



Empowering the Future: AI Skilling for Newcomers and Underserved Communities

November 2025



Founded in 1974, WES is a non-profit social enterprise that supports the educational, economic, and social inclusion of immigrants, refugees, and international students. From evaluating academic credentials to shaping policy, designing programs, and providing philanthropic funding, we partner with a diverse set of organizations, leaders, and networks to uplift individuals and drive systems change.



Immigration in Canada by the Numbers



- Canada's population is an estimated 41.7 million
 - Immigrants make up approximately 23% of Canada's population
- Immigration accounts for almost 100% of labour force growth
 - Immigration is projected to account for 100% of population growth by 2032

Underutilization of Immigrants' Skills and Experience



>29%

Immigrants make up over a quarter of Canada's workforce



59%

of new permanent residents were projected to arrive through economic streams in 2025



55.3%

of recent immigrants hold a bachelor's degree or higher



47.2%

Less than half of Canada's immigrants work in the same sector as pre-migration



12.6%

The unemployment rate of immigrants, compared to the overall rate of 7.1%

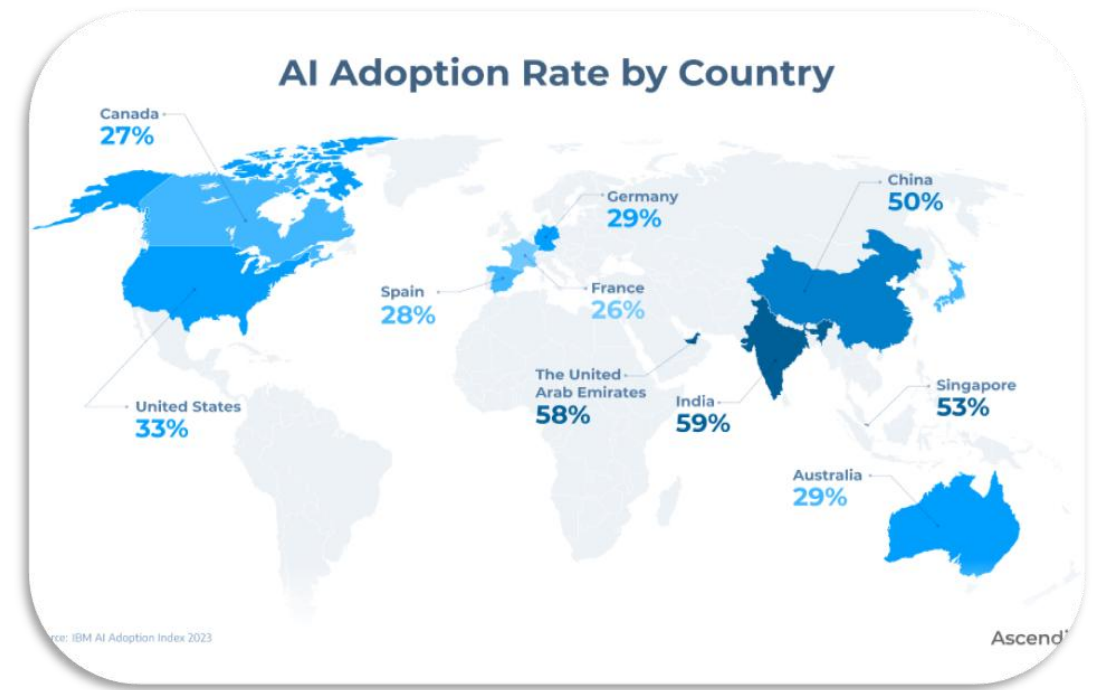


22.8%

The unemployment rate of immigrant youth, compared to 14.6% for Canadian youth

AI: The Big Picture

- AI promises to boost **productivity, innovation, and competitiveness** worldwide.
- Canada is a global leader in **AI research**, but there is currently no nationwide legislation regarding AI adoption.
- **Immigrants are central to Canada's innovation and entrepreneurship story**, yet they often face systemic barriers to participation.
- **The question isn't if AI will reshape the economy — it's who will benefit.**



AI could add \$15.7 trillion to the global economy by 2030.

The Canadian SME Challenge

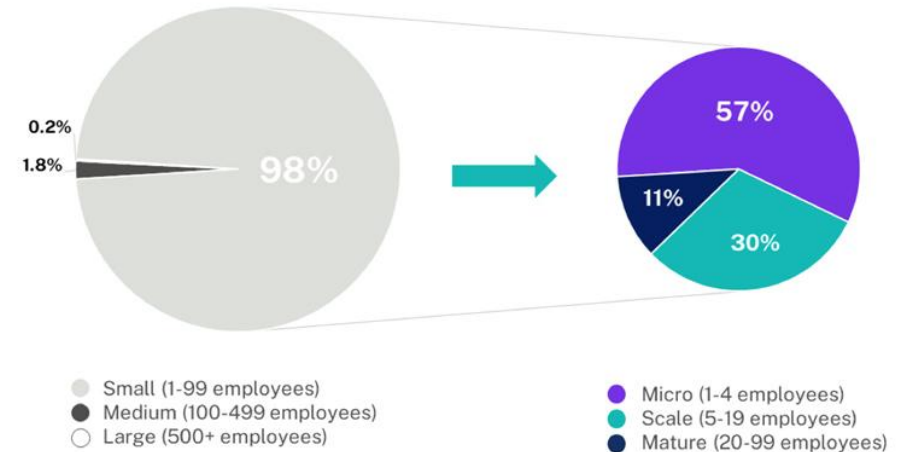
SMEs make up over **98% of all Canadian businesses**, yet most **lack digital integration strategies**.

Immigrant-owned SMEs contribute significantly to job creation and innovation, but face:

- Limited access to **AI tools, financing, and mentorship**
- **Skills and knowledge gaps** in AI literacy
- **Regulatory uncertainty** around AI use

Without targeted support, smaller immigrant-led enterprises **risk being left behind**.

Figure 1: The overwhelming majority of businesses in Canada are small.
Distribution of businesses in Canada, by firm size, per cent of total.



Source: Statistics Canada. Table 33-10-0661-01 Canadian Business Counts, with employees, December 2022; BDL calculations.

The Double-Edged Sword of AI

Opportunities

- **AI as an equalizer:** Expands access to learning, translation, and entrepreneurship tools.
- **Productivity gains:** Automation can reduce administrative burdens for SMEs.
- **Knowledge democratization:** Access to real-time analytics and decision support.

Risks

- **Job displacement** in entry-level and routine roles.
- **Algorithmic bias** reinforcing gender and racial inequities.
- **Digital divide:** Women adopt AI at a 25% lower rate than men on average.
- **Further underemployment** among skilled newcomers.

Pathways to Inclusion: Moving Forward Intentionally

- **Centre equity in innovation** — ensure that legislation, policies, and tools advance inclusion.
- **Invest in AI literacy and training** for immigrant entrepreneurs and employees.
- **Support inclusive AI design** — human-centred, bias-aware, and transparent.
- Recognize that collaboration between **government, academia, employers, and communities** is key.

AI can be a powerful equalizer — but only if inclusion, ethics, and equity guide how we design, deploy, and lead it.

