

Untapped Talent Pipelines: Leveraging Ontario's Diversity for Workforce Development

An outlook from the Ontario Chamber of Commerce's Workforce Development Policy Council



Ontario faces growing labour shortages that threaten its long-term competitiveness. Yet, many of the province's most diverse talent pools remain underutilized due to persistent barriers in education and employment.

Ontario is one of the most diverse provinces in Canada: 34.3 per cent of residents identify as visible minorities, newcomers drive over 60 per cent of labour force growth, and Indigenous youth represent the fastest-growing demographic.^{i ii iii} Moreover, women's participation has risen to 61 per cent, while 2SLGBTQIA+ workers and persons with disabilities represent vital and growing contributors.^{iv v vi} Despite these strengths, unemployment remains higher among racialized workers, youth unemployment rates are above the provincial average, and many internationally trained professionals remain unable to work in their fields.^{vii}

Recent measures, including investments through the [Skills Development Fund](#), reforms under the *Working for Workers Acts* (2021–2025), and recognition of Indigenous Institutes as the third pillar of post-secondary education under the *Indigenous Institutes Act* (2017), mark important progress. However, systemic barriers persist. Unless Ontario creates more inclusive pathways, it risks sidelining critical talent while employers face worsening shortages.

To strengthen workforce readiness at this critical time and unlock the province's full economic potential, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce's (OCC's) Workforce Development Policy Council has identified four key priorities:

1. Expand access to work-integrated learning (WIL) programs
2. Provide targeted and holistic supports for learners and employees
3. Prioritize inclusive and supportive workplace culture practices
4. Strengthen employer engagement with untapped talent

EXPAND ACCESS TO WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

WIL is a critical bridge between education and employment, equipping learners with real-world skills, professional networks, and confidence that prepare learners to enter the workforce. However, access to WIL opportunities remains uneven. Unpaid placements remain common in Ontario, creating systemic barriers that disproportionately affect equity-deserving groups who cannot afford to forgo income.^{viii} This not only limits opportunities for learners but also constrains the province's ability to fully leverage its diverse talent pipeline.

Ontario can strengthen access to WIL by expanding paid opportunities, providing wage subsidies, streamlining bursaries, and embedding wraparound supports to reduce financial and systemic barriers, including those faced by internationally trained professionals seeking Canadian experience.

As part of this effort, government supports that incentivize employer participation (e.g., the Co-operative Education Tax Credit) should be reviewed to ensure they are inclusive of all institutions with provincially regulated programs that meet placement requirements. Such reviews could help level the playing field for employers hiring learners from diverse educational settings, while maximizing participation among small and medium-sized businesses. The province should also broaden partnerships with employers and institutions such as Indigenous Institutes and extend WIL into fields where it is not yet established.

By scaling partnerships and accessible opportunities, Ontario can set a national benchmark for inclusive, equitable WIL, while building a workforce ready for the future.

PROVIDE TARGETED AND HOLISTIC SUPPORTS FOR LEARNERS AND WORKERS

Ontario learners often juggle financial pressures, family responsibilities and mental health needs alongside their education. Transportation is also a significant challenge, especially for those in rural or remote areas who must travel long distances to access training. Without adequate supports, these barriers increase the risk of learners leaving education early, especially for equity-deserving groups. Embedding wraparound services like childcare, wellness supports, and transportation directly into training programs can expand access, improve graduation rates, and support learners' transition into employment.

Extending these supports into the workplace further boosts retention and career progression. Access to wraparound services, alongside mentorship and soft-skills training (e.g., conflict management and resilience) can help employees remain in the labour force and enables career advancement. Government can scale these approaches by leveraging the Skills Development Fund (SDF), co-investing in wraparound supports with employers, and piloting targeted supports in sectors facing acute shortages. Together, these measures would foster a supportive professional environment where equity-deserving workers can thrive long-term.

■ **Spotlight: Indigenous Self-Care in Indigenous Education: Developing an Institutional Wellness Toolkit^{ix}**

Developed by the Indigenous Institutes Consortium (IIC) with seven Indigenous Institutes across Ontario, the *Institutional Wellness Toolkit* helps Indigenous Institutes design culturally grounded wellness supports that integrate traditional knowledge, community connection, and trauma-informed practices. Insights from the IIC's Graduate Survey (2024) demonstrate how holistic approaches to learner support offered by Indigenous Institutes, can strengthen confidence, belonging, and readiness to contribute meaningfully to their workplaces and communities.^x

PRIORITIZE INCLUSIVE AND SUPPORTIVE WORKPLACE CULTURE PRACTICES

Workplace culture is a key determinant to whether employees feel safe, valued, and able to advance. However, many still face barriers rooted in exclusion, from inadequate mental health supports and accommodations to performative diversity measures. The fact that 40 per cent of racialized employees in Canada experience race-based discrimination underscores that inequities remain widespread.^{xi} Addressing these challenges requires embedding inclusive practices into organizational culture and ensuring meaningful representation at decision-making levels.^{xii}

Ontario employers can foster equitable workplaces by embedding inclusive practices into day-to-day operations and by making supports available to employees (e.g., Employee assistance programs with culturally diverse counselling options, equitable hiring practices, flexible work arrangements, and culturally responsive mentorship programs). Treating diversity as a long-term business imperative rather than a “box to be checked” ensures these measures become a part of each organization's DNA. By reframing inclusion as a driver of competitiveness and innovation, Ontario businesses can build cultures that support both people and performance.

STRENGTHEN EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT WITH UNTAPPED TALENT

Connecting employers with equity-deserving workers is essential to addressing labour shortages and closing persistent workforce gaps. Businesses often struggle to access diverse talent pools or to create environments where these employees can thrive. Expanding cross-sector partnerships between businesses, training providers, and community organizations can open direct pipelines to diverse talent. Incentives such as wage subsidies, tax credits, or recognition programs can accelerate employer uptake. By equipping businesses with both concrete tools and a clear business case, Ontario can turn untapped talent into a competitive advantage while closing persistent labour market gaps.

The OCC's Workforce Development Policy Council, together with our broader membership, welcomes the opportunity to work with key provincial partners, including the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development; the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security; post-secondary institutions (including Indigenous Institutes); and employer networks to strengthen Ontario's investments in responsive education and training. By fostering strong and continuous collaboration with government, educators and industry, we can ensure workforce readiness while unlocking the full potential of Ontario's diverse and untapped talent.

ABOUT THE ONTARIO CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce (OCC) is the indispensable partner of business and Canada's largest, most influential provincial chamber. It is an independent, non-profit advocacy and member services organization representing a diverse network of 60,000 members. The OCC convenes, mobilizes and empowers businesses and local chambers in pursuit of its purpose: to bring inclusive and sustainable prosperity to Ontario's businesses, workers, and communities.

ⁱ Government of Ontario (2025). Labour market report, July 2025. Retrieved from: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/labour-market-report-july-2025?>

ⁱⁱ Financial Accountability Office of Ontario. (2023). Labour Market Outcomes of Immigrants in Ontario and its Major Cities <https://fao-on.org/en/report/ilmo/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Indigenous Education. (n.d.). Indigenous Institutes Consortium. Retrieved from: <https://iicontario.ca/indigenous-education/>

^{iv} Statistics Canada. (2023). Women in the labour market: Increased potential, pay, and participation. Retrieved from: <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/o1/en/plus/4823-women-labour-market-increased-potential-pay-and-participation>

^v Indspire. (2023). The Contribution of Indigenous People to Future Labour Force Growth in Canada: AN UPDATE. Retrieved from: https://indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Indigenous-Labour-Force-Contribution-AN-UPDATE-2023_EN.pdf?

^{vi} Institute for Work and Health. (2022). Cost to Canadians of excluding people with disabilities from the labour market. Retrieved from: <https://www.iwh.on.ca/projects/cost-to-canadians-of-excluding-people-with-disabilities-from-labour-market?>

^{vii} Government of Ontario (2025). Labour market report, July 2025. Retrieved from: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/labour-market-report-july-2025?>

^{viii} Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. (2018). Retrieved from: https://heqco.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Formatted_Barriers-to-WIL_FINAL.pdf

^{ix} Indigenous Institutes Consortium. (2022). Indigenous Self-Care in Indigenous Education: Developing an Institutional Wellness Toolkit. Retrieved from: https://iicontario.ca/documents/assets/uploads/files/en/iic-23_institutional_wellness_toolkit_digital-compressed.pdf

^x Indigenous Institutes Consortium. (2024). The Impact of Indigenous-Led Post-Secondary Education and Training: Results from the Inaugural Indigenous Institutes Graduate Survey. Retrieved from: <https://iicontario.ca/documents/viewFile/?fileid=365&catid=0>

^{xi} Future Skills Centre (n.d.) Inclusive Economy. Retrieved from: <https://fsc-ccf.ca/research-insights-key-themes/inclusive-economy/>

^{xii} Future Skills Centre. (2025). DiversityLeads: Diverse representation in leadership – A review of 10 Canadian cities retrieved from: <https://fsc-ccf.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/DI-FS-Diverse-Representation-in-Leadership-%E2%80%93-Aug2024-final.pdf>