



2 THE  
HUMAN  
STORY



MARCH 2018

# THE PEOPLE IMPERATIVE

Come From Away and Stay: Strategies to Grow  
Population and Prosperity in Atlantic Canada



**Good Policy. Better Canada.** The Public Policy Forum builds bridges among diverse participants in the policy-making process and gives them a platform to examine issues, offer new perspectives and feed fresh ideas into critical policy discussions. We believe good policy is critical to making a better Canada—a country that's cohesive, prosperous and secure. We contribute by:

- Conducting research on critical issues
- Convening roundtables to foster honest dialogue
- Recognizing exceptional leaders

Our approach – called Inclusion to Conclusion – brings emerging and established voices to policy conversations, which inform conclusions that identify obstacles to success and pathways forward.

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# THE PEOPLE IMPERATIVE

The key to Atlantic Canada's prosperity is people. People from around the world. People whose families have lived in the region for generations. People coming home. More people, period. In this companion to the Public Policy Forum's research report on immigration, we asked award-winning journalist **Kelly Toughill** to travel the region and talk to the people who are not just part of a demographic shift, but who are living it.

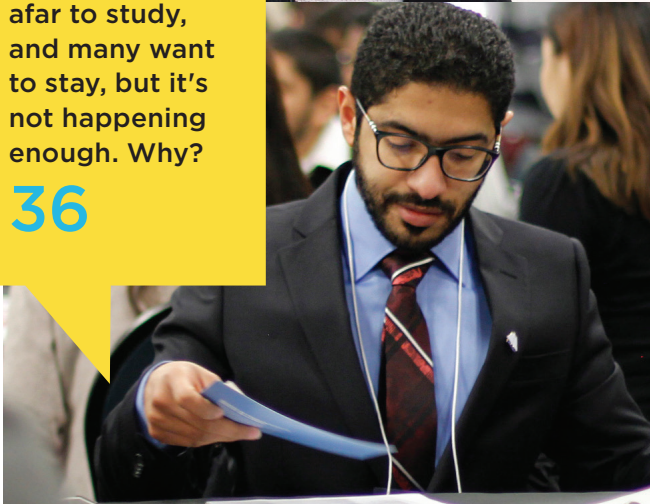
Atlantic Canada needs more people like Anna, who not only came, but stayed.

3



They come from afar to study, and many want to stay, but it's not happening enough. Why?

36



What business can learn from ballet about holding on to employees from abroad.

24



## ON THE COVER

Like many small business owners, Suzanne had trouble finding a successor. Like many newcomers, Adish was looking for a business opportunity. See page 32 to find out what happened.



# Atlantic Canada is facing a 'demographic bomb'

The region's population is Canada's ...

## Smallest

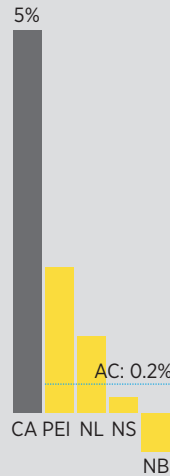
The Atlantic provinces are home to **2.3 million** people, fewer than Toronto's 2.7 million.



Its share of Canada's population fell from **7%** in 2011 to **6.6%** in 2016.

## Slowest growing

Canada's population grew by **5%** between 2011 and 2016. Atlantic Canada's grew by just **0.2%**, and New Brunswick's actually declined by **0.5%**.



## The effects

With much of its youth leaving, the region is short of skilled workers, while the aging rural workforce struggles to find jobs.

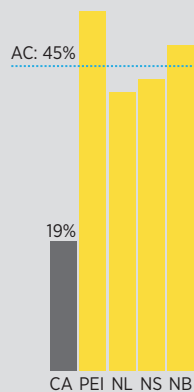
**9.9%**

Unemployment rate in Atlantic provinces in Jan. 2018 compared to Canada's overall rate of

**5.9%**

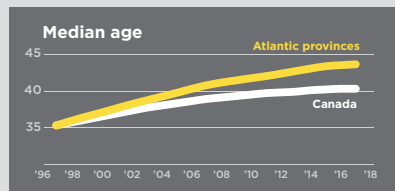
## Most rural

Its population is by far the most rural in Canada, with **45%** living outside large urban areas in 2011. Overall, Canada was **19%** rural in 2011.



## Oldest & fastest aging

**1 in 5** Atlantic Canadians is over 65. Canada's rate is **1 in 6**.

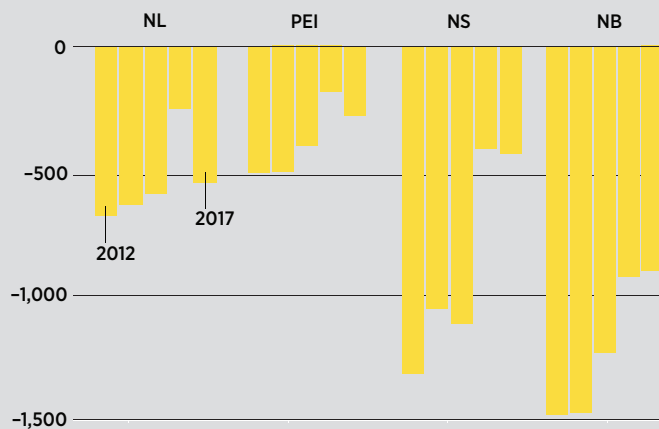


**23,000** jobs went unfilled in 2017 due to shortages of qualified workers, a number that could, by 2021, reach

**55,000**

## And young people are leaving

They're heading west in search of more promising opportunities. Net migration of 18-24 year olds is negative but improving:



SOURCES: Most facts and figures are drawn from the companion volume to this report, People Imperative: The Research Story. Additional material is from stories in this volume and from Statistics Canada, the November 2017 reports of the Atlantic Growth Advisory Group and the Report of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

# To defuse it, the region needs more people

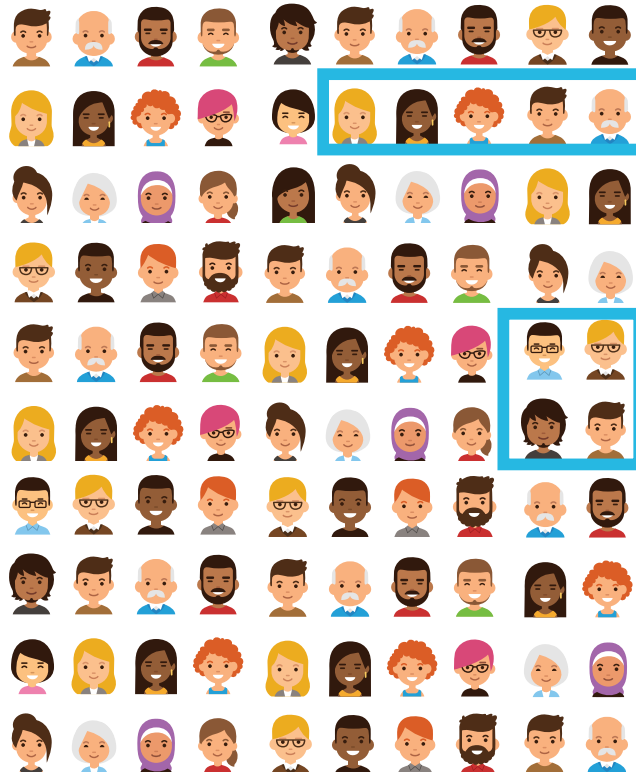
How Atlantic provinces are trying to attract – and keep – newcomers

## Temporary workers

More than **46,000** Temporary Foreign Worker (TFW) and International Mobility Program (IMP) permits were issued in the region in the last three years, helping businesses deal with labour shortages.

## International students

**24,765** students hold a permit to attend Atlantic Canada's universities and colleges, keeping them afloat as domestic enrolment drops. They're worth **\$795M** a year to the economy and are a prime source of immigration.



**11,685** immigrants arrived in 2017, up from **8,295** in 2015, an increase of **41%**.

The Atlantic Immigration Pilot program aims to boost newcomer total by **7,000** by 2020.

## Immigrants

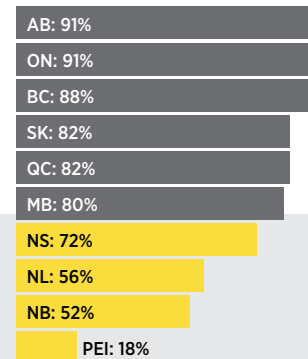
### 5 of every 100

Atlantic Canadians are immigrants. In 2016, that added up to 110,505 people. In Canada as a whole, almost 22 in 100 people are immigrants.

### 4 in 100

immigrants to Canada settled in Atlantic provinces in 2016, but the region's share of Canada's population is 6.5%.

Only **50%** of immigrants to the region in 2011 were still there in 2015. Atlantic provinces rank last in immigrant retention:



## A STAY-OR-GO SCORECARD

Top factors influencing immigrants to stay, and how Atlantic Canada fares on each:

- 1. EMPLOYMENT** Economic immigrants' income exceeds the Canadian immigrant average, but their spouses make less.
- 2. EDUCATION** 70% of international students want to stay on, but only 36% know of programs that help them do so.
- 3. FAMILY, SOCIAL NETWORKS** Family class immigrants earn about \$3,000 more than those in other parts of Canada.
- 4. SETTLEMENT SERVICES** They are difficult to deliver in rural communities, but Manitoba's success offers a model.
- 5. WELCOMING COMMUNITY** Those who stay cite local way of life, but 30% of immigrants experience discrimination.

THE  
IMMIGRATION  
CHALLENGE

PHOTO: STEPHEN MACGILLIVRAY



# 'We don't have all the people we need'

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The population crisis is here, and Atlantic Canada must figure out how to find – and keep – more people like Anna. She came. She stayed. Now she's home.



# Anna Tselichtchev

leans forward over the small table in the fluorescent-lit break room of an office in Woodstock, New Brunswick. There is something she wants to say, something big and important, and she can't quite find the words. English is her third language – after Russian and Hebrew – learned after she landed in Canada five years ago. She chatters easily at the grocery store, at her job as an educational assistant, at parent-teacher meetings and through most of an interview about her immigrant experience. But not now.

“Where is home?” she is asked.

“Canada.” The answer is instant.



“Was there a particular moment when you realized Canada was home?”

That's the hard one, the big one.

She starts to answer twice, opens her mouth and then stops, starts again, leans even farther forward, stares at the questioner. A microwave dings in the unexpected silence of the broken conversation. A refrigerator rumbles.

**“I have a house and there is a big tree.”**

Her answer is a story that meanders through both the Canadian landscape and her own state of mind; it touches on all the key issues in immigration today: what draws newcomers, the challenges they face and why they stay.

Those issues are crucial to the future of Atlantic Canada, where out-migration and an aging population have hollowed out the workforce, leaving a crisis in trucking, information technology, health care and scores of other industries. If Atlantic Canada is to have workers and taxpayers, children in school, doctors in hospitals and all the trappings of a modern society, it must attract the right people and hang on to them. People like Anna.







The Public Policy Forum set out to explore what factors influence the critical decisions of newcomers like Anna and what can be done to bend the trend lines in a better direction. We talked to policy makers, business people, immigration lawyers, settlement workers, community activists, newcomers and volunteers. They shared 12 lessons about how to find and keep the people this region needs.

Tselichtchev followed her husband to rural New Brunswick from Tel Aviv, Israel, in 2013. She was home with their two boys for more than a year, waiting for the permit that would allow her to work in Canada. In that year, she slowed down and became sensitive in a way that was unimaginable in her go-hard-and-get-things-done lifestyle in Tel Aviv.

In early spring of her second year in Canada, she was peering out the window in the living room of their rented home near Woodstock. She was just looking, nothing more, and saw tiny hints of light green dotting the winter-bare limbs of the old oak in the yard. It made her want to cry.

“It wasn’t even leaves, just little things. My husband, he is romantic, but not me, I am practical. Yet, I want to cry. Nature is beautiful here. New Brunswick is beautiful, and this makes me so happy. Maybe when I was 20 I couldn’t see this beauty, but I cannot lose this beauty now.”

In that moment, Anna Tselichtchev became attached. She claimed Canada, New Brunswick, the whole package – deep forests, twisting rivers, ice-pocked roads, black flies, woodstoves, cake-baking neighbours, covered bridges, vinyl-clad houses, bilingual services, weekends in Toronto, skiing, hockey, fishing – as her own. Canada became home.

Immigration is a process that unfolds as much in the heart as in the law. It does not start with paperwork and does not end with foot on soil. Some of the milestones are marked with stamps and permits and passports, but the success of any one immigration journey is deeply personal and never really ends.

## THE POPULATION BOMB

Tselichtchev is part of a deliberate, quiet, radical experiment in population management that has profound implications not just for

# TWELVE LESSONS

Talking to Atlantic Canadians new and old for this story, Kelly Toughill found some common threads to settlement success:

1. **Language is important**
2. **Make expectations clear**
3. **Find a great recruiter**
4. **Screen for attitude**
5. **Prepare the ground**
6. **Focus on the right market**
7. **Newcomers fare better in Atlantic Canada**
8. **Necessity creates affection**
9. **Child’s well-being trumps everything else**
10. **Community counts**
11. **Nature counts**
12. **Give newcomers time to fall in love with Atlantic Canada**



Atlantic Canada, but for the country as a whole. Canada is facing a demographic bomb, a bomb that will explode first in Atlantic Canada. This region has Canada's lowest birth rate, highest median age and often sends more residents to other parts of Canada than it takes in. Francis McGuire, president of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA), pointed out that there are more than 20,000 jobs unfilled in the region. J.D. Irving alone expects to hire 8,821 people in Atlantic Canada over the next three years. The company already employs about 15,000 people, 80 percent of them in Atlantic Canada.

"Our emphasis is on keeping (Atlantic Canadians) home and bringing them home," said Mary Keith, vice-president of communications for J.D. Irving. "But we know, given the demographic challenges, that we don't have all the people we need."

Across Atlantic Canada, one in every five residents is already over the age of 65. That compares to a rate of one in six across Canada.

Look further, and the numbers are downright scary.

## NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

- **The school-aged population has shrunk by one-third since 1996.**
- **More people have died than were born in the province for each of the last three years.**
- **The average age of 43.7 is the oldest in the country – almost three years above the Canadian average age of 41.**
- **The Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development at Memorial University predicts the province could lose 10 percent of its population by 2036 and that pockets of the province could lose more than 30 percent.**

## PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

- **The island is the only province in Atlantic Canada where more people were born last year than died, but the average age, 42.7, is still almost two years higher than the Canadian average.**
- **P.E.I.'s population grew last year – but only by two percent.**



## NEW BRUNSWICK

- The population actually shrank in 2016.
- The average age of 43.6 is almost as high as Newfoundland.
- The number of school-aged children has declined by one-fifth in the last two decades.

## NOVA SCOTIA

- The resilient economy of Halifax is the only factor propping up the province's population. Every region outside the provincial capital saw its population decline in the last census.
- Halifax grew by three percent last year, partly thanks to newcomers.

### 2016 immigration snapshot: How the provinces are changing

	Newfoundland and Labrador	Prince Edward Island	New Brunswick	Nova Scotia
<b>Number of immigrants</b>	<b>12,080</b>	<b>8,940</b>	<b>33,810</b>	<b>55,675</b>
	<b>8,135</b> lived in St. John's	<b>6,335</b> lived in Charlottetown	<b>8,225:</b> Fredericton <b>7,955:</b> Moncton <b>6,645:</b> Saint John	<b>37,205</b> lived in Halifax
<b>% immigrants</b>				
• in 2016	<b>2.4%</b>	<b>6.4%</b>	<b>4.6%</b>	<b>6.1%</b>
• in 2001	<b>1.6%</b>	<b>3.1%</b>	<b>3.1%</b>	<b>4.6%</b>
<b>Largest immigrant groups, 2011-16</b>	Philippines: 16% Syria: 8.2% China: 7.3%	China: 41.6% Philippines: 11.2% Syria: 5.5%	China: 14.9% Syria: 12.3% Philippines: 9.9%	Philippines: 12.7% U.K.: 9.2% China: 8.4%

Source: Statistics Canada: [Focus On Geography series: Immigration Topic of the 2016 Census](#)



PHOTO: KELLY TOUGHILL



They won't stay if their family isn't happy, if their kids aren't happy, if their dog isn't happy. It's important that even the dog is happy.

**Dan Elman** of the Shaarei Zedek Synagogue in Saint John, New Brunswick



As the region shrinks and ages, those left behind will inherit a nasty debt. The Atlantic Provinces Economic Council calculates that the interest on the current debt is equal to \$1,200 per year for every man, woman and child in the region.

Many agree that a massive increase in immigration is an inescapable part of the solution to the demographic bomb exploding across Atlantic Canada. Last year, the government of Newfoundland and Labrador launched a strategy designed to increase immigration by 50 percent over five years. Nova Scotia's target is even more ambitious. It wants to receive a proportionate share of all immigration to Canada. By 2020, that would mean an annual influx of more than 8,500 new immigrants to Nova Scotia – an increase of almost 90 percent over the 4,515 new permanent residents welcomed to the province last year. Neither Prince Edward Island nor New Brunswick have set specific goals, but both provincial governments have made increasing immigration a top priority. And Ottawa has stepped in with Canada's first regional immigration program: the Atlantic Immigration Pilot is a three-year experiment that gives employers a lead role in choosing who can immigrate to Canada.

The Atlantic Provinces Economic Council predicts Atlantic Canada could soon begin welcoming almost 19,000 new permanent residents every year – an increase of 37 percent over 2016 levels.

But deciding to transform your society with new blood – particularly a society that proudly holds onto its heritage and traditions – is easier than actually doing it. How do you find the right people to come to your community, your business, your school? And then how do you convince them to stay?

## FAILURE, THEN SUCCESS

Dan Elman has some ideas about that.

The 86-year-old entrepreneur and IT pioneer calls himself the “baby” of the Shaarei Zedek Synagogue in Saint John, N.B. It's a joke, but barely. Until a few years ago, Elman was one of the youngest members of the congregation, which had dwindled to just 28 families.

The Saint John Jewish Community was once a robust, complex colony of more than 1,500 people in a city that churned with opportunity. The first wave of Jews who arrived in Saint John in the 19th century were skilled cigar makers. They were followed by traders and merchants, mostly from Eastern Europe. The pride of the Saint John Jewish Community is Louis B. Mayer, the son of a local scrap metal dealer who spotted the early promise in cinema and went on to found Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios in Hollywood.

The story of the Saint John Jewish Community can be seen as a proxy for what is happening broadly across Atlantic Canada today. Elman said the decline was gradual, steady and seemingly irreversible. As Jewish families prospered, they sent their children away to Boston, New York, Montreal and Toronto to be trained as doctors, engineers, lawyers. Those children married away and developed professional networks that locked them down. As the economy of Atlantic Canada cooled, they returned home only to visit, never to stay. Eventually, parents moved to be near grandchildren and Jewish families disappeared from Saint John one by one. It is the same phenomenon that reports by the Conference Board of Canada, the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council and all four provincial governments partly blame for the crisis in the region today.



The magnificent Shaarei Zedek Synagogue was sold in 2008 and the tiny leftover congregation considered disbanding completely. Instead, they embraced an audacious plan to see if they could attract immigrants to revive the Jewish community of Saint John.

The plan failed.

The congregation recruited 17 families. Most of them were gone within a year. By 2011, only four families remained, most gone to Toronto and Montreal. Again, the elders of Shaarei Zedek thought about disbanding, but they decided to try once more. This time, they would do things differently, in the process testing new ideas and models that might help save other communities as well.

## STRONG FOUNDATIONS

### LESSON #1: Language is Important

The first wave of newcomers were not comfortable in English or French, and many had little education or skills, said Elman. They floundered.

The second time around, the congregation decided to build a website only in English and French. No more enticing new immigrants in their own language, for they would need English or French to thrive.

The congregation also decided to screen prospective immigrants themselves.

“We switched our thinking. Our thinking was to bring them in for a week to meet us before they moved – and for us to meet them,” said Elman.

### LESSON #2: Make Expectations Clear

In its second attempt to recruit newcomers, the Saint John Jewish Community insisted prospective immigrants come for a visit before they

applied. The congregation introduced them to a real estate agent, who gave them a tour of neighbourhoods and housing options. They provided a seminar on Canadian banking. They helped applicants visit schools, grocery stores and potential employers.

“If you want people to come here, you have to have people who care,” said Elman.

“They won’t stay if their family isn’t happy, if their kids aren’t happy, if their dog isn’t happy. It’s important that even the dog is happy.”

At the end of each visit, the congregation met to decide which applicants were a good fit for their community. The original plan used an immigration program that permitted community groups to sponsor individuals. That program no longer exists, but the influence of the Shaarei Zedek congregation still seems to carry weight when immigrants apply for permanent resident status through other programs.

The Israeli immigrants came to Saint John from every field: a dentist, a teacher, a tech entrepreneur, nurses, web developers, a dancer, a pharmacist, an electrician, a truck driver and more. Most, but not all, have found work in their profession.

The synagogue has reopened in a historic mansion in the heart of Saint John. The Hebrew School has three classes with 103 children. More than 50 families have settled here and 30 more are on their way.

It’s not always practical for prospective immigrants to visit Atlantic Canada first. Instead, Catherine Gellidon touted “brutal honesty” as the key to success in retaining immigrants. Gellidon has recruited more than 200 workers in the last four years into jobs for a private recruiting firm in Newfoundland called Work Global Canada. She sends



potential workers pictures of where they are headed, tells them details about where they will live and what the work will be like – even the bad parts.

“We have a long talk about expectations.”

## A SECRET WEAPON

### LESSON #3: Find a Great Recruiter

The tours and post-immigration support are the part of the Shaarei Zedek plan that has received the most attention, but Elman believes something else was even more crucial: an Israeli lawyer named Eital Muskal.

“This would not have happened without Eital. We would not have succeeded.”

Muskal was one of the first immigrants attracted to Saint John in the second version of the plan. She offered to help find more.

Elman recalled Muskal saying: “I only want to bring people who want to live here. Why don’t I vet people that I would like my own children to grow up with?”

Many dwindling communities have tried to reverse the exodus using some of the same government programs and settlement services employed by Shaarei Zedek, but few have had the same success. The secret weapon of Shaarei Zedek, said Elman, was Muskal’s early pre-screening. Recruiting the right people was even more important than making them feel as if they had a family when they arrived.

Dig into many successful immigration stories, and a key recruiter is often part of the winning equation.

Gellidon is originally from the Philippines, so



I look for people who are going to want to help their employers, who will understand that the employer in a small business is looking for a long-time partner, not just a worker. They are almost looking for someone who wants to be part of a family.

**Catherine Gellidon,**  
recruiter with Work Global Canada





Ukrainian Taras Tovstiy works as a trucker in Chipman, N.B. for J.D. Irving forestry operations. PHOTO: J.D. IRVING LTD.

J.D. Irving Ltd. began recruiting forestry workers in Ukraine because they use the same high-tech equipment used in New Brunswick. Irving travelled to nine countries last year to recruit for six different divisions of the company.





knows first-hand what her clients' journey is about. It is her job to tell Work Global Canada vice-president Wanda Cuff Young which applicants are likely to stay on the job and may want to become permanent residents when the contract is through.

"I can just tell," Gellidon said when asked how she decides who is suited to a placement.

"I tell Wanda this person will not fit, or they will."

#### **LESSON #4: Screen for Attitude**

It is never about whether people have the experience to do the work, Gellidon said.

"I am very particular about the soft skills. The soft skills are the most important thing. The hard skills you can learn."

And what are the most important soft skills?

"Compassion," said Gellidon. "I look for people who are going to want to help their employers, who will understand that the employer in a small business is looking for a long-time partner, not just a worker. They are almost looking for someone who wants to be part of a family."

Best practices of professional recruiters like Muskal and Gellidon are being adopted by governments eager to improve the retention rate of newcomers to Atlantic Canada.

Charles Ayles, assistant deputy minister for New Brunswick Population Growth, said changing the first stage of the recruitment process is key to his province's strategy to improve retention.

The province regularly joins government-sponsored fairs in major European and Middle Eastern cities. But now they go to those fairs looking for potential immigrants who grew up outside a city, and they make sure that potential immigrants

have a realistic view of where they are headed.

"We are trying to make sure we are recruiting from similar places," he said. "We have taken the focus off the megalopolis to look for people from more rural places. When we recruit in Dubai, we aren't necessarily looking for people from Dubai."

Jake Arbuckle is one of the New Brunswick officials who is sometimes on those tours.

"We try to paint a holistic picture of what New Brunswick actually is: fairly rural, the climate, how people live their lives. It's risk mitigation."

#### **LESSON #5: Prepare the Ground**

Elman's group tries to anticipate the needs of Israelis who are moving to Saint John, almost acting like a settlement agency. Some businesses are also taking on that role, lining up apartments, cars and schools for employees and their families before they arrive.

J.D. Irving is going one step further by trying to prepare the community itself. The company holds cultural awareness training in the towns where foreign workers will soon arrive. The sessions are followed up with training for teachers and principals in the local schools. So far, the company has held training sessions in Sussex and Chipman, N.B. Each attracted more than 40 participants, including municipal leaders, Irving staff and subcontractors.

## **MATCH MAKING**

#### **LESSON #6: Focus on the Right Market**

Gerry Mills, executive director of the Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia, has been working in the immigration field for 30 years. "We can lose a lot of energy trying to market Atlantic Canada to the world," she said. "We have



to be focused.”

Governments have taken this lesson to heart in recent years, Mills said, deliberately recruiting to bolster communities that already exist in Atlantic Canada.

“We should attract to retain. Don’t bring in 100 people to keep 20. Governments over the years have tried to match skills, but it’s not that easy. Who stays in a job for 30 years? It’s who the community wants and needs that is important.”

Just as Shaarei Zedek focused on immigrants from Israel, different companies are mining the labour pool of specific countries.

In New Brunswick, many are looking to Ukraine.

Bryana Ganong, president and CEO of the iconic candy company of the same name, said Ganong was so short of staff last year that it couldn’t fill orders, so she sent recruiters to Ukraine in December to hire 30 workers.

J.D. Irving is also looking to Ukraine. Susan Wilson is the company’s new director of immigration, a position just created in January. She said Irving began recruiting forestry workers in Ukraine because they can operate the same high-tech equipment used in New Brunswick. Irving was able to hire Ukrainian workers who could harvest a forest with a joy stick and a bank of computer screens.

J.D. Irving travelled to nine countries last year to recruit for six different divisions of the company.

But the process for figuring out which immigrants will be happy and productive working in the woods of New Brunswick won’t inform recruiting decisions for Irving’s massive IT centre in Saint John, where 11 percent of the workers already come from outside Canada.

It’s clear that the immigrant population is rising much faster in regional cities than in small towns, but it’s not clear why: Do immigrants tend to stay in the larger centres where they land, or are those places simply better at keeping them?

What is clear is that Halifax in particular is enjoying an immigration boom. More than nine percent of its residents are immigrants, and the visible trappings of this shift are clear. Banks and major stores now routinely offer service in languages other than English and French, there are specialty grocery stores scattered around the city, and multicultural organizations and events can be found in every public space. Newcomers have helped ease a shortage of coders in the city’s thriving gaming industry and newcomer entrepreneurs are resident at Volta, the start-up incubator funded by ACOA. Seven thousand international students attend university in Halifax alone.

On paper, Charlottetown has similar numbers: about nine percent of people in the greater Charlottetown area are immigrants and make up 12 percent in the city core. But there is less public influence on that city by newcomers than Halifax. That may be because even though the incoming numbers are large, immigrants don’t stay in Prince Edward Island. Although Craig Mackie, executive director of the P.E.I. Association for Newcomers, thinks that’s changing.

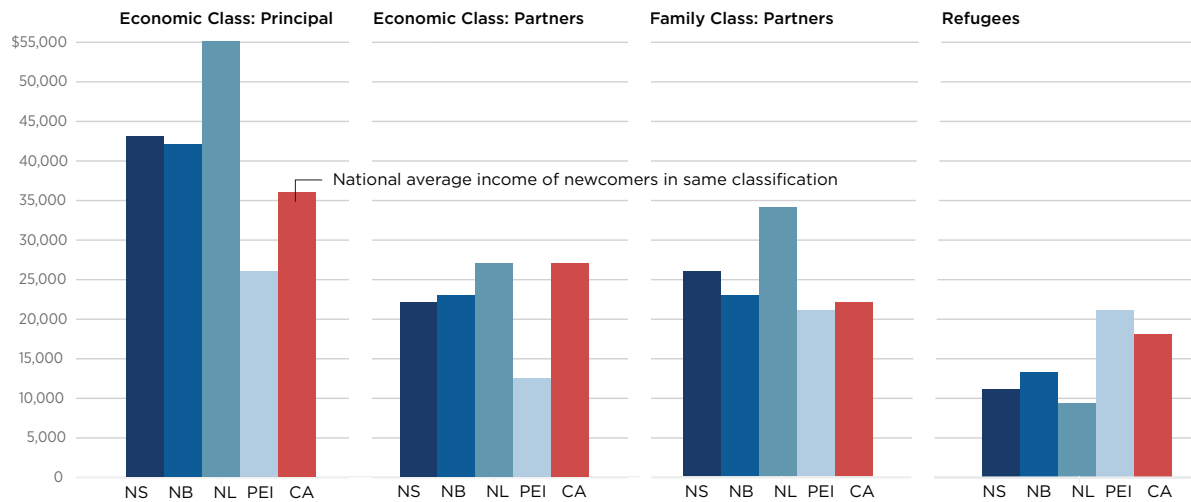
“What I see is that people are staying longer and engaging more with P.E.I. life,” he said.

Data from Statistics Canada show Atlantic Canada has the worst retention rate of immigrants of any region in the country. Only 18 percent of the people who landed as permanent residents in Prince Edward Island in 2011 were still living there five years later. New Brunswick retained 52 percent of the immigrants who landed in 2011; Newfound-



## Most newcomers to Atlantic region fare better than counterparts elsewhere

Average annual income one year after immigrating (2010-2012):



land and Labrador 56 percent and Nova Scotia 72 percent.

Compare that with Ontario and Alberta, where 91 percent of those who landed in 2011 were still living five years later, or British Columbia, which retained 88 percent of the immigrants who arrived in 2011.

### A REASON TO STAY

The decision to come to Atlantic Canada and the decision to stay are two very different things. The key question may not be why immigrants leave, but why they stick. After all, the exodus of native-born residents is an enduring narrative in Maritime culture and a key factor of the demographic bomb. But some of the factors that drive young people out of the region may not hold true for newcomers.

#### LESSON #7: Newcomers Fare Better in Atlantic Canada

Several surveys show that immigrants leave for Toronto, Montreal or Vancouver in search of bet-

ter jobs and opportunities, but research suggests that's not what they will find.

Immigrants in Atlantic Canada fare better economically than the average immigrant across Canada and in some cases better than native-born Canadians.

A profile of immigrant tax filers in Atlantic Canada published by Dalhousie University professors Yoko Yoshida and Howard Ramos found that immigrants to Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Newfoundland were more likely to be employed and earned higher wages than the average immigrant elsewhere in Canada who landed at the same time. Immigrants to P.E.I. were below the Canadian average, as were spouses of primary applicants, and refugees.

Professor Ather Akbari at Saint Mary's University found that immigrants in Atlantic Canada actually earn more than Canadian-born workers with similar skills who live in Atlantic Canada, though that wage advantage has narrowed over the last decade.



Others suggest immigrants face less discrimination in bigger cities, but again, research disputes the familiar assumption that urban areas are more welcoming than small towns.

Stacey Wilson-Forsberg did her doctoral thesis on the experience of adolescent immigrants in rural Florenceville, N.B., and in the city of Fredericton. She found that teens had more genuine contact with residents in Florenceville than in Fredericton, they were included in more social activities and they developed a stronger sense of belonging in the small town than in the city. Perhaps Florenceville, the headquarters of global food giant McCain's Foods Ltd., isn't your typical small town, but the research is consistent with the anecdotal evidence from elsewhere in the region, both of which fly in the face of persistent stereotypes of rural Atlantic Canada being inhospitable to people from away.

Recent research by Ramos reinforces those findings. His team looked at actual experiences of discrimination based on ethnicity, race and language. Overall, the incidence of discrimination was far lower in rural areas than in big cities. Atlantic Canada came out particularly well, with very low rates of discrimination compared to Ontario, the Prairies and British Columbia.

To be sure, newcomers do encounter hate and discrimination in Atlantic Canada, as in any other place. Neo-Nazi posters have been plastered on the campus of the University of New Brunswick and on light poles in Charlottetown. Earlier this year, a Royal Canadian Legion manager in P.E.I. demanded that a Sikh customer remove his turban. Last year in New Brunswick, louts yelled at a young Syrian mother who was pushing her baby in a stroller down the sidewalk in Woodstock.

## AFTER ARRIVAL

The road into L'Anse-au-Clair flows over rocky hills that crest and dip like waves on the nearby sea. Halfway between the ferry dock and the town, mammoth transmission towers pierce the empty horizon and sail across the icy barrens like a fleet of futuristic tall ships. No wires hang from their yardarms yet, but the rigging is coming. Soon.

These steel masts are at the root of an immigration boom in Southern Labrador. The way they tell it in Forteau, L'Anse-au-Clair and the other tiny towns that dot the shore of the Strait of Belle Isle, the hydroelectric project in far-away Muskrat Falls stole a generation of young people who will probably never return. If a small legion of workers from Tunisia, Morocco, the Philippines and elsewhere hadn't arrived to pick up the slack, the towns would be dying – or dead.

High school graduates with no training were offered \$10,000 a month to make beds and chop vegetables in the construction camps, according to Lisa Davis-Ryland, a local youth counselor.

"It used to be enough was enough. But not now. Now it's always more, you got to have more.

"So, how's some guy running a hotel in Forteau going to find someone to clean his hotel rooms?" she asked. "It's just not happening. And how's someone whose job is done in Muskrat Falls going to come back to what we've got here? How are they going to accept less? That's not happening either."

This is not a place that people chance upon. No paved road connects it to the rest of Canada and the 400-kilometre gravel track to Goose Bay turns into impassible mud soup a few times each spring. There is a very expensive flight to St. John's and a ferry from St. Barbe, a cluster of low white





Mannai Abdallahi, above, and Mohammed Walleni repair snowmobiles in a shop in L'Anse-au-Loup, Labrador. Both hail from Tunisia. PHOTO: KELLY TOUGHILL



When I first arrived I thought, 'What have I gotten myself into?' I had never seen snow. Now I Ski-doo, ice fish. I eat seal and moose meat and codfish.

Mohammed Walleni



The Ben Atti brothers – Rayen, 13, Omar, 5, and Ali, 3 – live in the remote hamlet of English Point, Labrador, with their parents, who came from Tunisia. PHOTO: RAYEN BEN ATTİ



Here there is no drugs. And it is safe.  
If you want to have a good future for  
your kids, you come to Labrador.

Rym Geunena Ben Atti



homes halfway up the Great Northern Peninsula that is itself a day's travel from most of the rest of the country. The town of L'Anse-au-Clair has 216 people. The next town, Forteau, has 409 and the third, L'Anse-au-Loup, has 558. This is not the most remote place in Canada, but no one blows through by accident. Yet immigrants are flocking here from around the world. And they are staying.

The cashiers at Robin's Donuts, the very first business at the edge of L'Anse-au-Clair, are from outside Canada, as are the clerks, cleaners and cooks at Northern Light Inn across the road. In Forteau, the physicians at the Labrador South Health Centre are from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Iran; the mechanic at Forteau Sales & Services is from the Philippines; the clerk who sells winter boots and hunting gear at Riff's Department Store is from the Congo; the mechanics at Coastal Motors are from Mauritius. The man who delivers almost all the food and booze to stores and restaurants in this part of the world is from Tunisia.

### LESSON #8: Necessity Creates Affection

In L'Anse-au-Loup, the list continues. The Eagle River Credit Union, the Florian Hotel, Earle's Groceries and Dot's Bakery all run on foreign labour and more than 10 percent of the students at the school on the hill are newcomers. At the other end of town, small-engine mechanics from Tunisia fix the snowmobiles at Normore, the big Ski-Doo dealership.

"We wouldn't be able to operate without them," said owner Tyrone Normore. "We'd be done."

Mohammed Walleni is a tall man who speaks with the precise diction of someone who studied for many years in good schools. He did an engineering degree in Tunisia before his country started to

fall apart. When he graduated, there was no work in his field.

"What are you going to do, sleep on the couch all day? No," he said. "I grew up fixing engines as a hobby, so then I decided to get paid for it."

Walleni had only seen one snowmobile in his life before he came to Labrador – in the James Bond movie *Die Another Day*. The movie poster now hangs on the wall of the garage where he strips out and rebuilds snowmobiles with a fellow Tunisian, Mannai Abdallah. Walleni has applied for permanent resident status and plans to stay in L'Anse-au-Loup.

"When I first arrived I thought, 'What have I gotten myself into?'" he said. "I had never seen snow. Now I Ski-Doo, ice fish. I eat seal and moose meat and codfish.

"When my contract was done after two years, I renewed. It's been four-and-a-half years now. In the city, nobody really cares about anybody. It's different here. You get used to it: the job, the place. It grows on you, you know."

Rym Geunena Ben Atti is quite sure she will stay when her application for permanent residence is approved.

It's hard to see why.

Rym is the wife of Helmi Ben Atti, who delivers the grocery shipments up and down the coast for Christopher's Trucking. Her husband spends most days on the road, leaving her alone in a ground-floor apartment in the hamlet of English Point with their three boys: Rayen, 13; Omar, 5; and Ali, 3. Rym is a devout Muslim. She and fellow Tunisians living in Labrador gather in their homes to celebrate Eid and other important holidays. Rym has a graduate degree in international commerce



and was a purchasing agent for a multinational corporation before she came to Canada. Now she works part time caring for a disabled man.

“It is good,” she said. “It is fine.”

Victor Paller grew up in Manila, where he helped his mother run an overnight food cart in a rough part of the city. He worked for years in the United Arab Emirates before landing in Corner Brook, then St. John’s and then Labrador. His phone is full of pictures of him exploring this part of the world: touring an old whaling station, racing a snowmobile across a frozen ocean, kissing a cod that he caught himself out on the bay.

The search for Paller leads through a convenience store and coffee shop to a back-room office at Forteau Sales. Two people stop working instantly when asked about the mechanic.

“We were desperate for somebody,” said Brandy Bailey, Peller’s boss.

“Victor is just awesome. He’s always on time, always keeps busy, is always well-mannered and thorough. We’d like to have another one just like him.”

What strikes a visitor is not the praise for Paller’s work ethic, but Bailey’s sense of gratitude and personal connection. Bailey can tell you what Paller’s hobbies are (photography, painting, music). One of her colleagues brought Paller a guitar from the mainland not long ago. They can name the new songs the mechanic has learned to play.

“I told them send me anywhere in Canada, even the Arctic,” Paller said of his recruiter, Work Global Canada. “But I like it here. Nobody bothers you, and it’s quiet.”

The lack of tension may have something to do

with the fact that this region is farther into the population crisis than other parts of Atlantic Canada and knows how much it needs new people. A study by the Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development at Memorial University predicts that the area could lose almost one-third of its population within the next 18 years.

While the immigrant populations of urban Halifax, Charlottetown and Saint John are swelling, some of the worst labour shortages are in rural Atlantic Canada, particularly in the small and medium-sized enterprises that create more than 90 percent of the private-sector jobs in this region.

In Forteau, ask about friction between native-born residents and new residents and the response is an awkward shrug. Ask Jennifer Hillyard, a clerk at Riff’s Department Store in Forteau, and she smiles and offers her own story. Hillyard was born and raised on the Labrador coast, and is now engaged to and living with a baker from Sri Lanka who works at Dot’s in L’Anse-au-Loup. They met at a beach party one summer night a few years ago.

“We’re both geeky and like movies,” she said.

They bonded over *Mortal Kombat*.

“This is as romantic as it gets in Labrador.”

### **LESSON #9: Child’s Well-being Trumps Everything Else**

The coast of Labrador is not a convenient place to raise kids. The nearest shopping mall is 350 kilometres and a ferry ride away. A trip to see a specialist in St. John’s requires a week off work. Rym and Helmi Ben Atti would earn more money in another part of Canada, but Rym said the quality of their life would not improve. For her, it is all about how her boys grow up.

“Here there is no drugs,” she said. “And it is safe.”







She does not lock her door. In the winter, she shoos her sons outside to go sliding on a hill nearby. In the summer, they ride their bikes far and wide without her worrying about their safety. The eldest, Rayen, goes skating and skiing. He takes judo and guitar lessons and is a member of the local Junior Rangers. He plans to be a doctor. Omar wants to be a pilot, and three-year-old Ali dreams about being a judge one day.

“If you want to have a good future for your kids, you come to Labrador,” said Rym.

It is a theme echoed in the kitchens and living rooms of immigrant families in all four Atlantic provinces: safety for the children.

At a gathering of six immigrants who belong to the Shaarei Zedek Synagogue in Saint John, every single one cited security as the primary reason they came to Canada. They all came from Israel, where they lived with air raids, car bombs, armed check points and a persistent, instinctive fear that made something as simple as riding a public bus feel like a life-taking risk.

It was also the reason that Anna Tselichtchev decided to come to rural New Brunswick from Tel Aviv.

“I was running for a bomb shelter in the night with two babies,” she said. “I realized it was time.”

But many of those who say they came to Atlantic Canada for their children recognize that those children may not stay. Both Anna Tselichtchev and Rym Geunena Ben Atti expect their children to leave the region for work one day. But they also hope that their children will return to Atlantic Canada after they establish themselves as professionals. They hope their children will decide to raise their own children here.



**Victor Paller grew up in Manila, but his phone is full of pictures of him exploring his new home in Labrador: touring an old whaling station, racing a snowmobile across a frozen ocean, kissing a cod that he caught himself.**





## A SENSE OF BELONGING

What gives someone a sense of belonging strong enough to tether them to a place?

Familiar food, language, values and family are the usual answer. A node of people from one culture will attract more of the same. That's the story reaching back to the Scots of Cape Breton or the Irish of Doaktown. The Lebanese community is the most famous 20th-century example of this in Atlantic Canada. In Prince Edward Island, former premiers Joe Ghiz and Robert Ghiz are of Lebanese descent, as is former Charlottetown mayor Frank Zakem. In Nova Scotia, immigrants who fled war in Lebanon in the 1980s now dominate the development industry.

The last decade has seen new nodes evolve. In addition to a steady stream of immigrants from the United States and the United Kingdom, the region has seen a huge spike in migration from China, the Philippines, Syria and India. There are strong Filipino communities in St. John's, N and in Shediac, N.B., pockets of Syrians who arrived as refugees across the region, and new clutches of immigrants from Brazil, Romania, Ukraine, Israel, Iran, Vietnam, Nigeria, Nepal, Pakistan and elsewhere.

### LESSON #10: Community Counts

Familiar food and new-found cousins are important, but they aren't the only things that give newcomers a sense of belonging.

Gerry Mills of the Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia said there are three keys to retention: jobs, family and community.

"We shouldn't underestimate the last one, the community one. If the children are happy in school, if the partner has fulfilling work, if the family is included in community events and contrib-

uting to the whole community, if they are able to practise their faith. That's not an immigrant's need; that's no different than anybody else, I think."

Esti Barlevy tells a story about her first day in Saint John, when a stranger said "Hello" to her on the street and asked how she was doing.

"I thought, 'Why would he do that?' I thought, 'Why would he care?"

"Then I realized that people here just care about each other for no benefit to themselves. People just care. It was a shock. I had never seen that before. In Israel, they wouldn't ask how you are even if they know you."

For Miri Davidov, the moment of belonging came when she asked her son's kindergarten teacher to help support his Jewish identity. The teacher gave dreidels to all the students and taught them dreidel songs.

Yaniv Isaacs is a dentist who moved to Saint John from Tel Aviv. His sense of belonging also came during the holidays. In 2015, his son was the only Jewish child in his daycare. The teacher had the class build a menorah and the class lit a candle every day of Hanukkah.

"I couldn't believe it," he said. Isaacs had to spend two months in Toronto to get his licence to practise dentistry in Canada. "Toronto reminds me of Tel Aviv. I couldn't wait to get back to Saint John."

That sense of community connection is as important to Rym in Labrador as it is to Isaacs in Saint John.

Rym is in the middle of a tale about how she came to love Labrador when someone comes through the front door without knocking. It is dark outside and dark in the entranceway, but everyone





knows who it is. All three boys rush to hug the old woman before she can pull off her coat or her boots.

Rita Davis, 80, has arrived.

Rym's husband, Helmi, lived in Davis's house for almost two years before his family arrived in Labrador.

"She's my mom," said Rym, trying to explain Rita's role in their life.

Sometimes the older woman picks up the kids after school or takes them there in the morning. They usually share a meal at least once a week and they always get together for holidays.

There are no official government settlement services in this part of Labrador: no free English classes, no sponsored skating trips, no job counseling, no housing lists. The research of Stacey Wilson-Forsberg suggests that immigrants may actually feel more welcome in areas without formal settlement services because local residents feel obliged to help out the newcomers.

Her theory seemed to hold last summer in Labrador, when local residents organized the area's first multicultural festival, a sort of pot luck that included traditional food from 11 different countries and Labrador. When Lisa Davis-Ryland pulled out pictures of the event, she rattled off the name of every single one of the more than 60 people who showed up. Asked how she remembered the name of every newcomer, she looked a bit surprised. Everyone knows the name of every single person in town, she said.

"There are no strangers."

### LESSON #11: Nature Counts

Anna Vinizer first settled in Saint John but was

drawn to Toronto by a job that paid more and offered more career advancement. She and her family only lasted three months in the city.

"This place is friendly, co-operative, open. People have time to really listen to you," she said of her return to Saint John. "It isn't all shopping centres and consumerism. There is landscape, countryside. Here we have the river at our door. We canoe and we skate. It's home."

Connection to nature is a common reason cited by newcomers for staying in Atlantic Canada, just as the yearning for the bustle of a big city is a common reason cited for leaving.

"I like it because it is quiet," said Rym.

### LESSON #12: Give Newcomers Time to Fall in Love with Atlantic Canada

When the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration held hearings on immigration in Atlantic Canada, several witnesses said the government shouldn't make it easier or faster for newcomers to become permanent residents in this region. Some employers worried that workers would leave town if they had the precious permanent resident card that allows them to work anywhere in Canada.

Anna Tselichtchev agrees with that recommendation, but not because she is worried about the regional labour shortage. Tselichtchev said she herself might not have stayed if her family had had the chance to move to Toronto right away.

"You need to feel it and live a little bit here to appreciate everything," she said. New Brunswick had to grow on her. She needed to slow down before she could appreciate the old oak tree.

"I had to learn to enjoy the life, not just survive."



## THE BUSINESS OF NEWCOMERS

The Atlantic Ballet Theatre will soon premier *Alien*, a new piece that explores the immigrant experience. ACOA has funded the company to stage immigration summits that will combine performances with day-long workshops about immigration challenges.

PHOTO: STEPHEN MACGILLIVRAY



# Recruiting: A carefully choreographed pas de deux

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Whether they wear steel-toed boots or ballet slippers, workers from abroad are in high demand. Successful companies have learned that keeping recruits happy requires more than a paycheque

**Susan Wilson made history this year when J.D. Irving Ltd. made her its first director of immigration.**

Atlantic Canada's largest private company has been recruiting overseas for a long time. Employees in its giant IT centre come from 14 different countries and make up 11 per cent of the staff. There are scores of foreign-born workers in its forestry, trucking and manufacturing divisions, but the company has never before set up a department dedicated to their needs.

Irving launched a centre of excellence in immigration and put Wilson in charge at the beginning of the year because it knows the labour shortage in Atlantic Canada is poised to go from tough to devastating.

The company will hire more than 8,000 people here over the next three years. Francis McGuire, president of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, predicts that up to one-third of those workers will come from outside the country. He said the region is moving into a labour drought and some businesses will not survive without international recruitment.

“In the 1990s, you’d have a call centre job fair and you’d have 1,000 people. Now you get 31 people and all of them are employed; they are just looking to improve their situation,” he said.

“This is a dramatic change in the landscape of the Maritimes. The paradigm has completely shifted. The public discourse has to catch up, and government policies have to change.”

Reports by the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council, the Conference Board of Canada and a pivotal 2014 Report of the Nova Scotia Commission on Building our New Economy have all warned of upcoming labour shortages. Statistics Canada reported that the region had over 23,000 jobs in the summer of 2017 without the workers to fill them.

In a tour of four provinces, the Public Policy Forum heard repeatedly that the crisis is already here. Big companies, small companies, high-tech start-ups and century-old family firms all reported trouble finding the people they need to operate. The labour shortage is masked by unemployment rates higher than the national average, explained McGuire, because many local residents either don’t have the skills in demand or can’t move to where their skills are needed.

Ganong Bros. Ltd. lost customers this year because it was short 40 workers and couldn’t fill orders for the famous chocolates it has made in St. Stephen, N.B., since 1873.





**Jim Irving chats with information technology staff from Russia, Ukraine, Nigeria and India at his company's headquarters in Saint John, N.B. PHOTO: J.D. IRVING, LIMITED**



Our viability depends on foreign workers. We have to pay very close attention to our people to see if they are happy or if they are sad. I am always keeping an eye (out).

**Atlantic Ballet co-founder and CEO Susan Chalmers-Gauvin.**

Of its 21 full-time employees, 12 are immigrants. They come from nine different countries. In the studio, no two dancers have the same nationality.





“We had the most difficult labour recruitment in our history last year,” said CEO Bryana Ganong. “It really stressed our employees during that time because of the heavy workload and the long hours. We lost some business because we couldn’t fill orders and we weren’t able to aggressively go out and look for business.”

Len Tucker owns Tim Hortons franchises in Deer Lake and St. Anthony, N.L. He, his wife and his daughter all work full time in the family business because they are chronically short five or six employees.

“If someone walks in the store, we hire them,” he said. “We don’t let them leave. We don’t even let them go out the door.”

Many are working on solutions.

All four provinces have developed immigration streams that help employers recruit workers from outside Canada. In 2017, the federal government established the Atlantic Immigration Pilot, a three-year experiment that gives business a lead role in deciding who can settle in Canada. The hope is that the new program will convince workers from abroad not just to stay for a while, but to bring their families and put down roots. Employers can recruit internationally without going through a lengthy approval process that requires advertising for Canadian workers, but they must develop a settlement plan to help employees adjust to Canadian life. The bonus for workers is they can bring their families with them and they are fast-tracked for permanent resident status. In some cases, the Atlantic Immigration Pilot can shave years off the time it takes a foreign national to become a permanent resident of Canada.

As of Feb. 1, 2018, almost 900 employers in Atlantic Canada were approved to participate in the

program, and more than 1,000 employees had either applied for permanent residence through the pilot program or were preparing their paperwork to do so. As of Jan. 31, 2018, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) had approved 150 applications for permanent residence through the program. The pilot did not meet its ambitious goal of bringing 2,000 workers into the region in its first year, but it is picking up speed quickly, in part because the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency has dedicated 15 staff just to visit employers and help them understand the benefits of the program – and how to do the paperwork.

“This translates into new workers and their families arriving in Atlantic Canada every month to fill job vacancies and help grow the economy,” IRCC communications adviser Faith St. John wrote in response to a query about the program.

“We are still in the early stages of the pilot, and are receiving very positive feedback from employers, service provider organizations and our provincial partners. As with any new program, our focus at this point is on increasing awareness of the program among employers and applicants.”

Day & Ross Transportation Group was one of the first companies to bring workers to Canada using the Atlantic Immigration Pilot. It took about eight months to get through the paperwork; two computer programmers from India arrived in November and an IT specialist from Cuba arrived in December.

“There is a worldwide shortage of labour in our industry,” said Mark Osborne, vice-president of human relations for Day & Ross.

“But people don’t realize it’s not just drivers. Transportation is complex. We track behaviour,



emissions efficiency, location. We need people in IT, finance, accounting, dispatch.”

Trucking is not the only traditional job that has been transformed by technology. When Irving puts out a call for forestry workers, it is no longer looking for strong backs and well-oiled chainsaws. The company now uses a sophisticated light-detection system to chart every tree, stream, slope and gully in the forests that it owns and manages. Cutting down trees has turned into a computer job. Workers still operate machines, but they are looking at a computer screen guided by more than 25 billion data points. The axe has given way to the joy stick.

A key part of the Atlantic Immigration Pilot program is getting employers to go beyond their traditional role and help newcomers thrive outside of work. The theory is that recruits will only stay if they are happy.

That kind of on-the-ground support is something the Atlantic Ballet Theatre has been doing for more than a decade. The Moncton, N.B.-based dance company has perfected many of the best practices that big business is now being urged to adopt.

“Our viability depends on foreign workers,” said co-founder and CEO Susan Chalmers-Gauvin.

“We have to pay very close attention to our people to see if they are happy or if they are sad. I am always keeping an eye (out).”

Of its 21 full-time employees, 12 are immigrants. They come from nine different countries. In the studio, no two dancers have the same nationality.

Operations manager and former company dancer Louis-Philippe Dionne scouts apartments for new recruits before they arrive. He meets dancers at the airport, takes them to Service Canada to get a

social insurance number and to the bank to set up an account. The company brings a retired professor into the studio for English lessons before and after rehearsals. Dancers are escorted to church, to the supermarket and the mall. Dionne makes sure the dancers have good winter boots and a coat and links the dancers to local families who share their culture.

Chalmers-Gauvin said she spends up to 20 per cent of her time dealing with cultural and immigration issues.

“As an employer, we make a lot of space for this. It is inefficient for certain kinds of businesses to do this. It takes time and a lot of care. If I were a bank, would it be worth it?”

It’s worth it for J.D. Irving. Its new centre of excellence has three main tasks: figure out where to recruit for specific jobs and divisions; streamline the immigration process that candidates go through with the government; and develop ways to ensure new workers are well integrated into their communities.

A big part of Wilson’s job is also figuring out what the company is already doing. She is working on a census that will show where workers recruited overseas are employed throughout the company, and where recruitment has worked in the past.

But it is also her job to develop the new best practices that will help J.D. Irving find and retain the people it needs and help Atlantic Canada reverse the demographic decline posed by an aging population.

Irving already does many of the things recommended by the pilot program. It works with settlement agencies to ensure international recruits get information that will help them adjust. Recently Irving has gone a step further. Now it is work-





ing on getting small towns in New Brunswick to adapt to the influx of newcomers.

The company has held two cultural training sessions with local leaders and Irving staff: one in Sussex and one in Chipman. They took turns role playing through different scenarios and had a chance to ask questions about what to expect when the newcomers arrive.

“I know it increased awareness,” said Wilson. “I saw it.”

McGuire said the next task is education for the whole region.

“This has completely changed the mentality in the Maritimes,” he said. “We are going through a massive education piece. It is a tremendous sociological challenge.”

The Atlantic Ballet Theatre will soon premier *Alien*, a new piece choreographed by co-founder and artistic director Igor Dobrovolskiy, a native of Ukraine who came to Canada 17 years ago. The ballet explores the immigrant experience. ACOA has funded the company to stage immigration summits that will combine performances with day-long workshops about immigration challenges.

Gerry Mills is executive director of the region's largest settlement agency, the Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia. She said there is already a profound shift in local attitudes to immigration. For most of her career, she said, she delivered presentations about the benefits of immigration. Now everyone already gets that. They just want to hear how to help.

“The naysayers are gone,” she said.

“It's a really exciting time.”



**This is a dramatic change in the landscape of the Maritimes. The paradigm has completely shifted. The public discourse has to catch up, and government policies have to change.**

**Francis McGuire**, President, Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency







# 'You have to have new blood, new ideas'

Small business owners want to retire, but in a region with fewer young people, who will take over?

**Adish Gebreselase is golden.**

The barber from Eritrea represents the highest hopes and dreams of government policy makers in Atlantic Canada: a newcomer who is running a business and creating jobs.

Perhaps that is why Suzanne Phillips was crying.

"I'm just so happy for him," she said, watching Gebreselase being interviewed at the end of her shift.

"And I'm so happy for my baby."

Her "baby" is Splitt Ends Unisex Hair Design, a storefront salon that Phillips opened with her mother 30 years ago in Halifax and where

PHOTO: KELLY TOUGHILL



she has worked ever since. She sold the shop to Gebreselase in September.

“It was time,” she said. “You have to have new blood, new ideas. There was so much stress: the books, managing staff. I was exhausted, just so exhausted.”

Thousands of small business owners in Atlantic Canada are exhausted. They want to retire, but in a region that’s rapidly aging and has fewer young people – and fewer still that stay – there is no one to take over or buy their businesses.

Provincial governments in Atlantic Canada have been trying to encourage immigrants to become entrepreneurs for more than a decade. There are immigration programs for newcomers who want to start businesses and for those who buy existing businesses.

Early versions of the programs in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island collapsed under allegations of corruption. Immigrants had to invest in private businesses owned by local residents and it was



**It’s quiet here, and in  
Canada you can do  
whatever you want.  
Money is nothing if  
you don’t have peace  
of mind.**

**Adish Gebreselase**

unclear what they received in return – other than permanent resident status.

P.E.I.’s program has been the most controversial. Only 20 percent of immigrants who were nominated by P.E.I. for permanent resident status between 2008 and 2013 were still in the province at the end of that period. By contrast, 60 percent of newcomers who arrived in P.E.I. as refugees in that period stayed, and 73 percent of family-sponsored newcomers stayed.

A 2012 change to the program required immigrants post a \$200,000 bond to ensure they stayed in the province after landing. But many have treated that as the cost of immigration and moved to Toronto and Vancouver anyway.

P.E.I. nominated 269 immigrant entrepreneurs for permanent resident status on the basis of their business plans between April 1, 2016, and March 31, 2017. Only 92 entrepreneurs qualified to get the business portion of their bonds back, and 30 of those closed their businesses shortly after. The province kept more than \$18 million in forfeited bonds.

P.E.I. has changed its system again in 2018. Now immigrants who want to buy a business can be nominated by a town and will be scored on a point system. But it’s unclear what is required to win a town nomination and the bond system remains in place. New Brunswick recently relaunched its entrepreneur stream with a similar system that evaluates applications on points and requires a bond, but the price of entry is \$100,000 – half that of P.E.I.’s.

Nova Scotia’s new program does not require a bond. Launched at the beginning of 2016, it requires newcomers to run a business for at least a year before they apply for nomination. So far,





1,844 newcomers have gone through the preliminary process to indicate they will be applying, but the province has not yet nominated anyone for permanent resident status.

Nova Scotia and New Brunswick also have special immigration streams for international students who want to start businesses after they graduate from a local college or university.

Newfoundland does not have a provincial immigration stream dedicated to entrepreneurs.

Gerry Mills, executive director of Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia, said many newcomers are starting and buying businesses, but they tend to be people who have already been in Canada for a while and didn't come through one of the special immigration streams for entrepreneurs.

Like Adish Gebreselase.

He, his pregnant wife and his three-year-old daughter landed in Canada on Jan. 14, 2014. Gebreselase had been a barber in Eritrea and in the Middle East. They came to Halifax because his wife has relatives here and they have friends in the growing Eritrean community.

He found a job at a salon in Halifax. A year later, a mutual friend introduced him to Suzanne Phillips.

Phillips' mother and grandmother were both stylists, and her father was a barber. She launched the little shop on the ground floor of the Somerset apartment building with money she inherited from her grandmother. Her mother was her business partner.

Halifax has changed a lot since 1986, when Phillips opened Splitt Ends. The bus that stops outside her shop follows a route serving universities that now rely on international students to survive. One

recent night, six students got off at the stop: two dark-skinned women with intricate braids woven around their scalps; two young Chinese women with long flowing black hair; a tall, broad white man with very short hair; and a lanky man with cascading curls.

"We can do anyone's hair now!" said Phillips, who continues to work at the salon she no longer owns. "It used to be that if a black person came to the door, I had to say, 'Sorry,' because we didn't have those skills here. Not anymore."

Gebreselase started working at the salon last summer and bought it in September.

Staff at the Immigrant Settlement Association of Nova Scotia helped him navigate the sale, but there were no government loans or grants involved. The salon employs four people.

Phillips bragged about Gebreselase as a mother would: how he worked as a cleaner last summer every night from 10 p.m. to midnight after finishing his shift at the salon; how he has enrolled in a high school program at Nova Scotia Community College to fill the morning hours before the salon opens; how he fills every moment with homework or salon business.

"This fellow is a work horse."

Gebreselase does not brag. Asked about going to school, he said, "I need something to do in the morning."

Asked why he chose Atlantic Canada, and why he chose to run a business instead of work for one, he cited friends and family, and security.

"It's quiet here, and in Canada you can do whatever you want. It's better to have your own business. Money is nothing if you don't have peace of mind."





# Students' toughest test? Figuring out how to stay

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International students are ideal candidates to stay after graduation, but many leave, wary of Canada's complex immigration rules or unaware of programs that can help them stay, find work and eventually become Canadians





## THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

**International students and immigrants learn about the Canadian workplace at the BEST conference at Dalhousie University in Halifax in March.** PHOTO: MOHAMMAD MASALMA

“I wasn’t taking any money from government. It wouldn’t cost them anything. Why? Why would they say no?”

“I cried every day. It was so hard. I cried and cried and cried. But I had to go back.”

Immigration Minister Ahmed Hussen has repeatedly urged international students to stay in Canada and the governments of all four provinces in Atlantic Canada have created special pathways to help international students transition to permanent resident status. But only 11 per cent of the students who graduate from Atlantic Canada universities and colleges are still in the province of their study one year after they become permanent residents, according to research by Professor Michael Haan of Western University in Ontario.

A new survey shows that a fear of running afoul of Canada’s complex immigration laws – as Joyeaux did – is one factor driving students to leave the country after graduation.

The International Student Barometer is the largest survey of students in the world. More than 2,000 international students in Atlantic Canada were included in the latest survey, released March 1.

It is Nannette Ripmeester’s job to explain the results of the survey to governments, associations and insti-

**Anita Joyeaux faced a tough choice when she discovered she was unexpectedly pregnant.**

If she took a term off school to care for her newborn, her family would lose its dream of settling in Prince Edward Island. So, eight weeks after the summer birth, with her diplomat husband away on a long-term work assignment in the Caribbean and two more children at home, the international student from Cameroon returned to class full time.

“I couldn’t understand why they would say no,” Joyeaux said of Ottawa’s refusal to extend her student status to cover her maternity leave.

tutions around the world. The biggest problems in Atlantic Canada, she said, are unrealistic expectations and false perceptions.

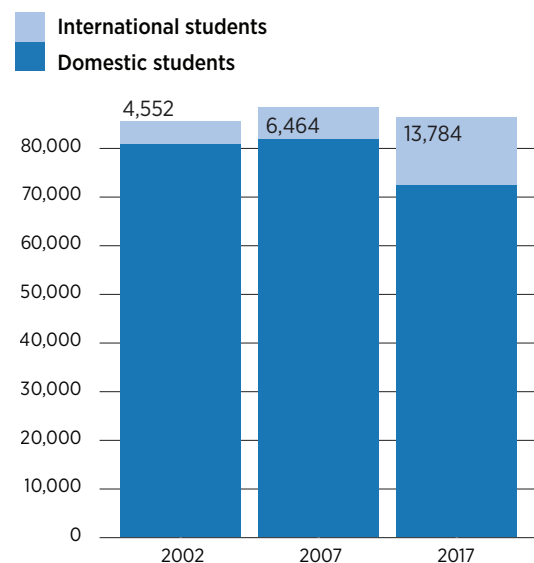
For example, four in 10 international students say they might leave Atlantic Canada after graduation because there is no suitable job in their career. However, research shows that immigrants to Atlantic Canada actually fare better than immigrants to other regions.

The difficulty, said Ripmeester, is that some students come from countries where they might get three or four job offers as soon as they graduate and they don't understand that all Canadian graduates must network their way into a career.

A particularly troubling insight from the survey, said Ripmeester, was that one in four international students in Atlantic Canada said they might leave the region after graduation because of work permit or visa restrictions.

## The international student effect

International students have made up for the decline in domestic enrolment in Atlantic Canada universities:



Source: Association of Atlantic Universities

“That’s ridiculous!” said Ripmeester. “Students come here because they want a job and they leave because they think there are no jobs available and there is difficulty with visas, but that is all not true.”

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) has recently launched a new web portal that should help international students better understand their path to immigration and counteract the impression that they will be blocked by visa problems.

“IRCC aims to make information readily available to students who are considering their options for staying in Canada to work temporarily or to live permanently,” spokesperson Lindsay Wemp wrote in an email response to questions about the survey.

The stakes could not be higher.

About 25,000 students currently hold a permit to study in Atlantic Canada. They are keeping universities afloat as domestic enrolment plummets; they are a major part of the regional economy; and they are a prime source of the immigration needed to thwart the region’s rapidly aging population.

Atlantic universities have become deeply dependent on international students. Enrolment from Canadian students dropped 10 per cent in the last 10 years and the proportion of university seats taken by international students has doubled. Some universities, like Saint Mary’s and Cape Breton, now draw almost one-third of their students from outside Canada.

According to research released Feb. 28, international students contribute \$795 million a year to the economy of Atlantic Canada. The study, conducted for the Council of Atlantic Ministers



of Education and Training, found that international students are responsible for 6,731 jobs in the region and contribute \$22 million annually in taxes. A 2017 report commissioned by the Council of Nova Scotia University Presidents estimates in-province spending by international students is Nova Scotia's fourth-largest export: smaller than the seafood industry, but larger than forestry.

Wendy Luther is CEO of EduNova Co-operative Ltd., an umbrella group of Nova Scotia universities and Nova Scotia Community College. EduNova has pioneered new programs to encourage international students to immigrate to Atlantic Canada. Its "Stay" program offers mentors, networking seminars and career counseling. Early results are very encouraging, and Hussen announced recently that EduNova will help roll out the program in Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador.

Luther echoed Ripmeester's concerns.

"We need to be a lot more explicit in describing pathways from the moment of recruitment."

IRCC's new website portal for students is much more explicit about the different paths, and about the difference between federal and provincial immigration programs.

Canada has one of the easiest immigration paths for students in the world. Most students can get a three-year work permit after graduating from a university or public college; with a little planning, that permit can lead to permanent resident status. Yet the survey found that despite Canada's generous policies, international students in Atlantic Canada have the same level of anxiety around work permits and visas as international students in Europe and the United States, where it is almost impossible to stay after graduation.

Unfortunately, actually obtaining the post-graduation work permit and finding the right path to immigration in Atlantic Canada can be harder than the written policies suggest.

Joyeaux asked that we not publish her real name because she is currently applying for permanent resident status and fears publicly discussing her story might affect her file.

She was caught by a rule that says students must be engaged in continuous full-time study to be eligible for a post-graduation work permit. It would have been very difficult for her to understand the immigration consequences of pregnancy in advance. Until last year, campus immigration advisers routinely advised students that they could take a term off for illness, pregnancy or family emergencies as long as their school reported them to IRCC as on "authorized leave." That was wrong.

Immigration consultants attending a national conference this fall were startled when IRCC employer liaison Sean Morency explained that students lose their eligibility for a work permit after graduation even if they leave school for cancer treatment, to care for a dying relative – or to give birth.

"We put the question to our colleagues who do the operational guidance and there is no distinction, there is no recognition of why the break occurred," he told the room full of immigration advisers.

"There is no policy difference between an authorized leave, simply dropping out for a term, being suspended or just withdrawing and coming back later for financial reasons. We are not telling them they can't (take a maternity leave), they are just not going to be able to get a post-graduate work permit."



IRCC's new portal for international students still doesn't make that rule clear. Wemp would not speculate on whether the maternity leave ban is under review.

"We can say that the Department's renewed focus on client service across all programs means that IRCC will be looking at common concerns in our guidelines, policies and processes," reads her email response.

Joyeaux is not the only student who got in trouble because she failed to understand the rules, or because the rules changed after they arrived.

When Canada introduced the Express Entry system three years ago, many students who had been planning their immigration for years suddenly lost their path. The program used most often by students was shut down, and most students hadn't accumulated enough points to be chosen out of the Express Entry pool of candidates. Several provinces responded by launching new immigration programs just for students and tweaked existing programs to make sure they were student-friendly.

For example, five months after Express Entry was launched, Nova Scotia adjusted its Experience program to accommodate students. Almost 1,000 people have come through the program since then; 85 per cent were students. That's not the only program in Nova Scotia that gives students a path to immigration: there is a purpose-built program for student entrepreneurs and a path for students who have a job offer but don't qualify for Express Entry.

Nova Scotia has tripled the number of students it has nominated for permanent residency in recent years, from 150 student nominations per year between 2011 and 2014 to 450 in 2017.

Suzanne Ley, executive director of the Nova Scotia Office of Immigration, pointed out that all but one of the province's five immigration programs are new since 2014.

"We are committed to being responsive to the needs of the labour market, to evolve as required and to innovate where possible to help Nova Scotia grow. We won't sit still."

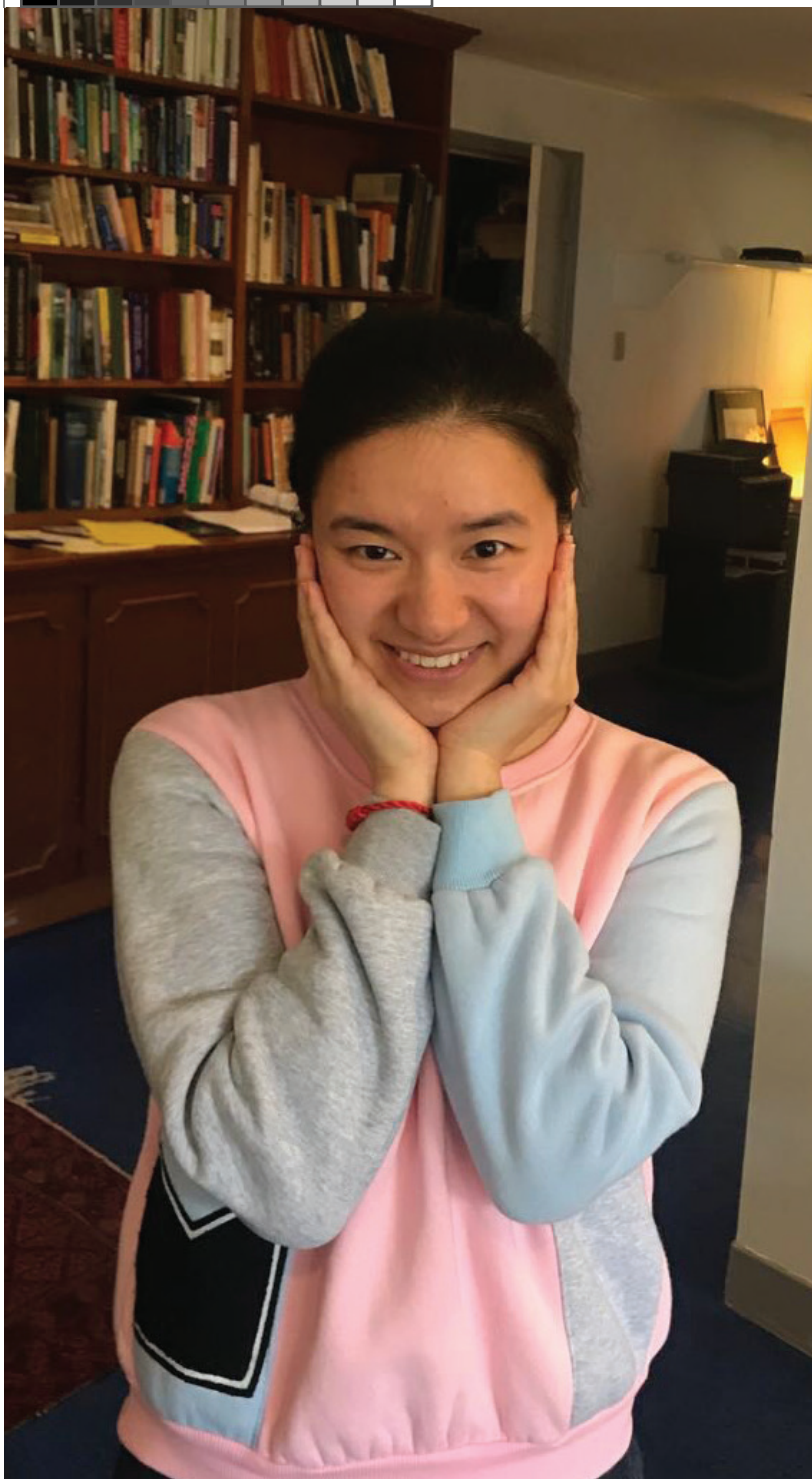
Newfoundland has recently funded paid internships and job placements for international students and recent graduates and a provincial immigration official keeps office hours at Memorial University to help students apply for permanent resident status. New Brunswick has followed Nova Scotia by creating a special path for student entrepreneurs. P.E.I. also has a special stream for students.

Ottawa revised the point system in November 2016, to make it easier for students to become permanent residents through Express Entry.

Even if students do find the right programs, they must tread carefully before and after graduation to make sure they will qualify. (See sidebar)

Then there are students who take a job hoping to accumulate the one year of Canadian employment experience needed for Express Entry only to discover too late that working as a bank teller, a food server or a receptionist won't qualify them for the fast-track immigration program. Figuring out which jobs qualify as experience for the Express Entry system requires that applicants learn how to use the National Occupational Classification system and its matrix. Many have simply assumed that a job like bank teller falls into the skilled category and discover too late that it does not. The new web portal launched in March offers information about the job classification system and





## Hidden rules and heartbreak

Liyiyun Dai made careful plans, hired a lawyer and began a second degree. Now her dream is in doubt.

Linyiyun Dai graduated from Saint Mary's University summa cum laude with a bachelor of commerce degree in 2016. She decided she wanted to work with children and applied for early childhood education diploma programs. She was accepted by the Nova Scotia Community College and the Nova Scotia College of Early Childhood Education; she chose the latter because it was an easier commute from her home. Before enrolling, she paid a local immigration lawyer to review her education plan and make sure it was consistent with her hope of becoming a Canadian citizen someday.

One year into Dai's two-year ECE diploma, Ottawa stopped issuing work permits to graduates of the school because it is not a public institution. The rule had been on the books since 2014, but it wasn't explained on the IRCC website, so there is no way Dai could have known about it when she chose her private college. CBC did a story on the heartbreak of Dai and her classmates last fall. In early 2018, IRCC changed its website so that students like Dai can clearly see whether attending a specific school in Canada will qualify them for a post-graduation work permit.

Nova Scotia is short of daycare workers. Dai will graduate with a valuable Level 3 ECE classification, and a centre wants to hire her but, so far, they haven't figured out how to make that happen. She is not eligible for a post-graduation work permit nor the Atlantic Immigration Pilot despite her degree from Saint Mary's.

Five years after arriving in Canada, the cheerful woman from Szechuan is no closer to her Canadian dream than when she arrived.



should help students avoid that problem in the future.

They are small stories, but big problems for students, their institutions and the local economy.

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada has recognized the communications trouble faced by students and others trying to stay in Canada. Last year it set up a new client experience branch to improve service and communication. The web redesign is part of that new focus.

Haan found that international students were less likely to settle in Atlantic Canada than other regions, but he also found that retention varies widely by citizenship.

Americans, South Koreans and students from the United Arab Emirates are more likely to stay in Atlantic Canada. Chinese students are the least likely to stay, which is bad news for Atlantic Canada since Chinese students make up more than

one-third of the international students in this region.

The Public Policy Forum spoke with six Chinese students who studied in Nova Scotia and either returned home to China or moved to Vancouver. Several of the students had arrived in Nova Scotia planning to stay after graduation. All cited a mix of three reasons for their departure: a perception that they had better job prospects outside the region; a yearning to live in a big city; and, for those who returned to China, a desire and responsibility to be near their parents and grandparents.

Joyeaux is not leaving. She is determined to stay in Prince Edward Island now that she has graduated. She said life would be easier for her in Montreal, where most people speak her mother tongue, and she might have a better job, but her children are happy in P.E.I. and all her neighbours care about each other. She won't give that up.



## ABOUT THE WRITER

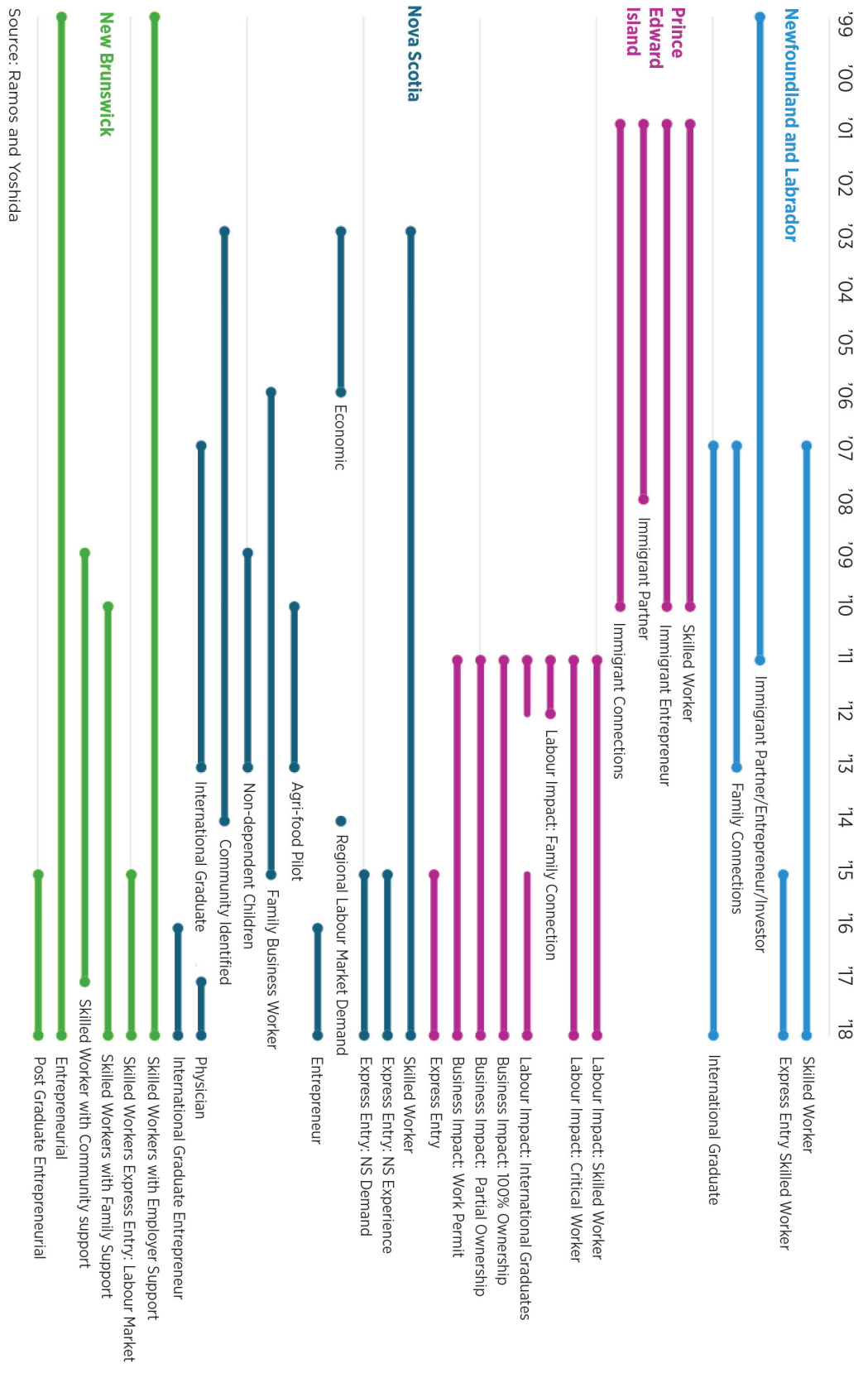
**Kelly Toughill** is an award-winning journalist and Associate Professor of Journalism at the University of King's College in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Prior to joining King's, she was Deputy Executive Editor and former Atlantic Canada Bureau Chief for the Toronto Star. Prof. Toughill is also the founder of Polestar Immigration Research, a media and consulting company that provides quality news, analysis and information about Canadian immigration to a range of stakeholders and institutions.





# Provincial immigration pathways to Atlantic Canada

Since 1999, Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) streams have grown to more than 20.



Source: Ramos and Yoshida



# Good Policy. Better **Atlantic** Canada.

The Public Policy Forum has been working on policy issues of national and regional importance for more than 30 years. We have a broadly based membership and we work to have doers, thinkers and deciders involved in our research so it will arrive at fresh solutions in the interests of Canada and Canadians.

Atlantic Canada is a bellwether for the demographic issues that the rest of Canada will soon encounter. An aging and, in some cases, shrinking population is not conducive to the social and economic base required for a region to thrive. A crisis should never be wasted, and today we see Atlantic Canada taking action to promote population growth and business development. There is a lot of good work happening and signs of a turnaround are promising but not yet secured. PPF will contribute to grassroots, business and government efforts through research, conferences and storytelling.

PPF is building a 10-year fund dedicated to addressing Atlantic Canadian issues, starting with population retention and attraction. People will spell the difference between growth and decline. We are building new partnerships with government, the business community, academia and non-profits. We need your participation.

Our Atlantic Advisory Council, made up of accomplished leaders from all sectors, will help guide us to the policy research and convening that makes sense for the region.

