

YOUTH PERCEPTIONS ON SECURING GREEN JOBS: AN EQUITY PERSPECTIVE

POLICY BRIEF

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INTRODUCTION

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Young people, especially those from underrepresented communities, are really keen to get involved in the global effort to tackle the climate crisis. Albeit federally funded government work programs have attempted to be more inclusive, international students and other groups have been systematically excluded from acquiring entry-level employment, which has ramifications for them well beyond their graduation from post-secondary institutions.

OBJECTIVES

I wanted this research to adopt an action-oriented approach; that is, propose recommendations that drive tangible outcomes for the underserved communities it involves. The end goal of my research is to help underserved youth secure employment in the environmental field by taking into account justice, equity, diversity and inclusion considerations. This research further serves to confirm my hypothesis that the environmental field is not racially diverse and needs to find ways to include people from racialized groups.

METHODOLOGY

Prior to conducting my research, I hosted a green jobs webinar with the support of Glendon College - York University's Office of Experiential Education and the charitable organization, TakingITGlobal. This enabled me to assemble the young people to contact for my focus groups/interviews. Further, I identified the communities that faced rampant unemployment rates, and who aspired for change to successfully acquire employment.

A month later, I sat down with eight young people to investigate this issue in depth through a series of two semi-structured focus groups in English and one interview session in French (see Appendix 1 for questions asked). All sessions were approximately one hour in length and each participant was paid an honorarium of \$25 for their time which was funded by Glendon College's Research Office. A pseudonym was used for participants who requested that their full name not be disclosed.

POSITIONALITY

Prior to venturing into this research, I had personal experience with challenges in securing green employment. I was the founder of an environmental non-profit organization and witnessed first hand how difficult it was to secure government funding for wage subsidies since there are a tremendous amount of barriers for youth-led organizations (see Appendix 2). These include providing payments up front and being required to be familiar with financial systems such as payroll. I was really interested in learning more about how to break down glass-ceilings for the youth-led climate movement so that we could achieve more change, and with government funding to pay youth for their labour, which is oftentimes uncompensated.

Simultaneously, I have many friends who are international students and come from underserved communities, who expressed to me the difficulties that they were facing in securing employment. Therefore, I wanted to focus more on highlighting equity concerns for international students, and those from other underrepresented groups.

PARTICIPANT ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

- To qualify to participate in my study the participants needed:
- To be between the ages of 18 - 30 years old (inclusive)
 - To identify with at least one underserved community (i.e. Black, Indigenous, visible minority, international student, francophone, LGBTQ2S+, refugee, newcomer, or having a physical or mental health-related disability)
 - To reside in Canada
 - To be actively seeking a green job over the past 12 months

LIMITATIONS

It should be noted that 87.5% of the participants were from Toronto, Ontario while 12.5% were from Montreal, Quebec. It is important to point out that due to the location of my network, 62.5% were current students (37.5%) or alumni (25.0%) of York University, with the remaining attending other colleges and universities (37.5%) within either Ontario or Quebec. The full demographics of the participants can be viewed in Figure 2.0.

EDUCATION OF PARTICIPANTS

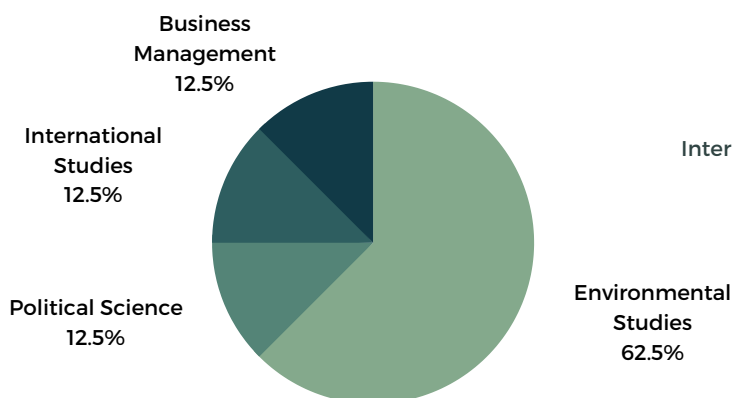


Figure 1.0

DEMOGRAPHICS OF PARTICIPANTS

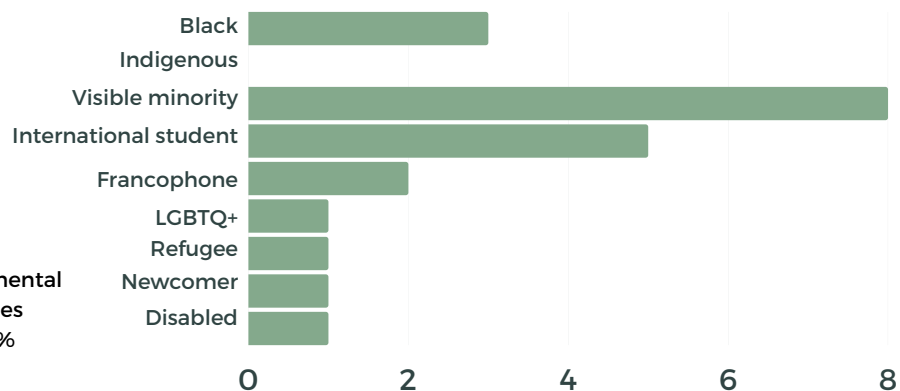


Figure 2.0

LABOUR MARKET RESTRUCTURING

PERMANENT RESIDENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

According to Statistics Canada, in 2020, there were an estimated 530,540 international students in Canada. The report also indicates that three in every ten first time study permit holders become permanent residents within ten years (Statistics Canada, 2021).

International students have three options to become permanent residents in Canada: the Canadian Experience Class, Federal Skilled Worker Program, or Provincial Nominee Program. Both the Canadian Experience Class and Federal Skilled Worker Program require at least one year of working experience in order to apply (Government of Canada, 2021). In Quebec, the Quebec Experience Program requires 18 months of work experience for foreign students who are Quebec graduates (Canada Visa, 2021). In Ontario, under the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program, international students can apply under the 'Employer Job Offer: International Student Stream' certifying that they have a job offer after they graduate for a full time (at least 30 hours a week) and permanent position (Government of Ontario, 2021).

Considering that international students are excluded from jobs that are subsidized by the government, and as per the discussions in my focus groups/interviews, this has posed an immense challenge because international students are left working for free by doing unpaid internships abroad or paying for their work placement in Canada. International students who graduate are also left in a difficult place given that even if they apply for a work permit under the Post-Graduate Work Permit Program, they are still excluded from these same government funded programs. This is the case since they do not have permanent residency status in Canada. In the following sections, I will elaborate on this issue by drawing upon the lived experiences of international students, newcomers and refugees to highlight the link between the desire to settle down and find work in Canada. In addition, using my interview data, I shed light on the demand from these students and young adults to assist in the sustainable transition to a green economy.

DEFINING A GREEN JOB

During the focus group sessions, participants arrived at varying definitions of a green job. Below are two of the participants' definitions:

"A job that benefits the environment and in turn also impacts human relationships with the Earth." - Maya Adachi

"Anything for the environment and does not necessarily comprise all the flora and fauna, but also people and human beings...everyone. So sustainability plays a role... anything that protects nature, as we also are a part of nature, and basically just prevents the degradation of society and the environment." - Rooha Imran

It is interesting to remark how these definitions contrast with the Government of Canada's definition which has more STEM and clean technology undertones:

"A green job is a job within an organization that aims to protect the environment or within an organization that is interested in processes with positive environmental outcomes. A green job can be classified as follows:

- Professions that require environmental skills, knowledge, experience or competencies in order to produce products or deliver services that have an environmental benefit (e.g., architects and land use planners who incorporate sustainability into designs, air quality engineers and conservation officers)
- Professions that may not require specialized environmental skills but result in an environmental benefit (e.g., construction or trades workers that apply knowledge of standard construction techniques while completing green projects, manufacturing production workers, and companies that produce environmental goods)
- Professions that support organizations in the natural resources sector that work toward positive environmental outcomes (e.g., communications, marketing, administration, project management, engagement, sales, and business analysis)" (Natural Resources Canada, 2021b).

These STEM undertones have translated into \$44 million in funding for green jobs within the clean technology and STEM fields (Natural Resources Canada, 2021a). Within my research discussions, it was apparent that the participants did not foresee themselves in the STEM field due to 100% of the participants having an educational background in the social sciences field (see Figure 1.0). However, the respondents still believe that during their respective careers and job paths, they can contribute to climate solutions and solve environmental crises.

DELINEATING KEY ACTORS

After conducting my research, there were three predominant categories that stood out to me as the main actors involved in perpetuating inequity and having the potential to simultaneously drive the solution. These three categories are academic institutions such as universities or colleges; government which include federal agencies such as Environment and Climate Change Canada and Economic and Social Development Canada; and organizations which include both for-profit businesses and non-profit/non-governmental organizations.

CLEARING THE AIR

CONCEPTIONS & SENTIMENTS

- Racialized people cannot afford to participate in experiences at home that can help set them up for success in the green jobs field.
- There is a misconception that international students are rich and have not suffered because of the exorbitant tuition fees that they pay for their education every year.

"I come from Colombia, where there's a lot of violence... really rough things going on. So like, my point is, why will you build this system, if you're not gonna help out? For me, it sounds like honestly, exploitation." - MJ Torres

- International students suffer from a sense of not-belonging when it comes to securing employment. When they return home their experience is relevant to Canada, but when they are in Canada they are treated as if they are going to go back to their home country.

"I'm kind of in this place where I don't know where I belong. For me, my experience is relevant to Canada. I study Lake Erie, I study Lake Ontario, and then I go back [to Pakistan], and they're like, 'Oh, you don't know anything about the Indus [River]. So why are we supposed to hire you?'" - Rooha Imran

ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

- International students are limited to accepting positions only at their academic institution since they do not discriminate against them.

"All of my work is like York University, York University and I'm like, okay, I need to branch out. I need to also experience other things. So that's also something that I'm a little worried about." - Rooha Imran

- Experiential education and career development centres at universities are unable to support underserved students with internship opportunities and lack awareness about the specific steps, skills, and requirements of students' dream green jobs.

"I think there's like a disconnect between who's working in the career centre, and who is working in the field." - Maya Adachi

"I've worked in immigration for six months, and I quit my job since I was told to go back to school and earn a certificate even though I have a bachelor's degree and have 3 years of experience working for an NGO in a volunteer capacity" - Mahammat Noor

- When students attempt to find green job opportunities abroad, they face a lot of difficulties including having to acquire a work visa.
- Universities are advertising paid work, but for semi-skilled positions such as customer service roles.
- University-led co-op programs are not always accessible for students who do not have a high academic standing.

"Yes, we have co-op but the criteria is way too strict. You have to have high grades or be extremely focused. But let's be realistic here. Not all students are like that. Some people are struggling with school and with grades. I'm the kind of person who struggles with academic grades which prevents me from accessing co-op programs." - Yasmine Stewart

GOVERNMENT

- International students and recently graduated international students are not eligible to apply for government funded internships since they are not a Canadian citizen, permanent resident or refugee, thereby limiting their ability to find jobs despite them being eligible and having a work permit to work up to 20 hours per week while classes are in session (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, 2021b).

"I feel like I'm qualified for most of the positions... but then I feel like because I'm an international student, I just can't apply to that position, which is really sad.. the only obstacle in my pathway happens to be that I'm not a citizen or a permanent resident." - Rooha Imran

ORGANIZATIONS

- Businesses prefer to get funded by the government so they pick Canadian citizens over international students since they can get the position funded.
- Businesses are having difficulty retaining talent because they cannot get funding to pay for their positions.
- Non-profits and NGOs rely on the government to fund their internship programs (since they presumably do not have that much funding) therefore they prioritize hiring Canadian citizens; international students are not eligible to participate in their programs.

"It's not only job seekers that are struggling to get a job, but it's also these non-profits and companies and small businesses that are struggling to retain the talent that they want. Because I cannot tell you how many times I've been so close to getting a job, but then because of the government restrictions, I can't and it's not only me, that's mad it's the person that's trying to recruit me, or get me into the organization, that's also mad, but they can't do anything." - MJ Torres

- Companies demand too much experience from young people, and international students cannot even get the experience.
- Companies are only offering internships for students and not recent graduates. Recent grads need more experience to join the workforce.

"You can't apply for an internship at Company A, since it's just reserved for students and not new graduates." - Jessica Davvies

- There is a lack of diversity in many organizations especially with higher up positions (such as at the executive or board level) for underserved groups to feel welcomed to apply for a green job.

"Whenever I apply for jobs, I always look at, like, the staff and board of directors if necessary. And like, if it is like a very white organization, it kind of prevents me from wanting to join, because I don't know, you know, even if they say they want to hire, actively hire like, you know, racialized groups, it's like, well, it doesn't seem like you're making it very welcoming in the first place. That's just my experience whenever I look for jobs." - Maya Adachi

RECOMMENDATIONS

ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

- Offer young people more professional development opportunities including networking (in-person is preferred over online).

"I think, especially in the Canadian job market, connections are so important in order to secure jobs. Even if you have a connection, it's like the last thing that we have to overcome." - Noriko Takahashi

- Subsidize paid co-op positions for international students in their industry so that it can speed up the process for getting them permanent residency.
- Support international students well after they graduate by finding them employment at the university or college.
- Universities should forge more partnerships with organizations so that they can offer students paid co-operative and work integrated learning experiences that count for course credit. These co-operative experiences should be more inclusive of all students and not solely select students on the basis of their academic performance or status in Canada. These experiences can also be abroad and conducted remotely given the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Universities need to offer more high skilled positions instead of finding and sharing those that relate to semi-skilled positions.

"I think the university should offer courses that respond to the needs of the job market such as the skills that are in demand. For example, in university I took courses that were very theoretical...and we didn't have the time to develop skills. For example, GIS, ISO and GHG quantification are requirements to apply for green jobs. The university didn't offer us the chance to learn these skills and put them into practice." - Jessica Davvies

- When offering students internships abroad, ensure that they receive help with fulfilling certain requirements (such as obtaining a work visa) so that they can get paid for their work placement.
- Establish career maps for students to follow so that they can find out the pathway that is right for them and can be more informed of the steps that it will take to get them to the green job that they want.
- Offer more mentorship programs to connect students with those in the industry so that they know what path they need to take in order to attain the green job that they seek.

"Career development centres in whatever school, another thing they could do is to have like a green job one on one session. Preferably, for first year students, or like you have, like every year, so they know what it entails, or like, up on the green job one on one session" - Yasmine Stewart

- Offer green jobs fairs so that students know what organizations are hiring for green jobs.

"Employees can come together and say, 'Oh, we have this position available. And this is what we do for our own business or corporation.' These are the kind of skills you need or this is the kind of certification you need during the job fair. So that is something of course to incorporate, because not all of us know what kind of green jobs are out there." - Yasmine Stewart

GOVERNMENT

- Remove the restrictions hindering international students from participating in government funded volunteering, work integrated learning, and work placement programs.

"I feel that it should be that the eligibility criteria shouldn't exist, like, it should be on the basis of skills." - Rooha Imran

- Open up more spots in the 'innovative pathway to permanent residency for international student graduates' so that they can fast track their permanent residency (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, 2021a).

"I know that the program they opened this year [to fast track permanent residency] is already closed, it actually got filled out in like two days." - MJ Torres

- Increase awareness on government funded work integrated learning programs so that young racialized people can access the funds they need to acquire more job ready experiences.
- Fund work placements that are not STEM related and that social science students can access.

ORGANIZATIONS

- Connect international students with volunteer experiences to set them up for paid work.

"The reason why I actually got the job at the [non-profit] was because they asked me something that I've learned while I was volunteering for a [NGO's] project." - MJ Torres

- Offer micro-credential and certification programs to help young people get their foot in the door to green job opportunities.
- Minimize the need from companies demanding too much experience especially with international students who cannot even acquire the experience.
- If a work experience is unpaid, then offer a certificate, stipend, or offer to cover transportation and food in order to compensate students for their work.
- Open up more green job opportunities to recent graduates instead of currently enrolled students.
- Include diversity quotas at the executive and board level so that young racialized people feel more welcomed when wanting to apply for a green job at your organization.

"We need more inclusion, especially because as much as we need biodiversity to tackle the climate crisis, we need diversity to tackle the climate crisis." - MJ Torres

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

After conducting this research, it was immediately evident that relying on each sector to take action on their recommendations is not realistic. Sectors should break down silos and collaborate with one another so that more work can be achieved to integrate more underserved youth into the Canadian job market. For example, there are plethora of recommendations for academic institutions, but some of them, including offering green jobs fairs, mentorship programs, and networking opportunities can be implemented by organizations like businesses, NGOs, or non-profits to reduce the burden on the academic sector.

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APPENDIX 1

Questions that were asked during the focus groups and interview (although they were also asked in French and there were many that came up during the discussion that are not included since the sessions were semi-structured to achieve organic discussions):

1. What does a green job mean to you?
2. What are ways in which you have tried to secure a green job over the last 12 months?
3. What can help you secure a green job? What type of support do you need (i.e. career/professional development tools)?
4. How can provincial and federal wage subsidy programs help you find a green job? How are they accessible/inaccessible to you? Do you need help finding out about more of these wage subsidy support programs?
5. What are the barriers that have stood in the way of getting a green job, if any?
6. Have any of you participated in self driven initiatives? If so, did it help you build meaningful skills for employment in the green sector? What are your opinions on the financial support you received (i.e. too little financing, not enough for an extended period of time, etc.)?
7. What policy changes would you like to see at the government level (if any) to support inclusive and accessible green jobs for youth?
8. Do you think that governments, corporations, and foundations have a role in supporting youth leading the climate movement (i.e. whether through their climate action projects, climate non-profit work, etc.)? How should they contribute?
9. What is the role of career development centres in helping youth secure employment? How can they ensure that youth who are marginalized receive the support they need?
10. What is the role of non-profit/civil society organizations in helping youth secure employment? How can they ensure that youth who are marginalized receive the support they need?

APPENDIX 2

The list of government government funded volunteering, work integrated learning, and work placement programs and their respective wage subsidies analyzed for this policy brief can be found on here: bit.ly/greenjoblinks.