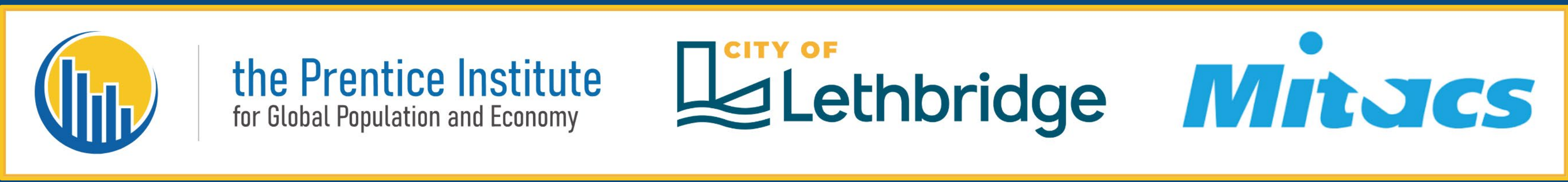


Jobs for Who? Analyzing Labour Market Data and Retention in Lethbridge, Alberta

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OVERVIEW

Supported by a **Mitacs Accelerate** grant, this year-long research project is in partnership with the City of Lethbridge and the Prentice Institute for Global Population and Economy to better understand the role of work-integrated learning (WIL) programs in supporting a thriving community, highly skilled students, and stronger relationships between post-secondary institutions and the labour market.

Drawing on other case studies from Canada and around the world, this project is especially relevant to Lethbridge, communities of comparable size and demographics, and the broader Alberta community. Overall, we had the following objectives:

- To understand the potential role of WIL in supporting student retention and employability (with a specific focus on Southern Alberta);
- To identify gaps in relationships between post-secondary institutions, students, communities, and the labour market;
- To understand skills gaps and labour shortages in Southern Alberta, particularly in the public sector; and
- To explore best practices in WIL (including measurement, service delivery, and relationship-building).

METHODS

Focus Groups

Six focus groups were conducted with WIL practitioners, public employers, and select private employers. Participants were asked to reflect on a series of 4-6 questions on WIL, post-secondary education, employability, and retention. Discussions took place online and were audio-recorded. The use of focus groups created spaces for important dialogue that helped researchers better understand the contexts of their research questions, while also facilitating opportunities for collaborative knowledge production for researchers and participants alike to consider new ways of thinking (Cameron [11], 2021).

Survey

We sent out an 18-question survey to University of Lethbridge and Lethbridge College alumni to explore intersections between WIL and student retention. Based on alumni from the past 5 years, the total population was approximately 20,000. With a confidence interval of 95% and a margin of error of 5%, a representative sample was set at 378 respondents. The survey was open from March 28th to May 31st, 2024, and 611 total responses were recorded.

Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Groups

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with alumni from the Lethbridge College and University, allowing participants to lead conversations and provide more depth to understand someone's experience and how they make sense of issues and events (Bryman & Bell, 2019). Students were recruited from self-identifying survey respondents. In total, 10 individuals were interviewed.

Analysis

Audio recordings from the focus groups and interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically coded with the NVivo software. Survey data was analyzed using SPSS. We utilized grounded theory (Bryman and Bell, 2019) and open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to understand the data's complexity and where it is situated to theoretical knowledge of the topic.

Vicinity Data and Analysis

Using the Vicinity online database, the researchers evaluated the education and experience requirements of job advertisements in Lethbridge, Alberta from 01/01/2023 to 12/31/2023.

REFERENCES

Bryman, A. & Bell, E. (2019). Social Research Methods (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Cameron [11], J. (2021). Focusing on the Focus Group in I. Hay & M. Cope (Eds.), Qualitative Research Methods in Human Geography (pp. 200-221). Oxford University Press. ISBN 9780199034222.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. M. (1990). Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques. Sage Publications, Inc.

CROSS-SECTION OF RESULTS: EMPLOYMENT AND RETENTION

In our survey, we asked alumni whether they lived in Lethbridge before starting post-secondary, if they chose to stay in Lethbridge once they graduated, and what contributed to their decisions to stay or leave. In **Figure 1**, this tabulation shows that there is most likely a relationship between the two variables—i.e., whether someone lived in Lethbridge before attending post-secondary and their likelihood to stay after graduation.

		Lived in Lethbridge Before Post-secondary		
		Yes	No	Total
		Yes	No	Total
Chose to Stay in Lethbridge Post-grad	Yes	154	136	290
	No	48	273	321
	Total	202	409	611

Figure 1. Crosstabs of variables 'lived in Lethbridge before post-grad' and 'chose to stay in Lethbridge post-grad' (Survey Data)

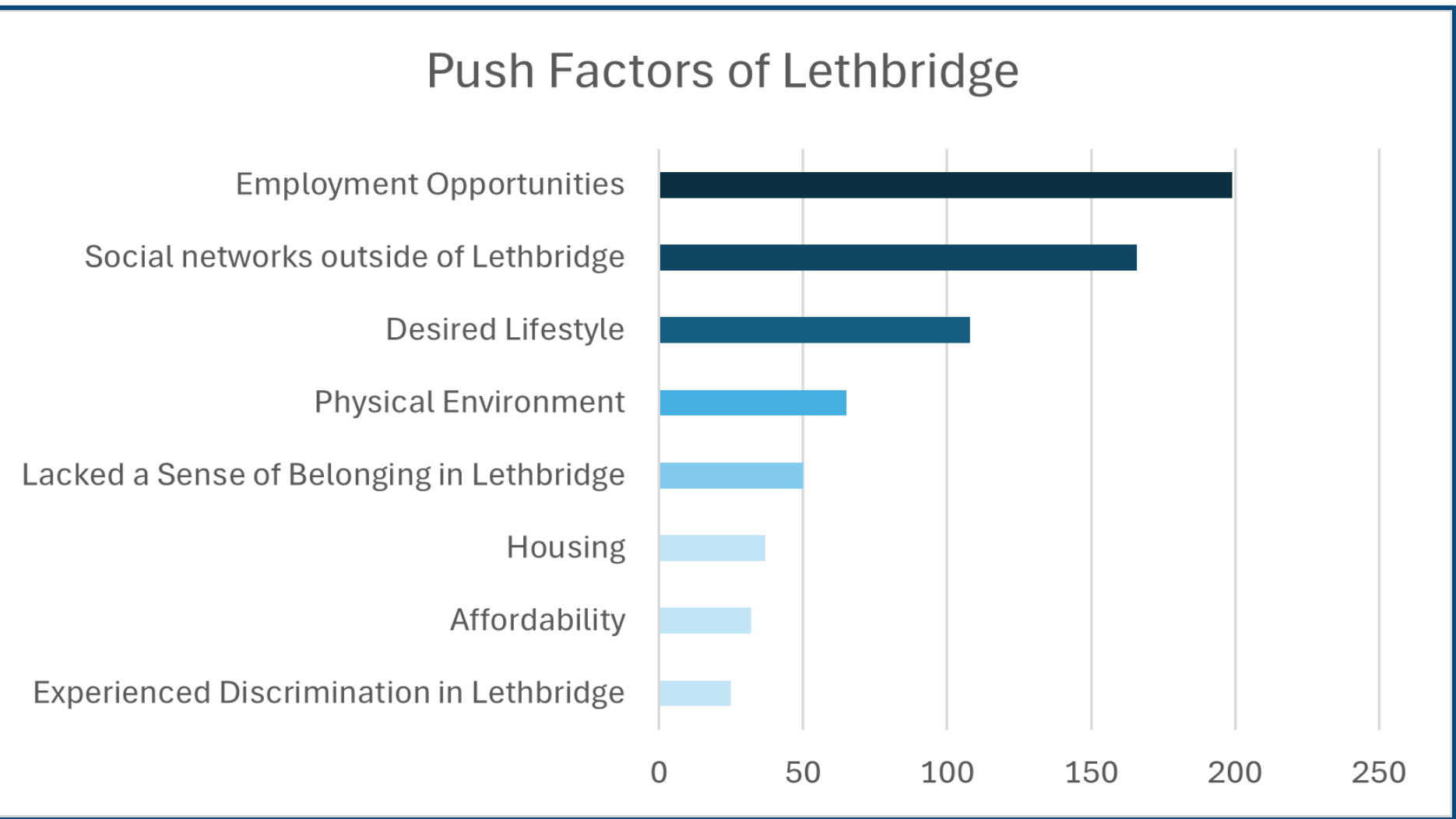


Figure 2. Distribution of Lethbridge push factors (Survey Data)

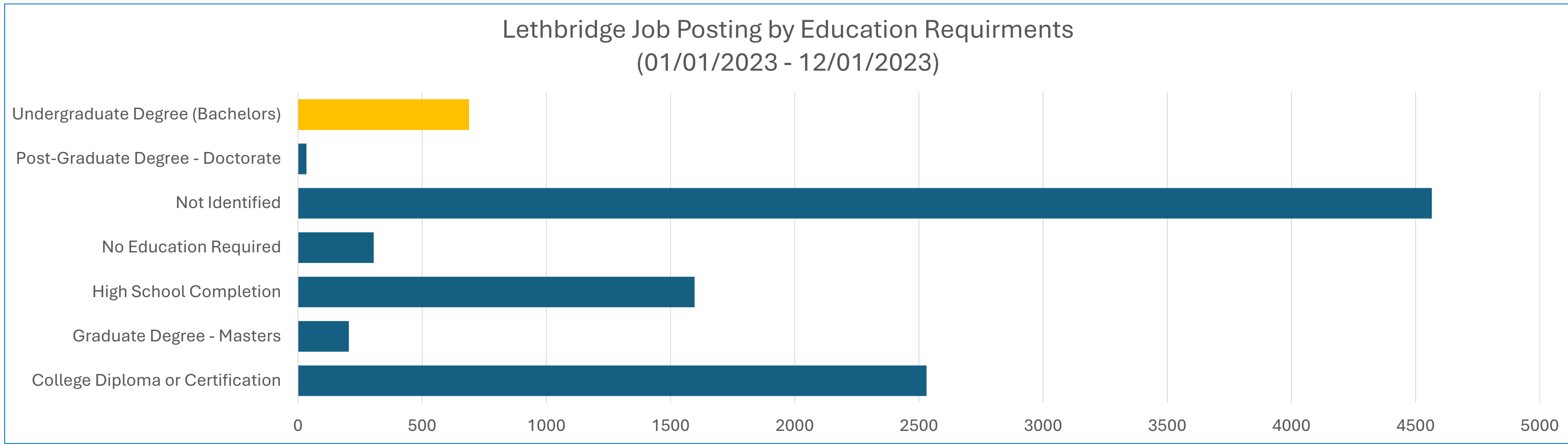
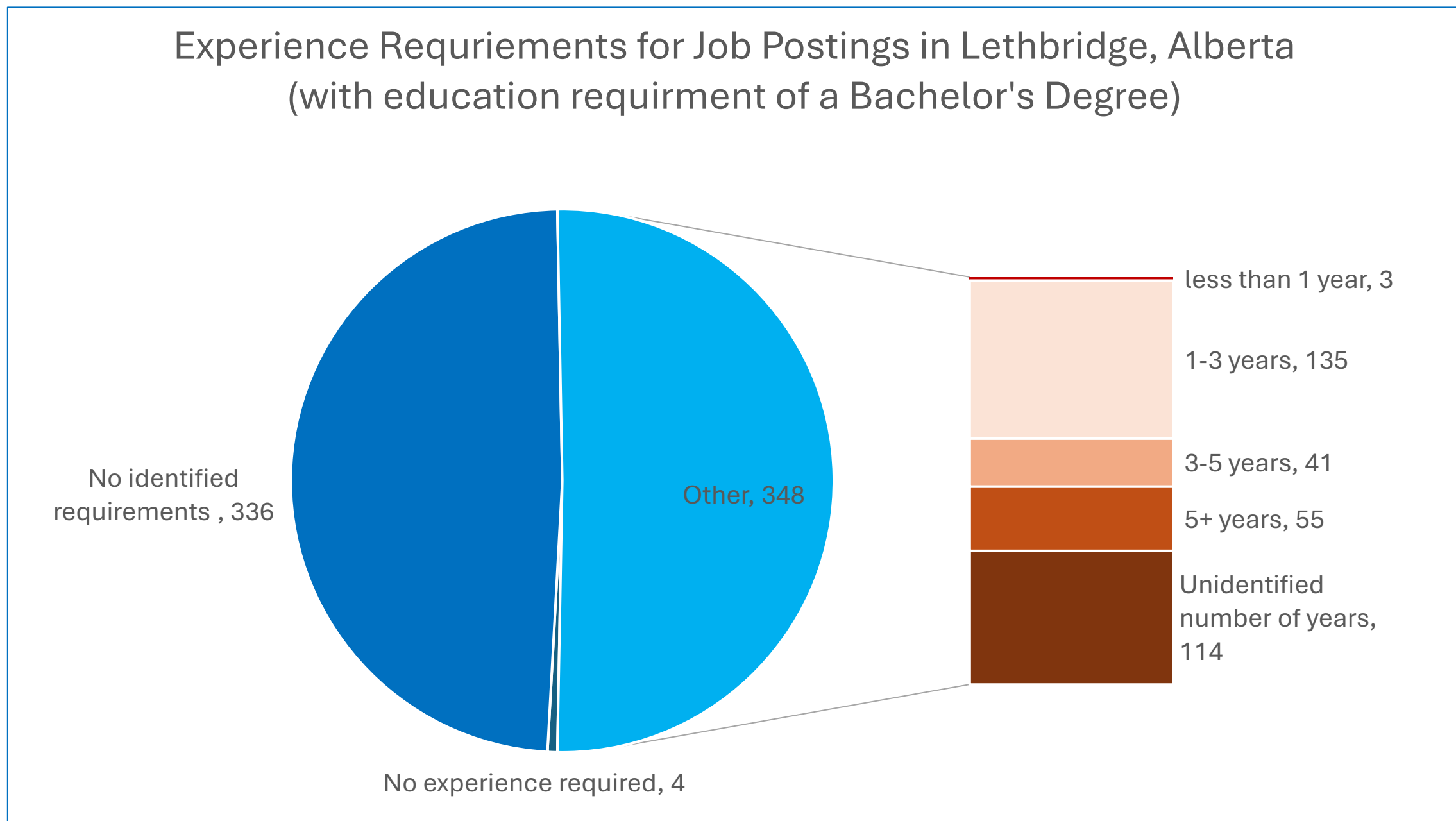


Figure 3. Education Requirements by Job Posting in Lethbridge (Vicinity Data)

Figure 2 shows that the strongest three factors contributing to someone's choice to leave after graduation are employment opportunities, social networks, and desired lifestyles within other municipalities. This perceived lack of job opportunities among recent graduates is validated by our analysis with the Vicinity job ad database. As demonstrated in **Figure 3**, job postings which specifically call for an undergraduate degree are limited. Of those, as per **Figure 4**, many of the jobs also require many years of prior work experience. For new graduates from the University of Lethbridge, this means that the labour market—despite best efforts at retention through work-integrated learning (i.e., internships, employer/student relationships, etc.)—is extremely tight.

Quotes from alumni, such as *"I've always thought of Lethbridge as just transitional for me, I've never felt like I actually live here, even though I've lived here for five years now"* and *"I think I always knew I was going to leave, right?"* highlight the perception among many students that Lethbridge is a transitional space. Individuals spoke highly about their time as a student on campus, but evident in **Figures 3** and **4**, there are not as many suitable entry-level positions for them to apply to once they graduate. There is a disconnect between the skills and training that University of Lethbridge students learn, and the opportunities available to them to put it into practice.

Figure 4. Experience Requirements for Bachelors-level job ads (Vicinity Data) in 2023



IMPLICATIONS

To improve the retention of graduates from the University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge should continue to prioritize the expansion of its skilled labour market by attracting new businesses, maintaining partnerships with the post-secondary institutions in Lethbridge, and investing in the services and amenities of the community. Additionally, as per **Figure 5**, Lethbridge can continue to invest in its assets; namely, keeping life affordable, maintaining the extensive parks system to promote a healthy lifestyle, and offering a variety of suitable housing options. This requires ongoing partnerships between employers, the University, and the municipality. As one employer shared in a focus group, retention is

...kind of a chicken egg situation, right? If the grads aren't there, or sometimes companies say, "we can't reliably find the talent we need." And so other places look more alluring. Conversely, individuals might graduate and think, "you know, I'd really like to stay in Lethbridge." But if there aren't places there to help them grow in their career and develop those kinds of skills, sometimes they get pushed elsewhere....

This analysis represents only a fraction of the project results, but some possible implications are to:

- Continue investing in community initiatives targeted toward students;
- Align the job requirements (i.e., credentials) with programs that are available locally;
- Foster strong relationships with post-secondary students, faculty, and administration to increase the City's the access to Lethbridge's talent pool;
- Be transparent and consistent in recruitment materials and job ads (list the salary, offer entry-level positions when possible, and advertise on multiple job listing sites); and
- Identify the necessary qualifications, experience, and knowledge, and how they align with post-secondary completion, to provide clarity for graduates and students applying to jobs.

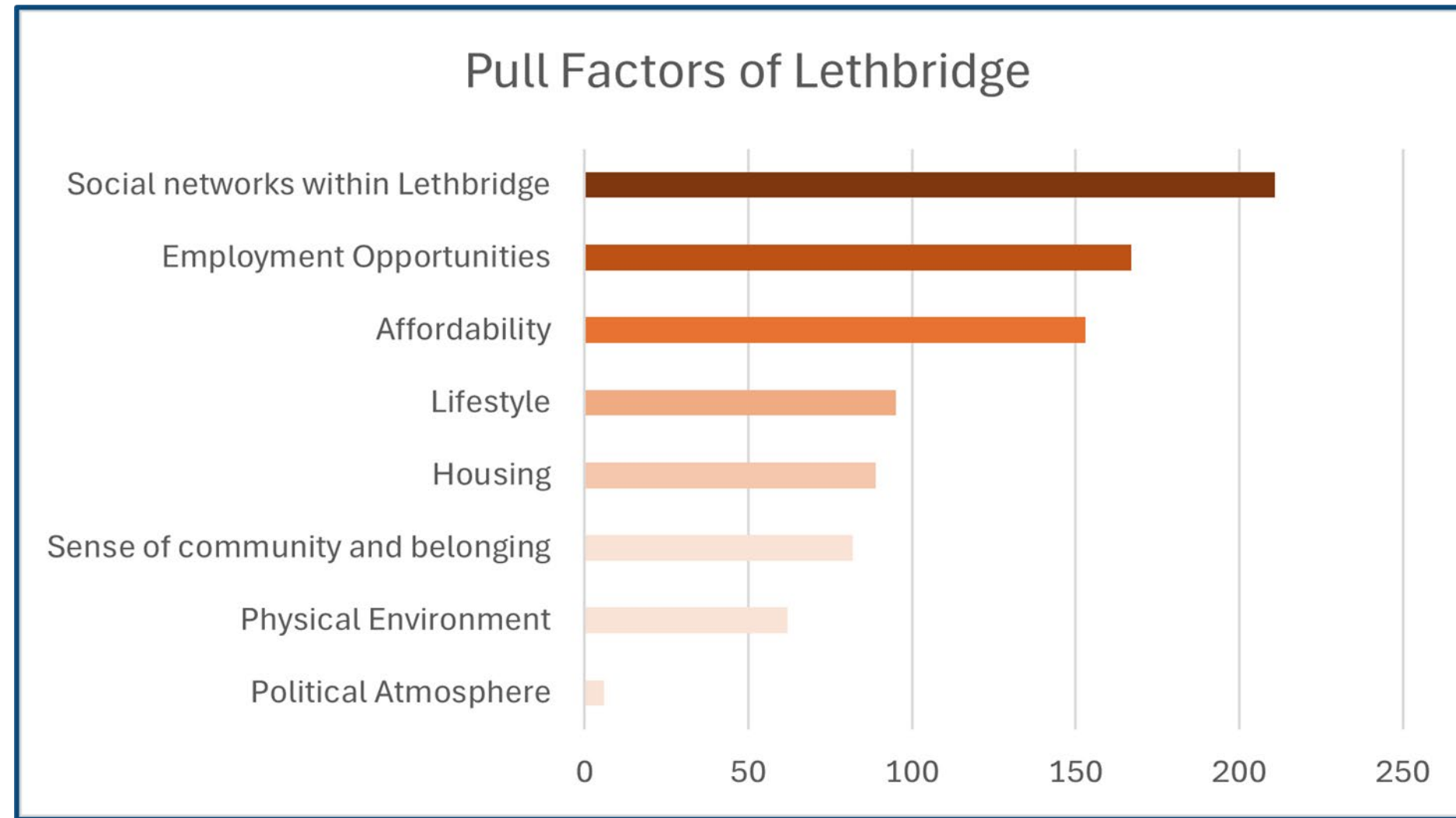


Figure 5. Distribution of Lethbridge pull factors (Survey Data)