A NATIONAL REVIEW OF IMMIGRANT ACCESS TO PROFESSIONS AND TRADES INITIATIVES

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ABSTRACT
This article features a national review of immigrant Access to Professions and Trades (APT) initiatives conducted by Capacity Canada in 2006. The article provides an overview of its key findings, and concludes by offering future directions to better facilitate the participation of immigrants in the labour market.

This article features a national review of immigrant Access to Professions and Trades (APT) initiatives. Conducted by Capacity Canada in 2006, the review provides a scan of existing APT initiatives across Canada. The article provides an overview of the review and its key findings, with specific attention given to credential recognition and licensing initiatives. It concludes by offering suggestions for future directions to better facilitate the participation of immigrants into the labour market.

Capacity Canada is an emerging collective voice for internationally educated and trained professionals (IETPs) across Canada. This roundtable provides national policy recommendations to facilitate the more effective and equitable participation of IETPs in the labour market. Capacity Canada was created by developing and supporting the capacity of provincial networks, associations and organizations of immigrant professionals across Canada. After more than a year of development, the national policy roundtable held its first full meeting in Halifax in September of 2006.

The national review

One of Capacity Canada's first endeavours was to conduct a national review of initiatives related to access to professions and trades (commonly referred to as APT processes). The purpose of this review was to help Capacity Canada better understand APT processes and to determine the next steps needed to improve APT processes across Canada. Capacity Canada understands APT processes to be any initiative (government-led or otherwise) that addresses systemic barriers for IETPs with respect to access to their profession or trade. The Centre for Research and Education in Human Services (CREHS) was contracted to complete this review.

The review was conducted in two phases between July and November 2006. Phase I was an environmental scan of national and provincial APT processes. Data was gathered primarily through a document review (more than 40 documents including academic articles, policy documents and community reports), an internet search (more than 100 websites) and a focus group with Capacity Canada Roundtable members from across Canada (n=33).

Phase II explored the next steps in improving APT processes both nationally and within selected provinces, including possible future directions for Capacity Canada. Methods in phase II included a second focus group discussion with Capacity Canada Roundtable members (n=33) and telephone interviews with 9 key informants from across Canada.

The final report provides an overview – in tabular form – of the government departments and non-governmental organizations working on immigrant employment issues. For each organization and department, information is provided about its overall mandate, its APT policy rationale, type of APT category, selected APT programs, and partnerships with others. More than 400 hyperlinks are included in the tables to provide access to in-depth information on a wide range of related topics.

The scope of the review was limited by three predetermined parameters. These are:

- geography (the review focuses on British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and the national level);
- professions (the review focuses primarily on cross-profession initiatives and not on trades or profession-specific initiatives); and
- level of intervention (the review focuses only on systems-level initiatives that address systemic barriers for IETPs and not on those directly helping individual IETPs find work).

The report should be read as a living document, given that new initiatives emerge in a rapidly changing environment. The complete report is accessible online at www.capacitycanada.ca.

Overview of findings on APT initiatives

Overall, the national review revealed a country that has begun to develop policy and seek initiatives that would more effectively facilitate the participation of immigrants in the labour market. Nonetheless, while progress is evident in recent years, the review also stressed that there is much to be done to facilitate immigrant employment through comprehensive processes and measures.

The review identified 55 key APT initiatives across the country. Sixteen were national-level initiatives, while the others were found in the six selected provinces. These initiatives were categorized into 10 types of interventions:

- Credential assessment,
- Licensing and regulation,
- Partnership development (including comprehensive community initiatives),
- Employer engagement,
- Internships/mentorship programs,
- Research, planning and design,
- Language training,
- Funding,
- Information development and sharing, and
- Other labour market training support (e.g., Bridging programs).

This list demonstrates the wide-ranging interventions that have been pursued in response to immigrant under-employment and unemployment. In addition, although credential assessment and licensing receive considerable attention in public and media discourse, they in fact represent only a portion of the policy tools currently being utilized.

When reflecting on the current APT response in Canada, a number of additional overarching observations were made:

- APT initiatives are now emerging across Canada. The number and breadth of **APT initiatives has grown** considerably since a similar scan was completed by CREHS for the Ontario-based Policy Roundtable Mobilizing Professions and Trades (PROMPT) in 2003.
- Qualitatively, there is recognition that progress has been made with respect to the **visibility of APT issues** in many parts of the country. In most provinces, a significant amount of research has been done, thereby pushing the APT agenda to the forefront. In addition, provinces have seen more resources allocated to address the issue.

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National – and some provincial – APT initiatives have been created to be **less "siloed"** than in the past. Nationally, there is an emphasis on comprehensiveness and inter-departmental collaboration. For example, 15 departments contribute to the federal Internationally Trained Workers Initiative, with two different departments taking the lead on various components of the initiative. At the provincial level, British Columbia, has decided to take a "systems approach" to APT.

By far the most common APT category was **information development and sharing**. Other common categories, in order of frequency, included: funding; partnership development; credential assessment; research, planning and design; and employer engagement.

The number and type of APT initiatives **varies greatly across provinces**. The provinces of Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia have a relatively long history in attempting to address APT issues and are now working to consolidate and coordinate their efforts. Government-led APT initiatives are just beginning to emerge in other provinces. This gap has been traditionally filled by civil society, which has active non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to systemic change, often in a collaborative role with the provinces' direct service providers.

Relatively **few partnerships** exist directly between provinces. Cross-jurisdictional partnerships tend to be created within provinces, or between the federal government and individual provincial governments. Generally, the few inter-provincial partnerships that do exist are brokered by the federal government or national NGOs.

A **depth in the policy response** is still lacking. In some provinces, the public policy on immigrant employment appeared only as a subcomponent of broader policy

directives (population recruitment, for example). Even in provinces specifically addressing immigrant employment, rhetoric and intentions did not exceed action. Notable were the lack of meaningful participation by all key stakeholders in developing workable solutions, the lack of efforts to communicate ongoing progress across jurisdictions and to stakeholders, and the lack of an equity lens in policy development (policy development was driven more by labour market needs than by principles of equitable labour market participation).

Spotlight on credential recognition and licensing initiatives

Given that the focus of this edition of *Canadian Issues* is credential recognition and assessment, we will now look at the broader immigrant employment response. First, we provide examples of some of the initiatives that are being undertaken to address credential recognition across Canada. This is followed by a look at licensing and professional regulation initiatives. Licensing and regulation initiatives are related to foreign credential recognition initiatives, but are narrower in that they address only provincially mandated regulated professions. It should be noted that the review did not assess the effectiveness of any single initiative and, therefore, does not claim to identify "promising practices." However, taken together, the initiatives below do provide an indication of the present status and of the progress that is being made.

These next steps stressed the need to build on the solution-oriented momentum of the past few years and to expand the progress made in large urban centres to other smaller centres across the country.

Credential recognition

Foreign Credential Recognition: FCR is one component of the federal government's Internationally Trained Workers Initiative. Led by Human Resources and Social Development Canada, FCR is designed to facilitate the recognition of international qualifications to enable internationally trained workers to better contribute to Canada's economic and social development.

Alliance of Credential Evaluation Services of Canada: The Alliance is an organization of provincially mandated credential assessment services from across Canada that provide assistance and quality assurance in assessing the credentials of prospective applicants to employers, professional regulatory bodies and educational institutions. Alliance members include: International Credential Evaluation Service (ICES – British Columbia); International Qualifications Assessment Service (IQAS – Alberta, Saskatchewan, Northwest Territories); World Education Services (Ontario); and Service des évaluations comparatives d'études (Québec).

Alberta International Medical Graduate Program: This program provides access into post graduate residency training in Family Medicine or Specialty disciplines for graduates of medical schools outside Canada or the United States. The AIMG program uses a merit based selection and assessment process which is designed to identify candidates for successful residency training. AIMG applicants are assessed on standard criteria utilizing tools including the OSCE exam, interviews and a summative review (see the article by Crutcher and Mann in this publication).

Manitoba Labour and Immigration: The Immigration and Multiculturalism Division of this provincial ministry houses the Settlement and Labour Market Services Branch. This Branch has a number of programs that assist foreign trained professionals or trades persons in having their credentials recognized in Manitoba. Main programs include: the Academic Credentials Assessment Service, the Credentials Recognition Program, the Access to Professions and Trades brochures, and Occupational Fact Sheets.

Licensing and regulation

Ontario Bill 124: Fair Access to Regulated Professions Act: This legislation, which was passed in December 2006, will require Ontario's 34 regulated professions to adopt registration practices that are fair, transparent and expeditious. The legislation will standardize licensure requirements of Occupational Regulatory Bodies. This includes appropriate and timely information supply about requirements, improved communication practices, and appeals processes. A Fairness Commissioner will also be appointed for oversight and auditing, and an Access Centre for Internationally Trained individuals will be established as a central clearinghouse of information.

Ontario Regulators for Access: ORA is a group of Ontario regulators who acknowledged the need for skilled immigrants and the continued enhancement and preservation of standards to ensure public safety for the benefit of all Ontarians. In 2003-04, ORA pursued a series of activities that included compiling a compendium of promising regulatory practices and developing a regulator's guide.

Quebec: An Act to amend the Professional Code as it regards to the issue of permits: This legislation was enacted in June 2006 and amends the Professional Code to allow for an expansion of permit criteria to allow foreign trained professionals to work in their professions. The legislation provides, in part, that a professional order must determine a procedure for recognizing an equivalence of standards established by regulation. It also determined that the procedure must have its decisions reviewed by persons other than those who mandated it.

Needed next steps

The review detailed future actions that would improve immigrant access to professions and trades across Canada. Generally, these next steps stressed the need to build on the solution-oriented momentum of the

past few years and to expand the progress made in large urban centres to other smaller centres across the country.

The future actions were summarized into four main categories of activity. These categories are necessary to the pursuit of a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach to systemic change initiatives.[1] The four categories of activity are:

- Education (raising awareness of APT issues among the various constituents),
- Policy influence (proposing new legislation, monitoring its implementation, and increasing horizontal and vertical collaboration),
- Planning and collaboration (increasing efforts for knowledge exchange and cross-sector collaborations, improving immigrant employment interventions, and creating better accountability mechanisms), and
- Action research (gathering information needed to support activities in the other areas).

A voice for IETP

Capacity Canada believes it has an important role to play in improving immigrant access to professions and trades by providing a voice to IETPs. Below, you will find an enumeration of some of Capacity Canada's intended next steps, which relate specifically to credential assessment and licensing, as well as more generally to immigrant employment.

- *Develop meaningful collaborations with key stakeholders for workable solutions*: The involvement of key stakeholders is essential for success. In developing meaningful collaborations with key stakeholders, Capacity Canada strategically positions itself relative to these groups and tactically engages with them. This is accomplished by articulating positions in a manner that resonates with and motivates partners. This ensures that the value of immigrant involvement is evident, that involvement does not duplicate existing efforts and that the successes and learnings of these collaborations are shared. Capacity Canada will continue to maintain its role as a national link between provinces.
- *Offer fresh, progressive ideas on APT issues within the overall framework of immigrant employment*: As additional voices speak out about immigrant employment increase, Capacity Canada will continue to carve out its unique niche and offer fresh ideas and solutions. To succeed, Capacity Canada will constantly consider the value that a national voice of immigrant professionals brings to the table. We recognize that each APT process has distinct considerations. At the same time, these processes are components within the larger framework of immigrant employment. Awareness of this overall framework will guide the work of Capacity Canada to ensure that comprehensive and workable solutions are offered.
- *Support provincial associations*: The majority of APT processes are under provincial jurisdiction and need to be addressed from a provincial level. At the same time, effective responses must be locally determined and encouraged within each province. Capacity Canada, in its national role, can encourage the federal government to adequately support and equip provinces and local initiatives. In fact, all federal policy related to immigrant employment should be analyzed from the perspective of how it can benefit provincial and local initiatives. In itself, Capacity Canada can also support provinces by offering training, providing information and coordinating communications in promoting the APT agenda.
- *Increase the visibility of APT processes, progress and best practices*: Capacity Canada has a promising role to play in coordinating communications across the provinces and acting as a national information clearinghouse. Information will be presented in a manner appropriate to each stakeholder group and will address unique considerations. On a related theme, the credibility of disseminated information will be enhanced through strengthened links with academic researchers and by ensuring that the research is accessible.

Conclusion

Credential recognition and licensing are two components within a larger access to professions and trades (APT) framework. Focused improvements in these two areas must be coordinated with improvements in the other eight APT categories identified in the review. Such coordination will maximize the potential of reaching the end goal – access to employment for immigrants.

To ensure that such a comprehensive approach becomes our guide, it is important to assess the effectiveness of existing APT processes and the interplay among them. These processes will differ by province and by profession. An overarching evaluative assessment will help to map how changes in one APT process impacts on others, and how they collectively co-exist to affect overall access to employment. A strong analytical focus is necessary for success.

A comprehensive response to immigrant employment also implies collaboration among key stakeholders. Effective collaboration would provide access to and dissemination of relevant information, and ensure that proposed solutions are reflective and responsive to varying contexts. A key component of collaboration is to consider the voice of IETPs, a primary stakeholder group. Here, Capacity Canada is well-positioned to play a national coordinating role by gathering and disseminating information, sharing best practices and assessing how changes to individual APT processes will impact the overall APT framework.

Note

[1] For a fuller discussion of these categories and how they relate to systemic change, see R. Janzen, G. Nelson, N. Hausfather and J. Ochocka (in press). "Capturing system level activities and impacts of consumer-run organizations." *American Journal of Community Psychology*. Special issue on systems change evaluation.