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Youth Perceptions On Securing Green Jobs: An Equity Perspective

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Table Of Contents

 Introduction	_____	3
 Labour Market Restructuring	_____	6
 Clearing the Air	_____	9
 Recommendations	_____	13
 Next Steps	_____	17
 References	_____	20
 Appendices	_____	21



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. Despite inclusion efforts from federally funded work programs, 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 my research on green jobs to adopt an action-oriented approach that proposes 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, through my lived experiences interacting with underserved youth, 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 low employment rates in sustainability 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.

Outside of work, I have many friends who are international students and come from underserved communities. They have expressed to me the difficulties that they were facing in securing employment. As a young woman of colour as well as my personal connection to these communities, 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 reside in Toronto, Ontario whereas 12.5% were from Montreal, Quebec. 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. All participant demographics are shown in **Figure 2.0**.

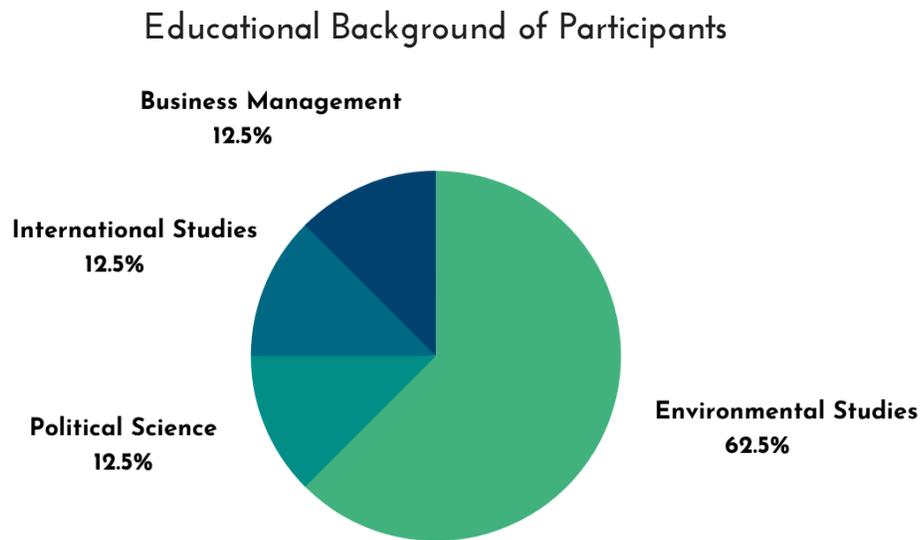


Figure 1.0.

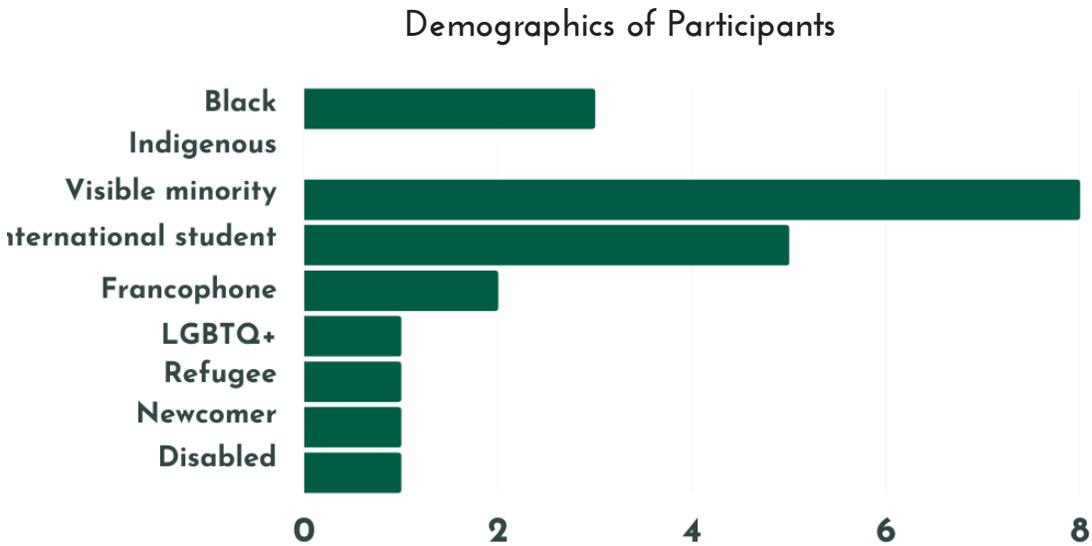


Figure 2.0.





Labour Market Restructuring

Permanent Residency For International Students

According to the latest Statistics Canada report 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).

There are three major government programs that permit/facilitate the permanent residency application process for international students in Canada: the Canadian Experience Class, Federal Skilled Worker Program, or Provincial Nominee Program. The Canadian Experience Class and Federal Skilled Worker Program require at least one year of work 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 graduates of Quebec institutions (Canada Visa, 2021). In Ontario, through 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).

The exclusion of international students from jobs subsidized by the government has posed an immense challenge to this population. The repercussions/effects of this exclusionary/exclusive government policy is shared in my focus groups/interviews with international students seeking permanent residency/green jobs. Students in the focus groups/interview expressed their many challenges securing paid work, often detailing experiences of participating in free/unpaid internships or paying for their work placement in Canada. International students who graduate from accredited post-secondary programs also face challenges securing paid employment even if they apply for a work



permit under the Post-Graduate Work Permit program. Despite their eligibility for the Post-Graduate Work Permit Program, international students are nonetheless excluded from the government funded wage subsidy programs because they lack permanent residency status.

In the following sections, I elaborate on this issue by drawing upon the lived experiences of international students, newcomers and refugees to highlight the link between the desire to live and work in Canada. Using my interview data, I shed light on the demand from these students and young adults to assist in the transition to a green economy.

Defining A Green Job

During the focus group/interview sessions, participants were asked to define what a green job was to them. They arrived at varying definitions of a green job. Below are two of the participants' definitions of a green job:

"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

Note that the participants' definition of a green job as encompassing a social sciences and humanities theme contrasts with the Government of Canada's STEM and clean-tech-focused definition of a green job:

"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 and clean tech undertones have translated into \$44 million in funding for green jobs within the clean technology and STEM fields (Natural Resources Canada, 2021a). As a result of the discussions collected from my research focus group/interviews, it is clear that the participants did not envision themselves as future employees/with future careers in STEM due to 100% of participants having an educational background in the social sciences and humanities field (see **Figure 1.0**). However, despite the differences between the federal government’s and participants’ definitions of a green job, the participants nonetheless believe in pursuing a green job because they want to contribute to solving the climate crisis.

Delineating Key Actors

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 to their country of origin 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 country of origin.

"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 ill equipped 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 administrative challenges 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 who are currently enrolled and recently graduated are both ineligible 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 having an eligible work permit that allows international students to work 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 to apply and receive government funding to support paid work positions and so these organizations are forced to hire Canadian citizens and permanent residents over international students.
- Businesses struggle to retain talent due to difficulties applying and receiving funding to support paid positions.
- Non-profits and NGOs rely on the government to fund their internship programs (since they presumably do not have that much funding) therefore these organizations are forced/given no choice but to prioritize hiring Canadian citizens because international students are ineligible to participate in the government-funded 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 as it stands international students struggle to even acquire the experience due to the limitations of their immigration status/visa.
- Due to government incentives, companies are seemingly only offering internships for students and not recent graduates. Recent graduates 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

- The lack of employee diversity at many organizations, especially in upper-level management positions (i.e., at the executive and board levels), makes it challenging for underserved groups to seek employment in green jobs as they feel unwelcome at such organizations.

"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 underserved youth 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 specialization so that it can expedite the process for getting them permanent residency.
- Establish mechanisms to support international students in finding and retaining employment after graduation
- Post-secondary institutions should increase the number of community partnerships to offer students co-operative and work integrated learning experiences that are paid and count towards 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 to underserved youth 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.
- Create career maps for students seeking green jobs to follow so that they: a) are aware of the skills to develop for employability in green jobs; b) know the pathways available to accessing employment in the sustainability sector
- Increase the number of mentorship programs available to connect students with industry partners, helping students establish connections in the sustainability sector and gain awareness of potential careers in this field.

"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 students in the Social Sciences can access these funded opportunities.

Organizations

- Increase opportunities for international students to connect with volunteer work experiences, creating pathways to introduce this group to future paid work opportunities.

"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 job requirements from companies as they demand too much experience for their entry-level positions.
- To adequately recognize students for unpaid work experiences, organizations must offer written references, a certificate or stipend.
- Increase availability of green job opportunities to new graduates.
- 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



Next Steps

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 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. From my point of view, one way to facilitate this collaboration would be through an initiative run by underserved youth to bring these actors together (see: **Introducing the Green Career Centre**).

Advocating For Policy Change

There is a much needed push to advocate for policy change at the government level to fight to include international students and underserved groups in their programs. Throughout the process of sharing my research I received the opportunity to present my findings to policymakers at Natural Resources Canada. Though I was very grateful I had the chance to share my research, it appeared like Immigration, Citizenship and Refugees Canada was a key department in the government that needed to be part of this greater discussion. The policymakers from Natural Resources Canada also expressed that they want to break down barriers for young people and make their programs more inclusive. However, when they try to communicate potential changes to their programs with the 12 other federal agencies they are constrained and restricted in what they can do.

A manager of a green jobs program at Natural Resources Canada shared with me the mass labour shortages we have been having over the pandemic, and how international students could be used to fill in



this labour gap. She also positively shared that their team will make strides towards marketing the STIP (Science & Technology Internship Program) more broadly so that social sciences and humanities youth feel like they are eligible to participate instead of exclusively STEM and clean tech focused youth.

I was surprised to hear that some of the policymakers could sympathize with my research findings, as one of them recalled needing a high average to get accepted into her co-operative education program. Another found my approach to sharing findings on LinkedIn very intriguing, and was amazed at the amount of engagement that could be made on such platform. For context, I shared the first edition of this policy brief on LinkedIn and garnered over 60 000 views, more than 350 comments, and more than 300 reactions on my post.

Despite slow developments in policy, I am hopeful that over time and with youth constantly mobilizing over social and environmental causes, that we will be able to instigate change where international students and other underserved groups feel more included in pursuing work in the sustainability field.

Introducing the Green Career Centre

Through my lived experiences as a young neurodivergent woman of colour, I have witnessed first hand the struggles of succeeding in this space. I continue to face misogyny, racism, ableism and ageism in the field and when pursuing my own projects. I have experience with cis-het white men taking my work on an extractive, unpaid and plagiarized basis. I have been in boardrooms with old men telling me to leave the room, so I have no power in high level decision making. Likewise, I have been in situations where people of power and privilege attempt to lower my title and salary despite my outstanding contributions. The focus group/interview consultations with underserved youth further exacerbated the point of needing a collective of young people from these communities to come together and push for change.



After months of hard work, I am ecstatic to share the launch of the Green Career Centre, an initiative of Regenesi, a community environmental organization. With a focus on supporting BIPOC, newcomers and women, the Green Career Centre's mission to prepare underrepresented youth for green careers. The Green Career Centre works by and for these communities to bridge the gap between equitable, accessible and transparent social and environmental employment opportunities. Our key areas and initiatives include hosting green career events, conducting innovative participatory and community centred research, and developing useful and impactful resources.

I am confident that this initiative can serve as a starting point to advocate for underserved youth interested in pursuing a career path in sustainability and can help further drive the transformative change that we need to see in order to address some or all of the proposed recommendations outlined in this policy brief.



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Appendices

Below is the list of initial questions asked to prompt discussion with participants in the focus groups and interview. Please note that in certain circumstances, these questions were asked in French. It is also important to note that due to the semi-structured nature of the research conducted, additional questions not listed below were asked as a result of organic discussions facilitated.

Appendix 1

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/greenjobslinks. You can also consult the Green Career Centre's wage subsidy tool on our website under the resources section here: <https://www.greencareer.ca/resources>.

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