New program seeks to help make Canada a more inclusive place for immigrants

Bridging Divides harnesses wide-ranging expertise from across the country to better understand and address a complex issue.

April 28, 2023 By Adrianna MacPherson

Sandeep Agrawal, an expert in urban planning, immigration and public policy, is the U of A lead on a new national research collaboration aimed at bridging social and economic divides immigrants face as they integrate into Canadian society. (Photo: John Ulan)

Immigrants made up 23 per cent of the Canadian population as of 2021, and that number is projected to increase to between 29.1 and 34 per cent by 2041. Immigration remains the main driver of population growth in the nation, and finding ways to help newcomers integrate into Canadian society is vital, explains Sandeep Agrawal.

"If these newcomers are not integrated into Canadian society and the Canadian economy, Canada as a whole suffers, because then we're not using the skills and talents that have come to us," says Agrawal, director of the University of Alberta's School of Urban and Regional Planning.

That's what Bridging Divides, a new program he's involved in, is looking to address. The program has received $98.6 million from the Canada First Research Excellence Fund, as well as additional in-kind and cash contributions from participating institutions and industry.

"Bridging Divides is essentially looking at the divide between immigrants and non-immigrant communities, and how we can bridge that gap."

The program will examine a range of key areas relevant to immigrant integration, including health, technology, homes and neighbourhoods, and civic participation, as well as access to and success in the labour market.

"We're talking about immigrant integration, be it social, economic, political or spatial," says Agrawal.

Researchers will focus mainly on data from large urban centres and small to mid-sized cities, where the vast majority of newcomers and immigrants choose to live, Agrawal explains.

Along with the U of A, the program involves the University of British Columbia, Concordia University and Toronto Metropolitan University, with Agrawal serving as both the U of A team lead as well as a co-lead of the Place and Infrastructure research area. Among many other U of A researchers who will participate, Yasmeen Abu-Laban will contribute to the Citizen Participation area, Geoffrey Rockwell will provide expertise in digital humanities, and other researchers will apply their knowledge in the field of labour economics to contribute to the economic integration components of the project. Additional research areas include Work and Lifelong Learning, and Immigrant Health and Well-Being.

Broad base of expertise

Given the breadth of what the program is looking to explore, it's crucial to have an approach that involves experts from multiple disciplines and institutions, says Agrawal.

"You have to have health experts, social scientists, individuals who do labour market surveys, AI experts looking at how technology can help, civil engineers who do work on housing and neighbourhoods and how they're constructed, policy makers in political science," he says.

"There's a whole plethora of disciplines that need to come together to look at a rather complex problem of immigrant integration."

In addition to overseeing the U of A's contribution to the program through his role as institutional lead, Agrawal is drawing on nearly 25 years of expertise in the field of immigration, urban planning, and government and municipal policies to help spark further research in the area he's co-leading.

"We are looking at how immigrants shape places, how they create spaces and how we can make places and spaces more inclusive for immigrants."

Agrawal and the other researchers involved will examine neighbourhoods, places of worship and the role faith plays in integration, as well as social isolation among immigrants and how certain social infrastructure solutions could help remedy it.

They also plan to explore how municipalities can play a bigger role — a relevant issue in a system where most initiatives and services are federally led, according to Agrawal.

"Almost 90 per cent of immigrants and refugees settle in cities and their first contact with government is the local government, so we wanted to see how we can enhance [that] role," says Agrawal.

Agrawal notes that Canada is already a world leader in this field, and feels programs like Bridging Divides can help strengthen that position and expertise as immigration continues to grow in the years to come.

"It's the immigrants who are coming to Canada and fuelling the population growth, the economic growth — they are essential to the future of Canada."

Source: Folio

URL: https://www.ualberta.ca/folio/2023/04/new-program-seeks-to-help-make-canada-a-more-inclusive-place-for-immigrants.html