

Rural Immigration Investigation of the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot (RNIP) Program in Brandon and Altona (Canada): A blueprint for rural communities in Japan?

ブランドンとアルトナ (カナダ) におけるルーラルアンドノーザンイミグレーションパイロット (RNIP) プログラムの調査:
日本の農村社会への手引書となるか?

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Although Canada's population has more than doubled over the past sixty years, most newcomers settle in major urban areas, leaving rural municipalities grappling with aging populations and depopulation. Immigration can significantly benefit these communities by lowering the average age, increasing the fertility rate, addressing labor shortages, and boosting demand for goods and services. The Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot (RNIP) is a community-driven program designed to extend the benefits of immigration to smaller communities by providing a pathway to permanent residence for skilled foreign workers who wish to work and live in these areas. Unlike the Provincial Nominee Program (PNP), which relies on community recommendations, the RNIP is employer-driven, allowing employers to select foreign candidates for necessary positions. This study provides an overview of the RNIP program and elucidates its critical features through interviews with immigration coordinators from two participating communities.

要旨

過去60年間でカナダの人口は2倍以上に増加したが、大多数の新規移住者は主要都市部に集中しており、地方自治体は高齢化や人口減少の問題に直面している。移民は、平均年齢を引き下げ、出生率を向上させ、労働力不足を解消し、商品やサービスの需要を増加させることで、これらの地域社会に大きな利益をもたらすことができる。ルーラル・アンド・ノーザン・イミグレーション・パイロット (RNIP) は、地域社会主導のプログラムであり、参加する地域社会で働き、生活することを希望する熟練した外国人労働者に対して永住権への道を提供することを目的としている。候補者を地域社会が推薦する州推薦プログラム (PNP) とは異なり、RNIPは雇用主主導のプログラムであり、雇用主が必要なポジションに対して外国人候補者を選ぶことができる。本研究では、RNIPプログラムの概要を提供し、2つの参加コミュニティの移民コーディネーターへのインタビューを通じてその重要な特徴を明らかにする。

Introduction

Under the slogan #ImmigrationMatters, the Government of Canada has utilized its official website to broadcast the value of immigration to the public, including such benefits as growing the economy, supporting an aging population, filling labor needs, sustaining the education system, and boosting trade. It summarizes the role played by immigrants as follows:

Thanks to immigration, Canada's labour force continues to grow every year. While funds for public services are vital, welcoming immigrants is essential in helping employers find qualified workers to fill available jobs. This is because Canadians live longer and have fewer children. More people are retiring, and there are fewer students in schools. As a result, the pool of Canadian-born existing and potential workers is limited.

Immigrants contribute to our economy, not only by filling gaps in our labour force and paying taxes, but also by spending money on goods, housing and transportation. (Government of Canada, n.d., “Immigrants Contribute” section)

As evidenced in these paragraphs, the Canadian government recognizes that it faces severe social headwinds. Of principal concern is the fertility rate (1.33 children per woman in 2022), which has dropped to its lowest level on record (Provencher & Galbraith, 2024). The country is also aging, with the national average of residents at 40.6 years and 18.8% of the population aged 65 or over (Statistics Canada, 2024). Furthermore, Canada faces short-term labor-related challenges, with nearly half of businesses of twenty or more employees reporting that they expect challenges in retaining skilled workers in the near future (Canaj et al., 2023). While workers are required across industries, healthcare practitioners are in particular demand, with a need for 13 million additional nurses forecast over the following decade (Baumann & Crea-Arsenio, 2023) and a predicted shortfall of 78,000 physicians by 2031 (House of Commons, 2023). Finally, Canada has suffered a slow depopulation of the countryside, with urban centers housing more than 80% of the population despite comprising less than 1% of Canada’s total land area (Finlay, 2022). While admitting that immigration is not a panacea, the Canadian Government sees immigrants as integral to addressing these challenges, as well as maintaining a high standard of living for Canadians:

Without immigrants to help offset the trends of an aging population, Canada would not be able to offer the same level of services to its residents into the future. Immigration alone cannot solve this challenge, but it can help as we look to keep our economy growing

and maintain our commitments to health care, public pensions and other social programs. (Government of Canada, n.d., “Support our aging population” section)

Canadian Immigration Minister Marc Miller is even more explicit:

The challenge I face as the Minister of Immigration, and our government generally, is to look at things that move in generational cycles as opposed to electoral cycles... [Our immigration system] is about sustaining Canada as we understand it today, and the health services, social services that our older generation expect, those that have built Canada, that is not doable without people coming in from abroad. (Emphasis added: 2024, para 22)

In Japan, the government struggles to address many of the challenges enumerated above. The fertility rate remains perpetually low at 1.20 in 2023 (Fujinami, 2024), with persons 65 and over comprising 29.1% of the total population (Chiba, 2023), by far the oldest in the developed world (Edmond & North, 2023). Furthermore, social security payments to senior citizens currently occupy 62.9% of the total (Cabinet Office, 2023) and have been rising yearly. Like Canada, Japan suffers from labor shortages across many industries, with over half of employers reporting difficulties securing full-time employees (Teikoku Data Bank, 2023). The healthcare industry is under considerable strain and is predicted to incur shortages of one million medical workers by 2040 (NikkeiAsia, 2022). Labor shortages and demographic challenges are particularly acute in the countryside, where 51.5% of municipalities are classified as “depopulated” (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2023a).

Unlike Canada, the population of Japan has been shrinking annually since 2008 (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2023b), with

the government predicting a decline to 86 million by 2060 from a peak of 128 million¹ (Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare, 2014). A principal reason for this decline is the small number of immigrants who have entered the country, with only 2.5% of the population comprised of non-Japanese residents² compared with a Canadian foreign-born population of 23% (Statistics Canada, 2021a). While reforms to the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act (1989; 2012; 2015; 2019) have expanded visa classes and opportunities for foreigners to enter and reside in the country, political leaders have repeatedly denied that such changes represent the implementation of an immigration policy³ (cf. Roberts, 2019, p. 89; Menjyu, 2020, p. 83). Although many researchers regard the 1989 immigration reforms as the beginning of Japan's immigration framework (Nagayoshi, 2020), the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) continues to deny that immigration is occurring or will be undertaken in the future:

In order to ensure the sustainability of the economic and social infrastructure, a comprehensive and concrete study will be conducted on how to accept foreign talent in the medium to long term, focusing on areas of real need. To this end, we will conduct cross-governmental studies and deliberations on necessary matters, including a mechanism that will not be misunderstood as an immigration policy and a way to build a national consensus. [Emphasis added; translation mine] (LDP Political Investigation Committee, 2016, p. 1)

LDP protestations notwithstanding, of the country's roughly 3.5 million foreign residents, over 1.5 million hold permanent residency status⁴ (Immigration Services Agency, 2023). Furthermore, with calls to increase foreign residents to as much as 15% of the population by 2100 (Population

Strategy Council, 2024), the total number of foreign residents may be expected to increase⁵.

Despite differing conceptions of immigration and the role that immigrants play in society, Canada and Japan can expect to rely on foreign-born residents in the future to address demographic and labor-related issues. This research presents a rural immigration initiative, the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot (RNIP), conducted in two rural Canadian municipalities: Altona, Manitoba, and Brandon, Manitoba. Beginning with a brief description of each municipality and an overview of the RNIP program, it includes the results of interviews with officials overseeing the facilitation of the pilot in both cities. Finally, it offers proposals for rural municipalities in Japan, who may desire to implement immigration strategies.

Manitoba, Canada

The Town of Altona and the City of Brandon are located in the Province of Manitoba, which occupies the geographic center of Canada. One of Canada's Prairie Provinces⁶, Manitoba, has a population of 1.47 million (Manitoba Bureau of Statistics, 2023), with a steady annual population growth rate of 1.46% over the past decade (Manitoba Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Most residents live in Winnipeg, home to 783,100 in 2023 and expected to reach 828,000 by 2027 (City of Winnipeg, 2023). While the north of the province is dominated by woodland, swamps, and glacial lakes, Southern Manitoba is home to some of Canada's most productive farmland (McLintock et al., 2024). Both Altona and Brandon are located in this fertile region.



(Source: Manitoba Electoral Divisions Boundary Commission, 2018)

Figure 1: Map of Southern Manitoba

Brandon

Located 213 km west of Winnipeg, the City of Brandon boasts a population of over 51,000 (2021), up 22% from 2001 (Economic Development Brandon, n.d.). The average age of residents is 39.0 years, with residents 65 and over comprising 16% and children 0-14 comprising 18% of the population (Statistics Canada, 2021b). English is the first language for 76% of the population; however, 17% of residents report a mother tongue other than English or French (Statistics Canada, 2021b).

Although traditionally known as an agricultural city, Brandon enjoys a mixed economy due in part to its role as a provider of health and retail services for the surrounding population of 180,000 (City of Brandon, n.d.), including the most prominent educational institutions outside of Winnipeg (Brandon University, Assiniboine Community College). One of the largest

employers in the manufacturing sector is Maple Leaf Consumer Foods, which began operating a 650,000-square-foot pork “super-plant” in 1999 and is currently staffed by over 2,000 employees (Maple Leaf Foods, n.d.).

Although immigration to Brandon was modest until 2003, over 7,900 immigrants have arrived over the past decade, with over 4,900 arriving in the past five years (Economic Development Brandon, n.d.). The city currently includes residents from over seventy countries.

Altona/Rhineland

Located 112 km south of Winnipeg, the Town of Altona has a small population of around 4,200 (Statistics Canada, 2021c) and over 10,000 combined with the surrounding Municipality of Rhineland (Statistics Canada, 2021d). Rhineland is included in this analysis as its population accesses Altona for services, including care facilities for seniors, where many residents choose to retire. In addition, the Altona immigration office (SEED) offers services to both Altona and Rhineland. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the population of Altona, Rhineland and Brandon: While the average ages in Brandon and Altona are close to the national average (41.7 years; Statistics Canada, 2022), Rhineland residents are young (31.0 years), partially due to older residents choosing Altona as a retirement destination. Couples in Altona and Rhineland are overwhelmingly married, and in the case of Rhineland, they are raising children. That common-law and one-parent families are almost nonexistent reflects these communities’ traditionally-minded Christian backgrounds. By contrast, Brandon evidences more diversity about partner arrangements, although again, most couples with children are married. The working population (15 – 65) is above 60% in all three communities; however, the median income

Table 1 : Population statistics for Altona, Rhineland & Brandon

	Altona	Rhineland	Brandon
Total population (2021)	4,267	5,819	54,268
Total population (2016)	4,212	5,945	51,807
0 – 14 (%)	19.2	30.5	18.5
15 – 64 (%)	60.0	61.6	65.3
65 + (%)	20.8	7.8	16.3
Average age	41.1	31.0	39.1
Median total income in 2020 among recipients (CDN\$)	\$38,400	\$35,200	\$41,600
Total couple families	1,065	1,345	11,885
Total married couples	1,035 (97%)	1,320 (98%)	9,635 (81%)
Married couples with children	470 (45%)	865 (64%)	5,025 (52%)
Common-law couples with children (% of couple families)	30 (2.8%)	15 (1.1%)	900 (7.6%)

(Source: Statistics Canada, 2021b; 2021c, 2021d)

in Altona and Rhineland is below the national average (\$41,200; Statistics Canada, 2021e).

Although population growth between 2016-2021 has been slow, Altona/Rhineland grew 21% between 2011 and 2016, with 20% coming from immigration (Government of Canada, 2019a). Although many rural areas have experienced difficulties attracting and retaining immigrants, Altona/Rhineland's immigration rate is slightly higher than the national average (Government of Canada, 2019a). The economy relies heavily on agriculture, particularly field crops, but is also home to small-to-medium livestock operations (Rhineland Municipality, n.d.). The region also supports a vibrant manufacturing sector, with many companies engaged in agriculture-related machine production, such as Elmer's Manufacturing, which employs over 180 workers to manufacture implements such as crop cultivators, grain carts, and bale processors (Elmer's Manufacturing, n.d.). However, the largest employer, Friesens, is a printing company founded

in 1907 and is currently home to over 500 workers (Friesens, n.d.).

The Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot

The Rural and Northern Immigration Program (RNIP) is a five-year pilot program launched in 2019, initiated in eleven communities for the purpose of “helping smaller rural and northern communities to attract, integrate and retain foreign skilled workers meeting their economic development and labour market needs” (Government of Canada, 2019b, para 1). This mission statement hints at a problem common to many rural communities: a majority of immigrants migrate to Canada’s three major cities (Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal), with the provinces of Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia garnering over 70% of immigrants in 2020 (El-Assal, 2021). Despite the implementation of the Provincial Nominee Program (PNP), a program inaugurated in 1998 through which provincial governments select applicants with the understanding that they will reside, at least initially, in the community by whom they are nominated (Hornstein, 2022), analysis of the Manitoba PNP revealed that while the majority of provincial nominees (98.2%) resided in the province one year after landing, that number dropped considerably (85.5%) after five years (Picot et al., 2023). In contrast to PNP programs, where local governments select nominees based on assessments of present and future labor needs, RNIP allows communities to nominate applicants based on existing job offers for skilled positions. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) explains the program as follows:

The RNIP is an economic pilot program targeted to foreign nationals who have received a recommendation from a participating community and obtained a job offer within the same community’s

boundaries; who meet minimum education, work experience, language proficiency, and settlement fund requirements; and who intend to reside in the recommending community. (IRCC, n.d., para 1)

Table 2 contains a brief overview of the RNIP nomination process outlined by the SEED immigration office, which operates the RNIP program in Altona/Rhineland.

Table 2 : Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot in Altona/Rhineland

Step	Explanation
1	Local employers agree to participate in RNIP to secure workers following screening by the immigration office (SEED).
2	Jobs are posted on the SEED website, etc. Candidates create profiles on the SEED website, after which they apply for posted positions.
3	Immigration officers screen applicants and send qualified candidates to employers for further screening.
4	The employer screens candidates independently and provides an Offer of Employment to candidates, who then complete the IRCC form IMM 5911 and submit it to the immigration office.
5	The immigration office conducts face-to-face (in-person or online) interviews to verify information and assists applicants in submitting necessary paperwork for RNIP community recommendation. This process also includes a points-based assessment of community-specific criteria. Successful candidates are recommended to an independent selection committee.
6	An independent selection committee (Altona = Vetting Committee; Brandon = Brandon RNIP Recommendation Committee) provides final approval. The candidate is awarded a community recommendation.
7	The candidate applies to IRCC for a permanent residency visa and a temporary working permit to enter Canada expediently and work in Altona (PR applications require longer processing times than temporary work permits). In many cases, candidates enter Canada on temporary work permits.
8	The candidate comes to Altona (with spouse/children) and begins working immediately.
9	Permanent residency is approved approximately 6 to 12 months following entrance to Canada.

(Source: Interviews with SEED and EDB immigration officials, 2023)

The RNIP process is employer-initiated, unlike the Provincial Nominee Program, where applicants are selected based on community assessments of labor needs, after which successful applications enter Canada with permanent residency (PR) status but not always with a work position. Under RNIP, employers unable to source positions for skilled positions locally apply to the Altona immigration office (SEED) to participate in the RNIP program⁷. Approved employers can post positions online on the Town of Altona website (<https://www.seedrpga.com/immigration-pilot>) or elsewhere. Immigrants interested in the position create a “candidate profile” on the SEED website and submit application documents for review by SEED officials. SEED then reviews initial applications to ensure that applicants meet IRCC standards for work experience, education, language, and settlement funds before forwarding qualified applications to the employer. In addition to allowing SEED to eliminate unqualified/undesirable candidates quickly, performing this service reduces the burden on employers, who are only tasked with reviewing qualified candidates. The next step involves employers conducting screenings based on their criteria, such as interviews and reference checks. They then offer successful candidates a Job Offer, which is used to fill out form IMM 5911 of IRCC (Schedule 1 – Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot). Applicants upload this form and all required documents to their candidate profile on the SEED website to apply for community recommendation. SEED reviews the form and assesses candidates based on community-specific criteria, using a point-based system to evaluate their suitability for settling in the Altona/Rhineland area. The primary assessment areas for Altona/Rhineland and Brandon are summarized below.

Table 3 : Community-specific Evaluation Criteria

Criteria	Altona/Rhineland	pts	Brandon	pts
Language (applicant)			Exceeds minimum levels required for candidates TEER	15
Language (spouse)			Equal or exceeds CLB/NCLC 4	8
Education (applicant)			Completed two years post-secondary in Brandon	10
Education (spouse)	Has post-secondary education enabling work in specific industries	10	Completed two years post-secondary in Brandon	5
Age (applicant)	Is between the ages of 25 - 38	10		
Work (applicant)	Has a job offer in agriculture/manufacturing	20	Has a job offer or is already working in Brandon	20
Work (applicant)	Has a job offer from an established employer in another sector	10		
Work (spouse)	Has experience in and can work in specific industries	10	Has worked in Brandon 6 consecutive months in the past three years	5
Experience (applicant)			Has lived in Brandon 6 consecutive months in the past three years	15
Experience (spouse)			Has lived in Brandon 6 consecutive months in the past three years	5
Experience (applicant)	Has lived in a community of under 10,000 people for at least six months	5		
Personal Connections (applicant)	Close family connections (parents, siblings, children) in Altona who have lived at least two years	20	Close family connection (parents, previous legal guardian, siblings, or children of applicant or spouse / common-law partner of applicant) in Brandon who has lived at least two years (10 pts x max three people)	Max 30
Personal Connections (applicant)	Medium family connection (grandparent, uncle, aunt, cousin, niece, nephew) in Altona who have lived at least two years	10	Medium family connection (grandparent, aunt, uncle, cousin, niece, nephew) Brandon who have lived at least two years (5 pts x max three people)	Max 15
Personal Connections (applicant)	A friend in Altona who has lived at least two years	10	A friend in Brandon (2 pts x max of 3 people.	Max 6

(Source: SEED and Economic Development Brandon websites)

As evidenced above, each community awards points based on criteria that respective immigration offices believe will contribute to long-term immigrant retention. Whereas Brandon awards points for candidates with language ability above government requirements, who have experience living, working, or studying in Brandon, and who have strong personal connections to the community, Altona immigration officers are more concerned with the candidate's age and whether the candidate has experience living in small communities. Both communities highly value candidate spouses/partners. Although points are not awarded for small children, both point systems favor candidates who can come to Canada with a partner who can contribute to the economy. The importance of spouses directly relates to the nature of RNIP as a skilled worker program, which means that many in-demand positions (i.e., unskilled positions) cannot be directly filled through RNIP. However, spouses/partners who come into the community can be utilized to work outside the program's parameters. While candidates who come to Altona/Rhineland are almost invariably newcomers, Brandon, with its educational institutions, seeks to attract candidates who have already lived in Brandon as students or on temporary work visas.

A further part of the SEED review process involves conducting interviews directly with the applicants, usually online. When an applicant is deemed satisfactory, SEED officials propose them for Community Recommendation to an independent selection committee that meets regularly (e.g., monthly or bi-monthly, depending on the number of candidates). If approved, a candidate is granted Community Recommendation, after which they are directed to apply to IRRC for a permanent residency visa. As processing times can be lengthy, the

applicant will usually also apply for a temporary work visa, which allows them to live and work in Altona until their PR visa is processed. In such cases, candidates are tied to a specific employer (who issued the job offer) and a community (who issued the community recommendation). The candidate can change jobs or relocate to another community after obtaining PR status.

Interview research

To better understand how community officials were administering the RNIP, interviews were conducted with two local government employees (B1, B2) at Economic Development Brandon (EDB; 2023, September 11) and one local government employee (A1) in Altona at the Supporting Entrepreneurs through Economic Development office (SEED; 2023, September 12)⁸. Subsequent sections outline the following topics:

Table 4 : Interview topics

#	Topic
1	Initiating a rural immigration program
2	Issues with immigration in Canada
3	The RNIP focus on retention through selection processes.
4	Advantages of the RNIP program
5	Settlement services and aftercare
6	RNIP and educational requirements
7	Age restrictions
8	Ethnic communities
9	Conducting labor assessments
10	Use of immigration brokers and consultants
11	Requiring settlement funds
12	Messaging to the public
13	Immigration challenges

Initiating a rural immigration program

Brandon's foray into aggressively seeking foreign-born workers started in 1999 with the opening of Maple Leaf Foods.

B1: Prior to Maple Leaf, we had about 65 newcomers [immigrants] a year that permanently settled in Brandon, which is relatively small. It almost wasn't even worth measuring. After Maple Leaf opened in Brandon, the first shift of workers (for the processing plant) was all staff through local regional labor. When we moved into planning for the second shift of workers, we knew in advance because we had done these socio-economic studies that that would have to come from international labor.

Brandon initially used the Temporary Foreign Workers Program (TFWP), followed by the MPNP, to help them get PR status.

Brandon also uses international students to bring in workers:

B1: We see a fair bit of people as both the college [Assiniboine College] and the university [Brandon University] have international students as their targets. They generate a lot of revenue for the university and colleges, and in some situations, they stay [on to become permanent residents]. Most of those students would then go through the PNP avenue for permanent residency.

In the case of Altona, early attempts at immigration were carried out by two local companies, Friesens Corporation, and Elmers Manufacturing, both of which used the Manitoba PNP to source workers. In the case of Friesens, company officials went to the Philippines to conduct in-person interviews with each candidate as part of the hiring process. These first immigrants are often related to current users of the RNIP program. At the time of the interview (2023), A1 reported that 20 local companies were enrolled in the RNIP program and that 100 community recommendations had been issued, resulting in a 3% population increase in the local

community, including spouses and children. B1 did not provide specific numbers except to indicate that 150 community recommendations were allocated yearly (750 total over the five years of the program).

Issues with immigration in Canada

When asked about the demerits of the current immigration strategy the Government of Canada set out, B1 indicated several areas. To begin with, they noted that the system is designed to facilitate immigration to large urban areas but is less optimized to encourage settlement in rural areas. That this is happening can be seen in the fact that most immigrants settle in Canada's three largest cities (Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver). B1 explains:

They [the bureaucrats at the federal government] don't understand the reality of rural communities. They don't understand the complexities of attracting labor here. If there isn't a competitive advantage [that rural communities have] and immigration is just set like this, applicants don't come to Brandon, Manitoba, they go to the large centers.

By "competitive advantage," B1 may be referencing several factors, such as lower salaries, fewer services, and less support from one's ethnic community in the countryside compared to urban areas. To illustrate, B1 offers the example of Maple Leaf Foods, a large pork producer with production facilities across Canada.

We have Maple Leaf Foods here, which is a large pork processor with locations throughout Canada. When I talk to my Maple Leaf colleagues in Ontario, they tell me that they have capped application dates to once a week because they are inundated with so many applications. Here in Brandon, we would sell our soul to get that. It's the same occupation, paying the same

wage, doing the same job, but the access to the labor pool is 100% opposite.

Rural areas are usually not a first choice for immigrants, which can influence an employer's decision to locate outside urban areas despite other operational benefits (i.e., operation costs are generally lower in rural areas). However, B1 indicates another problematic dimension of federal policy: the points-based system. For example, the federal government will set targets for specific occupations, after which qualified individuals navigate the points system to enter the country. Without considering issues related to retraining, which many immigrants are forced to do, B1 stresses that the federal government's selection of in-need occupations often ignores the actual needs of rural Canadian communities:

On a federal level immigration is a largely numerical process. At the federal level they do not consider retention rates or how an individual might fit in a community or if they are going to be supported. To them, they only consider the occupation and do not give much consideration to what happens after the immigrant enters Canada... I would say that at the federal level, their priorities are good in that they are tackling the question of immigration predominantly from an economic lens where the large numbers are. We need that. Where the disconnect happens is the type of people they're bringing in and then the pressures that we have in some of the more local or regional areas.

While the federal points system excels at bringing in high-skilled workers (e.g., engineers, physicians, IT workers, etc.) who can garner the highest points by virtue of their strong educational background and work experience, the system affords fewer points to workers with skills that are often in demand in rural communities (e.g., welders, carpenters, machine technicians). The Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) partially addresses

this problem by awarding extra points to applicants nominated by rural communities. However, immigrants coming into Canada on the PNP often do not have a job at the time of entry. They are not obligated to reside in the community that nominated them. In this regard, RNIP represents a significant departure, as the process begins with employers who provide job offers, which ensures that nominees begin working as soon as they enter Canada. Furthermore, as RNIP nominees usually enter Canada with a temporary work visa, they are obligated to reside in the community that nominates them for a period of time (usually 6 – 12 months).

The RNIP program also allows communities to screen for candidates they believe are most likely to settle permanently. B2 explains:

With our program [RNIP], I think the advantage is that our government is sharing the power and allowing us to bring people to the right spot. So for us, [unlike federal policies] we also look at if candidates are suitable for life in Brandon, and consider if they are going to stay here after they come or will they leave after.

And we also look at their connection to the community. So, for example, if you have a brother here or a sibling, there's a higher chance that you will stay. IRCC (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada) might not have the time or capacity to look at individual applicants. Candidates are a number to them.

RNIP focus on retention through selection processes

For interviewees at SEED and EDB, success is measured not only in population increases but also in the long-term retention rate of newcomers to their communities.

B1: RNIP, because the objective is retention, the level of investment that

we as an organization and the employers need to make in making sure that they pick the right candidate is very different.

After the employer picks the people they want, a thorough screening is performed to verify information, including whether the candidate meets the criteria for NOC (National Occupational Classification) level and TEER (Training, Education, Experience and Responsibilities) band⁹. If everything is in order, EDB conducts a community interview.

B1: The purpose of the interview is to confirm that the candidate is a fit for our community. We look carefully at the push and the pull factors [Push factors “push” people away from their home and include things like war. Pull factors “pull” people to a new home and include things like better opportunities.]. We would then take that candidate and present them to our recommendation committee.

Success in screening is also a matter of experience that officials gain over time.

B1: When we get that candidate, we’re able to assess their suitability based on our experience. I mean, after you go through lots of candidates, you learn about who is lying and who is telling the truth. Some candidates will tell you anything you want to hear. They say that they would do anything to live in a country town or that they love cold weather. Because of this, we really have to start digging to find the truth. So, I would say that whether it’s RNIP or Morden’s PNP, the process of digging for information is what makes the difference.

Brandon and Altona give points if a candidate has close family members in the area and tend to regard it negatively if candidates have family members elsewhere in Canada. For Brandon, this is not necessarily a disqualifying factor.

*B1: We don't have that as a hard and fast rule, but it does weigh heavily on us. There will be exceptions where you will have a candidate that does have a family member somewhere else. But we will look at the dynamic of that particular family unit, the employability of the spouse, if applicable, the type of community they're used to living in, and what their income bracket is like. For example, having family in Toronto, if they're earning \$15 an hour, they can't afford to live in Toronto. We try to take positive and negative factors into consideration for each candidate, so as a result, we don't have a hard and fast rule [for out-of-province family members], as such, but a family member anywhere else in Canada is a risk and the term we use is "red flag." When we present our candidates [to the recommendation committee], we have red flags and green flags, and a candidate **needs the green flags to outweigh the red flags**. Sometimes, occasionally, depending on the importance of that particular position, we may even still approve a candidate [with red flags] with the hopes that we get them here because we do have a good success rate once people are here.*

When asked if having relatives living in other parts of Canada was disqualifying for a candidate, A1 indicated such a factor as unfavorable but stopped short of saying that a candidate would not be considered for such reasons:

A1: We do ask if they've got family or friends that live within the town of Altona or Municipality of Rhineland. That's one of our criteria and they get extra points for that. However, when we're meeting with them and asking them questions, we do find out if they have family or relatives that live within Canada. If so, we ask them where in Canada they live. I know some of the other programs are very strict, and if you have any family or friends that live outside of a specific community, you're out.

There are practical advantages to having community officials pre-screen applicants: It saves employers significant time, allowing them to concentrate on qualified candidates. In this way, community officials and companies work symbiotically:

*B1: To give you a bit of context, we just closed a manual CNC machinist position [Note: CNC machinists program, run, and monitor computer-numeric-controlled machines, which are used to make metal tools and parts]. The applicant pool for that position was just under 3500 applications. Of those 3500 applications, I think maybe 30 got forwarded to the employer because the rest weren't eligible. The employer **doesn't have the capacity** to screen 3500 applicants, so they would have probably thrown up their hands and given up. So we [EDB] perform an important function, but IRCC didn't want us involved at the initial stages of the screening process.*

Another essential part of the screening process involves consideration of spouses and children, something that employers would not necessarily do. In particular, spouses can fill positions that RNIP cannot source. B1 did not indicate that children were necessary for demographic reasons; rather, it mentioned that as Brandon was experiencing a shortage of childcare workers, children were not always an advantage for candidates in the screening process. By contrast, A1 was quick to point out the desirability of candidates with families:

A1: Our ideal candidates through this program have been young families, where one spouse is the primary applicant filling a specific need, with the other spouse capable of filling other positions in the community. The children are in school, and they're making friends. Those are our best opportunities to integrate a family in the community. We've got great schools, and we've

got great parks and recreational activities. We've got hospitals, grocery stores, some nice general retail. So those are really great things for those young families.

One nearby community participating in the Manitoba PNP (Morden) requires candidates to visit the city for one week at their own cost before being approved. This policy has been linked to Morden's high retention rate. Asked if Brandon considered a mandatory visit before approval, B1 admitted that while exploratory visits allowed communities to select out candidates who were not serious, as well as eliminate candidates who are providing false information (often through information ascertained through casual conversations), the costs involved can also eliminate qualified candidates. Faced with the same question, A1 also dismissed the importance of exploratory visits:

A1: The whole immigration process is already expensive enough without asking them to make that trip out in advance, so I would have to agree with B1. More often than not, they're coming from overseas on a closed work permit while they're waiting for their permanent resident status to be processed. That does give them time to determine whether or not this is the right fit for them. It gives us the opportunity to try to get them integrated as quickly as possible so that they don't want to leave.

More than an exploratory visit for both SEED and EDB, careful candidate selection followed by adequate settlement services is crucial to achieving high retention levels.

One possible disadvantage of RNIP compared with PNP is that while the latter is candidate-driven, meaning that immigration workers screen job offers, the RNIP is job-offer-driven. In other words, although SEED and EDB conduct initial screenings, the employer selects the employee.

This means that while PNP gives communities more latitude in selecting factors such as spouses and children, employers using RNIP may not be interested in such dimensions. Asked about if SEED considers the occupations of applicants' spouses, A1 responded as follows:

A1: It would be different if it was a candidate-driven program. It would be a completely different story. But I'm looking at the candidates that the employer has vetted. They're doing the hiring, so they're doing their own vetting process to make sure it's a good candidate. I'm only looking at individuals who have job offers.

Advantages of the RNIP program

Both interviewees indicated that processing times were a significant advantage of RNIP compared with PNP. Processing times are faster due to a direct line of communication that has been set up between each RNIP community and the federal government. This differs from PNP programs, where applicants must go through the nominating community and then the province before making applications at the federal level.

B1: We also have the advantage through RNIP of very fast processing of applications. If you look at our applicants prior to the backlog that we currently have, our work permits were being approved within 2 to 3 months maximum as opposed to the 147 days that it takes now. Our permanent residency is always approved within 12 months and sometimes as fast as five, and this is where the program gives us huge advantage [over PNP and other federal programs]. I think PNP takes around a year and a half to two years, so candidates are waiting for about 17 months or so.

Another clear advantage is that people come with a job.

B2: I think the other advantage is that for us, when a newcomer comes,

they already have a contact here, which is the employer, and the employer agrees to have them settle in the community. So compared to PNP, where they might or might not have a job when they come, they come and start their lives over.

A further advantage is that with RNIP, candidates enter Canada on temporary work visas, which tie them to the community for a set period. This time can often be used to form bonds that encourage immigrants to stay after they have obtained permanent residency status.

*B1: The beauty of the RNIP approach, and I think the difference between our program and other programs, is that although we can't mandate it, we strongly encourage the employer to only consider candidates that will come on a work permit [Note: applicants must apply for permanent residency before they can apply for an RNIP work permit]. If they're going to stay in their home country until receiving permanent residency, **the odds of us retaining them go down significantly**. However, if we can get them into this community and settled for the eight solid months before they have permanent residency, there is a much higher probability that we will retain them.*

B1 indicates that if a candidate says they would like to wait until they receive their PR before coming, that constitutes a major red flag, as it hints at the possibility that they do not intend to settle in Brandon.

A further advantage of RNIP is that it allows employers to participate in the process and to choose the candidates they want, but it does not give them final authority. This ensures that employers' interests and the interests of the community stay aligned.

B1: Employers are part of our team, but I would never be comfortable relying completely on the employer because employers are short sighted.

*There's a couple of different things that need to be considered. First off, employers are motivated to get the job filled as soon as possible, even if the job is only filled for six months; it's better than nothing. Employers don't think holistically the way we need them to think holistically all the time. This can lead to another problem which are abuses of the program. We have a lot of newcomer businesses in our community that will use the program to **bring in family**, whether they're skilled or not because there's no accountability. Putting employers in charge leads to both the abuses and a drop in retention because employers don't think about things the same as we do [i.e., the same as EDB does]. We have some employers that will come back and ask us why we declined a candidate that they need. We [EDB] have our reasons. We can't share them with the employer because that's a breach of privacy, but we ask employers to trust that we've done the process right.*

For community officials at EDB, the RNIP is successful because it empowers the community to decide what jobs need to be filled and engage in a selection process designed to meet the community's specific needs. The program's future is undecided as the RNIP is scheduled to finish in 2024. Regarding the future of immigration policy in Brandon, B1 commented as follows:

B1: We've proven that we can retain people, and we're asking to keep the essence of our program. Our messaging to them is that we need to be able to determine labor need and we need to be able to have the power to make the [community] recommendations. If you take those two things away, then fundamentally, I can't say that the program would be successful.

A1 also sees the ability of Altona officials to contact IRCC directly as an advantage of the program. Having the Altona office function as a go-

between (between employers and IRCC) has made RNIP more accessible for local companies, who become enthusiastic about using the program when initial results are positive.

A1: In the beginning there was a little bit of hesitation, as people wondered if the program would work or had concerns about how it would work. Navigating the [RNIP] process is difficult, so I think it helped having our office to work with. It helped for us to have access to IRCC directly so we could best inform our businesses as well as our applicants. I think that's what's made the program so successful. As you know, a business that hired one individual, and see that things are working okay, will want to hire another one.

Just as immigrants who settle successfully share their experiences with potential immigrants through word of mouth, companies in Altona who experience positive results through the RNIP program function to encourage other companies to participate.

A1: We've seen that and now businesses are talking to other businesses. They ask each other about how to use the program, about how it works, about if they like it. The word is getting out that it's a great program. We do have a significant labor market shortage in our region.

One strength of the RNIP program is that it widens the pool of candidates to ensure that local employers gain access to workers that best suit their labor needs. A1 comments that the Manitoba PNP, as a points-based system, sometimes eliminates candidates who are well-suited for life in Altona. Because the RNIP employs community recommendations rather than points, Altona can gain access to such individuals.

A1: We interview a lot of candidates who have tried to apply for MPNP, but they're not getting pulled [out of the list of candidates] because their

numbers aren't high enough. But guess what? They're great working in assembly at Elmers Manufacturing. They're great working on a printing press machine for Friesens, you know, they're a great cook or whatever the case might be. They are applying for positions where we have the need, but because they're not a software developer or, an architect, or a highly skilled individual, they're not getting pulled.

Settlement services and aftercare

Both Brandon and Altona stressed the importance of providing settlement services to newcomers.

B1: I've worked the temporary worker path, the RNIP, the PNP, but if you don't resource the back side of it, which is the settlement, then the retention rate is going to suffer, and you become just a churn of activity where you are forever scrambling to find the people. The people [immigrants] are uprooting their lives; they're making destination choices only to discover that it's not a fit or they're not supported or the resources aren't there, and then they move on.

Altona believes in offering extensive settlement services to help welcome and integrate immigrants. According to A1, this process begins online in interviews and in person at the airport.

*A1: We interview the person [online], so they have a chance to meet me, our staff, other members of the vetting committee. Then, when they get here, the employers will meet them at the airport. So, they're meeting their employers, they're meeting our office staff, they're meeting the staff at Regional Connections. **It's a bit more of like a holistic approach**, I think, when it comes to the way Altona and Rhineland has embraced immigration.*

In addition to the airport, A1 indicated that some employers assist in finding accommodation and provide house furnishings, although they are not required to do so. In principle, immigrants are expected to support themselves when they arrive in Canada; however, businesses also understand that aftercare is connected with the retention of workers.

A1: Some businesses choose to rent a place, furnish it, put some groceries in there. It's not a criterion of the program. This being an economic pathway, it is expected that the person who is coming makes sure that they have arrangements, a place where they want to live, and those sorts of things. So there is that expectation on the applicant that's coming. However, I think that the businesses are doing a really good job of trying to ensure that their employee who is coming is well taken care of and established for the first little while until they're able to get on their feet.

Brandon makes extensive use of settlement services for both permanent residents as well as immigrants coming in on temporary work visas.

B1: Through RNIP, we negotiated with the federal government that when the individuals come in on temporary status [with temporary working visas], they're also able to access the federal settlement services [Regional Connections; Westman Immigrant Services] because that used to be a huge void [i.e., an area that was lacking]. This helps them with everything from registering their kids in school to getting their health cards, to getting their social insurance cards to acclimatizing to the community.

Both SEED and EDB make efforts to connect immigrants with local immigration services before they enter Canada. These services are provided by Westman Immigration Services (WIS) in Brandon, and in the case of Altona, Regional Connections, a federal service, has an Altona office. However, B1 acknowledges that more could be done to help

immigrants after they arrive:

B1: Newcomers will come where they are known and where they're comfortable. We [EDB] know them, and they're comfortable with us. It's our job, then, to push them where they need to go. We do the best we can, but we need to move them over to WIS. There will be times when we help far beyond what we are technically required, and I'll be honest with you: With the magnitude of the program and the work that we've done, in my opinion, we have not done a good enough job on the settlement follow-up side of it. If I had an extra full-time staff, they could do nothing but that [i.e., nothing but help newcomers with settlement issues]. It's the follow-ups [that are important]. It's helping people when they hit a snag and telling them where they need to go. Sometimes, you need to take their hand and take them there. Unfortunately, we don't have the human resources, but it's a real need, and these follow-ups can be a defining moment in changing the outcome [i.e., whether a person stays in Brandon or moves on].

Regional Connections and WIS perform various services to address immediate and short-term immigrant needs, such as obtaining driver's licenses, social insurance numbers, accommodation, and school services for children. In the case of Regional Connections, immigrants can make an appointment with staff to create an extensive life plan for residency in the community.

However, even with settlement services, life can be difficult for immigrants in rural Manitoba. Winters are long and cold, and as temporary workers, they are unable to get financing for homes or cars. In the case of transportation, Brandon has public buses, but immigrants in Altona must secure their own means of transportation. B1 outlines some of the

challenges for newcomers:

*B1: I'm not going to pretend that the RNIP model is perfect for the newcomer initially because when they arrive here, they don't have the ability to buy a vehicle because they can't finance it unless they bring cash. They can't buy a home because no bank will finance them. But we're clear about that at the beginning, and we hope that the employer makes concessions in those areas. Newcomers have to be prepared to use public transit, and **we always advise them to use the first year to figure out what they want so that they can save their money and then do it.** It's not without impact on the newcomers, but our goal is retention.*

SEED also works to ensure that newcomers understand what they will need to successfully navigate life in Altona.

A1: We don't have public transportation, so we ask them, "Do you have a driver's license? What are your plans for transportation here? Do you plan on getting a vehicle? Have you looked at the housing market? Do you understand how much you're going to be paying for rent? Have you thought about what your budget will look like? Have you ever experienced a winter before?" We try to have conversations with our applicants and also try to best inform them so that they know what they're coming and they know what to expect.

Although the government offices in Altona and Brandon worked closely together in initiating the RNIP in their communities, one area in which they differed was the use of community mentors and workplace mentors, both utilized exclusively by Altona. A1 explains the function of the community mentor:

A1: Then, Regional Connections Settlement Services will connect them with a community mentor for approximately a year. This is not a

*settlement worker, but actually, somebody who's from the community who is volunteering and commits to working with this newcomer to have them all for dinner and let them meet their friends, or go for coffee and be a resource if they've got questions. We try to connect the community mentor to the applicant based on what their hobbies are and what their ages are and things like that. We really try to have the community mentor be somebody who's been living in the community for quite some time so that they're already more integrated in the community, and they can also have an opportunity to help them get integrated **with more people than just those from their cultural background.***

Like many rural communities, residents in Altona have minimal experience welcoming newcomers, particularly those from differing cultural backgrounds. Using a community mentor, SEED staff hope to facilitate integration through the formation of personal connections as quickly as possible. Similarly, SEED understands that starting work at a new company can be daunting. To help overcome this hurdle, they also pair newcomers with a workplace mentor, a current employee who agrees to help explain the basics of the job and provide introductions to other members of the company.

When asked about employer misconduct of immigrants, A1 indicated that the SEED office does not actively monitor the workplaces of participating businesses but that any misconduct on the part of the company would result in its elimination from further participation in the RNIP program. At the time of the interview, no incidents had been reported to the SEED office.

RNIP and educational requirements

When asked about the education requirements for the RNIP program in Brandon, B1 provided the following information:

B1: It's a generalization, but many of the individuals that work in the trades have not completed [secondary] education. They have become experts through trades training. They don't get the points they need to immigrate because a requirement is a Canadian grade 12-equivalent education. And then on top of that, they [IRCC] implement a minimum language requirement. Could that individual that has spent 15 years building [in the construction industry] be highly productive here in Canada? Absolutely. Six months on the ground, their language ability would be sufficient or they will find the resources within their teams.

Language requirements are often a hurdle as IRCC mandates CLB4, which is much higher than what most people have or need to do their jobs.

B1: They get there [i.e., the immigrants achieve CLB4 proficiency], and we've seen it through the 2000 that have come in (to work at Maple Leaf). They eventually get there, but you need to allow them to come in [to Canada]. You need to allow them to earn a good living while they slowly acquire language proficiency.

Age restrictions

In contrast to PNP, RNIP does not come with age restrictions, although Altona does award points for people of certain ages. B1 was able to provide a nuanced rationale behind Brandon's policy of not employing an age restriction:

B1: It's a matter of what you want, right? If I want an individual that can flourish in the trades and a candidate has ten-plus years of experience,

*it just so happens that they gained this experience in the latter part of their career, so they would be in the 50-year age bracket. That still potentially gives us 20 years or more of labor from them because people don't stop working at the ages that they used to. Considering the trends of people working until later in life, is it realistic to exclude them with an arbitrary age restriction? When you look at how people move around in their careers and the choices that they make these days, we are lucky if we get five years of labor from a candidate. One could argue and say, "Well, I don't want them above 45 because I want a guaranteed 20 years of labor force work before they consider retiring." Well, if you have the luxury of that, okay. However, if you don't have that luxury and you can get ten years with that individual and after they retire they are going to look after their grandchildren who are already in the community, enabling those parents to work, then it's a net positive, I think. So again, **there's no hard and fast rule**. I understand why the age restriction is there, but I don't feel it should be a black-and-white issue.*

Ethnic communities

In discussing how the selection process was being used to influence the cultural tone of their communities, interviewees in both Altona and Brandon dismissed the idea of considering culture when selecting candidates. A1 was most explicit on the topic:

*A1: It's not a discussion, I would say. It's been more about who's a good fit for the community, who can do the job, who's got the job offer, and who as an individual is a good fit. We're **not looking at where a candidate comes from** as a factor in determining if they're a good fit for the community or not.*

B1: When we started off, there was no foreign recruitment there. No capacity to incorporate people from other ethnic backgrounds with non-English languages. Then they [Maple Leaf Foods] made a conscious decision and they hired within certain ethnic groups so that language was shared and they could support one another.

B2: If you have people from your country, you're more likely to stay. If they have their religious organizations, they are more likely to stay. There are also other social factors that make people more willing to stay.

There was some discussion about cultural objectives when selecting candidates. In previous research, the immigration policies of two nearby cities of roughly 10,000 persons (Winkler and Morden) were analyzed. Winkler began its immigration strategy by seeking immigrants whose cultural and ethnic backgrounds matched local residents (German-speaking Mennonites). By contrast, Morden's community officials made significant efforts to create cultural diversity so that no one group of people would come to dominate. Asked about which approach was superior, B1 said the following:

*B1: It really it all comes down to what you want within your community or your region. When we worked with Maple Leaf, we actually took the same approach as Morden. We needed enough individuals to have a cultural nucleus of connectivity and support, but we didn't want a single ethnic or cultural group to dominate because then it becomes an issue within the plant. On the other hand, there were also other considerations, such as language support in the schools. You need all these different things to be successful. And so we largely followed the Morden model, which is a **little bit of everyone**.*

That said, I'll tell you, the Winkler model is extremely successful for

economic development there. Their immigration policies are strategic, and are heavily weighted towards economic growth. If your lens is economic growth, the Winkler model works. If your lens is diversity and stability and all these different things within your community, the Morden/Brandon model works.

In Winkler's case, the community understands that economic development is the primary goal, underscoring the community's approach. Such a view is supported by Government of Canada research indicating that 100 immigrant families with average household incomes would directly generate over \$6 million worth of expenditures, much of which would benefit their community, in addition to \$2.2 million annually in taxes (Government of Canada, 2019c). Asked whether cultural diversity is a suitable community goal, B1 responded as follows:

*B1: I can't speak for what another community would want, but for us [in Brandon] immigration is two things: **it's about economic prosperity and it's about population growth.** We don't want to be a declining rural community, but we also need prosperity. However, while we have those two objectives, it doesn't mean that we can't work in this vein to create the diversity, but there's a reason for it. The diversity isn't the purpose. The diversity is to manage negative outcomes from a lack of diversity. For example, at the Maple Leaf plant, we had no language capacity. We needed time to grow language capacity [i.e., we needed to limit cultural diversity so that people could communicate]. On the other hand, we can't have a dominating culture within the plant because that leads to problems. So, introducing cultural diversity is more about mitigation than a goal, if that makes sense. Cultural diversity for cultural diversity's sake doesn't factor in to our calculations... We can't be naive enough to think that politics don't*

influence immigration policies. Politically, at a federal level, they do have those pressures [of supporting cultural diversity], right? That's a reality. But for us, and in my opinion, it's always about the economy and the population.

Although B1 clearly prioritized economic development, A1 viewed the increases in cultural diversity in Altona positively:

A1: Through the pilot program itself, we've brought in people from over 13 different countries, and we are known for having a strong Filipino community because Friesens Corporation [a large printing company based in Altona] made a lot of trips to the Philippines and brought in employment from there. And now their families [of the original immigrants] are joining them, so we have a significant Filipino community. Now we are seeing that we have a South African community being created, along with people from Nigeria and the Ukraine, so we have a number of different cultures here.

As with Brandon, A1 indicated that pragmatic concerns generally took precedence over the desire to manage cultural diversity overtly during the selection process.

A1: There was a printing press company that closed down in South Africa due to COVID-19. Because of this, Friesens was able to hire a lot of employees who lost their jobs from a closing, and these workers referred their friends in South Africa saying, "Hey, I got this job at a printing press company in Canada through the RNIP program, you should look at this." So they were doing their own recruitment through their employees.

In discussing Altona's history, A1 hints at the difficulties of gaining acceptance as a newcomer, as the town was originally settled by predominantly German speakers.

A1: We do get asked a lot how about how our community is concerning accepting newcomers. People ask if we are welcoming, or if there a little bit of tension. You could even be moving from Winnipeg to Altona, but if you don't know somebody who knows somebody who knows somebody, good luck getting invited to someone's family gathering.

Conducting labor assessments

For communities enrolled in PNP programs, regular labor assessments are a condition for participation. By contrast, RNIP does not require communities to conduct annual assessments of labor needs. B1's opinion on the subject was as follows:

B1: Most employers are lucky if they know what they need six months down the road or in a year because they're so busy just getting through today that what we discovered was just doing surveys doesn't get you especially meaningful or relevant data. It gets you information, and in truth, we could forward it to the province, and we would get candidates for the positions we wanted, but it wouldn't be informed data. I'm not sure how Morden does surveys, but they have not resulted in actionable data for us in the past. If we were going to go down that path again, we've learned through the years that what we need to do is actually sit down and meet with both the human resources teams in a (corporate) department and the leadership in that department.

For B1, regular surveys only burden companies. Alternatively, the best way to gather data is to have people on the ground who can build relationships with employers, which enables them to stay on top of labor needs. Economic Development Brandon is not primarily an immigration office; they are focused on addressing Brandon's economic needs, with

immigration being one tool. According to B1, EDB assesses labor needs by paying attention to in-demand jobs at the provincial level, which they use as a starting point for further research. In addition, the Brandon RNIP selection committee provides information on labor conditions, as does EDB's cooperation with the Brandon Chamber of Commerce. Finally, EDB also networks with the community college (but not the university) to assess in-demand jobs.

B1: The college itself [Assiniboine College] is always doing their own labor force analysis to figure out the community needs, because their whole validity and success is built on their graduation and employment rates. They are a very active partner [with EDB] in that regard. Also, we have a member of their team on our RNIP committee, and we have them on our labor force committee as well.

Because Altona is a much smaller community, the SEED office can accurately assess labor needs without employing labor assessment surveys.

A1: The nice thing is that we have such close working relationships with our business community already that we know and we see what's going on. We know who has been trying to hire welders for years. Post-COVID, every single restaurant had to change their hours or were shut down because they couldn't find cooks or they couldn't find servers. We know where our economic needs are the greatest.

Use of immigration brokers and consultants

B1 indicates that immigration consultants pose a major impediment to achieving high retention rates, as their interests (collecting fees from applicants) do not align with community goals.

B1: Another problem that can occur and that we detected when we launched RNIP involved immigration consultants, who are very savvy. They will actually pay employers to hire their candidates. The employer's profiting off of it and the consultant is profiting [and the candidate is paying]. We at EDB have nothing to gain other than meeting labor needs and growing our population, so we're much more unbiased.

In Brandon, EDB has received multiple reports from companies contacted by immigration consultants offering \$20,000 a job to sponsor their clients. This indicates how an employer-led selection process could result in abuses. By contrast, face-to-face interviews between SEED/EDB and candidates work to forestall the interference of immigration consultants. The Altona SEED office also attempts to dissuade applicants from using consultants to complete applications.

*A1: We do have a disclosure on our website that just lets them [candidates] know that they do need to be using somebody who has been approved by IRCC, but also lets them know it's not going to expedite the process for them, and that they're not going to get their PR any faster. So, they are aware that an immigration consultant is not going to help them get through the process quicker and faster. Whatever the case may be, we really discourage against using them. In my in my time working with immigration consultants on applicants' files, it's been quite frustrating because the immigration consultants **are not aware with how the RNIP program works**, and have incorrectly completed forms on behalf of their applicants.*

As with the Brandon office, SEED attempts to mitigate the use of consultants through the use of face-to-face online interviews. Doing so allows Altona to detect deceptive practices. A1 provides an example:

A1: We had one situation where the immigration consultant completed

information, but when we conducted the interview with the candidate, we said, "Oh, it says on your form here that you have transportation," and they were confused. They were like, "What form are you talking about?" So then we started to understand that we had not been corresponding with the applicant but were instead emailing back and forth with the immigration consultant, who was acting as if they were the applicant. And it completely negates our attempt to determine if an applicant really intends to reside within our community, when an immigration consultant does this.

The above example demonstrates the importance of having SEED carefully screen applicants after employers have provided them with an Offer of Employment. Consultants can sometimes satisfy businesses whose interests may be limited to the workplace. By contrast, the SEED office is tasked with determining the candidate's suitability for life in the community, so they have the final say over whether a candidate is given a community recommendation. A1 indicated that there had been instances in which employers had provided job offers but that SEED had declined to provide a community recommendation.

Requiring settlement funds

Regarding settlement funds, B1 indicated that while settlement funds are required, EDB does not verify them (it is IRCC's job to do so). Regarding how much immigrants must save before coming, they responded that the previous requirement of \$9,500 + \$2,500 for each additional family member was excessive; however, IRCC has since lowered the requirement from \$9,500 to \$2,400, which may be too low. This sum does not include airfare.

B1: I think IRCC went too far in the extreme by cutting the requirement down to a quarter of what it was. I would have liked to have seen it cut

to about half, just because we also want the candidates to be successful, and when they're coming in at a high-end job, it's not a problem, but when they're coming in to work in the \$16/hour range, and then you have to buy furniture... Just stocking your cupboard in your fridge, and they have to buy winter clothing. You need money for these kind of things, but people often get here and realize they need to buy things they hadn't expected. They might need to have documents notarized, and then on top of that, there are all the fees that you still need to pay for permanent residency on top of that, which is \$500 to \$1000 each, and then there is the landing fee.

Messaging to the public

Unlike previous interviews in the City of Morden, EDB did not report expending resources to message the RNIP to the greater community. This may relate to a lack of time for such activities; B1 and B2 indicated that they were severely understaffed and that over 100,000 candidate profiles had been created on the website in the past three years (2019-23), for only 150 community recommendations.

Although B1 did not indicate activities taken by EDB to explain the benefits of immigration to the public (or the RNIP program in particular), they indicated a strong belief in the economic benefits of accepting immigrants into the city:

B1: We've had new schools built. We have both of our main roadways into the city, both of those bridges being rebuilt. One's done, and the other one will be done next year. There's a rich commercial retail section called Corral Center that has been built, and it's about 550,000 square feet of retail space in there. All of that occurred after Maple Leaf started operations and spurred population growth. It's a strong argument [for immigration], and

all that economic leakage that happened when people left Brandon and moved to Winnipeg is now staying in our community. This generates jobs for everyone because those dollars circulate, right? I mean, we had figures that, you know, one immigrant has an economic impact of this many dollars. And when you look at the Maple Leaf workers, for almost every one of them, their spouses work, and then their children worked when they became of age. So, we had one that filled a primary job need and then a second that filled another job, and they're not all filling menial jobs. They're working in hospitals, they're working in pharmacies, they're working in manufacturing companies. We've got companies now like Modern Industrial (Modern Industrial Structures Brandon, pre-fabricating, transportable buildings manufacturer). When we started, everybody in that place was white. You walk in now, you probably see people from ten different cultures there, and they love it. It's been good for business.

While A1 did not give examples of specific measures that the SEED office had taken to promote understanding towards immigrants coming into Altona/Rhineland on the RNIP program, they indicated that the successful incorporation of workers has generated a positive response amongst local businesses:

A1: We asked for letters of support for the program from our local businesses, and we got 14 letters of support representing 750 positions. So we're going to be finding 750 people in the next three years.

For a community of around 10,000, incorporating 750 workers and their families into the local community represents considerable social challenges and the possibility of expanding the economy and providing services for local residents.

Immigration challenges

While Brandon and Altona have achieved high retention rates through the RNIP program, some immigrants have chosen not to stay in rural Manitoba. While Brandon is a small city with many services, Altona is a town with limited work opportunities and no post-secondary educational opportunities. Asked whether any RNIP participants had left Altona after receiving their permanent residency status, A1 responded as follows:

A1: We have, yeah. It's a very small group of people, I would say about four, and they moved for good reasons. They're not moving because they felt that Altona wasn't for them. One got a job offer in Australia and then the business closed down here that was participating in the program and then they got a job offer somewhere else. Another one had a child who's going to post-secondary school and they wanted to stay together as a family, so they moved. One was a spouse who wanted to continue their education, so they moved. There are reasonable factors behind their decisions, and it wasn't that they hated Altona and wanted out of here.

Discussion

In addition to an overview of the RNIP program, this research conducted interviews with local officials tasked with screening applicants desiring to immigrate to their communities. This final section will attempt to identify why the RNIP is succeeding in retaining immigrants in the two rural communities surveyed and aspects of the program that may prove useful for rural communities in Japan.

Unlike federally determined approaches to immigration, the RNIP program allows rural communities to decide what work positions they need filled and what type of immigrants are suitable for their respective

communities. Although immigrants must obtain visas from IRCC, Brandon and Altona are empowered to select candidates they believe have the greatest chances of integrating into the community.

A second important aspect of the program lies in the decision-making procedures. To begin, EDB and SEED assist employers by conducting preliminary candidate screenings to ensure that employers, who may have limited resources, are only tasked with screening qualified candidates. Equally important are the comprehensive online screenings conducted after employers have selected workers that meet their criteria. EDB and SEED function to mitigate the influences of immigration consultants and brokers, which officials in both offices indicated to be detrimental to the immigration process. Further, both offices used screenings and respective point systems to assess candidate suitability concerning their potential incorporation into their rural communities. Finally, independent selection committees were employed by both communities to act as a final measure to determine candidate suitability and limit potential malfeasance by workers in the EDB and SEED offices.

EDB and SEED workers indicated the importance of providing immigrants with settlement services and aftercare; however, the range of services and providers varied. These services are necessary, even though immigrants enter the community with a work position waiting. EDB intimated that more could be done to assist new immigrants with adjusting to life in Brandon but expressed regret that the human resources to provide such care were not currently available. By contrast, SEED outlined work mentor and community mentor programs that rely on local volunteers to work with newcomers for six months to one year following their arrival.

Finally, unlike the nearby cities of Winkler and Morden, which have made significant efforts to publicize the benefits of immigration to residents, neither EBD nor SEED indicated that extensive efforts were being made to convince residents of the benefits of incorporating immigrants into society. It is possible that, unlike the PNP programs in Winkler and Morden, where immigrants often come in without work positions secured, RNIP immigrants begin working as soon as they arrive in the community. By doing so, explaining their presence to residents, who can easily understand their contributions to local society may not be necessary.

For rural communities in Japan to adopt an approach similar to that currently practiced in rural Manitoba communities, several fundamental changes may be necessary. To begin, local communities would need to take direct responsibility for candidate selection rather than outsourcing to brokers or delegating final authority to employers. Of course, such an approach would only be necessary if communities regarded immigrants not as temporary laborers but as part of a long-term strategy to address issues related to demography, depopulation, and economic decline. Rural Manitoba communities aggressively select candidates with spouses and children, which is difficult in the current Japanese system, which allows skilled workers to bring family members, but not many classes of workers that rural communities require.

A second area of consideration is the level of aftercare provided to immigrants. Considering that most newcomers entering Canada can communicate in English to some degree, the challenges for communities in Japan may be significantly greater, and more attention may need to be given to helping newcomers learn Japanese. As town customs and dialects vary across rural Japan, a community mentor system may be beneficial in

helping newcomers adjust and assimilate.

Finally, messaging may be more important in rural Japanese communities than in towns and cities in Manitoba. In the case of the latter, much progress has been made over the past two decades in expanding local populations, growing industries, and raising the standard of living in communities. By contrast, rural residents in Japan may have a limited understanding of the potential benefits of incorporating immigrants. They may be concerned with crime-related issues or perceived detriments to local culture. Local community leaders should consider strategies to comprehensively explain immigration initiatives and function as intermediaries between immigrants and residents.

Notes

- 1 Since 2014, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare has not offered predictions on future population declines. However, considering that MHLW 2020 predictions for total births in 2040 (740,000 births) actually exceeded *actual births* in 2024 (720,000, excluding non-Japanese), government predictions of the population in the future may be overly optimistic.
- 2 At present, the Japanese government does not keep statistics on foreign-born residents, only residents with foreign citizenship. However, the rate of naturalization amongst permanent residents is historically low, with the Immigration Services Agency reporting 7,059 persons in 2022.
- 3 Prime Minister Shinzo Abe prefaced 2014 reforms by telling the public that “We are not adopting a so-called immigration policy.” Prior to the 2019 reforms, he again stated the expansion of visa classes was “not an immigration policy.”
- 4 Adding the five visa categories without term restrictions (永住者, 特別永住者, 定住者, 日本人の配偶者等, 永住者の配偶者等) produces a total of 1,574,686 persons in 2023, up

from 1,499,242 in 2019.

5 In their policy paper titled “Population Vision 2100” [人口ビジョン2100], which was handed to Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, the Population Strategy Council offered four scenarios based on two variables: 1) the future fertility rate, and 2) the foreign population. While Cases 1 & 2 called for raising the fertility rate drastically, thereby keeping the foreign population to 10%, Cases 2 & 3, in which the fertility rate remained low (1.36 & 1.13 respectively), called for increasing the population of foreigners to 15% by 2100.

6 Canada’s Prairie Provinces include Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. Together with British Columbia, they constitute Western Canada.

7 Employer eligibility criteria for Altona can be accessed at the SEED website (<https://www.seedrpga.com/employerservices>). Employer eligibility criteria for Brandon can be accessed at the Economic Development Brandon website (<http://economicdevelopmentbrandon.com/employer>).

8 To obtain cooperation from these officials, who are primarily involved in program administration, interviewees were assured that their names would not be used in this research.

9 An explanation of TEER categories and examples of jobs can be accessed at the IRCC website: (<https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/immigrate-canada/express-entry/eligibility/find-national-occupation-code.html>)

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