

Spotlight — Kurt Strachan



Kurt Strachan is an Adult ESL Program Officer, in the Continuing Education Department of the Toronto District School Board. His extensive experience as an ELT instructor provides Kurt a deep understanding of the lived experiences of internationally educated professionals, and issues faced by unionized, frontline adult educators and administrative staff in government funded programs. Kurt has a Master of Education from York University, a graduate diploma in Postsecondary Education in Policy, Community and Culture and is currently completing a Master degree in Public Policy, Administration and Law (MPPAL). He recently joined The Institute of Public Administration of Canada (IPAC) Toronto Region, as one of its Board of Directors.

Kurt, thank you for taking the time to tell us more about the multi-faceted work you do. But to start, who would you say Kurt Strachan is?

Well first, I want to thank you again Nicola for reaching out and inviting me to join you in this discussion. I really appreciate this opportunity to share a bit of my journey and hope that its helpful to others.

Who is Kurt Strachan? I'd say I'm someone who thinks of others, enjoys finding solutions or at least providing options that help. Being a Program Officer for the last two years has been a good fit for me because it has allowed me to collaborate, contribute to, problem solve, and lead my staff through the daily highs and lows of frontline service to adult ESL learners who are Canadian citizens, refugees, and permanent residents. I'm happy to be part of a very supportive management team with the Toronto District School Board's (TDSB) Adult ESL program. It's been great working with amazing colleagues to support clerical staff, ESL instructors and their learners in multiple locations around the city. As an adult educator for well over a decade in federally-funded ELT and OSLT courses, time and time again I've been energized by my students' successes—whether it was finding a job after providing a supportive reference, communicating comfortably with their child's teacher at school after several months in language classes, or even personal discoveries about themselves and their own courage as they navigate what it means to be relatively new to Toronto. From the words of staff and students, I'm grateful to have been described as a positive, kind, embracing, pragmatic, and intellectually engaging supervisor and instructor.

Collaboration is a huge part of who I am. In my experience, it's how the best ways forward reveal themselves—by thinking together. And extending from that, I'd say volunteering is another major part of who I am. Several years ago, I was asked by a union VP to consider becoming a CUPE4400 Union Steward because she appreciated the way I advocated for my colleagues, while also building

collaborative opportunities for employer and union members to work through labour relation issues. I served in this capacity for a little over two years. Serving on TDSB’s Community Services Equity Committee for a couple of years also expanded my perspective on the opportunities and challenges of guiding public sector workplaces to more fully reflect equitable principles and practices. Most recently, as in just a few days ago, I was thrilled to join The Institute of Public Administration of Canada (IPAC)–Toronto Region as a new member of the Board of Directors. I look forward to serving IPAC Toronto members of the public service, who directly work for the municipal, provincial, and federal government or who work in public sector programs, agencies, commissions, and tribunals that are fully or partially funded by the government.

You’re currently a Master of Public Policy, Administration and Law (MPPAL) candidate, what made you interested in this field?

It’s funny how one thing leads to another, but that’s precisely how I would describe becoming interested in this field of study. With my intrinsic motivations toward service and seeking public good alongside likeminded colleagues, it seems inevitable to me now that I’d find my way here.

In the summer months of 2022, I was nearing the finish line of my Master of Education degree that I was taking at York University. Learning multiple theoretical and pedagogical approaches to learning, different modalities of teaching, various research methods, and innovative ways to incorporate digital technologies into education are some of the things that stand out. And here I was nearing the end of the summer, and I needed to pick a course to fill an elective gap I had in the fall term. I was on target to graduate in April 2023. After looking through my options and finding nothing

in the fall offerings that struck me, I decided to look outside of the faculty of education, and I stumbled across a course called *Program Evaluation and Public Policy Analysis*. My immediate curiosity and excitement drew me in, and I signed up for it right away.

Have you ever had a representative of the government visit your class to observe how federal or provincial funds are being used, implemented, and to get feedback from you and your learners? I had experienced this multiple times, almost annually, and I often wondered how program evaluation worked. So, I couldn’t wait to finally understand this. The course far exceeded my expectations. Guided by the excellent Professor Alena Kimakova, an economist and the 2023 Graduate Program Director for the School of Public Policy Administration and Law at York University, I gained an in-depth understanding of different types of program evaluation, objectives, and tools. I became versed in articulating policy research, program evaluation questions, literature reviews, and identifying potential data sources. I had to design and present the implementation a program evaluation process, be aware of ethical issues and the limitations of program evaluation in terms of its design, methodology, practical feasibility, and interpreted findings. And I loved every minute of it!

I graduated with a Master of Education degree in the spring of April 2023 and continued in a Master of Public Policy, Administration and Law (MPPAL) in the fall term of September 2023. I wanted to acquire more of the managerial and executive level skillsets that I had gained in the program evaluation course. MPPAL is a professional designation rather than a theoretically based graduate degree, and so I’ve learned how policy and executive decision-making integrates Constitutional Law, Public Finance and



Accounting in the Public Sector, Leadership and Human Resources Management, Equity, Policy, Law and Planning for the Public Sector, Court Organization and Management, Research Methods and Information Systems, Administrative Law and Ethics. My final course in May/June 2025 will be Public Management.

I know those courses all might sound incredibly boring, but honestly, finding problems, digging into where these problems come from, learning contextual information, exploring strategic options to solve the problems, honing in on recommended policy adjustments or a strategic approach, and describing next steps can be absolutely exhilarating. I highly recommend the MPPAL program at YorkU. The networking among MPPAL alumni, current grad students, industry, and governmental actors has been spectacular. So many chances to meet, have a drink and eat together, receive mentorship, and connect with high profile public servants. Finding ways to really help the public, specific communities or even individuals in need of support are what motivates me as I near the finish line of this second master's degree. I want to keep growing and increasing my usefulness.

I'm sure you've heard it said to *follow your bliss*, and I couldn't agree more.

You have been a long-time Occupation Specific Language (OSLT) instructor. I would consider this a very niche area of language teaching. Did you specifically pursue this, or did it just somehow happen naturally?

I'd say this was a combination of my intellectual curiosity and things happening naturally. After teaching ESL to business professionals and kids in South Korea for 3 1/2 years and teaching English for Specific Purposes to welders in Portugal for a few months, when I returned to Canada

and settled in Toronto, a friend of mine put my résumé on the desk of a newly forming, federal funded TDSB language program, called the Enhanced Language Training Program. After a couple of years working with internationally educated professionals there, I cold-called a George Brown College (GBC) department to see if I could arrange an informational interview. It didn't really work. But I was received warmly over the phone and eventually after circulating about 4 copies of my résumé to various people in the department, the manager at the time, Pam Glaser-French invited me for an interview. I was hired into an OSLT construction course that was already going on because the instructor had to prematurely end her contract for personal reasons. It's been almost fifteen years now that I've done contract work with GBC.

Employment-focused ESL lessons, navigating workplace environments, managing interaction, sociocultural awareness building of communication styles, and culturally-responsive engagement with people around us at work—these themes and many other topics are what English language learners need for better success in the marketplace. The TDSB Adult ESL program has been mandated by the province to incorporate these themes and topics through all levels of ESL learning at our multiple sites across the GTA. I'm glad that my pedagogical background and experience have prepared me to be an instructional leader as well as a managerial support for the times ahead.

Over the years in education, what has been your greatest pleasure?

Definitely it's been my greatest pleasure to meet, work with, and know my teams, as well as internationally educated professionals, construction and trades people, and ESL



learners in general. I have so many memories filled with laughter, celebrated achievements, and struggles that my students and staff have overcome.

Many people agree our world is divided right now, and Canadian politics is no different when we consider international students and newcomers and courses available to them. How do you think English language education will change in the coming years? What do you hope to see?

There's a Kenyan quote that I often reference: "When elephants fight, it's the grass that suffers". It reminds me that our individual proximity to larger societal forces, policies, rules, institutions, and levels of government impact our lives. When these dominant entities are in conflict or disarray, we suffer.

I think current geopolitical tensions, generative AI, and governmental shifts in immigration policy regarding international students and newcomers demand change. These changes can be small daily tweaks or fairly big shifts in how we do things. I hope to see increased government support, with integrated funding models breaking down accreditation barriers and interprovincial barriers to enable faster pathways to employment. Canada needs internationally educated physicians, nurses, and trained construction and trades people to fill our huge gaps. Additional, TESL educators and administration need to create more up-to-date, personal, interactive, engaging English language education through in-person classes and virtual sessions to look to the future and build on what has worked in the past. There will a lot of upskilling in every sector as AI transform the way the public approaches work environments.

Being curious and interested, following your passions even as they shift over time, continuing to learn and develop

yourself in ways that energize you, and extending yourself and your abilities to be useful in the world—those are my tips to share. These are the things that have worked for me so far. I'm confident that your preparedness, luck, and connection to good people will always open doors of unexpected opportunities for you.

Your LinkedIn *About* section is honestly one of the most gripping introductions I have read on the site. It's personal and informative, and it gives people an idea of what you would like to achieve or what you bring to the table.

When you say, "I want to be involved in thinking together about public service, and how to make sustainable changes for the betterment of society, while supporting relationships that increase collaboration, mutual transformation and actions to produce, at times even unexpected, ways forward." What does that look like in your field?

Also, would you do that cycling trip again?!

I'll answer your last question with a definite yes! I would love to do another cycling trip across Canada. If time and resources align, I'd jump at the chance. It was an incredible experience.

What does my *About* section look like in my field?

It influences the way I collaborate with my staff, how I strategize and plan as a member on my management team, it expands my vision of what professional development should include and keeps me centred on balancing Ministry mandates with the needs of the eclectic adult learners I serve.

My *About* section also moves beyond the expected activities in my field and has led me to:

- Becoming a volunteer IPAC intern (note taker) in May 2024, with the national Mentorship Partnership Program for executive leadership in the public sector



- The 2024 International Policy Idea Challenge/
Competition (GAC & SSHRC) – I co-authored one of six
winning research proposals – titled, Reputational Risk:
Canada’s Triple Threat (Aug. 2024)
 - The 2024 National Student Paper Competition (IPAC &
GAGS) – My co-authored paper was selected as one of
top five research papers – titled, Canada’s Immigration
Policy: The intersection of Public Perception and
Canada’s Future (Jun. 2024)
 - The 2024 National Case Study Competition
Representative (CAPP & IPAC)
 - Selected to represent York University in this
national competition after intensive training in
compiling facts, developing resolution-focused
action plans, writing briefing notes, reports, and
high-level senior executive presentations on
topics such as Housing, Ageing Population, Trans
Mountain Pipeline, Federal Procurement;
 - Considerable experience using PESTEL, Resource
analysis, and SWOT analysis to produce case
decks/presentations, jurisdictional/environmental
scans, feasibility and financial analytics, and
reports on various national concerns that demand
multi-level governance and cross-jurisdictional
partnerships.
 - Lastly, becoming one of the Board of Directors with
IPAC Toronto Region (the local chapter of IPAC
national)
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Thank you once again for your contribution, Kurt!

If you would like to know more, please visit [Kurt’s LinkedIn](#).

