantly, professional contacts in his field. Today, Mustafa works in an entry-level position with an engineering consulting firm in Toronto. Through his work he has created a professional and social network for himself and feels more hopeful about his and his family's future in Canada. Mustafa was so grateful to the organization that helped him that he now volunteers with them every Saturday to help mentor other Syrian refugees who are facing similar challenges as he did, in finding a job (Interview 8).

From the early days of the Syrian civil war in Spring of 2011, more than 10 million Syrians have been displaced, approximately 4 million of them across international borders (Betts & Collier, 2015). In late 2015, the newly-elected Canadian Liberal government under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, committed to resettling 25, 000 Syrian refugees between November 4, 2015 and February 29, 2016 in addition to investing \$250 million "to increase refugee processing, as well as sponsorship and settlement services capacity in Canada" (Liberal Party of Canada, 2015). This process was overseen by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada

(IRCC), the federal government ministry responsible for facilitating the arrival of immigrants to Canada, providing protection to refugees, and offering programming to help newcomers settle in Canada. Despite much skepticism and criticism from fellow government officials and major actors in the settlement sector, the 25 000th Syrian refugee was resettled in Canada by February 29th, 2016 (Government of Canada).

The Canadian Liberal Government did not stop there as approximately 40% of the applications processed before February 29th were those of privately-sponsored Syrian refugees who were already in the queue and therefore continued to process Syrian refugee applications through the remainder of 2016 and most of 2017. As of February 28 2018, a total of 51 835 Syrian refugees have been resettled in Canada (IRCC Monthly Updates-Open Government Portal, 2018). Of these 51 835, 41% of them arrived through the privately sponsored stream while nearly 50% arrived through the government assisted stream- these streams will be further explained in the following sections. The remaining 9% arrived through a blended stream by which the refugees are partially government-sponsored and partially privately-sponsored (IRCC Monthly Updates-Open Government Portal, 2018). Further, 22 750 of them were resettled in the province of Ontario meaning that nearly half of all Syrian refugees in Canada were resettled in Ontario (IRCC Monthly Updates-Open Government Portal, 2018). Within this group, again nearly half (10 195 Syrian refugees) were resettled in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA)¹ making it the urban centre with the highest number of resettled Syrian refugees in all of Canada (Syrian Jobs Agenda Roundtable Report, 2017) and the region this paper will primarily focus on.

¹ For the purposes of this research study, the GTA refers to Toronto, Etobicoke, North York, Mississauga and Scarborough.

More than two years have passed since the first wave of Syrian refugees landed in Canada. With most of the original 25, 000 Syrians no longer receiving financial support through their government or private sponsorship programs and transitioning onto Ontario social assistance programs, a focus on employment support and the economic integration of these individuals, is critical.

1.1 Employment as an important component of refugee integration

When resettled refugees, such as those arriving from Syria, first arrive to Canada, the primary concern for IRCC and settlement service providers is to ensure that their immediate needs are met. These needs typically include: securing temporary and then permanent housing; finding a family doctor or dentist if needed; enrolling their children in school; receiving an orientation to Canadian culture and society; and registering adults in official language classes (Wilkinson & Garcea, 2017). While these needs should remain top priority, settlement organizations are encouraged to equally prioritize "looking beyond registration, accommodation, and primary care and taking early steps to support refugees' socioeconomic inclusion, if they are to ensure that those who stay can thrive" (Desiderio, 2016, p. 7).

The Migration Policy Institute's report on integrating refugees into host country labour markets (2016) argues that early and successful labour market integration of refugees is essential to their overall long-term integration. Ensuring that refugees have the tools and support to access employment early in their resettlement process can provide many benefits including: economic self-sufficiency, a sense of purpose, the prevention of marginalization and social exclusion as well as facilitating social and cultural integration by introducing them to new social and

professional networks as demonstrated through Mustafa's story at the beginning of this paper. Further, studies on the mental health of refugees who have fled conflict and violence, as is the case for many of the Syrian refugees in Canada, suggest that "being economically active soon after arrival may help foster psychological well-being and a sense of belonging" (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2016).

Smooth labour market integration is also important from the perspective of the receiving countries. It prevents "humanitarian commitments from creating unsustainable welfare and fiscal burdens," which can lead to resentment in the resident population (Wilkinson and Garcea, 2017, p. 19). It is also in the best interest of the economy of the receiving country to tap into the labour market potential of any refugee group, especially for countries that have an aging population and growing labour shortages in a variety of fields and sectors, such as Canada (Desiderio, 2016).

1.2 Research Focus

While providing Syrian newcomers with refuge and a feeling of safety in their new home country is of utmost importance, finding appropriate and sustainable employment is also imperative in ensuring that they have the opportunities to become self-sufficient, integrated members of Canadian society. There are many factors that can make the process of finding a job rather challenging for them including: low English language levels; low education levels; a lack of Canadian work experience; personal trauma; little to no social networks; among other barriers (DeVoretz et al., 2004; Hyndman, 2011; Ott, 2013). While settlement agencies throughout Canada are offering Syrian refugees, as well as other newcomers, with employment skills training and support services to find jobs, a survey conducted by the IRCC in December 2016

showed that less than half of adult Syrian refugees had found employment after their first year in Canada (IRCC Rapid Impact Evaluation of the Syrian Refugee Initiative, 2016) and among them, a very small percentage have been able to access 'appropriate employment' defined by the Canadian Council for Refugees as: "employment opportunities that are appropriate to the educational background and professional experience of the individual" (Canadian Council for Refugees, n.d.). With the above in mind, this paper will seek to answer the following research questions:

Main research question:

- *What employment support services are currently available to assist Syrian refugees in achieving labour market integration in the GTA and are these services meeting their current needs?*

Sub-questions:

- *What are some of the challenges that the organizations offering these programs face?*
- *What are the major challenges or barriers that Syrian refugees face in finding employment and do these differ from those faced by other groups of resettled refugees in Canada?*

The sub-questions look at the challenges and barriers associated with these employment support services both from a 'macro-level' and a 'micro-level'. Macro-level refers to challenges organizations face on a broader, sector level that have developed over time and over which individual organizations have less control such as: rigid government funding models or the fragmentation of the employment sector in the GTA. And, micro-level refers to challenges faced

by the clients of these organizations, in this case the Syrian refugee group, and over which individual organizations typically have more influence.

This research is a case-study on the employment support services available to Syrian refugees in the Greater Toronto Area while also considering the challenges the organizations offering these programs face, and the barriers encountered by Syrian refugees in accessing them. The paper begins by providing a brief introduction to Canada's history of refugee policy as well as an overview of Canada's current refugee protection system. It then goes on to review some of the existing literature on the different interpretations of labour market integration as a concept and on the barriers to refugee access to employment. The paper continues by presenting some of the main findings gathered from the participant interviews, at both a macro and micro level, followed by a closer look at a few of the findings in particular. The paper then concludes by highlighting some of the ongoing challenges and gaps in employment services for Syrian refugees moving forward and a few recommendations on how these may be addressed. Lastly, it presents an example of a successful Syrian employment initiative in the GTA that has been, and should continue to be, replicated.

2. Background:

Focusing more specifically on the refugee population of interest in this research endeavour, the background section concludes with an overview of the Syrian refugee profile in Canada, with a focus on aspects such as: age; gender; family size; language levels; education levels and occupational background.

2.1 A brief history of refugee policy in Canada:

On June 4, 1969 Canada became a signatory to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (Canadian Council for Refugees, n.d.) and it was not until the Immigration Act of 1978 that Canada legally recognized 'refugees' as their own special class of immigrants for the first time (Perin and Troper, 1999). Prior to 1978 however, the selection criteria used to grant access to refugees "were guided by considerations of economic self-interest, racial prejudice and political bias" (Canadian Council for Refugees, n.d., p.1). In the forty-eight years since the signing of the UN convention and the implementation of the 1978 Immigration Act, Canada has gained the reputation of being a global leader in refugee protection and resettlement as one of the world's largest resettlement countries, alongside Australia, Sweden and the United States (Ott, 2013). Canada is one of the few countries in the world to have a managed immigration program that aims to have newcomers (including refugees) ultimately become full Canadian citizens (Citizenship and Immigration Canada Annual Report, 2012). This immigration program, and the settlement and integration of immigrants to Canada, is legislated by the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA), passed in 2002, and implemented through the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) of Canada together with the Ministry of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, 2001). Similar to the 1978 Immigration Act, the passage of the IRPA in 2002 represented a significant shift in Canada's refugee selection process, this time from an emphasis on the refugee claimant's "ability to establish", particularly with regards to financial means, to a new focus on protection-related concerns (Hyndman, 2011). Refugees now make up roughly 11.6% of all immigrants to Canada (Statistics Canada Census, 2016).

2.2 Overview of Canada's current refugee protection program:

It is important to note that while there are three different classes of immigrants that exist in Canada's immigration system, *refugees* as well as *family* and *economic* class immigrants, Canada's refugee protection program can also be broken up into two main categories of refugees: the Refugee and Humanitarian Resettlement Program (RHRP) and the In-Canada Asylum Program (ICAP). The RHRP is open to those who are residing outside of Canada while the ICAP focuses on those requesting asylum from within the country (Wilkinson and Garcea, 2017). The Refugee and Humanitarian Resettlement Program is then further divided into two streams through which refugees can arrive to the country: *Privately-Sponsored* refugees and *Government-Assisted* refugees, herein referred to as *PSRs* and *GARs* respectively (Hyndman, 2011). More recently, in 2013, a third category was introduced called the Blended Visa-Office Referred (BVOR) in which the refugee is partially government-sponsored and partially privately-sponsored (Labman and Pearlman, 2018). For the purposes of this paper, the focus will be solely on PSRs and GARs, also referred to as 'resettled refugees' (Bevelander and Pendakur, 2012). An explanation of the differences between both groups is provided below:

Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs): These include refugees who have been selected abroad by the UNHCR to be resettled in Canada. GARs' initial resettlement is entirely funded by the Canadian government through the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP). Through the RAP, GARs are provided two types of support: direct income support during their first 12 months to help with the costs of accommodation, clothing, food, furniture etc., and access to RAP-funded settlement services offered by select organizations providing support with housing, orientation to Canada, enrolling their children in school, among others (IRCC Key Figures, 2017).

Privately-Sponsored Refugees (PSRs): The private sponsorship program has existed since the Immigration Act of 1978 however it has seen a particular spike in private sponsors in 1979-80 when 60,000 Indonchinese refugees came to Canada and more recently with the arrival of Syrian refugees to Canada, with 21 275 of Syrians being privately sponsored. Unlike GARs, PSRs can be identified by the IRCC office or by private sponsor groups directly. Sponsor groups can either be: organizations that are

sponsorship agreement holders (SAHs); constituent groups (CGs); and groups of five or more Canadian citizens or a combination of all of the above (Dhital, 2015). Similar to the RAP, sponsor groups will provide the refugee with financial support to cover the living costs for their first year in Canada although some may continue their support for longer. While PSRs also have access to the support services offered by settlement organizations, many sponsors will take on the role of aiding with finding housing, driving to appointments, enrolling in school, interpretation, etcetera.

Following their first year in Canada, all resettled refugees, PSRs and GARs, become eligible for government social assistance programs if they are having trouble finding steady employment (Bevelander and Pendakur, 2012).

2.3 Syrian Refugee Profile in Canada:

- *Age, Gender & Family Size*

The Syrian refugee population in Canada is particularly young with nearly 50% being 18 years of age or younger (The Globe and Mail, 2016). Less than 5% are 65 and over while the remainder are of employable age, between 18 and 65 (IRCC Rapid Impact Evaluation of Syrian Refugee Initiative, 2016). The gender breakdown is nearly even across the country with slightly more males than females (51.3% vs. 48.7% respectively) (IRCC Rapid Impact Evaluation of Syrian Refugee Initiative, 2016). When it comes to family size Syrian refugees, particularly among the government-assisted group, have significantly larger families than other refugee groups resettled in Canada between 2010-2014 (IRCC Rapid Impact Evaluation, December 2016). A government-sponsored Syrian refugee family in Canada consists of, on average, 7 people and can reach up to 14. This has made finding appropriate housing a challenge for many (CBC News, 2016). This number is lower among privately-sponsored Syrian refugees with the

average family size being between 2 and 6 people (IRCC Rapid Impact Evaluation of Syrian Refugee Initiative, 2016). This discrepancy in family size could be explained in part by the differences in recruitment procedures between the different refugee categories. For example, GARs are referred to IRCC by referral organizations abroad, primarily the UNHCR. The UNHCR as well as the Canadian Government prioritize cases of those individuals who are considered to be most vulnerable which typically includes refugees who: have experienced trauma from violence or torture; are living with medical disabilities; are facing systemic discrimination; or refugees with a large number of family members (Elgersma, 2015). These are all also factors that can potentially make their integration process in Canada more challenging if not provided with appropriate support services. On the other hand, private sponsorship is unique in that sponsor groups are able to refer refugee applicants to IRCC for consideration. However, private sponsors are responsible for all resettlement costs during the refugee's first year in Canada making the sponsorship of large families much more difficult to afford. Further, the process for GARs tends to be faster than that for PSRs which can average between 1 to 2 years (IRCC Evaluation of the Resettlement Programs Final Report, 2016). During this time the situation for these applicants may change - extended family members may find resettlement options elsewhere therefore also potentially altering the family composition.

- *Language Levels*

The majority of Syrian refugees to Canada speak Arabic as their mother tongue while a smaller percentage speak Armenian or Kurdish as their first language. A handful (between 5-9%) are illiterate in their own language (Magnet & YMCA Report, 2017). According to several

studies conducted by organizations such as Magnet, Hire Immigrants, COSTI and IRCC, the vast majority of government-sponsored Syrian refugees (83.6%) reported having no knowledge of English or French upon arrival while only 19% of privately-sponsored Syrian refugees reported the same (IRCC Rapid Impact Evaluation of Syrian Refugee Initiative, 2016). This not only indicates that government-assisted Syrians have much lower knowledge levels of an official language than privately-sponsored Syrians but also significantly lower language levels than previous cohorts of government-assisted refugee groups in Canada, 68.3% of which reported having no knowledge of an official language (IRCC Rapid Impact Evaluation of Syrian Refugee Initiative, 2016). This can be partially explained by the fact that, unlike other Arabic-speaking countries in the region such as Egypt, Lebanon or Jordan, Syrians go through their entire education system exclusively in Arabic- from primary school up to and including university. Consequently, many Syrians have never been exposed to English or French therefore placing them at a disadvantage when starting their lives anew in Canada. This makes language training a top priority for this group.

- *Education Levels*

Among Syrian refugees, 68.6% have a secondary school education or less; this number rises to 81.3% among the government-assisted group alone. Of the remaining privately sponsored Syrian refugees, 7.2% hold a formal trade certificate and 13.9% have a university degree or higher. Once again, the level of education is higher among the privately-sponsored Syrian group than those who are government-assisted. Overall, Syrian refugees to Canada tend to have lower education levels than other resettled refugee groups (56.7% have a secondary school

education or less) who arrived between 2010 and 2014 (IRCC Rapid Impact Evaluation of Syrian Refugee Initiative, 2016).

- *Occupational background:*

According to anecdotal evidence provided to the IRCC from UNHCR visa officers in Amman and Beirut, the large majority of Syrian refugees to Canada had work experience and occupational skills in the following 10 fields in order of most common to least common: Service and Sales; Trades, Transport and Equipment Operators; Education, Community and Social Services; Business, Finance and Administration; Natural and Applied Sciences (in particular, engineers); Health Occupations; Culture and Recreation; Natural Resources and Agriculture; Management; and Manufacturing and Utilities (Source: Magnet & YMCA Report, 2017).

It is important to note that the above list reflects the original occupations of these refugees in Syria however, many Syrians spent long periods of time living in other host countries before arriving to Canada (ie. Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and the Gulf Region) during which they picked up jobs in fields of work other than their own, in order to survive. Further, the work experience noted above was almost always limited to male Syrians (Syrian Refugee Roundtable Report, 2017). Some may explain this by arguing that Syrians come from a largely patriarchal culture in which men are typically seen as the head of the household and the primary breadwinner thus the responsibility to find work and provide for the family falls on them while Syrian women are typically expected to stay home to take care of the children and the household. However, this is a sweeping generalization and depends very much on a number of factors including: region of origin within Syria; social class; age; education levels; among others.

Given the above described characteristics of Syrian refugees who have been resettled in Canada since November 2015, it could be argued that certain aspects of their integration into Canadian society, such as economic integration, may be more challenging as compared to other groups of resettled refugees who arrived to Canada with generally higher levels of an official language and education. This of course varies within refugee groups and depends highly on factors such as which region of a country they originated from or how long they have been displaced. For example, Syrian refugees originating from the agricultural province of Idlib or Dar'aa just north of the border with Jordan, are largely farmers and labourers and are likely to be less educated and have little to no knowledge of English or French upon their arrival to Canada. On the other hand, Syrian refugees originating from larger cities like Aleppo and Damascus are, on average, more likely to hold a university degree, professional experience and some knowledge of one of Canada's official languages. Many in the latter group arrived through the privately-sponsored category as they had the means or social connections to have someone sponsor them from Canada whereas many in the former group came through the government-assisted stream (Magnet & YMCA Report, 2017).

3. Literature Review:

Given the primary research question for this paper, it is important to begin by clarifying what it means to achieve 'labour market integration', particularly for a newcomer and more specifically, for a refugee. Therefore, the following section will begin by exploring some of the more common interpretations of the concept in the literature; how such a concept is typically measured; and what some of the major barriers to achieving labour market integration are for

refugees and other newcomer groups to Canada. Since this study is centered around the Canadian context, this literature review will focus largely on Canadian sources.

3.1 Defining 'Labour Market Integration'

'Integration' as an umbrella concept:

When it comes to defining labour market integration, in relation to newcomers, it is important to define 'integration' as it is an umbrella concept. To this day there is no universally accepted definition or understanding of 'integration' among scholars, practitioners or institutions and it continues to be a hotly debated topic in the settlement community. The International Organization for Migration defines the integration (of migrants) as "the process of mutual adaptation between host society and migrant" (International Organization for Migration, n.d.). Similarly, Castles et al.'s (2002) research on migration and community formation describe integration (of all newcomers) as a two-way process of adaptation on behalf of the newcomers as well as the host society in which there are changes to values, norms and behaviours to both groups (as cited by Hyndman, 2011). Stemming from a similar school of thought, Brunner et al. (2014) offer several interpretations of refugee integration in their study, one of them being the "two-way interchange of culture and understanding between the host community, its institutions and newcomers." (Brunner et al., 2014, p. 83). The UNHCR uses a slightly more detailed definition of 'local integration' (of refugees) and unlike other definitions, introduces the concept of nationality as the end goal: "local integration is a complex and gradual process with legal, economic, social and cultural dimensions. It imposes considerable demands on both the individual and the receiving society. In many cases, acquiring the nationality of the country of

asylum is the culmination of this process" (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.). This perspective applies to the Canadian context as Canada is one of the very few countries whose refugee resettlement system is set up with the intention of eventually attaining Canadian citizenship. According to Phillimore and Goodson (2008), "integration begins with arrival and ends when refugees are in an equal position to the majority" (Phillimore & Goodson, 2008, p. 309).

Ranu Basu of York University provides a view on integration that focuses on how communities "redefine meanings of integration that are locally specific" (Basu, 2011). Basu looks at integration as transcending different socio-cultural spaces, such as schools, the workplace and social relations to allow for the recognition of the power of immigrants "as not just passive recipients but rather active agents of city-building itself" (Basu, 2011). This is a particularly applicable perspective when looking at the role of employment in a newcomer's integration process. Alastair Ager and Alison Strang (2008) introduce a conceptual framework that is to be used as a tool to better understand the concept of 'integration' and the many perceptions of what successful integration entails. Their seminal paper offers a framework that uses ten key domains (categories) and associated themes to help measure refugee access to and participation in: education; employment; health and housing sectors; rights and citizenship; and community and social connections, while considering associated structural and cultural barriers. Unlike other studies on the topic, Ager and Strang go beyond only considering typical objective material markers of integration such as: employment; education; housing etc. and instead recognize the importance of social relationships and the role of contextual variables like security and stability. That said, Ager and Strang (2008) do highlight employment as one of the integral

domains in successful refugee integration and the importance of vocational programs that meet refugee needs.

Lastly, Hynie et al. (2016) build on Ager and Strang's framework and their approach to social integration by proposing what they refer to as the Holistic Integration Model. Their model, as the name suggests, takes a more holistic approach by considering more subjective variables including refugee feelings of belonging and feeling at home in their new communities as well as the ways in which a community adapts to its changing composition. Hynie et al.'s model portrays integration as occurring across three separate spheres whereby the spheres "move from subjective individual elements such as a sense of belonging or feeling excluded, to objective individual characteristics including social identities like gender; age; race; sexual orientation etc., to the characteristics of the social and institutional environment for example: political policies; public discourses and the socioeconomic circumstances of a community"(Hynie et al., 2016, p. 4).

Integration is a process that is influenced by many factors including: motivation to migrate (was it a choice?); age at time of arrival; duration of time in Canada; language levels; education levels; differences between generations; among many more. While on the one hand some of the above definitions of 'integration' may offer a somewhat broad understanding of the concept, this is in effect a reflection of the complex, fluid and ever-changing understanding of the process of integration for newcomers, including refugees, and consequently the everpresent challenge in defining it.

3.2 Labour Market Integration (newcomers vs. refugees):

When it comes to literature on labour market integration, there has been a great deal of scholarly research done on the newcomer population in Canada as a whole. However, far less has been written on the topic with relation to the refugee population specifically, and even less so has been published regarding the more recent Syrian refugee group who have been settling in the Greater Toronto Area since late 2015. There is a tendency for refugees to be lumped in under the broader 'newcomer' term, particularly with respect to employment supports, but this ignores the unique set of needs and challenges this group faces when accessing employment. This said, although there seems to be a gap in the literature when it comes to studying the economic outcomes of resettled refugees, particularly Syrian refugees, there are certainly some scholars and organizations who have published works on the topic. The following section will highlight some of these studies.

The existing literature on the labour market integration of newcomers, including refugees, has characterized and measured the concept in several ways and changes depending on context, who is doing the measuring and with what purpose in mind. Many national governments, by way of their census, will tend to focus on more objective approaches to measuring labour market integration. For example, reports by the European Parliament (2016) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2018) consider measures such as the gap in employment and unemployment rates as well as income levels between refugees and their native-born counterparts. Similarly, in her UNHCR report for the Policy Development and Evaluation Service, Eleanor Ott (2013) offers a number of ways to describe labour market integration and 'employment success'. Among them she refers to measuring labour force participation; employment; and unemployment rates as key indicators

(Ott, 2013). Labour market integration is also characterized by some resettlement agencies, as well as the International Labour Organization (ILO), by looking at job retention as an indicator of job stability, measuring degrees of social mobility or by considering levels of job diversity as opposed to a concentration of newcomers working in certain fields such as the service industry, cleaning or factory work (ILO Labour Migration Branch, 2016). While this interpretation is more applicable to the typical employment path for many refugees, one would need to be conscious of considering factors such as secondary migration, the state of the economy and the role of social networks and ethnic community networks in influencing the above indicators; these are factors that will be further examined later on in this paper. Paul Lewkowicz of Queen's University defines 'effective labour market integration' as "obtaining a position in the field of one's expertise that is commensurate in pay and level to one's skills and knowledge" (Lewkowicz, 2008, p. 10). Similar to the scholars mentioned above, in their study on Gender, Immigration and Labour Market Integration (2005) Tastsoglou and Preston also use indicators such as: employment status, earnings, and occupational attainment although they emphasize the importance of "using more composite measures of economic performance that take into account education, qualifications, experience, and their influence on an individual's economic performance" (Tastsoglou & Preston, 2005, p. 2).

Other scholars will take a slightly different approach to labour market integration for example, DeVoretz et al. (2004) use what they call the 'human capital model' when measuring the economic success of refugees to Canada. They argue that refugees will invest in themselves by way of education or language training, before and after their arrival to Canada. The higher their human capital, the higher their chances of economic success (DeVoretz et al., 2004). While this concept is undoubtedly valuable in understanding labour market integration, it assumes

refugees have a choice to invest in themselves and ignores potential barriers that place refugees in a particularly vulnerable position such as: lower language levels; physical ability; psychological trauma; financial means or discriminative policies which prevent them from increasing their human capital and thus, lower their chances of integrating into the labour market. Another interpretation of labour market success for new immigrants shared by scholars such as Bourmpoula et al. (2016), include the measurement of job advancement; a person's ability to move from one occupation to another and often one social class to another- also referred to as one's *social mobility* (Bourmpoula et al., 2016).

The UNHCR has found, by way of multiple analyses in a variety of countries, that refugees have the tendency to do worse with labour market integration in the short-term, relative to other newcomer groups and Canadian-born individuals. This is still true after accounting for certain demographics such as age, education level or knowledge of the host country's official language(s) (Ott, 2013). In fact, according to Wilkinson and Garcea's study on the economic integration of refugees in Canada, they state that "refugees are more likely than any other newcomer group to arrive without job-ready skills suited to the Canadian labour market" (Wilkinson & Garcea, 2017, p. 13) as unlike other newcomer groups, refugees do not plan to emigrate but instead are forced to flee their countries, sometimes quite suddenly. Alternatively, when speaking of the Syrian refugee population, Dawn Edlund of IRCC, as quoted by M. Lowrie of the Canadian Press (2017), stated that "while more than half of the Privately Sponsored Syrian Refugees (PSRs) who arrived to Canada before March 2016 have found work, only 10 per cent of Government-Sponsored Refugees (GARs) have done so" (Lowrie, 2017, p. 2) suggesting that this really varies depending on which refugee stream one arrives through. She goes on to explain that "part of the reason for the discrepancy is the fact that GARs tend to arrive with a lower level

of education and have a lower self-reported level of knowledge of English or French", making it more difficult for them to find a job (Lowrie, 2017, p. 2).

In DeVoretz et al.'s study on the economic experiences of refugees in Vancouver, Canada, they find that the length of resettlement has a noticeable effect on a newcomer's economic success in the labour force (DeVoretz et al., 2004). Research has shown that although refugees in Canada have significantly lower incomes than those from other newcomer classes in their first few years, with time (usually after an average of ten years in Canada) their incomes begin to converge with those of their counterparts (DeVoretz et al., 2004; Hyndman, 2014; IRCC, 2012; Wilkinson & Garcea, 2017). In fact, after an average of 12 to 15 years of living in Canada, "refugees reported earnings at or near the Canadian-born average" (DeVoretz et al., 2004). This has been further analyzed by scholars such as Hyndman (2014) and Hiebert (2009), who looked at the economic integration of newcomers and the difference in economic outcomes among groups of refugees (ie. PSRs, GARs and LCRs). It has been found that while PSRs tend to find employment more quickly than GARs, their income levels were between 29% and 45% of Canada's low income cut-off for a family of four and lower than the incomes of GARs (Hyndman, 2014). Similarly, Dikshya Dhital of the University of Ottawa conducted a study comparing the economic integration of GAR, PSR and LCR categories of refugees in Canada between 1992 and 2009 by using indicators including: annual income levels; education levels; and length of time in Canada and found that both male and female PSRs in the group that she analyzed did far better than GARs or LCRs at integrating into the labour market. Although GARs seemed to catch up to their PSR counterparts around their 8th year in Canada, it was concluded that PSRs demonstrated a stable increase in income over the 18 years while GARs were found to be much more vulnerable to dips in the economy and consequently, significant

dips in their income. This was explained in large part by PSRs' generally higher levels of education and social capital (Dhital, 2015). Although it is still too early to draw any definitive conclusions with regards to the Syrians' case, preliminary studies by organizations such as the YMCA of Greater Toronto and Magnet have shown similar patterns when it comes to education levels with 46% of PSRs having some form of post-secondary education versus only 14% among the GARs (Report compiled by the YMCA of Greater Toronto, 2017). Further, a Syrian Refugee Jobs Agenda Roundtable report based on data from the IRCC states that the average level of schooling for adult Syrian GARs in Canada is 6-9 years (Syrian Refugee Jobs Agenda Roundtable report, 2017). This said, it is important to note that it is difficult to truly draw an accurate or meaningful comparison of these different categories of refugees since, as outlined above and earlier in this paper, the recruitment, membership, and demographics of those in each category are so distinct it makes them incomparable.

Academics such as Dan Hiebert (2009) and Kathy Sherrell (2010) of the University of British Columbia note that refugees' labour market success is significantly influenced by their language capacity and language literacy rates. Refugees tend to fall below the Canadian average for both categories (Hiebert, 2009). Sherrell's research, conducted in Winnipeg and Vancouver in 2010, demonstrated that although refugees (specifically GARs) had access to settlement services and language training, their low English levels were identified as the primary barrier to finding employment (Sherrell, 2010). This barrier will be further examined in the following section of this paper.

Other scholars have taken a more holistic approach to studying refugee labour market integration by considering external factors that may influence their economic success as well as more subjective measures of labour market integration. For instance, DeVoretz et al. (2004)

argue that their economic success is highly dependent on the state of the economy at the time of the newcomer's (or refugee's) arrival, as the strength of the economy can have a significant influence on their ultimate economic success (DeVoretz et al., 2004). Alternatively, in her CERIS Refugee Research Synthesis report (2014), Jennifer Hyndman concludes that very little has changed in terms of refugees' economic outcomes, since the passage of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) in 2001. She argues that "the economic outcomes of resettled refugees are less a reflection of their human capital or integration potential and more a result of the age cohort and the support provided upon arrival" (Hyndman, 2014). Gericke et al. (2017) examine refugees' access to different types of social capital and the ways in which this social capital can help and influence their ability to integrate into the German labour market. Further, Hynie et al. (2016) highlight the role of the host community institutions', including employers', responsibility to adapt and accommodate the needs of incoming refugees and how this ultimately influences their successful integration into different aspects of host society life. Lastly, scholars such as Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2007) consider the importance of refugees' own interpretations and attitudes in determining successful labour market integration including levels of job satisfaction and feeling valued and respected in the workplace.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, it is important to remember that there are many interpretations and factors to consider when measuring labour market integration and economic success- particularly when referring to refugees. This paper will consider several of the interpretations above when surveying the types of employment support programs available in the GTA and their role in facilitating the labour market integration of Syrian refugees. Although it will take into account indicators such as employment rates; income levels; levels of job diversity and job retention as highlighted by Lewkowicz (2008), Ott (2013) and the ILO (2016), it will

also look at more qualitative data such as the relationships between a refugee's past experience, qualifications and their job as emphasized by Tastsoglou and Preston (2005); their social mobility as underlined by Bourmpoula (2016); their levels of job satisfaction (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury) and most of all, Hynie et al.'s emphasis on the role of host community organizations in facilitating refugee labour market integration. Further, it will consider something that seems to be missing from the current literature on refugee labour market integration which is the high levels of refugee participation in the informal labour market in the GTA, working what are referred to as 'survival jobs' (Desiderio, 2016).

To reiterate, there is a fair amount of grey literature on the economic outcomes and labour market participation of newcomers as a whole, of which a small portion is dedicated to resettled refugees in Canada. As of yet, however, it has been difficult to find a significant scholarly contribution to the literature with regards to academic studies focused on resettled Syrian refugees in Canada and namely, in the Greater Toronto Area. Further, despite the number of employment support programs that exist in the GTA, there are a number of barriers, some of which were mentioned briefly above, which hinder a refugee's ability to successfully integrate into the Canadian labour market placing them at a greater disadvantage than other newcomer groups. The following section will review some of the current literature on the more common barriers, in further detail.

3.3 Barriers to labour market integration for resettled refugees:

As mentioned earlier in this paper, research has demonstrated that upon their arrival to Canada, refugees have a more difficult time gaining employment and tend to earn lower incomes

than other newcomer classes, particularly in their first few years (DeVoretz et al., 2004; Hyndman, 2011; Lamba, 2003). There are a plethora of barriers and factors that can limit a refugee's ability to join the Canadian workforce, some of which include: their ethnic origin; their knowledge of the official language; recognition of their foreign credentials, if any; or the state of the host country's job market. Although there are many more challenges involved, this section will highlight only a few of the ones most frequently mentioned in the current literature.

Research studies conducted by Hiebert (2009), Sherrell (2010), Hyndman (2014) and Wilkinson & Garcea (2017), have identified refugees' English (or French) language levels as one of the top factors in accessing employment in Canada. Due to the circumstances under which refugees typically leave their home countries (ie. armed conflict, war, persecution), learning a new language before their arrival to Canada is not top of mind nor is it an option for most. Further, unlike other newcomer groups, resettled refugees are not required to have a minimum language level in order to be accepted into Canada (Dempsey et al., 2009). In fact, whereas 80% or more of the immigrants who arrive through the economic class typically speak English or French, only 30% of refugees speak an official language and some are even illiterate in their mother tongue (Wilkinson & Garcea, 2017). In turn, this often means refugees are automatically at a disadvantage, compared to fellow newcomers, when trying to attain employment. Bourmpoula et al. (2016) argue that although resettled refugees are given access to free language training, it will typically take a couple of years to reach a fluency level high enough to join the "skilled labour force" which often means refugees are stuck in manual labour jobs or 'under the table' jobs that don't require language skills and typically earn much lower wages; offer little job security; and unsafe work conditions. According to statistics collected by the IRCC from visa officers in Amman and Beirut, this seems to be particularly true of the recent Syrian refugee

cohort in Canada with only 12% of Syrian GARs self-reporting any knowledge of an official language upon arrival whereas 57% of PSRs reported speaking either English or French (Syrian Refugee Jobs Agenda Roundtable Report, 2017).

According to the existing literature, a significant gender gap also exists when looking at refugee labour force participation. According to a 2012 report by the Toronto Immigrant Employment Data Initiative (TIEDI), only 63% of refugee women were employed in Canada versus 83.6% of refugee men (TIEDI, 2012). Alternatively, a 2009 Citizenship and Immigration Canada report on the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program stated that immigrant women (among them, refugees) made up three quarters of their clients for English language classes (Dempsey et al., 2009). Dempsey's study suggests there is a clear disparity between the number of female newcomers participating in language training programs and those who go on to join the Canadian labour market. As mentioned earlier in this paper, this could be explained by a number of factors including cultural barriers or expectations around gender roles, unaffordability of childcare, and a lack of family support, among others.

This leads to another barrier which studies by Lori Wilkinson and Joseph Garcea (2017) argue is often overlooked, or insufficiently addressed, by settlement agencies and government organizations alike. This is the influence of cultural differences on gender roles as a potential barrier to employment. Although the gender gap in the labour force is noticeable regardless of cultural or ethnic origins, Wilkinson and Garcea suggest that it is accentuated in the case of refugees due to factors such as financial limitations; family composition and dynamics; as well as a lack of a support network in Canada (Wilkinson & Garcea, 2017). Reports by Citizenship and Immigration Canada in 2015 support this opinion when referring to the recent influx of Syrian refugees to Canada. The reports explained that more often than not, Syrian refugee

women living in Canada will stay at home to take care of the household and the children while their husbands work or go to language classes. While this is partially due to unaffordable childcare costs and the limited financial means of most refugees, the onus to stay home and look after the children often falls on the woman as "in general, Syrian culture is patriarchal, with the family under the authority of the man... the man is typically the breadwinner while the woman is responsible for looking after the children..." (CIC Syrian Population Profile, 2015). This is of course not specific to Syrian culture but rather a common occurrence in many cultures consequently making it more challenging for refugee women to integrate economically. Although it is important to be aware of cultural expectations, it is equally important to note that this is not the case for all families of a particular culture and it should be argued that the onus ultimately falls on settlement organizations to inform themselves and ensure their programs are culturally appropriate for the clients accessing them. By being cognisant of any possible cultural (or other) barriers to participation and addressing them, settlement organizations play a key role in ensuring that refugees' integration is a two-way process of mutual accommodation as described previously in this paper.

Another barrier mentioned often in the literature is refugees' lack of a support network or other forms of social capital upon their arrival to Canada (Lamba 2003; Lewkowicz 2008; Stevens 2016; Hyndman 2011). Social ties and community support networks can play a significant role in the overall integration experience of refugees and more specifically, can aid a great deal in accessing or even hearing about employment opportunities (Lamba, 2003; Stewart et al., 2008). Unlike other classes of newcomers who usually arrive to Canada with some form of financial or 'human' capital, Lewkowicz argues that the only type of capital refugees have access to is social capital. This can be in the form of social networks; familial connections; ethno-

cultural communities; and the potential job information and connections that can come from these (Lewkewicz, 2008). More specifically, Matthew Stevens (2016), formerly of York University, refers to the value of social networks among those of the same faith, ethnicity, country of origin etc. as 'bonding capital' whereas the value of social ties between those of different socio-cultural, ethnic, religious groups (for example Syrian refugees and Canadian-born individuals) is referred to as 'bridging capital' (Ager and Strang, 2008 as cited by Stevens, 2016). As mentioned earlier in this paper, it is argued that this explains why Syrian refugees who were privately sponsored by Canadians appear to have had better luck with finding employment, faster. By creating bridging capital through their sponsors and their networks, they have more access to potential job opportunities (Dhital, 2015). This said, according to Jennifer Hyndman's studies on refugee labour market integration (2011), in the more recent years since the IRPA was implemented, GARs arriving to Canada typically come in smaller numbers (not including the recent influx of Syrian refugees) without a pre-existing group of people from the same nation-state (Hyndman, 2011). Navjot Lamba argues that this can consequently mean a more challenging integration process due to a lack of social support; a diminished sense of community or belonging in their new country; less knowledge of and access to settlement resources; as well as fewer connections to professional networks and potential job opportunities (Lamba, 2003). Lastly, a lack of social capital upon arrival to Canada can also be the cause for many refugee families to opt for moving to another city or region where they may have relatives, friends or a larger community of people from their country of origin- as Dhital points out is the case for many of the Syrians who first settled in Toronto- resulting in a wave of secondary migration with the hope of an easier integration experience elsewhere (Dhital, 2015).

Although this barrier is not exclusive to refugees, reports compiled by Hyndman (2011); Kelly et al. (2014); and Ott (2013) highlight the lack of recognition for refugees' work experience and credentials prior to arriving to Canada. Employers' emphasis on Canadian work experience makes it immensely challenging for refugees, as well as other newcomer groups, to attain their first job. While it has been found in studies by Bevelander and Pendakur (2014) that a correlation exists between higher levels of schooling among refugees and higher levels of earnings, other studies by Vroome and Toobergen (2010) showed that having education pays but it pays more to have domestic education rather than foreign education. Similarly, a study by Maria Vincenza Desiderio (2016) echoes this finding by stating that it is much more difficult for newcomers to have their foreign credentials translated or recognized by employers- not to mention having access to accurate information and the financial means to do so. In her 2014 CERIS report, Hyndman highlights the need for a renewed focus on equivalency programs to support refugees in finding meaningful employment that is commensurate with their knowledge and skills (Hyndman, 2014). Lastly, something that seems to be overlooked by the current literature on foreign credential recognition is the onus on employers to also make an effort to inform themselves on foreign credential systems rather than newcomer professionals having to always bear the brunt of the responsibility of proving their credentials to employers.

4. Methodology

In order to best understand the nature and effectiveness of employment support programs available to Syrian refugees in the GTA, a qualitative case study research method was applied. The GTA was chosen as the geographical area of focus for this study as it is the urban centre

with the highest number of resettled Syrian refugees in Canada (as per IRCC monthly stat report) as well as the highest concentration of settlement services for new immigrants. For the purposes of this study, the GTA region refers to Toronto, Etobicoke, North York, Mississauga and Scarborough.

Data gathered for this study was primarily done so by way of semi-structured individual interviews each approximately one hour in length. Criteria for the selection of interview participants were as follows: a) they had to be a current or past staff at an organization that provides settlement support services being accessed by Syrian refugee newcomers; b) their organization had to offer employment-related support services for newcomers to Canada, even if they weren't being accessed by Syrians specifically; and c) the organization had to be located within the boundaries of the GTA as outlined above. All organizations in the GTA that met the aforementioned criteria were contacted and interviews were conducted with those who responded with interest in participating.

Following the first set of interviews, it quickly became apparent that in order to thoroughly and accurately portray the nature of employment supports existing for Syrians in the GTA, it was necessary to include organizations and initiatives outside of the settlement sector. Given the significant outpour of support for Syrians from communities as well as from a few major players in the private sector, the interview participant criteria was therefore expanded to include any organization or initiative providing employment supports catering to Syrian refugees in the GTA. Most subsequent interview participants were recruited using the snowball sampling technique via past participants' professional and social networks. A total of 17 interviews were conducted with staff from 17 different organizations and initiatives, herein referred to as Interviews 1-17.

The participant sample consisted of a mix of frontline staff who work directly with Syrian refugees as clients; members of senior management who oversee programs and services accessed by, or catering to, Syrian refugees; staff at organizations who act as coordinating bodies or facilitators in Syrian resettlement; as well as employers who have hired Syrian refugees. Data collected from all interviews was transcribed and coded using qualitative data analysis techniques to identify prominent themes and trends.

In addition to the interviews, data was also collected through participation in: conferences focused on the resettlement of Syrian refugees in Canada (ie. Jusoor Conference); relevant academic seminars given by visiting scholars to York University's Centre for Refugee Studies; attendance at screenings of relevant documentaries on the topic; as well as information sessions on resettlement services offered by a few different GTA-based settlement organizations. All data gathering techniques complied with appropriate informed consent and ethics procedures.

5. *Findings:*

This section presents the findings of this research. It first addresses the main research question by providing detail on the employment support services that are currently available to assist Syrian refugees in achieving labour market integration in the GTA. The next section focuses on the barriers and challenges faced, directly addressing the research sub-questions.

5.1 Key Players & Employment Support Programs

There are three categories of key players involved in the resettlement process for Syrian refugees in the GTA: a) government; b) non-profit; and c) grassroots initiatives². There are also different types of employment support programs that currently exist for newcomers in the GTA, including some that are offered by several organizations, and other types which are specific to one organization only. The following section highlights the key players involved in the resettlement of Syrian refugees in the GTA, and then categorizes the employment support programs provided to support their labour market integration (see Figure 1 below).

- *Key players:*

- a) Government*

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the Canadian Syrian Refugee Initiative was spearheaded by Prime Minister Trudeau's Liberal Government in late 2015 at which point it was also decided that the name of the ministry responsible for overseeing Canada's immigration system would be changed from Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) to Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) in order to better reflect all newcomer groups (Canada Immigration Newsletter, 2016). IRCC has been the central government body overseeing, coordinating and funding the arrival and settlement of the 50, 000+ Syrian refugees who have come to Canada since November 2015. From coordinating with the UNHCR and foreign national governments to select, register and prepare Syrians for their arrival to Canada, working closely with settlement organizations and other levels of government (ie. Ontario Ministry of Citizenship

² This is not an exhaustive list and the inclusion of the organizations in this section, or exclusion of others, is not a reflection of the value of their services and programs.

and Immigration (MCI), City of Toronto Newcomer Office) to provide a range of services once arrived in Canada, funding the Resettlement Assistance Program described above, to overseeing and funding service providers in their delivery of special projects for Syrian refugees.

b) Non-Profit

While there have been an overwhelming number of non-profits who have played and continue to play an integral role in the resettlement of refugees in Canada, this section will highlight just a few of the key players in the non-profit sector who have been heavily involved in the resettlement of the Syrian refugee group.

COSTI Immigrant Services is a community-based multicultural agency offering educational, employment, settlement and social services to newcomer populations in the GTA. As the designated service-providing organization for all government-assisted refugees (GARs) arriving in the GTA, COSTI was the organization responsible for receiving Syrian refugees at Pearson and ensuring their immediate needs (ie. housing, medical, schooling, etc.) were met for their first few months in the country. Since language instruction for newcomers is one of their primary services, COSTI worked directly with the YMCA who conducted on-site language assessments for all Syrian refugee adults being housed by COSTI. For those who ended up finding permanent housing outside of COSTI's service areas, COSTI collaborated closely with a number of other settlement agencies to ensure the Syrian clients' files were passed on to an agency closer to them. For those who stayed, COSTI continues to work with them to provide a range of services, including employment support, as well as referrals to aid with other aspects of their resettlement.

With regards to employment support for Syrians, one of the non-profit key players involved in supporting Syrians' access to jobs is ACCES Employment, an organization providing support services to those facing barriers to employment, namely newcomers. ACCES Employment has acted as a leader in its sector by creating programs tailored to the needs of Syrian refugees such as its Construction-Trades program which incorporates on-site language support with hands-on job training followed by an apprenticeship. Most importantly, this is one of the only employment programs in the GTA that is open to newcomers with a low language level (CLB2) compared to the standard CLB 6 or 7 requirement with most programs- this is something that will be further discussed later in this paper.

c) Grassroots initiatives

In addition to the key players in the not for profit and public sectors, there has also been some remarkable work done at the grassroots, community level by actors such as Refugee Career Jumpstart Project (RCJP), the Together Project, and the Syrian Refugee Jobs Agenda Roundtable.

RCJP, a community initiative started in 2015 by 2 Syrian-Canadians set out with the goal of helping Syrian refugees navigate the Canadian labour market with the aim of continuing their careers and rebuilding their lives in Canada (RCJP website). By connecting skilled Syrians to Canadian employers, they were able to help hundreds of Syrian refugees find jobs. Their organization has now grown to include all refugees in their scope.

Similarly, the Together Project was created by a small group of 5 community members in Toronto who identified a need for more social and settlement support for Syrian government-

assisted refugees (GARs). Similar to privately-sponsored refugees who had a group of five sponsors dedicated to supporting them throughout their first year, the Together Project matches GARs with a 'welcome group' made up of five community member volunteers. Welcome groups organize field trips, accompany refugees to appointments, open up their professional networks to them, among other supports. By helping to create strong community connections and social networks, the Together Project continues to foster a sense of belonging for Syrian GARs in Toronto.

Another grassroots initiative that came about in response to the need for further employment support for Syrian refugees was the coming together of over 50 key members from the public, not for profit and private sectors to form the Syrian Refugee Jobs Agenda Roundtable for the GTA. The roundtable recognized that while the primary needs of Syrians were being addressed, navigating employment with the absence of social networks was going to be a challenge for many of them (Syrian Refugee Jobs Agenda Roundtable Report, 2016). Through regular meetings to gather, share, and distribute relevant information across sectors, new partnerships were forged and innovative programs have been born including the Construction-Trades program mentioned above by ACCES Employment, as well as an entrepreneurship training program through a partnership between ACCES Employment and the Business Development Bank of Canada. Most importantly, the Roundtable has, and continues to, enable collaboration and communication across all three sectors while working towards the same common goal: connecting Syrian refugees to jobs. Table 1 below provides a summary of the key players involved in the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative in the GTA.

Categories	Key Players
Government	IRCC, MCI, City of Toronto Newcomer Office
Non-Profit	COSTI, YMCA, ACCES Employment
Grassroots & Community Initiatives	Refugee Career Jumpstart Project (RCJP), The Together Project, Syrian Refugee Jobs Agenda Roundtable

Table 1: Summary of key players in the GTA

- *Types of employment support programs in the GTA*

There are a number of employment services and support programs offered for newcomers by settlement and employment agencies alike. While most of the program types are standardized and offered by multiple settlement agencies, there are a few that are specific to a particular organization and to a particular client group for example, Syrian refugees. This said, most employment support programs generally fall under the following categories: Enhanced Language Training/Job-Specific Language Training; Bridging Programs; Mentoring Programs; and Entrepreneurship Programs.

a) Enhanced Language Training (ELT)/ Job-Specific Language Training:

Enhanced Language Training (ELT), and Job-Specific Language Training programs are referred to differently depending on the organization offering them. However, in essence, they both share the same goal: to help internationally-trained professionals develop English language skills that are specific to their field of study or professional experience. Most of these programs are offered for regulated professions such as engineers; HR professionals; people in IT;

accountants; among others. ELT and Job-Specific Language Training programs provide all newcomers who are trained in these fields with guidance around: assessing their education and skills; preparing for a certification examination; or creating individual learning plans.

b) Bridging Programs

In addition to the job-specific language training mentioned above, a few select organizations will offer their participants the option of a short placement or apprenticeship at the end of the language training and connect them directly to potential employers in their fields. These are referred to as *Bridging Programs* and sometimes require a fee which newcomers have the option to pay for through the Ontario Bridging Participant Assistance Program (OBPAP) offered by the Ontario Government. The OBPAP is a one-time bursary for up to \$5000 that helps internationally-trained professionals break into the Ontario labour market by assisting with the costs of tuition, books and equipment (OBPAP website).

c) Mentoring Programs

Some settlement organizations will offer mentoring programs for their newcomer clients whereby they are matched with a Canadian professional currently working in their field who can provide advice and tips on what employers are looking for in Canada, how to tailor their resumes or how to best network with other professionals in their field. Newcomers are sometimes matched with one person over the span of several months or some organizations also offer the

option of speed-mentoring events during which newcomers meet with several different mentors, for a short period of time, over the span of a few hours.

d) Entrepreneurship Programs

A few select organizations offer training programs for those newcomers who are interested in starting their own business in Canada. Providing them with knowledge and tips on how to develop a business plan, advice on how to target investors and secure funding as well as legal consultation on how to launch their new business. These programs can range from 1 day workshops to 4 week training courses, depending on the organization.

Table 2 provides a summary of the types of employment programs that are available in the GTA.

Program Type	Description
Enhanced Language Training & Job-Specific Language Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Field-specific English classes for internationally-trained professionals. •Typically require a CLB level 6/7 to participate.
Bridging Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Field-specific language training that includes a job placement or internship. •Typically require a CLB level 7/8 to participate.
Mentoring Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Newcomer clients are matched with a professional working in their field to provide tips and guidance. •Typically require a CLB level 6/7 to participate.
Entrepreneurship Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Help newcomers looking to start their own business with financial, business and legal advice. •Typically require a CLB level 7/8 to participate.

Table 2: Summary of Employment Support Programs in the GTA

In addition to the above-mentioned employment program types, many settlement agencies will offer additional employment supports including: 1-on-1 employment counselling and Job Search Workshops (JSWs) which introduce newcomers to the many job search tools available to them. The ongoing challenge with most of these programs however, is threefold. Firstly, these programs cater to all newcomers to Canada, they are not specific to refugees and the unique barriers they face. Secondly, they cater mostly to those who have previous education and professional experience which tends to be less common among the refugee population as compared to other newcomer groups. Lastly, they require a fairly high English language level (CLB 6/7) in order to participate. These challenges can create significant barriers to participation for many refugees, in particular Syrians, and will be discussed in more detail in the later sections of this paper.

5.2 Barriers & Challenges

The data collected from the 17 interviews conducted, together with the additional data sources mentioned in the Methodology section above, highlight challenges and barriers to employment for Syrian newcomers in the GTA. Some findings confirm challenges previously identified in the field, while others are applicable primarily to the Syrian refugee group. Given this study's research questions, the following section will take a closer look at these challenges under two categories: macro-level and micro-level findings. At the macro-level, the following findings will aim to answer: *What are some of the challenges that the organizations offering these programs face?* While under the micro-level category, the findings address the question:

What are the major challenges or barriers that Syrian refugees face in finding employment and do these differ from those faced by other groups of resettled refugees in Canada?

Macro-level findings include: i) the lack of differentiation between refugee-specific and general newcomer programs; ii) the fragmentation of the employment sector; iii) challenging funding models; and iv) the need for more employer engagement. Micro-level findings include: i) language as the largest barrier to employment; ii) a gap in services for refugees with low English; and iii) the accessibility of employment services and the importance of social capital.

5.3 Macro-level Findings:

i) Differentiating between refugees and other newcomer groups in programming

One of the most prominent overarching findings identified in this study is the lack of differentiation between refugees and other newcomer groups when it comes to settlement services in general, but more specifically, with regards to employment support programs. Firstly, several of the participants repeatedly referred to the settlement sector's tendency to lump refugees, family class immigrants and skilled immigrants together into the same category. They explained that consequently, there are very few employment support programs in the GTA that differentiate between the unique needs of refugees and other newcomer groups. Commenting on this, one participant who founded a grassroots organization that addresses the employment needs of Syrian refugees in the GTA, said:

I know there are many people out there these days saying that we shouldn't call them 'refugees', we should refer to them as 'newcomers' but I disagree. Being a refugee to Canada myself, I believe the word refugee is synonymous with resilience and adaptability

and by referring [refugees] to general programs for newcomers, we are putting them in the same group as people who have very different needs" (Interview 8).

While some participants argued that their organizations intentionally did not separate programs for refugees from those for other newcomers in fear of singling out and labeling refugees as "different from the rest," many participants highlighted the unique needs of refugees.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, refugees face very particular barriers to employment that people from other newcomer groups do not necessarily experience or know about. One of the barriers mentioned by participants is refugees' lack of preparation before arrival. Unlike economic immigrants who usually receive a fair amount of notice before moving to Canada, refugees, and particularly Syrian refugees, often have between 24 hours and a week before being told they have been approved and when they are put on a plane to Canada. One settlement worker explained that this lack of preparation disadvantages refugees "right off the bat in terms of language ability, financial means, and social networks which have a huge impact on [their] ability to find employment" (Interview 15). Another barrier that was brought up by several participants is the higher incidence of trauma and poor mental health among refugees, as compared to other newcomer groups. This is sometimes true for refugees fleeing violence or war, such as the Syrian refugee group however, studies conducted by Dr. Kwame McKenzie et al. together with the Mental Health Commission of Canada (2016) have noted that "only a small minority of refugees overall arrive to Canada with symptoms of trauma and even fewer will develop diagnosed mental health issues" (McKenzie et al., 2016, p.8). That said, McKenzie et al. also argue that refugees are still considered a high-risk group for mental illnesses and their mental health is more often "linked to varying social responses to refugee groups [by the host society]. For instance, risk of mental illness is significantly increased in countries where refugees

are not allowed to work" (McKenzie et al., 2016, p.8). On the other hand, participants insisted that although many Syrians are eager to work, the trauma some of them have experienced can act as a barrier to moving forward and participating in employment programs. "When it comes to refugees" explained the director of employment programs at a GTA-based settlement agency, "it's not only about the lack of Canadian work experience, they've also experienced a lot of trauma and a loss of self-confidence...there's a lot we need to do with them before they can think about employment" (Interview 12). While this seems to be a common sentiment within the settlement sector, there are studies on refugee mental health and wellbeing that suggest otherwise, demonstrating that sometimes the discourse on refugee trauma can overshadow the reality of people's conditions on the ground.

One of the positive outcomes of the influx of Syrian refugees to the GTA since late 2015 is that it forced many organizations to look inwardly at their existing newcomer programs and reflect on whether they were meeting the needs of Syrian refugees. As a result, several organizations took a more integrated approach towards settlement support with the Syrian group in that they provided what is referred to as "wrap-around services" which integrate support services addressing mental health, housing, education and employment while customizing them to the needs of the specific client. A staff member at an organization offering customized employment services for Syrians said:

What is particularly important for refugees, that they won't find at mainstream employment services, is the cultural norms component to training. It is very important to understand the cultural differences in terms of societal norms but also the 'sub-culture' of many of the places these refugees lived in before coming to Canada...for example refugee camps in Lebanon/Turkey/Jordan (Interview 12).

Consequently, some organizations have implemented "pre-employment services" also known in some organizations as "life skills counselling" which focus on some of the above-mentioned cultural norms, both in and out of the workplace. While some organizations have taken these adaptations and incorporated them into their regular programming, a couple of participants feel that this is not enough and critiqued these organizations for taking the "lazy approach" rather than creating customized programs from scratch that specifically address the needs of refugees. "Settlement agencies," said the co-founder of a grassroots organization supporting Syrians in finding employment, "are trying to adapt 30 and 40 year old programs for newcomers to include refugees but that doesn't work" (Interview 8). These same participants are also skeptical of the continuity of these adaptations as they fear that funding for customized refugee programs will disappear once "the attention on Syrian refugees dissipates" (Interview 8).

Other barriers that distinguish refugee needs from other newcomer groups' needs highlighted by participants include: missing or stolen documentation; gaps in employment due to prolonged periods of time in refugee camps or temporary host countries; and difficulty finding accurate labour market information on their specific fields of work.

ii) Fragmentation of the employment sector in Toronto

On a macro or structural level, one of the recurring findings that the data pointed to was the ongoing fragmentation of the employment sector in the GTA, particularly when it comes to employment supports for new immigrants, including refugees. "A huge challenge," said one of the participants who works for a government agency, "is the fragmentation of the employment services that exist in Toronto. We are blessed with having so many different programs and

initiatives but people don't talk to one another and don't coordinate..." (Interview 2). Multiple participants mentioned the tendency for organizations to work in silos with very little sharing of information or collaboration on projects, making it particularly difficult for new immigrants to navigate the sector. This was also said to be a challenge for employers in the GTA who wanted to hire Syrian refugees:

We had an outpouring of support from employers and community groups wanting to help Syrian refugees and when employers asked [settlement] organizations where the Syrians with x/y/z skills were- we couldn't tell them... there is a maze of organizations and processes [employers] need to go through so as you can imagine, after so much chasing after different organizations and calling around to gain access to potential Syrian employees, [employers] began to lose interest... (Interview 14).

Alternatively, there was a common sentiment among participants that the Syrian Resettlement Initiative has acted as an opportunity for many key players in the sector to break down the silos and begin speaking to one another, form new partnerships, and work together towards a common goal; that goal being the successful resettlement of the thousands of Syrians arriving to the GTA. A participant who works for the municipal government said:

It was wonderfully surprising to see all 3 levels of government work together and share information- which doesn't always happen- to respond to the Syrian crisis. A lot of the changes and new initiatives made for the Syrians are now being integrated into the regular work that we do...these are needs that we've known about all along for all newcomers but this allowed us to capitalize on the opportunity and the funding available to make the changes long-lasting. (Interview 2).

Although several organizations collaborated to address the basic needs of the incoming Syrian refugees, i.e. accommodation, food and schooling, many organizations foresaw a challenging road ahead for their clients when it came to navigating the system to find employment. In response to this concern and to address the issue, Senator Omidvar called upon

dozens of settlement organizations, financial institutions, government agencies, think-tanks, and employer partners to come together and form the Syrian Refugee Jobs Agenda Roundtable mentioned earlier in this paper. In the introduction of the Roundtable's first published report, Senator Omidvar stated the following: "We know that securing employment is an important indicator of successful integration that contributes to newcomers' sense of belonging. In the absence of social networks and links to the Canadian labour market, searching for employment opportunities would be a challenge for many newcomers and a missed opportunity for local employers. So we decided to act. We convened, and called ourselves the Syrian Refugee Jobs Agenda Roundtable" (Syrian Jobs Agenda Roundtable Report, 2017). It was initiatives such as these, and organizations like the Consortium of Agencies Serving Internationally Trained Persons (CASIP), that played an integral role in the coming together of the sector's major players to the same table. The following quotation from a participant employer in the financial sector explains this further:

I actually think one of the really influential things about this [roundtable] is that it brought all of these major actors around the same table. Financial institutions and organizations that are usually competitors out in the business world were all of a sudden working together, sharing best practices for the same issue and are now fighting over refugee talent. (Interview 13).

The initiatives that were born from the roundtable served multiple purposes including: capturing data on employer needs and on Syrians' job skills; facilitating communication and collaboration among members to create new opportunities that meet Syrians' needs; and supporting employers as well as Syrian refugees in navigating the employment sector.

While much progress has been and continues to be made on this front, the fragmentation of programs and services in the sector remains an issue as described in the following comment by a member of the Syrian Refugee Jobs Agenda Roundtable:

One of the things I find particularly amazing is that we now have this 2 year waiting period between Syrian refugees being selected, vetted and going through different screening processes to finally arrive to Canada and even once they're here we still can't effectively connect them to employers who want to hire them... you have a lot of refugees saying, 'hey, I need a job' and a lot of employers saying 'hey, I need to hire people'...we clearly have a communication issue of fragmentation of actors and that's what we're trying to address. (Interview 5).

This participant is from an organization that is trying to address the issue of fragmentation by developing an online platform for newcomer organizations to use which captures and matches current employer needs to newcomers' skills, all in one place.

iii) Challenging Funding Models

The GTA's fragmented employment sector discussed above can, in part, be explained by the government funding models that most organizations are bound to. Almost all participants in the study highlighted funding models as a challenge for a number of reasons. The rigidity and time-consuming nature of applying for government funding was mentioned numerous times. One newcomer employment agency explained:

We've had to spend so much time in these past 2 years writing a thousand reports, producing stats and searching and applying for grants. Funders -, primarily government, always like responses to Calls For Proposals but when you have an emergent situation like [the Syrian Crisis] where you want customized programs to happen and you need flexible money and needs were not clear and constantly changing, it was really hard to

find funding...we've requested more flexibility in funding structures from IRCC and MCI and anyone who will listen! (Interview 4).

While there is an understandable need to ensure government accountability by way of formalized application and reporting processes, it should also be noted that the federal government tasked the Canadian settlement sector with providing services and support to an unprecedented high volume of Syrian GARs in a very compressed period of time (Syrian Refugee Profile-Addendum, 2016) yet, made accessing available funding to do so very difficult. Otherwise put, the federal government asked the settlement sector to go above and beyond and make an exception to meet the deadlines for their Syrian Resettlement Initiative yet failed to extend the same courtesy to the sector when it came to accessing funding.

Further, "the grassroots initiatives," argued several of the participants, "are the ones that really take off. The less you have to worry about rules, regulations, internal and funding structures around these things, the further you get with them." (Interview 13). While this may be true in the short-term, and is certainly reflected in the incredible accomplishments of the grassroots initiatives mentioned in this paper, it is difficult to ensure the continuity of these initiatives and allow for them to grow further without involving more formalized structures and processes, obtaining required organizational sign-offs and most importantly, securing sufficient and sustainable funding. The following participant explains this further: "Many of the Syrian-focused projects were very short-term. They had IRCC funding for 4 or 6 months and then they'd disappear..."(Interview 16). When it comes to new non-profits, the organization needs to have been in existence for a minimum of 2 years before being eligible to apply for government funding. There are smaller grants of \$5000 or \$8000 that are available before the 2 year mark

but, "navigating the government websites and knowing that these grants exist," said the co-founder of a new grassroots initiative for Syrian refugee employment, "is something we only found out with the help of the roundtable we were on but many other grassroots organizations doing great things were dissolved after a year because they weren't aware of their options" (Interview 8). This often means that some of the larger organizations that have been around for many years- or what some of the participants refer to as the "usual suspects"- end up winning the funding bids year after year, for the same programs, leaving them with very little incentive to change or improve the way they do things.

Participants insist that the type of reporting and evaluating required by government funders such as the IRCC and MCI contributes to the tendency for organizations in the settlement and employment sectors to work in silos. A co-founder of a grassroots organization that works closely with Syrian refugees expressed his frustrations with government funding models:

Provincial and federal government funding models are essentially competitive bids for outputs and not outcomes- they don't include any program analysis or evaluation, they don't look at the correlation between program participation and language proficiency or employment rates but rather just numbers of people who finish the program, regardless of what they get out of it! (Interview 3)

The government's focus on numbers of clients served rather than outcomes of these programs has fostered a culture of competition rather than collaboration between settlement organizations fighting for clients. "There were organizations [during the Syrian crisis]", said a program manager at a Toronto-based settlement organization, "who didn't want to share their clients...they were understaffed and had people on waitlists but they still didn't want to share their clients with

us. " (Interview 17). Consequently, this number-oriented approach places the emphasis on quantity not quality of services whereby "we treat clients like a business unit rather than human beings. " (Interview 6). One of the participants who works with a non-profit organization that supports employers in hiring refugees commented the following:

There's this tension between the government pressuring for high numbers and settlement organizations trying to provide quality services and outcomes but of course, they're completely reliant on the funding. If IRCC says they need 200 people to go through skills training, they will push 200 people through skills training but does that training actually result in a job for them? We don't know because there's no tracking beyond that (Interview 5).

The majority of organizations in the settlement sector, including employment support programs for refugees, are almost entirely reliant on government funding for the survival of their programs, which only aggravates the above issue further.

Lastly, the way government funding models are set up does not incentivize organizations in the sector to collaborate and share information or knowledge. In fact, a participant member of the Syrian Refugee Jobs Agenda Roundtable stated, "the Canadian Government [IRCC] has said that they're not interested in funding knowledge, they want to fund service delivery and outcomes" (Interview 5). While tangible outcomes are certainly important, the focus cannot solely be on the numbers. That said, how does one change this competitive culture when they depend on the funding to survive? The same participant shared the following thoughts on the topic:

For me, the feds should be giving more incentives for collaborative-type projects [ie. roundtables] because I'm confident there is so much duplication of services in this sector and we're reinventing the wheel every time there's a funding call for proposals (Interview 5).

iv) Employer engagement

In addition to the fragmentation of the sector and the problematic government funding models, most participants, particularly those who were frontline workers, emphasized the need for a closer link between employment support programs and current industry needs. More specifically, "employment agencies (and support programs)", a participant from a government agency explained, "really need to have 'labour market intelligence' if they're going to effectively steer newcomers in the right direction for training and jobs" (Interview 2). There is an identified need for employment support programs to provide more accurate information on the current state of different industries and sectors in the GTA so that refugees are not being channelled into stagnant sectors where it will be very difficult for them to find jobs. However, "the average employment counselor doesn't have access to this type of info nor this knowledge and therefore can't be of much help, especially to some of the more highly educated Syrian refugees who arrived to Toronto." (Interview 2). The suggestion to hire job market specialists to help address this problem was mentioned several times in the participant interviews with frontline workers. In addition to the need for labour market intelligence, a shift in the approach to employment support was also highlighted. A participant settlement worker explained the following when speaking about the approach of many employment support programs:

The tendency now is to use a supply-led (clients' skills and wants) approach but without considering the job market's needs. It's important to bring both perspectives to the table so that the client- the newcomer- is being trained and advised according to market needs therefore ensuring job success. (Interview 15)

While this is certainly a valuable approach for those refugees who arrive to Canada with little education or previous experience in a particular field, this could come across as somewhat

paternalistic or as disregarding the value of existing skills and knowledge of others who have already dedicated much of their lives to a profession that they are passionate about. Further, Canadian labour market needs are able to change drastically meaning that what could be a booming industry today may not offer any jobs a few years into the future. Therefore, a client-led approach which allows the refugee to take charge of their own career and ensures more long-term client buy-in, should remain the focus for employment support programs.

Further, the data from participant interviews demonstrated a pronounced need for stronger and more formalized relationships between newcomer employment support programs and employers in the GTA to aid in "providing more concrete connections between clients and employers" (Interview 16). Forming stronger partnerships was also recognized as a benefit to employer participants since "As a business," an employer participant said, "we also don't have access to refugee talent- we can't go out there and find these people- which is why our relationship with X employment agency was so pivotal in the hiring of our Syrian staff" (Interview 13).

A variety of different forms of effective employer relationships were mentioned by participants, some of which include offering: mentoring programs with current employees; networking events with current employees and hiring managers; internship programs (paid or unpaid); and, on-the-job English training, among others. A few of the companies who partnered with employment agencies and settlement agencies in the GTA to offer the above-mentioned programs to Syrian refugee newcomers include: Starbucks Canada; the Business Development Bank of Canada; Paramount Restaurants Inc.; LiUna Trades Union; and Adonis Grocers. An employer participant from this study said the following about an event they ran for Syrian refugees through a partnership they have with a newcomer employment agency in Toronto:

We hosted a morning with employees who had finance and administration backgrounds to meet with the refugees and go over their resumes but more importantly sit with them and have conversations about how to network in their field and who to contact. The truth is they can send as many resumes out as they want but you're not going to find a job that way, you need to build yourself a network (Interview 4).

Another employer participant whose company offered an internship program for Syrian refugee newcomers said:

When we spoke to our CEO, we figured okay, maybe we can't hire but we can provide internships. Our main goal is to provide Syrian refugees with exposure to the Canadian workplace and get them Canadian experience. We found it really helps them get something to put on their resume, it introduces them to our corporate culture and how it differs from other organizations, work ethic and the hierarchy of large organizations. (Interview 13)

When it comes to employers in the GTA who have either already hired staff who are refugee newcomers to Canada, or have expressed interest in doing so, participants stressed a gap in support services and resources available to aid employers in how to do this well. One of the participants whose organization acts as a facilitator between employers and newcomers feels that "Employers need to be trained and supported on how to work with newcomers too. More tools are needed to build employers' capacity to better leverage newcomer- including refugee- talent within their workforce." (Interview 5). Some support services for employers do already exist and are offered by organizations such as Hire Immigrants, ACCES Employment or the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC). However, it was identified by participants that part of the larger issue at hand is the need for a cultural and mental shift, among employers, towards hiring foreign-trained professionals. A large majority of employers do not have sufficient knowledge or familiarity with newcomer education, skills and professional experience

which fosters a great deal of hesitation when deciding whether or not to hire a candidate who is new to Canada, as illustrated by the following quotation from one of the participant employers:

I have a few hiring leaders in the organization who see universities from other countries on people's CVs and they become very apprehensive because it can't be as good as Queen's or McGill or a university they know... it also shocks me how many employers still place so much emphasis on 'Canadian work experience' but how do they expect newcomers to get that experience and what makes Canadian business experience any better than Chinese or Syrian business experience. I'd say most financial institutions have 1 or 2 champions who get it and are trying to change the culture but it's an uphill battle (Interview 17).

This participant's comments highlight the discrepancy between the encouraging messaging refugees, and newcomers in general, receive from government and settlement organizations who emphasize Canada's willingness to integrate these individuals into Canadian society, and on the other hand, the failure on behalf of the employer community to adapt to the changing composition of the Canadian workforce. The above quotation demonstrates the urgent need to educate and equip Canada's hiring managers with the tools and knowledge to address ignorance around the value of refugee talent. It is important to note that some participants felt strongly that the onus is on employers or recruiters and not refugee job applicants, to educate themselves on how to read an international resume and the type of work that their international counterparts do.

Many new and innovative initiatives were developed over the past two years to address Syrian refugee employment in the GTA, some of which were listed earlier and others which will be explored further later on in this paper. Most of them were born via collaborative projects such as the Syrian Refugee Jobs Agenda Roundtable as well as Syrian Task Force teams across all

three levels of government that brought potential employers, employment and settlement agencies as well as Syrian refugees, into the same spaces. "The problem is," said a participant working with an organization that tries to connect employers to newcomer talent, "the government needs to do a better job at incentivizing employers and industry (via these collaborative initiatives), to invest in these programs and these refugee newcomers." (Interview 3).

Lastly, a recurring finding among participant interviews was that when partnering with and engaging employers to facilitate employment learning opportunities for Syrian refugees, it is important to note that these types of initiatives, "aren't about pitying these newcomers because they are refugees and they've been through horrible situations," commented an employer participant.. "At the end of the day I'm a brutal recruiter and I need to know that the people I hire will be of value to our company. Providing these Syrians with internships was simply about giving them an opportunity to showcase their skills and experience," she explained (Interview 13). Once again, the above comments demonstrate that in order to ensure that these types of employment initiatives translate into sustainable change in hiring practices, there is a need for a broader mental and cultural shift within the Canadian employer community for them to realize that hiring (Syrian) refugees is about a lot more than just helping out a cause, but that in fact it makes good business sense.

5.4 Micro-level findings:

i) Language as the largest barrier

If there is one thing all 17 participants whole heartedly agreed upon it is that "low English levels are the most common and significant barrier to employment for refugees in the GTA," (Interview 17). As mentioned earlier in this paper, refugees tend to have significantly lower English levels than other newcomer groups. This is particularly true in the case of Syrian refugees as they have below average levels of English or French and literacy levels overall, compared to other refugee groups in Canada (Syrian Rapid Impact Evaluation Report, 2016). Participants explained that while Syrians were encouraged, as most refugees who receive the RAP are, to focus on improving their English via Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) classes offered by settlement organizations during their first year, many were particularly eager to start working right away. One frontline worker at a settlement agency spoke about her Syrian clients: "All they care about is finding a job...they don't want to work on their language or participate in settlement programs, they have families to feed and they are ready to take any job" (Interview 17). Another participant who works for an employment agency in Toronto explained:

They're trying to find some normalcy in some way- and working for them is normalcy... they want to rebuild their lives, they're anxious to move forward. We can't ignore that when we're trying to design a response. You can't tell people to do things in a certain order like for example go spend a year learning English and don't work, it's not human nature (Interview 1).

Despite the keenness of refugees to work, their very low English levels impeded many from successfully finding jobs. According to some participants working for settlement agencies in

Toronto, "...we would set up job fairs, have the Syrians with low English come and even with an interpreter there, [employers] would realize this wasn't going to work on the job. They just didn't have the English." (Interview 12). This often led to many opting for 'survival jobs' on a cash basis- something that will be explored further in the following section of this paper.

For those Syrians who chose to and could afford taking the language improvement route, accessing LINC classes - while free for newcomers - sometimes proved to be a challenge. Participants identified a number of barriers in Syrian refugees' participation in LINC classes. The following quotation from a participant who works with a grassroots initiative for Syrian refugees in the GTA mentions a few of these barriers:

The wait times for LINC classes are very long in Toronto, they don't offer childcare which creates a gender imbalance in terms of access, and refugees are expected to travel long distances to get to class (Interview 3).

While other participants who worked for settlement agencies did mention the option of free child-minding services for LINC students, these spots fill up quite quickly and more often than not, it is the men attending classes in a family while the women opt to stay home with the children in turn causing the gender imbalance mentioned above. "The waitlist for ESL classes," explained a participant who works with a community organization that supports private refugee sponsors, "is anywhere between 1 and 6 months in the GTA, and without English they can't do so many things- go to doctor's appointments, register for school, navigate services, find a job!" (Interview 7) therefore significantly limiting their integration and self-sufficiency. Further, participants note that many Syrian refugees have been settling in the same communities, particularly Mississauga, Scarborough and North York, where Arabic is spoken among them

most, if not all, the time consequently acting as an additional barrier to their English language improvement.

When it comes to the Syrian refugees in the GTA who were able to access LINC programs, feedback from students and from several of the participating organizations in this study shared a common sentiment toward the quality and effectiveness of LINC as a program. "LINC is a very old program that just hasn't evolved and it's no longer meeting the needs of the newcomer population in Canada" (Interview 5). More specifically, participants highlighted the lack of customized language support due to very large class sizes and a limited number of teachers as well as outdated curricula that no longer reflect vocabulary and cultural knowledge useful in Canadian society nowadays. Since its inception in 1992, LINC has been federally funded by IRCC and largely delivered by settlement organizations across the country. Newcomers begin by going through a language test at a YMCA assessment centre in the GTA and are then placed in the appropriate LINC class according to their Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) level. The program was developed under the assumption that newcomers will spend an average of three months in each level, whereas the data shows that "those who started at CLB level 1 (a large majority of Syrian GARs)," said a staff member at a Syrian cultural association in Toronto, "took two years before they got to CLB 3. Many refugees who have been here for a year taking LINC classes still aren't able to carry on a basic conversation- that says something." (Interview 7). Alternatively, some organizations were able to partner with private language schools to provide Syrian refugee students with the opportunity to attend English classes at these schools for free. One of this study's participant grassroots organizations shared the following about their own experience doing this:

We started a pilot where we raised \$700,000 in scholarship funds to allow refugees to attend private language schools to learn English, and it made a world of difference. People were going from Level 3 to Level 8 and ready to work/go to university etc. in 6 months. It was so successful that we're desperately looking for money to extend this initiative. (Interview 8)

While IRCC conducted public consultations regarding the LINC program this past summer (2017), very little came from them in the way of concrete conclusions, and signs of any considerable changes or improvements to the program remain to be seen.

Participants identified an alternative, or complement, to LINC classes for Syrians and refugees in general. This includes the numerous language and cultural exchange initiatives that have been formed in the GTA over the past two years to help Syrian refugees of all ages, practice their conversational English by matching them with a native English speaking volunteer. These programs, both formal and informal, have been offered by universities in the GTA and by several community grassroots organizations such as Refugee Career Jumpstart Program, the Syrian Canadian Foundation and Cultural Exchange and Support Initiative (CESI), among others. 'English Talk Cafes' have also been offered by a few of the settlement agencies in the Greater Toronto Area.

ii) Gap in services for Syrians with low English levels

The lower than average English levels of Syrian refugees do not only impede them from finding jobs but according to the participant interviews, they also drastically limit their participation in existing newcomer employment programs. The most common types of employment support programs include: Job Search Workshop (JSW); Enhanced Language

Training (ELT), also referred to by some agencies as Occupation-Specific or Job-Specific Language Training; as well as Bridging Programs, also known as Language-to-Work programs. JSWs provide support in tailoring newcomers' resumes to particular jobs, participating in mock interviews and learning about Canadian workplace culture. ELTs provide newcomers with occupation-specific English classes so that they can develop vocabulary for their particular field. Finally, Bridging Programs typically combine language training with a short job placement or apprenticeship hence bridging language improvement with a connection to the labour market. More detailed descriptions of these programs can also be found in the *Background* section of this paper.

While all three of the aforementioned programs can be quite valuable to those newcomers who have previous education and professional experience, this does not match the profile of many of the Syrian refugees who have arrived in the GTA. These programs require a minimum CLB English level between 5 and 8 to participate whereas the large majority of Syrian refugees (particularly government-assisted refugees) arrived to Canada with a CLB level between 0 and 3 (IRCC Rapid Impact Evaluation Report, 2016). A participant who works at a settlement organization in Toronto explained, "You need a minimum LINC Level 5 to participate in any of our employment programs actually, or they won't be able to keep up. So this is where I feel some newcomers are left out. Even if they want that support, they can't get it until they hit that Level 5, so it's a barrier for them" (Interview 1). Therefore, this suggests that the current employment support programs most commonly offered by settlement organizations target a particular newcomer profile; that of a well-educated, experienced individual with an intermediate/advanced level of English. While there are certainly some Syrian refugees in the GTA who match this

profile, the majority do not. This begs the question, which employment programs do the rest of Syrian refugees, and refugees in general, have access to?

Participants identified bridging programs (language-to-work programs) as the most successful employment support programs available in the GTA. This is echoed by reports written by Wilkinson and Garcea (2017); ACCES Employment (2017); the Migration Policy Institute (2016); and the Syrian Refugee Jobs Agenda Roundtable (2017). This is primarily because of the incorporation of field-specific English training into hands-on job training. In particular, any programs that include an internship or placement component were highlighted as most valuable to refugees. These tend to have the highest success rates overall in terms of clients finding employment upon completion due to the direct link they provide to the workforce and to potential employers (ACCES Employment Annual Report, 2017; IRCC Evaluation of the Resettlement Programs final report, 2016; Syrian Refugee Jobs Agenda Roundtable Report, 2017). Once again, most bridging programs require a minimum CLB language Level 5/6 to participate which automatically eliminates a large portion of the Syrian refugee population. In fact, a participant who works for the largest settlement agency in the GTA stated: "So, when it comes to the GARs, the focus is language for now which means we're only working with about 30% of Syrian GARs on employment right now. " (Interview 12). Even when it comes to the Syrian refugees who are eligible to participate in bridging programs, participants noted that there are not nearly enough to meet the needs for newcomers in the GTA. Spots are limited and waitlists are long.

This gap in employment services for Syrian refugees, and refugees in general, who do not arrive in Canada with past professional experience and business-level English causes many to turn to other options. The most common of these alternatives, which was highlighted by several

participants, is to turn to survival jobs- also known as work in the grey economy. This may include jobs in: construction, painting, cleaning, babysitting, food delivery, among others. One of the participants who works in a client-facing role with Syrian refugees explains:

The Syrians who came without educational or professional backgrounds (mostly GARs) are so focused on surviving month to month they have no time to entertain the idea of a long-term employment or career plan, or to navigate the different (employment) programs available to them- they're focused on feeding their families. (Interview 17).

This is particularly true when they are not eligible to participate in any of the programs being offered. The monthly amount received by Syrian GARs through the RAP does not suffice, particularly for Syrian refugees' above-average family sizes and given the fact that refugees are expected to pay back transportation loans and the cost of medical examinations prior to arriving to Canada (Canadian Council for Refugees, n.d.), thus they are eager to find any type of work that will help them make ends meet. Further, a participant who works with a grassroots community initiative for Syrian GARs explains the following issue with the RAP:

The other problem with GARs with respect to employment is "clawbacks"...the RAP is set up the same way as OW [Ontario Works] in that you're disincentivized to work full time because if you work more than a certain number of hours or make more than a certain amount of money, they will reduce your monthly assistance. Clawbacks don't only disincentivize finding work- it also incentivizes joining the grey economy (Interview 3).

Many participants expressed long-term concerns for Syrians who have chosen to join the grey economy. For example, many Syrian refugees will hear about a survival job through the Arab community, often meaning their lack of English skills will not be a problem but on the other

hand, they will not be improving their English either. One settlement worker expressed a few additional concerns:

We are now seeing many Syrian families (mostly GARs) move onto social assistance because they haven't been engaged with any employment programs during their first year here and they continue to work in the grey economy and at this point, it's difficult to tell them "look you need to pay taxes, you're going to retire one day, you need WSIB, you need benefits and job security etc. (Interview 11)

iii) How Syrians hear about employment services & the role of social capital

Part of this study included looking at whether Syrian refugees knew about the employment services that are available to them in the GTA and if so, how they were hearing about them. When speaking with participants, there were a few different methods mentioned around getting the word out about employment support programs. One method in particular was unanimously highlighted by all participants as the most effective - word of mouth via Whatsapp. "Whatsapp and social media were integral to spreading the word about our programs within the Syrian refugee community. It's all word of mouth- they trust each other much more than they trust us- obviously!" (Interview 4). Other methods include community outreach programs, other forms of social media, and direct referrals from other settlement agencies. However, when it comes specifically to the Syrian community, Whatsapp has been the most effective medium for all age groups. Participants also identified a few common barriers they have noticed among the Syrian population with regards to accessing information on programs or even hearing about them. Some of these barriers include: a lack of computer literacy as most information for programs is online nowadays; low English levels among Syrians and a lack of Arabic-speaking staff at settlement agencies; a sense of pride as sometimes participating in support programs was

seen as taking charity; as well as a need for more time to adjust to Canadian culture, develop trust of others and cope with potential trauma. One of the participants who works directly with Syrian clients at a newcomer employment agency spoke about a client of hers who needed 6 months before she felt comfortable leaving the house, let alone accessing any programs (Interview 16). The following is a quotation from a participant who is speaking about one of his Syrian client's experiences versus other Syrians who are facing several barriers:

This guy was a best case scenario in many ways - he was educated, he spoke the language, he had lots of experience and he still couldn't find a job...imagine a refugee who arrives to Canada, they are struggling with PTSD, they don't speak the language, they have no degree, they have no idea how to navigate the system. I myself (as a Syrian newcomer) tried going to settlement agencies to ask about employment and most of the time I got a brochure and told to go look at their website. This is very overwhelming for a newcomer (Interview 8).

These barriers to accessing or hearing about programs led several participants to speak about the importance of social capital in this process. Social capital has many interpretations but a definition by Robert Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone: the collapse and revival of American community* (2000) is particularly fitting to this context. He defines it as: "the collective value of all social networks (who people know), and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other". He emphasizes the "specific benefits that flow from the trust, reciprocity, information, and cooperation associated with social networks" (Putnam, 2000, p. 52). Some participants spoke about the role social capital played for Syrian PSRs in navigating employment support programs, compared to the lack thereof for Syrian GARs. Overall, "the services are there for the most part," said a participant who works with a Syrian cultural association, "but piecing information together to try and navigate the different organizations and services they offer is

incredibly challenging for a Canadian, let alone a newcomer" (Interview 16). Therefore, while there are several great employment programs out there, particularly for those Syrian refugees with a degree, past professional experience and decent English, many Syrians still do not know about them.

6. Discussion

The following section will discuss some of the aforementioned findings in further detail. In particular, it will explore: the need for updating current settlement programs to include the specific needs of refugees as well as other newcomers; the challenges refugees face with credential recognition; the importance of social capital; and it will conclude by sharing an employment program success story for Syrian refugees in the GTA.

6.1 Updating existing settlement programs

This study's findings highlighted a few of the different employment support programs commonly offered by settlement organizations in the GTA. More specifically, it emphasized the value of combining occupation-specific language training with practical on-the-job training by way of bridging programs. The direct link internships, apprenticeships and job placements provide to the labour market has been repeatedly identified by all newcomers as the most needed piece in the employment search puzzle. As refugees, bridging programs not only teach them English vocabulary specific to their field of work; provide them with employer contacts and a chance to showcase their skills; but they also give insight into Canadian workplace culture and

supply them with Canadian work experience to put on their resume- two things Canadian employers tend to look for when hiring newcomers. However, as valuable as bridging programs can be, the requirements for participation make it so that currently, only a very small percentage of the refugee population can benefit from them. As mentioned earlier in this paper, all bridging programs offered in the GTA, and across Canada, require a minimum CLB level 5 to participate while most of them require a CLB 7 or 8 before beginning a job placement. Almost all of them, and this requirement applies to ELT programs as well, also assume participants have a post-secondary education and previous professional experience in the field the program is focused on. As noted numerous times in earlier sections of this paper, the average refugee to Canada has much lower levels of English and lower levels of formal education than other newcomer groups, among other barriers to participation. Given that settlement organizations do not typically offer employment programs specific to refugees, these requirements often exclude most refugees from the pool of eligible candidates. In essence, the way employment support programs are currently set up favours those newcomers (and few refugees) who arrive from more favourable or 'privileged' situations while the rest are left to face very limited options for employment support, if any at all. This therefore highlights the need for current employment programs to be updated and revamped to address the needs of all refugees instead of only a select few.

This is not a recent issue nor is it a new issue for the settlement sector. However, this gap in employment services for newcomers with lower English and education levels became particularly apparent with the mass arrival of thousands of Syrian refugees to the GTA who have had a tremendously difficult time finding sustainable employment. Reports from the IRCC as well as feedback from the participants in this study have shown that the Syrian refugees who arrived since 2015 have lower English levels than other refugee groups upon arrival to Canada.

This can partially be explained by the fact that Syrians who grow up in Syria, unlike other Arab countries in the region, go through their entire education exclusively in Arabic whereas students in Egypt, for example, have access to a bilingual curriculum usually learning English or French from a young age. Further, when Canada's government selected the Syrian refugees that would be admitted to Canada, they largely chose based on the cases that were considered most vulnerable. This often included individuals with severe medical conditions; individuals living in extreme poverty; the elderly; among others. Many amid this group had never been in the formalized education system in Syria and several are illiterate. Needless to say, this particular cohort of Syrian refugees faced and continues to face a variety of barriers to accessing employment in Canada. What makes matters worse, however, is that there are virtually no employment programs out there that account for these barriers or match the needs of these individuals. It should therefore come as no surprise that a grand majority of Syrian refugees in the GTA are finding it very challenging to find long-term employment. If the Canadian government has chosen to admit Syrian refugees (and all refugees) based on vulnerability criteria, as they should, then designing programs and services to better cater to these particular vulnerabilities should also be considered.

When it comes to most refugees who do not meet the English eligibility criteria for employment support programs, the only option available to them is to continue attending LINC classes until they reach a CLB level high enough to participate. As mentioned by participants in this study, the government's Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration initially set up the LINC program with the intention of having newcomers spending 3-6 months in each level. However, given the numerous barriers refugees face and their lower than average English levels upon their arrival to Canada, the reality is it is taking them significantly longer to work through the CLB

levels than other newcomer groups. In addition, the waitlists for LINC classes in Toronto are long; class sizes are large; and the LINC curriculum has seen little to no changes since its inception in 1992 leading many students to lose interest after a few sessions and drop out. If the only option for these refugees is to improve their English through language classes, then an updated LINC curriculum; more language centres; and an evaluation system that focuses on quality over quantity is necessary.

With regards to Syrian refugees specifically, most of them arrived to Canada with a CLB level between 0 and 2 and are said to be spending up to a year in each LINC level. This suggests that it could take up to 5 or 6 years of LINC classes before these Syrians would be able to access most employment bridging programs, or possibly any employment support programs. With the financial pressures of Toronto's high cost of living, the limited support received from the RAP and the average Syrian family size being 7 people, it is no wonder that many Syrians, and other refugees alike, have turned to survival jobs in the grey economy as their choice for employment. Given that many Syrians have settled in the same areas in the GTA, and often among other Arabic-speaking communities, many of them will hear about under-the-table opportunities through friends or neighbours for which they will likely need very little, if any, English. This consequently leads many refugees, Syrians and others, to join a vicious cycle in which they are often working in Arabic which means they are consequently not improving their English. This also means they are not getting any closer to accessing employment programs that will allow them to join the formal labour market yet they are dependent on these survival jobs to support their families.

While settlement workers will try to dissuade many from taking these grey market jobs in the first place and inform them of the importance of having benefits such as workplace

insurance; vacation pay; and pension plans, when the only other option offered is to stick with outdated LINC classes and depend on RAP payments alone, one can certainly understand their eagerness to take any job being offered to them. As mentioned by participants in this study, given the above-mentioned challenges, it is imperative that the government, together with the settlement sector, provide refugees with low English levels with more options to facilitate their integration into the labour market and create more programs such as ACCES Employment's Construction-Trades Bridging Program for Syrians with lower English levels. Programs such as these provide opportunities to engage refugees from an early stage in their settlement process and supply them with practical skills and knowledge to facilitate their integration into the formal labour market, while continuing to improve their English.

6.2 Challenges with Credential Recognition

In addition to outdated programs, it is also important to note that even the refugees who have high enough English levels to access employment support programs, still face challenges in accessing employment in the GTA. Firstly, the number of employment bridging programs in the GTA are limited as each settlement organization typically only offers ELT or Bridging Programs for 2 to 3 professions while some do not offer any. This often means long waitlists to register or long travel times to get to classes if there are no programs being offered in their area/city. Another significant barrier, even once participants graduate from a bridging program, is credential recognition. Many, if not all, of the ELT programs offered are for regulated professions such as: accountants; engineers; finance professionals; IT and the like. Participants are expected to have a degree and/or previous professional experience in these areas to

participate and undoubtedly, when trying to secure a job. Having one's foreign credentials recognized in Canada can be a very lengthy; expensive and unfair process as studied by many including: Xue & Xu (2010); Reitz et al. (2014); Kustec (2012) among several others. Particularly for refugees, who unlike other newcomers, come from situations in which their documentation has been lost or stolen or in some cases, as is the case for many Syrians, academic institutions back home have been shut down due to civil conflict making it impossible to acquire additional copies of their credentials. While most settlement organizations will provide some support in navigating the procedures of accreditation organizations such as World Education Services (WES), some of the participants in the study who are frontline workers admitted that they often have to encourage their clients to go back to school or to pursue a field that is slightly different from the one they used to work in, as the likelihood of their credentials being recognized by Canadian employers is quite low. This is not only a challenge for refugees with professional degrees but also for many in the trades. For example, many of the Syrian refugees who arrived to the GTA had backgrounds in manual labour jobs such as masonry; house painting; carpentry; among others. In Canada, these types of jobs are also regulated and require particular certifications. While there is some focus on supporting newcomers with getting their foreign degrees accredited, there is little attention given to those with backgrounds in the skilled trades.

6.3 The importance of social capital

The participants in this study identified the accessibility of programs and knowing how to navigate the system as some of the more significant challenges for Syrian refugees, and refugees

overall. Prior to arriving to Canada, resettled refugees who are selected either through the government sponsored or privately sponsored streams, typically receive Canadian Orientation Abroad (COA) sessions that outline key information such as the type of assistance and services they are eligible for upon arrival. While this does not necessarily mean that it will be easy to access these services for them, it does certainly aid them in knowing what to ask or look for once they are here. Due to the sheer number of arrivals in such little time, many of the Syrian refugees who arrived as part of the first wave to Canada, between November 2015 and March 2016, did not receive this orientation. Consequently, putting them at a disadvantage when attempting to navigate the settlement services available to them, including employment support programs.

When asked how their Syrian clients were hearing about their employment programs, several participants highlighted word of mouth as the most common way as well as the importance of having a trustworthy point of reference before deciding to participate. Participants also stated that most clients either heard about them through a friend in their community who had participated in the program or were told about them by their sponsors. This demonstrates the value social capital can have for refugees when trying to navigate the settlement sector and access programs in a new country. As explained in the previous section of this paper, social capital is a term used to refer to "benefits that flow from the trust, reciprocity, information, and cooperation associated with social networks" (Putnam, 2000, p.52). This is very much the case with regards to the Syrian refugee group whose integration experiences have varied greatly depending on their access to social networks in the GTA. Scholars who study the concept of social capital such as: Ager & Strang (2008); Putnam (2000); Stevens (2016) have further subdivided it into *bonding* and *bridging capital*. *Bonding capital* refers to "links with people based on a sense of common identity- such as family; close friends; or people who share our culture or

ethnicity" (Ager & Strang (2008) as cited by Stevens (2016), p. 17). For Syrian refugees in the GTA this largely includes their links with neighbours and friends who are also Syrian refugees, the Syrian-Canadian community and for some, the larger Arab-Canadian community in Toronto. On the other hand, *bridging capital* refers to "links that stretch beyond a sense of shared identity, for example to distant friends, colleagues and associates" (OECD). When considering the Syrian refugee population in the GTA, bridging capital could include their connections with settlement workers, Canadian-born acquaintances and most of all for PSRs, their sponsors.

In the early 1970s, a sociologist by the name of Mark Granovetter, was the first of what would become many scholars who have written about the strong link between social capital and job attainment (Granovetter, 1973). Through his famous paper *The Strength of Weak Ties*, he argued that there are strong and weak social ties. Strong ties being the types of links characterized by bonding capital, as explained above, while the kinds of links involved in bridging capital are considered to be the weaker ties. Granovetter explains that it is typically through the strength of these 'weaker ties' that individuals are more likely to find employment. This understanding of the value of social capital could help explain the discrepancy in the economic integration of many Syrian GARs versus PSRs in the GTA, particularly during their first year in Canada. Data compiled by IRCC; the Syrian Refugee Jobs Agenda Roundtable; as well as the interviews conducted in this study, suggest that Syrian PSRs have more access to social capital upon their arrival given that they have a group of individuals who are dedicated to supporting them and meeting their needs during their first year. While GARs also receive support from settlement organizations, settlement workers have an average caseload of 60-80 files at a time allowing them to only meet with clients once a month. Participants explained that PSRs have an easier time accessing employment thanks to the support and social ties they form

via their sponsors. By tapping into the knowledge and social networks of their sponsor groups they begin to build bridging capital that many GARs don't have access to. As individuals who are new to the country and do not know anyone here, this bridging capital can often connect them to opportunities that they otherwise would never hear about.

Sponsor groups not only provide support in terms of navigating the settlement sector and accessing employment opportunities but they also provide refugees and their families with translation support (which is particularly pivotal for Syrians with low English levels); help enrolling their children in school; navigating the healthcare system; providing occasional childcare so that mothers can go to LINC classes; as well as assisting them in finding mental health supports. In essence, sponsor groups can act as emotional, economic and social support systems to refugees during that first year of resettlement. One of the participants referred to sponsor groups as a safety net for their Syrian clients. Unlike Syrian GARs, who rely on settlement workers to access programs and who are completely dependent on the RAP, most PSRs have the luxury of sticking with ESL classes and turning down survival jobs during their first year because they know they can count on the financial and social support of their sponsors.

This said, it is important to note that this is not the case for all privately-sponsored Syrian refugees in the GTA nor is this specific to Syrian refugees only. The private sponsorship program has been around for many years but became particularly popular in early 2016 with an exceptional outpour of support from Canadians wanting to sponsor a Syrian refugee family. With this large wave of private sponsorship came many incredibly dedicated sponsor groups and others that were less so. While there is the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program (RSTP) in the GTA run out of Catholic Crosscultural Services which offers training and guidance for groups sponsoring a refugee, it is optional to participate in their sessions and it does not act as an

overseeing body for sponsor groups (Refugee Sponsorship Training Program website). It is also important to note that the access to social capital that comes with having a sponsor group may end or change drastically once the first year of sponsorship is up. For both GARs and PSRs, social and economic integration can become very challenging after the first year of assistance has ended. Financial pressures become greater, English levels are not yet strong enough to be fully independent or access many programs, the novelty of moving to a new country wears off and is often replaced with loneliness and isolation. This is why initiatives such as the Together Project which matches Syrian GARs with 'welcome groups' who provide social and emotional support, are integral to helping refugees build social capital and facilitate their social and economic integration (Together Project website).

6.4 A Syrian Employment Program Success Story

While there are several successful programs in the GTA that played a pivotal role in the overall integration of Syrian refugees, there is one bridging program in particular that was customized specifically for Syrian refugees' employment needs which was emphasized by almost all participants as a success story. The Construction-Trades program, delivered by ACCES Employment in partnership with LiUna Trades Union, is a bridging program that was born from the Syrian Refugee Jobs Agenda Roundtable with the hope of addressing the employment training needs of Syrians with low English levels. It is made up of three components. Participants begin with 2 language training components of 8 weeks (200 hours total) which focus on vocabulary specific to the construction field followed by a 4 week modified pre-apprenticeship program that focuses on health and safety and equipment handling. Students complete the

program with 7 certificates to put on their resumes. Graduates then have the option to participate in a full-time apprenticeship program after which the union may offer them a job. What sets this program apart from all other existing bridging programs in the GTA, is the fact that the Construction-Trades Program does not require any previous professional experience or education and only a CLB level 2 to participate- making this program much more widely accessible to Syrian refugees. "This was the first time that we've heard of in Canada", said the Vice President of Services and Organizational Development at ACCES Employment, "where a sector-specific language program was created for clients with such low English levels. It's the first time we've ever had a sector-specific program for a CLB Level 2 group. We tried for CLB 0 and 1 but IRCC wouldn't have it." (Interview 4). Within five months, the organization was able to acquire funding, develop the curriculum together with LiUna workers' union and run the program with a 100% student retention rate-something unheard of among their other employment programs. A participant who works with a grassroots employment initiative for Syrian Refugees spoke highly of the program: "It was an incredibly successful program. Of the 67 Syrian graduates of the program, 36 of them found full-time, unionized jobs in the construction field. This is unheard of within refugee and newcomer programming. These people would have never dreamed of making \$18-\$30/hr with benefits in their first year in Canada" (Interview 8). The Construction-Trades Program was such a success that their funding contract, which was initially meant for a short-term pilot project, was renewed for a second year. The City of Toronto's Employment and Social Services division was so impressed by the success of the Construction-Trades Program that it is now creating a very similar program open to all newcomers in Toronto. While there were also a few other successful customized employment support programs, such as TRIEC's mentoring

program or COSTI's refugee internship program created for Syrian refugees, these were often funded by one-off grants and still require a minimum CLB level 5 to participate.

7. Conclusion

This study surveyed the types of employment support programs available to Syrian refugees in the GTA, and identified systemic; organizational and personal challenges hindering their integration into the labour market. By way of 17 qualitative interviews conducted with participants from settlement organizations; community grassroots organizations; public sector agencies; and, private sector employers, seven main findings were identified. Four of which were categorized as Macro-Level findings while the other three were focused on the Micro-Level.

The findings highlight the tendency for the settlement sector to group employment services for refugees together with those of skilled immigrants and family class immigrants, despite the fact that refugee needs and barriers to accessing employment are most often vastly different to those of other newcomer groups. There is a need for employment services that cater specifically to refugees and address their unique challenges, including mental health and trauma. lower levels of English than skilled immigrants, missing documentation, as well as significant gaps in employment experience due to time spent in refugee camps or other host countries before their arrival to Canada. Funding earmarked specifically for sustainable refugee employment support programs should be considered.

Data collected in the interviews also stressed other macro-level challenges related to the fragmentation of the employment sector and the need for the government to incentivize more

collaborative initiatives such as roundtables and cross-divisional task forces to bring major settlement actors together; minimize duplication of services; and create a more streamlined system that will be easier for refugees and employers to navigate.

When it comes to funding, participants emphasized frustrations around rigid government funding models and pressure to meet target numbers for a fear of losing their funding altogether consequently fostering a culture of competition among settlement actors rather than encouraging collaboration between them. This was said to be particularly true during the mass arrival of Syrian refugees to the GTA in 2016. Further, this type of funding system continues to favour the same veteran programs while disadvantaging many of the smaller, innovative grassroots organizations causing them to often disappear. Creating more flexible funding, particularly for emergent situations such as the Syrian refugee crisis, as well as reporting that values outcomes rather than solely outputs, and encourages follow up with clients, could help address these concerns. Finally, more employer engagement on behalf of settlement organizations and government, as well as employers taking more initiative to inform themselves of the value of international credentials could be a step towards the two-way nature of effective integration described at the beginning of this paper.

At the micro-level, where the challenges and barriers faced by Syrian refugees themselves were explored, low English levels was highlighted as the single largest barrier to accessing employment services in the GTA. IRCC reports (IRCC Rapid Impact Evaluation of the Syrian Refugee Initiative, 2016) identified the Syrian refugee group as having lower English and literacy levels overall upon arrival, as compared with other refugee groups in Canada. As recipients of the RAP, refugees are often encouraged by settlement organizations to spend their first year improving their English by taking LINC classes (Canadian Council for Refugees, n.d.),

yet findings showed that challenges such as long waitlists to get into classes; a lack of childcare options during class times; and an outdated curriculum, mean that many refugees are taking much longer than average to work through each level or are dropping out altogether, and turning to survival jobs that require minimal English.

Similarly, findings also demonstrated that low English levels are hindering Syrian refugees-and refugees as a whole- from accessing most current employment programs, as a CLB level between 5-7 is needed to participate, while the average Syrian refugee arrived with a CLB level between 0 and 2. This highlights the urgent need for employment programs in the GTA that bridge language and job skills training for refugees with lower English levels. Lastly, this study found that most Syrian refugees hear about employment services through word of mouth from friends in their communities, past participants, and from their sponsors (in the case of PSRs). This emphasizes the importance of social capital for Syrian refugees in finding employment and the need for more initiatives that can help Syrians build this type of capital in their new communities.

Given that next to none of the current employment support services in the GTA differentiate between their clients who are refugees versus those who are skilled or family class immigrants, it is still very difficult to acquire accurate numbers on how many *refugees* are indeed accessing employment programs, let alone Syrian refugees. Although, given this study's findings, it is safe to assume this number is lower than other refugee groups in the city suggesting that current programs are not meeting the needs of Syrians. This problem is only exasperated by the fact that according to the available literature on refugee labour market integration, it can take up to ten years before refugees reach an economic level akin to their Canadian-born peers. Given that the Syrian refugee group have only been living in the GTA for 1-2 years and it is still

somewhat early to gauge their economic success, it will likely take a long time given some of their unique challenges.

Contributing to studies on labour market integration for refugees, with a particular focus on Syrian refugees in the Greater Toronto Area, this study provides a foundation from which to base future longitudinal research on the changes and developments in Syrian refugee labour market integration in the GTA. In addition, given that this study focused on the perspectives of employment service providers, it would be prudent to conduct a similar study focusing on the perspectives of Syrian refugees who have participated in employment support programs in the GTA, to determine if the challenges they identify for themselves do in fact fall in line with those identified by the service providers in this study.

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