

Pioneering Canada's Clinical Public Health Certificate for Internationally Educated Health Professionals at the University of Toronto's School of Continuing Studies

Shafi Bhuiyan^{1*}, Agafya Krivova¹, Orin Mithila², Rifat Farzan Nipun³, Ruwaida Ahsan⁴, Sanzida Shams⁵ & Amirhossein Haghihesar⁶

¹University of Toronto

²Site activation partner for Pfizer

³Community Living Toronto

⁴Western University

⁵McMaster University

⁶York University

*Corresponding author: Shafi Bhuiyan, Professor (Associate), Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto.

E Mail: shafi.bhuiyan@utoronto.ca

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Abstract

Background: Canada's healthcare system faces a persistent family physicians' shortage, while internationally educated health professionals in Canada are being underutilized. Despite international medical graduates comprising 27% of physicians and 31% of family doctors, only an estimated 6% successfully attain licensure. Similarly low rates exist among internationally educated nurses (CIHI, 2024a).

Objective: To describe the evolution of the Clinical Public Health Program, developed from the International Medical Graduates' Bridging Program, evaluate its development, needs and effectiveness based on participant feedback, and inform policy decisions on integrating internationally educated health professionals.

Methods: We conducted an anonymous, voluntary course-evaluation survey of Clinical Public Health Program graduates (n=60) between June 15 - July 25, 2025. Invitations were distributed via WhatsApp using Microsoft Forms to host the survey. Descriptive statistics summarized quantitative data; thematic analysis was applied to qualitative feedback.

Results: Graduates who responded (n=42) reported high satisfaction: 21% rated the program "Satisfied" and 79% "Very Satisfied," and all would recommend it to peers. 80% indicated the curriculum was "Perfectly Aligned" with their public health aspirations. Mean confidence in system navigation was 4.52/5, and mean professional development impact was 4.55/5. Competency gains were robust: 100% reported proficiency in clinical public health and project management concepts; 64–74% reported improvements in networking, leadership, and research methods.

Conclusions: By integrating practicum placements, technical skill modules, and sustained community engagement, the Clinical Public Health Program effectively readies internationally educated health professionals for public health roles and offers policymakers a scalable framework to address workforce shortages in Canada and beyond.

Keywords: Internationally Trained Medical Doctors (ITMDs), Internationally Educated Health Professionals (IEHPs), Bridging Program, Health Workforce Integration, Clinical Public Health Education.

Introduction

Gap and Reliance on International Talent

Canada faces an acute physician shortage, with approximately 6.5 million residents lacking access to a family doctor. Unfortunately, projections through 2029 offer little hope for the integration of internationally educated healthcare professionals into the skilled healthcare workforce, despite Canada's ongoing shortage of family physicians, which is currently estimated at approximately 243 per 100,000 people [1].

The Canadian healthcare system has a long history of reliance on international medical graduates and physicians who completed medical training outside of Canada, primarily to address healthcare needs in rural and remote areas [2]. Unfortunately, only 18% of residency spots were secured by internationally educat-

ed physicians in 2024, compared to 81% of Canadian medical graduates [3]. These trends highlight both the reliance on and the underutilization of internationally trained medical doctors in addressing Canada's healthcare needs.

International medical graduates constitute a significant portion of the physician workforce (27% of all doctors*, 31% of family physicians). Despite their qualifications, only a small fraction successfully transition into licensed practice. According to recent data, as few as 6% of international medical graduates ultimately succeed in becoming licensed physicians in Canada (see Figure 1). The low rate of licensure is primarily attributable to a limited number of residency spots, systemic discrimination, and individual barriers such as socio-cultural and linguistic differences [4].



Figure 1: Statistics and Gaps for Internationally Educated Healthcare Professionals in Canada

A similar challenge exists within nursing: only 12% of newly licensed nurses are internationally educated, despite a national RN shortfall estimated in the tens of thousands [5]. More broadly, over 250,000 landed immigrants in Canada hold a foreign health credential, yet only 67% of internationally trained physicians and 69% of internationally trained nurses are employed in any healthcare capacity, leaving substantial human capital underutilized [6].

Barriers to Integration and Alternative Pathways

The loophole in the licensing process of international medical graduates causes them to question their job security questioning their job security and making them vulnerable to compromising their professional goals [7]. Some highly skilled international medical graduates are forced to work in entry-level roles requiring only high school diplomas in order to survive.

This reflects Canada's ongoing brain gain, drain, and waste issue—international medical graduates often arrive unaware of pathways or support and end up wasting resources chasing uncertain options [8].

Alternative Career Pathways and Gaps in Support

While some international medical graduates pursue alternative careers outside medicine, including non-health-related fields such as taxi driving, the literature underscores the lack of structured support for integration into health-adjacent roles. International medical graduates face significant obstacles accessing bridging programs and skill-training initiatives, with scant data available on the outcomes or effectiveness of such interventions. Moreover, a lack of awareness among both internationally trained medical doctors and potential employers further limits

the uptake of alternative career pathways. Program directors and international medical graduates surveyed at the University of Toronto identified specific areas of need: international medical graduates themselves emphasized knowledge of the Canadian healthcare system, pharmaceuticals, and hospital formularies, while program directors prioritized communication with patients and team members [9]. Bridging these knowledge and skill gaps is essential for successful integration, but robust continuing education and career support programs remain limited [10].

Article Aim & Objectives

Pioneering the development of a first-of-its-kind continuous learning program, the Certificate in Clinical Public Health at the School of Continuing Studies, University of Toronto, is designed to enhance internationally educated health professionals' skills and competencies.

This article examines the impact and evolution of the Clinical Public Health Certificate Program for internationally educated health professionals in Canada. Drawing on participant feedback and a recent survey, this article highlights the program's role in addressing healthcare workforce gaps, and offers a model for policymakers globally to develop and scale similar integration initiatives.

History of the Program: The Journey of the immigrant health professionals bridging program and beyond

In 2015, a small but impactful idea emerged in downtown Toronto—one that would change the course of many lives and shine a light on the untapped potential of internationally trained medical doctors.

Guided by this idea, the internationally trained medical doctors' Bridging Program was born at Ryerson University (now Toronto Metropolitan University). It began with a simple question: What happens to doctors who migrate to Canada but can't practice medicine here? The answer was difficult. Many were working survival jobs, their clinical skills sitting unused, their dreams dimmed.

But visionary educators like Dr. Shafi Bhuiyan believed in second chances. Together with the University's Chang School of Continuing Education, he launched the first cohort of the internationally trained medical doctors' Bridging Program, with just 14 doctors from 10 countries. It wasn't a path back to the operating room—but it was a bridge to new healthcare careers in research, policy, data science and public health. And the bridge worked.

Over time, the program grew. Dozens became hundreds. By 2022, over 275 doctors from more than 50 countries had walked through its doors. They learned the nuances of the Canadian healthcare system, sharpened their skills in epidemiology and health data, and stepped into meaningful jobs at organizations like SickKids, Sunnybrook, Toronto Public Health, and ICES. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, internationally trained medical doctors' Bridging Program alumni were among those who stepped up, supporting vaccine clinics, conducting contact tracing, delivering mental health outreach, and filling critical gaps in Ontario's response. Their impact was no longer just individual. It was collective. It was public.

However, despite its success, the program faced a harsh reality: limited long-term funding. In 2022, after seven years of transforming lives, the internationally trained medical doctors' Bridging Program closed its doors. The decision was not a reflection of failure—it was a result of systemic gaps in funding for immigrant integration and workforce inclusion. The closure marked the end of an era. Yet, the story doesn't end there.

A New Chapter: From international medical graduates to internationally educated health professionals

The closure of the internationally trained medical doctors' Bridging Program in 2022 marked the end of a pioneering initiative—one that had empowered hundreds of internationally trained medical doctors to rebuild their careers and strengthen Ontario's healthcare system. Despite its proven success, the program could not continue due to a lack of long-term, sustainable funding. Yet the story of support for internationally educated health professionals did not end there. In 2023, Dr Shafi Bhuiyan at the University of Toronto, in partnership with professionals' support, launched a new, expanded initiative aimed at Internationally Educated Health Professionals across disciplines—not just physicians, but also nurses, pharmacists, and allied health workers.

This new program reflects a natural evolution of the international medical graduates' vision: broadening the scope, increasing national collaboration, and addressing systemic barriers across the healthcare workforce. It builds on the lessons learned, the infrastructure created, and the undeniable value that internationally trained professionals bring to Canada.

The internationally educated health professionals initiative continues the mission of recognition, reintegration, and representation—ensuring that skilled professionals arriving in Canada have pathways to meaningful careers, and that our healthcare system is strengthened by global experience and expertise.

Through career guidance, mentorship, professional development, and integration pathways, the University of Toronto's program now carries forward the mission: to make Canada's healthcare system more inclusive, more diverse, and more reflective of the world-class talent arriving at its borders.

And so, while the original bridge may have closed, new pathways have emerged. The legacy of the internationally trained medical doctors' Bridging Program lives on—not just in policy or paperwork, but in every doctor who refused to give up, in every life they now touch, and in every new Canadian who dares to believe their skills still matter.

Because the Truth Remains: talent has no borders—only barriers. And barriers can be broken.

Clinical Public Health Program Design, Format, and Key Components

Launched at the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies on September 20, 2023, the program has since trained over 200 internationally educated health professionals to earn a Certificate in Clinical Public Health. The Clinical Public Health Program for Internationally Educated Health Professionals is designed for adult learners balancing multiple responsibilities and is delivered in a hybrid format. This not only provides flexibility, but also a unique opportunity to build a strong professional network. The program comprises three courses: Clinical Public Health and Health Research, Professional Networking and Healthcare Leadership Skills, and Healthcare and Project Management. Each course consists of eight sessions, combining lectures with case studies, peer-to-peer group discussions, and mentorship from multidisciplinary experts. Students who complete all three courses are eligible to receive the Certificate in Clinical Public Health.

The Clinical Public Health and Health Research course equips learners with fundamental skills in qualitative and quantitative research design and analysis, while also introducing key concepts in health informatics. It covers core principles of global health research, as well as Canada's commitment to advancing healthcare through global research and innovations.

The Professional Networking and Healthcare Leadership Skills course provides learning resources and guidance to orient internationally educated health professionals to the complex Canadian healthcare system, as well as to learn about team functioning, collaborative leadership, cultural aspects of patient care, and corporate culture awareness. This course develops essential communication and leadership skills with a focus on professional writing, teamwork, presentation, and career readiness.

The Healthcare and Project Management course introduces the basics of management, along with its nuances in the healthcare sector. It provides hands-on experience in applying the knowledge gained through project charter development and project

plan creation.

Methods

We conducted a course evaluation survey among previous and recent graduates of the Clinical Public Health Certification program, where participants provided feedback on their experiences, outcomes, and recommendations for improvement. Invitations to complete the survey were sent via WhatsApp Groups, which were the main channel of communication with the participants. Data collection was executed through online Microsoft Forms for the period from June 15th to July 25th, 2025. Participation was voluntary, and responses were anonymous. We did not collect any personal identifiers.

The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions, including three multiple-choice questions on impact on career/professional development and skills/knowledge gained, and perception of being integrated and valued within public health community, four Likert scale questions on program satisfaction rate, program alignment with career goals, confidence in the Canadian healthcare system navigation, and extent of professional advancement impact. To allow participants to share what they found most valuable about the program, offer suggestions for improvement, and explain their reasons for recommending the program to other internationally educated health professionals, the questionnaire contains several open-ended questions. One optional question asked participants to provide information about their current role, future plans, and their perception of the program's contribution to their career path.

At the time of the analysis, 42 responses were collected with a participation rate of 70%. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data.

Results

The findings demonstrate a consistently high level of endorsement across key domains. All respondents (100%) reported being either "Satisfied" (21%) or "Very Satisfied" (79%) with the program, and unanimously indicated they would recommend it to other internationally educated healthcare professionals. Eighty percent (80%) of participants reported that the curriculum was "Perfectly aligned" with their career goals, while 19% selected "Somewhat aligned" and only one respondent (2%) indicated a neutral alignment (see Figure 4). These responses suggest a high degree of perceived relevance to their professional trajectories.

The program's influence on participants' self-efficacy and preparedness was reflected in strong mean ratings: confidence in

navigating the Canadian healthcare system averaged 4.52 out of 5, while perceived impact on professional development averaged 4.55 out of 5. These scores indicate the program's effectiveness in enhancing both knowledge and applied competencies among internationally educated health professionals.

Skill acquisition was similarly robust. All respondents reported gaining core competencies in Canadian clinical public health concepts and project management, consistent with the program's curricular pillars (see Figure 5). Additionally, 74% reported gains in professional networking strategies, 67% in mentorship and leadership skills, and 64% in research methods and data interpretation (see Figure 5). A small number of respondents also cited knowledge related to teamwork, collaboration, and comparative public health systems as added benefits.

Participants described a range of positive outcomes since completing the program (see Figure 3). Over half (57%) reported improved clarity in their career goals, and 55% cited expanded professional networks or access to mentorship. One-third (33%) noted they were still exploring career options, while 26% had enrolled in higher education (e.g., master's or doctoral programs). Smaller but meaningful proportions reported initiating licensing or training pathways (12%), securing public health or healthcare roles (14%), or receiving promotions or advancement within existing positions (5%).

In terms of integration and sense of belonging, 76% of respondents reported feeling more integrated and valued within Canada's public health community (see Figure 2). While a minority (17%) remained uncertain and 5% did not feel integrated, these results point to promising progress in fostering professional inclusion.

Open-ended feedback further reinforced the program's perceived value, highlighting the importance of project-based learning, exposure to the Canadian healthcare context, and opportunities for peer collaboration. Suggestions for improvement included the addition of hands-on practice, technical workshops in areas such as epidemiological software, expanded in-person engagement, structured alumni networks, and longer mentorship timelines. These themes underscore the participants' desire for sustained, applied, and community-based learning experiences that support long-term professional integration.

Overall, the evaluation findings reflect a highly effective program that equips internationally educated professionals with relevant skills, builds confidence in system navigation, and con-

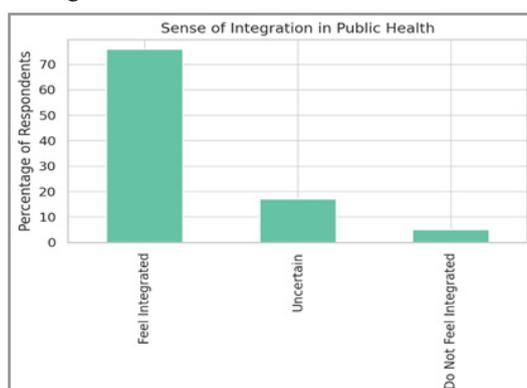


Figure 2: Sense of Integration in Public Health

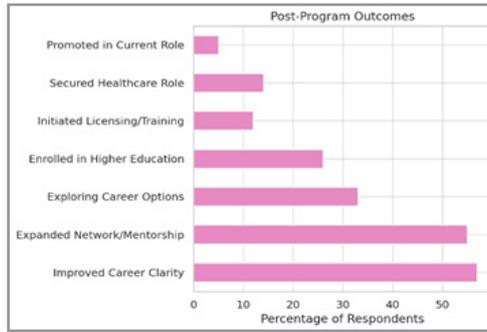


Figure 3: Post-Program Outcomes

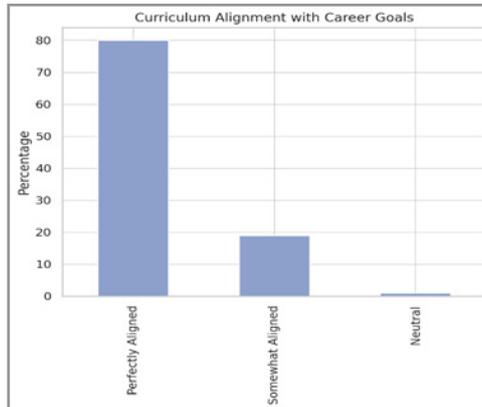


Figure 4: Curriculum Alignment with Career Goals

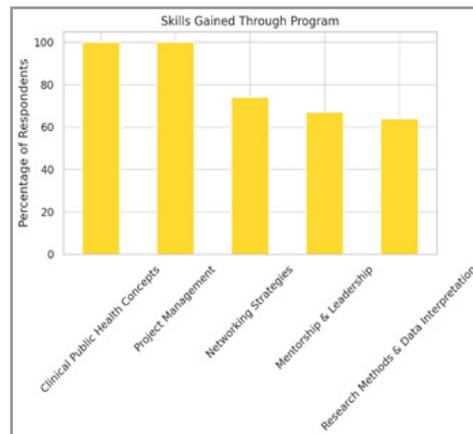


Figure 5: Skills Gained through Program

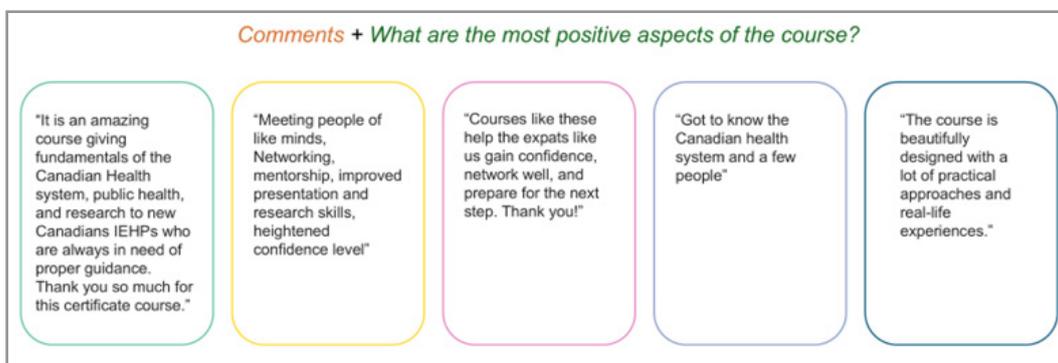


Figure 6: Comments on what are the most positive aspects of the course

Discussion

The survey findings are consistent with the program evaluation results, which are the standard process of integrating feedback to improve the Clinical Public Health Program. The high level

of satisfaction (with approximately 80% of survey participants ranking it the highest) can be attributed to the perception that the learning experience exceeded expectations by nearly 96% of program students (average rating of 4.7 out of 5), with about

99% of learners (4.9/5) reporting that the knowledge provided during the course was valuable and reflected real-world settings (see Figure 7). The relevance of the program content to current industry trends was supported by nearly 97% of internationally educated health professionals, with more than 90% of respondents giving the highest relevance rating to each of the three courses (see Figure 8).

The vast majority (97%) of program alumni indicated improved self-confidence in their knowledge and skills, with 91% strongly confident in knowledge gained in Health Professional Communication & Leadership, followed by Healthcare and Project Management (89%), and Clinical Public Health and Health Research (74%) (see Figure 9). This may explain the perceived high impact on professional development (average rating of 4.55 out of 5) and strong confidence in navigating the Canadian healthcare system (average rating of 4.52 out of 5) reported in the survey.

Professional network expansion was ranked second among positive program outcomes in the survey, with the program evaluation report supporting these findings. Specifically, 97% of internationally educated health professionals claimed that their network had grown as a result of program enrollment (see Figure 7). Moreover, 96% of program participants stated that they would recommend the course to a friend or colleague, indicating a high level of satisfaction and a positive learning experience

(see Figure 7).

Findings from our survey also align with those reported in the Australian pilot study evaluating experiences of internationally qualified registered nurses enrolled in a bridging program. Aggar et al. found that the bridging program met expectations of internationally qualified registered nurses, enhancing participants' perceived confidence and competence, particularly in the leadership domain [11]. Similarly, in our study, 67% reported improvements in mentorship and leadership skills, while the top area of growth was professional networking strategies, with 74% responders indicating advancement.

A significant part of the program's success is attributed to its adaptability to the emerging needs of Canadian healthcare, as well as the concept of tailoring program content based on continuous feedback from participants. Moreover, the Clinical Public Health program evolved from the International Medical Graduates' Bridging Program, building upon the previous experience and understanding of the significant barriers and needs of internationally educated health professionals. All these factors make the program effective, ensuring that the talent brought by this highly skilled immigrant population is utilized to its full potential. This, in turn, meets the increasing demands for healthcare services and strengthens Canada's healthcare system.

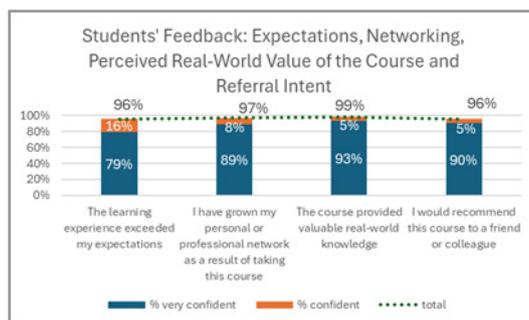


Figure 7: Students' Feedback: Expectations, Networking, Perceived Real-World Value of the Course and Referral Intent

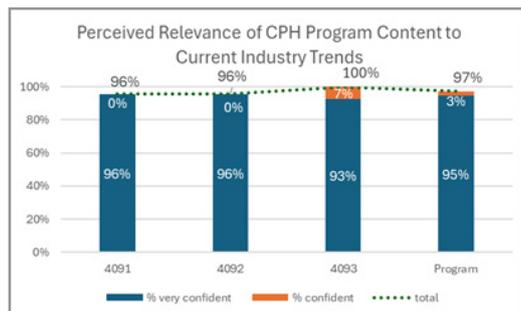


Figure 8: Perceived Relevance of CPH Program Content to Current Industry Trends

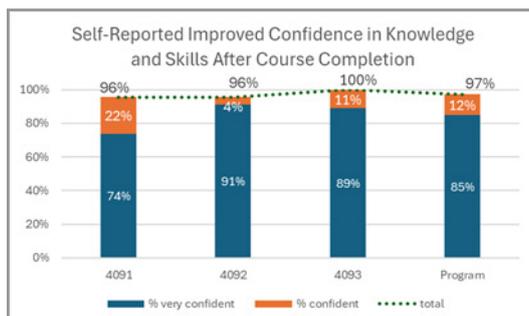


Figure 9: Self-Reported Improved Confidence Knowledge and Skills After Course Completion

Strategic Recommendations

Based on the recent survey findings and program evaluation, we suggest the following recommendations to further enhance program quality. Including hands-on practice was among the highly suggested areas for improvement. Thus, we recommend enhancing experiential learning by partnering with local health agencies for field visits and capstone projects rooted in real-world public health challenges. Although 55% cited expanded their networks, the majority still requested more professional networking opportunities. We suggest creating an Alumni Network in the form of post-certificate events, such as webinars, networking mixers, and mentorship circles, to sustain engagement and professional growth. While over half (57%) reported improved clarity in their career goals, establishing a formal career service through a dedicated career-pathway module that offers mentorship matching, mock interviews, and licensure tutorials is recommended to address the need for more structured career guidance, which will enhance internationally educated health professionals' job-readiness, and support smoother integration into the healthcare workforce. Given the short program duration (eight sessions each course), we suggest considering program extension by 10–15% in duration to accommodate deeper group work without compromising content density.

Despite the survey representing a subset of graduates, the feedback is unequivocal: the Clinical Public Health Certification delivers exceptional value. By integrating targeted enhancements in experiential learning and career support, the program can further accelerate its impact and cement its reputation as a premier bridge for internationally educated healthcare professionals in Canada. However, the key structural barrier is funding constraints, thus ensuring sustainable resources are paramount to enable national-scale program implementation and long-term program success.

Implications

The Clinical Public Health program takes a massive step toward eliminating barriers faced by international medical graduates by streamlining the lengthy process of integrating internationally educated health professionals into the landscape of Canadian healthcare. As indicated by the survey responses, the program is highly effective in enhancing essential skills, such as research methods, leadership, and professional networking. For internationally educated health professionals, these skills provide a means of expanding their employment opportunities by empowering them to pursue further licensing or education within the Canadian system. Beyond this individual outcome, successful integration into the health workforce increases their sense of belonging. Moreover, the addition of international perspectives will ensure culturally sensitive care and incorporate more inclusive care for underserved communities. From an economic standpoint, better employment opportunities for internationally educated health professionals and a healthier population result in greater tax contributions and a stronger economy in Canada. Overall, the Canadian healthcare system can be vastly strengthened, both externally and within, when transitional programs such as the Clinical Public Health Program are put in use. To broaden the program's impact to a provincial or national level, increased funding must be available. This provides a feasible solution to the ongoing shortage of healthcare workers across Canada. Finally, the positive impact of the Clinical Public

Health program presents a model that can be replicated to use on a global scale and enhance the experiences of internationally educated health professionals worldwide. Developing similar transitional programs in other nations is an opportunity to utilize the untapped potential of internationally educated healthcare professionals.

Conclusion

The Clinical Public Health Program has demonstrated strong effectiveness in boosting internationally educated health professionals' knowledge about the Canadian Healthcare sector, creating a strong network for newly immigrated healthcare professionals, and preparing them for meaningful roles in Canada's public health sector. Incorporating larger networking events with established professionals in the Canadian healthcare sector, technical skill developing modules, and sustained community engagement through co-op placements or practicums, and embedding robust career support (licensing workshops, mentorship circles, mock interviews) has the potential to enhance integration outcomes further. This model offers a scalable framework for policymakers seeking to leverage the skills and lived experiences of internationally educated healthcare professionals to help address critical healthcare workforce shortages in Canada and worldwide. By securing steady funding and partnering with healthcare organizations, this model can be scaled nationally and adapted internationally to turn "brain waste" into "brain gain," enriching our healthcare workforce and improving population health.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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