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Version: Published

Publisher's version Bejan, R. & Lightman, N. (2014). Intègre! Intégrons! Intégrez!
The economic imperative of integration within Canadian immigration: A commentary on
the 16th National Metropolis Conference. *Transnational Social Review. A Social Work
Journal*, 4(2-3), 303-308. DOI: 10.1080/21931674.2014.949093

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On: 16 December 2014, At: 12:36

Publisher: Routledge

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Transnational Social Review: A Social Work Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtsr20>

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Published online: 16 Dec 2014.



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To cite this article: Raluca Bejan & Naomi Lightman (2014) Intègre! Intégrons! Intégrez! The economic imperative of integration within Canadian immigration: a commentary on the 16th National Metropolis Conference, *Transnational Social Review: A Social Work Journal*, 4:2-3, 303-308, DOI: [10.1080/21931674.2014.949093](https://doi.org/10.1080/21931674.2014.949093)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21931674.2014.949093>

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MAPPING TRANSNATIONALISM: CONFERENCE REPORT

Intègre! Intégrons! Intégrez! The economic imperative of integration within Canadian immigration: a commentary on the 16th National Metropolis Conference

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The 16th National Metropolis Conference took place in Gatineau, Quebec on 13–15 March 2014. Entitled *Partnering for Success: Facilitating Integration and Inclusion*, the conference was devoted to provide a forum for academic dialogs and policy debates vis-à-vis contemporary issues within the field of Canadian immigration. As this year marked the second in a row without federal funding for the annual conference, its undertaking through the organizational auspices of the Association for Canadian Studies (ACS) demonstrated the resilience and dedication of Canadian scholars and community practitioners in advancing the field of migration research.

The conference served as a launching pad for a new ACS initiative, the Canadian Institute for Identities and Migration (CIIM). Billed as a non-partisan, non-profit think tank focused on issues of migration, integration and belonging, CIIM aims to provide a web platform for ongoing knowledge exchange between migration researchers and practitioners, and henceforth to act as convenor of the annual Metropolis conferences. Yet despite its stated goals, detailed conversations regarding the nature, organizational structure, or role of the Institute appeared to be missing from the conference's pre-forums, plenaries and roundtables, leading to a lack of clarity surrounding its future role. Nonetheless, despite a policy context of widespread cuts to the funding of research and data collection (Lightman & Bejan, 2013), the 2014 Metropolis demonstrated that researchers and service providers remain motivated to assist with migrants' integration and inclusion, even though these terms often take on multiple, and occasionally problematic, meanings. Inclusion, for its part, was largely equated with participation in a variety of social arenas, with little analysis of the conditions and dynamics of exclusion that have resulted in economic, spatial, political and subjective divides within Canada (Lightman & Good Gingrich, 2012).

1. Who's in and who's out? Elite migrants still the focus of Canadian migration research

Currently, Canada has three major streams of migration: the so-called "points system" for skilled/economic migrants, the family class, and the refugee stream. In recent decades, the federal government has increasingly encouraged the entry of skilled applicants

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(CIC, 2013), to the detriment of those attempting to enter the country for humanitarian reasons or family reunification. This year's Metropolis conference appeared to be following this very same trend: for the most part, the major plenary sessions focused more on the challenges encountered by skilled migrants, including foreign credential recognition (FCR), economic and social integration, and partnership building with Canadian businesses, and less on the issues primarily faced by precarious, lower-skilled migrants.

In general, integration dialogs centered on the macroeconomic implications of migration, as opposed to shedding light on the needs of migrants themselves. For example, in a plenary focused on maximizing the effectiveness of the FCR process, Margot Morrish, Director at the Manitoba Ministry of Labour and Immigration, argued that internationally educated immigrants are of critical importance to fill Canada's long-term labor market gaps and industry-specific needs. While Morrish also mentioned skilled migrants' hardships in securing employment commensurate with their skill levels, her argument was mainly framed in terms of the detrimental effects of skills' underutilization on the Canadian economy. Citing numbers from the Conference Board of Canada, Morrish estimated this economic loss to be anywhere between Can\$4.1 and Can\$5.9 billion per year. Yet by focusing on stakeholders' roles in maximizing FCR effectiveness, Morrish and many other presenters implicitly emphasized the role of the employer over that of the migrant.

Calling into question this single-minded focus on migrants' pre-existing social and economic capital, Daniyal Zuberi, Associate Professor of Social Policy at the University of Toronto, stated that in comparison to native-born Canadians, newcomers' earnings are consistently worse, especially in recessionary periods, with this gap growing wider in recent years. Thus, while today's immigrants have ever-higher levels of education, they continue to struggle in securing employment commensurate with their skills and training (Bejan, 2012; Elrick & Lightman, 2014; Frenette & Morissette, 2005).

2. Pathways to permanency: how feasible are they?

The Metropolis opening plenary featured discussions on temporary to permanent residency (PR) transitions. Umit Kiziltan, Director General of the Research and Evaluation division within Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), stated that for the last five to six years, government policies have largely focused on making Canada more attractive to those already possessing "Canadian experience." Yet considerable evidence has documented that the "Canadian experience" criterion does not equally apply to all migrants (Sakamoto, 2013). Thus, emphasis on such PR transitions shifts the focus onto the *crème* of temporary migrants: international students, PhD applicants, and highly skilled temporary foreign workers (TFWs).

Many presenters focused specifically on international students. In a panel exploring the role of institutions in absorbing newcomers, Chedly Belkhodja, from Moncton University, spoke in support of a new educational strategy for international students, based on anticipated numbers soaring to 450,000 by 2022, from the current estimate of 265,000 (as at 1 December 2014). Belkhodja's research found that immigration is a motivational factor for many international students to Canada, and that transitional status periods have an impact on their integration. Belkhodja subsequently identified the lack of services for this population as a major challenge.

Adrian Conradi, from Thompson Rivers University in British Columbia, also raised concerns about the assistance needed by international tertiary students in Canada. He stated that while some university-based services are supporting students by facilitating

access to federal programs (e.g. the completion of Social Insurance Number applications, tax returns, drivers licenses, access to health services) or local resources (e.g. housing, transportation, volunteer opportunities, faith accommodation/prayer spaces), CIC policies often seem at odds with those of provincial school boards. Integration solutions should not be limited to the provision of funds, Conradi suggested, but should also engage with international students as part of transnational family units, via open learning sessions or parent orientations in places of origin.

Notably, Canada is not alone in its recent focus on PR transitions for international students. Robertson (2013) documented a trend of transnational “student-migrants” coming to Australia for tertiary education. She argued that this “immigration for education” represents a new type of “radically different” relocation, blurring the boundary between skilled and non-skilled migrants. Such students typically arrive as part of a staggered pathway to permanency, starting with temporary work visas, and ultimately moving toward gaining Australian residency.

3. Programming integration: what is it good for?

Derek Kunsken, Director of the Governance and Engagement Division within CIC, stated that social policies and programs are necessary to assist migrants with integrating in Canada. However, the integration efforts proposed at Metropolis seemed to advocate micro rather than macro solutions, paradoxically aiming to enhance newcomers’ ability to break down systemic barriers rather than tackling these barriers as exclusionary obstacles. One such example included British Columbia’s SUCCESS program. Diane Delgado, the program director, stated that SUCCESS has a mission of fostering integration and promoting multiculturalism. Currently, the program is sustained by a private–public partnership and operates two overseas offices in Taiwan and Korea. SUCCESS provides microloans to internationally trained professionals, to help them pay for credentials upgrading once in Canada, as well to assist with living expenses as they work toward professional certification.

Ann Maan, vice-chair of the Edmonton-based National Nursing Assessment Service (NNAS), provided another example. She outlined how the credentialing application processes of three nursing regulatory bodies have been harmonized to comprise a new assessment program, where nurses can proceed via a single application. Chedly Belkhodja also referred to several other promising practices: University of British Columbia’s Professional Development Program for International Teaching Assistants; the Connector program in Halifax, Nova Scotia; and Memorial University’s Professional Skills Development Program and International Student Work Experience Program.

Many of these programs appeared to emphasize inclusion as the *sine qua non* orthodox solution to address the problem of exclusion, without questioning its applicability in disrupting the differential processes that legitimize this very same exclusion (Bejan, 2013). Thus, presenters often focused on individualized solutions to what is demonstrably a systemic issue of widespread marginalization and institutional discrimination of immigrants in Canada (Galabuzi & Teeluckksingh, 2010; Dowding & Razi, 2006; Good Gingrich, 2003).

Carl Nicholson, from Ottawa’s Catholic Immigration Centre, advocated for incorporating the needs of TFWs directly into settlement service provision. Nicholson raised concerns regarding CIC’s lack of funding support, stating that it places strains on provincial governments in footing the bill for these services. TFWs in Canada are considered a vulnerable, transnational, and marginalized population, as they lack the rights and

entitlements that come with permanent residency, such as adequate access to health care or other essential government benefits (Goldring, Berinstein & Bernhard, 2009; Nakache & Kinoshita, 2010; Kim & Gross, 2009). Thus, Nicholson argued, the focus must be on meeting migrant workers' needs, rather than those of their employers. Similarly, Navjeet Sidhu, a community researcher from Social Planning Toronto, detailed the organizational challenges faced by service providers in offering community services for non-status Toronto residents. These included difficulties in identifying referral places, a lack of institutional resources, funding restrictions prohibiting access for those without full immigration statuses, and increased organizational workloads, as a result of economic austerity measures.

4. Conclusions

While this year's Metropolis was branded as the "sweet 16" edition of the conference, there is little that is sweet about promoting economic profit as the main *raison d'être* to guide immigrant integration in Canada. Such a focus suggests that integration is primarily necessary for the betterment of the market, rather than the betterment of the migrants. This places the site of intervention – and thus the problem and the solution of integration – squarely onto the individual. However, considerable research suggests that welfare residualism, with its hyper-individualized logic, is largely ineffective in addressing the inherent inequities of the market, further diminishing the original and defining role of the welfare state (Good Gingrich, 2003, 2008; Lightman, 2003).

Positioning immigrant integration primarily as a means to sustain Canada's global economic competitiveness obscures or downplays the systemic barriers experienced by migrants. For instance, documenting migrants' lack of familiarity with licensure processes implies that the problem lies in individual lack of information vis-à-vis the Canadian labour market demands. Stating that lower language skills place them at a workplace disadvantage negates the unfair comparison in juxtaposing their skills to those possessed by native English speakers. Suggesting they lack Canadian work experience gives no consideration to how they could have actually acquired such experience if they have only recently entered Canada. Clearly, migrants' work experience in their sending societies was considered good enough to gain them entry into the country. Less focus is perhaps needed on getting immigrants' Canadian work experience, and more on divesting the "Canadian experience" benchmark as a regulator of labor market integration.

In fact, the "Canadian experience" requirement also contributes to immigrant unemployment, as shown by the highly publicized "Beyond Canadian Experience" project, led by Associate Professor Izumi Sakamoto from the University of Toronto. Notably, the province of Ontario recently took positive steps in this direction: in 2013, the Ontario Human Rights Commission launched a policy directive denouncing the requirement for so-called "Canadian experience" as discriminatory and a human rights violation (OHRC, 2013).

Regarding PR transitions, greater assistance is also required to provide pathways to permanency for migrants who enter Canada for humanitarian reasons or with precarious migration statuses. Currently, programs facilitating PR are limited to certain entry streams, specifically higher-skilled TFWs and international students. It is necessary to deconstruct why Canada appears to only value the experience of highly educated individuals, as opposed to those within the low-skilled stream of the TFW program, who also enter Canada to fill pressing labor market needs. Dichotomizing migrants between

the haves and have-nots in terms of PR desirability is not a new phenomenon within Canadian immigration policy. Yet since the current federal government took power in 2006, migrants have been steadily commodified on their preconceived ability to acquire citizenship capital – a mix of cultural and social dispositions conditioned by the logic of economic capital distribution (Bejan & Lightman, 2013).

Overall, while the 2014 Metropolis provided a valuable platform to showcase research measuring and justifying the need to rapidly integrate immigrants, there is a need to move away from a singular focus on the economic impetus behind immigration. In addition, although many of the policy prescriptions were laudable in theory, these were oftentimes lacking feasibility for implementation or enforcement. Reflecting on the challenges encountered even by those migrants relatively privileged in terms of accessing residency (i.e. international students), it is worth asking whether existing entry categories are stuck in outdated and rigid rules and definitions that fail to reflect the increasing diversity of immigrant bodies within Canada.

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