



## 2023 Ontario Pre-budget Consultations

Written Submission from World Education Services (WES)  
February 2023

### About WES

World Education Services (WES) is a non-profit social enterprise dedicated to helping international students, immigrants, and refugees achieve their educational and career goals in Canada and the United States. For more than 45 years, WES has set the standard of excellence in the field of international academic credential evaluation. Through WES Global Talent Bridge, the organization joins with institutional partners, community-based organizations, and policymakers to help immigrants and refugees who hold international credentials fully utilize their talents and education to achieve their academic and professional goals. Through its grantmaking, impact investing, and partnerships, the WES Mariam Assefa Fund seeks to advance economic and social inclusion for immigrants and refugees. Since 2013, WES has been a designated provider of Educational Credential Assessments (ECAs) for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC).

### Supporting Newcomers through the Provincial Budget

WES is pleased to provide inputs into the Ontario pre-budget consultation process because of the significant role newcomers play in the economy and social fabric of the province.

Newcomers – including immigrants, refugees, refugee claimants, international students, work permit holders, and undocumented persons – contribute significantly to Ontario’s economic, social, and cultural prosperity. The province hosts close to **50 percent** of all newcomers to Canada.

Newcomers bring work experience and skills, new perspectives, and ethnic and linguistic diversity. They help address complex labour force challenges, including an **aging population** alongside a **shrinking workforce and labour and skills shortages**. Ontario’s **long-term reports on the economy** consistently note that population and labour force growth is immigration-driven.

However, newcomers face various challenges in Ontario, including **unemployment** and finding **commensurate employment**. Despite having the training, experience, and qualifications, newcomers, particularly those who are racialized, are affected by **skills underutilization and overrepresentation in low-paying sectors**, such as accommodation and food services.

The worsening housing crisis is particularly acute for newcomers, who are also more vulnerable to **evictions** and **landlord discrimination**. The pandemic and the rising cost of living have increased the need for **mental health support** for all Ontario residents, including newcomers.

These challenges are not new. They have been **documented** for many years. But their scale and intensity are exacerbated by the pandemic and the looming recession, and they need immediate attention. The budget scope should ensure that provincial policies, programs, and funding are available to identify and eliminate barriers to equitable and meaningful newcomer integration.

For example, the success of the **Community Benefit Agreements (CBA)** initiatives supported by WES shows that they have the capacity to create decent jobs benefiting newcomers, women, and economically marginalized groups in the construction sector. Amplifying such initiatives province-wide will lead to inclusive economic growth.

Below are WES' general and immigration status-specific recommendations to help shape the preparation of a provincial budget that is responsive to the needs of newcomers.

## I. General Recommendations

### Skills Training and Workforce Development

- Support **predictive modelling initiatives**, such as the Ontario Occupation Outlook by the Labour Market Information Council, to identify pending skills and labour shortages, to inform investments in upscaling or retraining programs, and to provide evidence to inform provincial and intergovernmental immigration and labour market policy decisions.
- Promote the use of **Community Benefit Agreements and Social Procurement Strategies** which have demonstrated economic benefits for all.
- Work with employers to create a **skills development program** that responds to the province's need for in-demand skills.
- Provide **support and services to employers, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), to hire and train newcomers** using competency-based assessments and hiring practices.
- Expand funding and eligibility criteria for the **Canada-Ontario Job Grant** program to make it more accessible to SMEs to hire those in underrepresented groups, including newcomers and refugees.

## Income and Employment Support

- Standardize **eligibility criteria for provincial employment and settlement services** through Employment Ontario to include all newcomers regardless of immigration status.
- Urge the federal government to provide **equitable access to immigration and settlement services** regardless of immigration status.
- Ensure that **labour market information, including credential recognition and alternative career options**, is available to newcomers easily and at the appropriate time in their immigration journey.
- Continue to support **programs and initiatives, such as the Youth Opportunities Program, that help newcomer youth** develop social capital, build marketable skills, and actively participate in communities.
- Legislate **10 paid sick days per year for all workers** experiencing illness, injury, medical emergencies, or family emergencies to provide important protections to the labour force, including newcomers who, studies have shown, are exposed to higher **workplace** and **pandemic** risks.
- Increase **minimum wage levels in proportion to inflation** to maintain purchasing power. This is crucial for many minimum wage earners who are newcomers, youth, and women.
- Fund on-the-job **Occupation-specific Language Training** programs.

## Housing and Childcare Support

- Invest in and significantly expand **shelters and affordable and sustainable non-market housing options**, particularly in major urban centres, for all Ontario residents including refugee claimants and refugees.
- Invest in **more affordable, high-quality, and regulated and non-profit childcare spaces** to support all Ontario residents, including newcomer parents as they enter and advance in the workforce.

## Creating a Welcoming and Inclusive Province

- Take concrete measures to address **persistent xenophobia and racism** and provide funding to community-based anti-racism and anti-hate initiatives.
- Mandate the collection of **disaggregated data by race, gender, age, and immigration status across provincial programs** to inform the design and implementation of targeted policies or programs aimed at addressing socioeconomic, political, and health inequities.
- Require the use of an **inclusive equity analysis** in the development and implementation of provincial policies and programs.

## II. Immigrants

**Roughly half of all recent immigrants** to Canada arrive in Ontario, and many are poised to make significant economic contributions. Ensuring that all Ontario residents can equitably and meaningfully contribute to the workforce is key to supporting both short- and long-term economic and labour market stability in the province.

- Establish a **permanent working group or task force** to analyze the economic contributions immigrants make to the provincial economy, and to offer recommendations to improve labour force integration of immigrants into decent jobs in key sectors.
- Establish a **Wages and Working Conditions Provincial Commission** tasked with researching the economic, occupational health and safety, and social benefits associated with minimum wage versus living wage standards.
- Allocate **more funding and increase access to Newcomer Settlement and Language Training** programs. These programs are essential to the settlement and integration of newcomers.

## II. Internationally Educated Health Workers

The contributions of internationally educated health workers (IEHWs) are vital to Ontario's health systems, but many IEHWs (notably racialized, immigrant women) are underemployed or underutilized. There are **over 20,000 IEHWs** in Ontario who are seeking to re-enter their professions in the health sector. Recruiting eligible IEHWs and leveraging their linguistic and cultural competencies will contribute to public health initiatives.

- Implement the **Practice-Ready Assessment (PRA) model for internationally trained physicians (ITPs)** at a scale that can help meet current and future health care staffing needs.
- In line with a recent WES **policy brief**, introduce in a coordinated, strategic manner (1) **implementation of PRA at an appropriate scale**, (2) **establishment of a defined class of registration for Clinical Assistants (CA)**, and (3) the means for an **equitable expansion of medical residency training** seats for ITPs.
- Direct the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario (CPSO) to create a defined class of registration for **Clinical Assistants (CA)**. The CA class should be designed as a training or laddering program that provides recency of practice and access to additional targeted training to meet requirements for independent licensure.
- Provide funding to scale **workplace-linked bridging models, such as the Supervised Practice Experience Partnership**, to allow more internationally educated nurses to immediately contribute their training in clinical settings and fulfil professional registration requirements.

- Ensure that medical regulatory bodies are held accountable to **streamline the assessment, registration, and integration of trained and qualified physicians.**
- Ensure that regulatory bodies have an **IEHW designated seat** via the public appointments process to provide an informed IEHW perspective.
- Mandate an **Ontario Health Human Resources (HHR) planning table** to develop a comprehensive HHR plan, including an Ontario IEHW integration plan.
- Acknowledge the Ontario Superior Court of Justice’s **repeal of Bill 124 as an opportunity to help address the ongoing health care staffing crisis and the growing exodus of health care workers.** This would also demonstrate respect and acknowledgment of the contributions of all public sector workers, including nurses and frontline health care workers.

#### IV. International Students

Ontario hosts the largest international student population in Canada. Nearly **50 percent** of the country’s international students live in the province. International students play a vital role in contributing to Ontario’s economic, social, and cultural prosperity. In 2020/21, their college fees alone were worth **\$1.7 billion**, exceeding provincial grants provided to the colleges. However, international students face **various challenges** establishing themselves, including finding commensurate employment and access to streamlined immigration pathways.

- Provide accessible, streamlined pathways to international students from **temporary to permanent residency via the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program (OINP).**
- Fund post-secondary institutions (PSIs) to **expand Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) opportunities** for international students.
- Increase **operating funds for PSIs** to ensure that international students have access to and are made aware of available supports offered through the post-secondary sector, including financial and mental health services.
- Develop **guidelines and accountability frameworks for PSIs** receiving provincial funding to ensure that tuition structures are applied equitably to all students and ensure affordability.
- Establish a **task force to investigate the relationship between PSIs and international student recruiters;** incentivize PSIs to adhere to principles of equitable inclusion and ethical recruitment practices.
- Work with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) to develop a **needs-based financial aid program** for international students.
- Expand **eligibility for Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP)** to include international students. International students are currently covered under provincial health insurance programs in many other provinces, including British Columbia, Manitoba, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick.

## V. Temporary Work Permit Holders

The pandemic has shown that temporary work permit holders are essential to Ontario's economy and that they fulfill long-term needs in sectors that experience ongoing demands. Despite their clear contributions to the labour market, work permit holders, particularly those in low-income occupations, are prone to **exploitation** and face **significant barriers** to becoming permanent residents.

- Provide a **long-term, stable pathway from temporary to permanent residency via the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program (OINP)** to work permit holders in all skill categories.
- Undertake **targeted inspections** of workplaces that employ work permit holders to ensure that employers are compliant, and workers' rights are protected.
- Lift exemptions to the *Employment Standards Act, 2000* to provide a **broader set of rights and protections to all work permit holders** regardless of the industries they work in.
- Gather and incorporate **disaggregated data on work permit holders** to facilitate a timely and comprehensive policy response in line with labour market needs.

## V. Refugees, Refugee Claimants, and Undocumented Persons

Many refugees, refugee claimants, and undocumented persons **experience precarious living and working conditions** in Ontario. They typically perform the low-paying, undesirable jobs that Canadian citizens are not willing to do. Current estimates indicate that the population of individuals with precarious immigration status is over 500,000 nationally, and many **live in Ontario**. Concrete steps need to be taken to reduce the vulnerability factors experienced by the most marginalized people; these steps will, in turn, also help the province to address current labour shortages.

- Work with the federal government to establish **adequate, stable, long-term funding for legal aid services**, including immigration and refugee legal aid services. The **funding cut to Legal Aid Ontario** increases "trial times, demands on public services, and the cost of legal proceedings for everyone involved."
- Establish Ontario as an **"Access without Fear" province** for those who are subject to a deportation order or are undocumented and provide them access without fear to provincial services regardless of their immigration status.
- Develop a strategy to **help refugees access post-secondary education** and to **support their retention** at post-secondary institutions (PSIs).
- Promote and expand opportunities for skilled refugees to resettle through economic immigration streams. Amendments to OINP, such as removing the work permit stage and waiving minimum net worth requirements, would allow **displaced entrepreneurs to participate in the OINP Entrepreneur Stream**.
- Invest in **free, high-quality, culturally sensitive trauma counselling** for refugees, refugee claimants, and undocumented persons.