ENHANCING POLICY CAPACITY ON THE ISSUE OF FOREIGN CREDENTIAL RECOGNITION

ABSTRACT

This article outlines the role that the Department of Canadian Heritage has played in addressing challenges related to the recognition of foreign credentials. It suggests that problems related to foreign credential recognition are not simply labour market issues, but rather can serve as an indicator of Canada's "institutional openness" and acceptance of newcomers. The author presents several community-based projects aimed at facilitating the recognition of foreign credentials.

Arguably, of all the immigrant integration issues that we face, the recognition of foreign credentials has emerged as the most indicative of the acceptance of newcomers as equal partners in the continuing evolution of Canada. This is perhaps because no other issue so clearly reflects the pressure that economic globalization is imposing upon Canadian professional standards. For Canada to benefit from the opportunities of globalization, professional standards must become more open and adapt to changing domestic and global labour market needs and conditions. The barriers to change are systemic, however. A recent study comparing credentials recognition processes in Canada and Sweden concludes that, in both countries, processes tend to rely on a "difference-blind", or liberal-universalist approach which assesses differences from the domestic norm as deficient, incompatible, and inferior, thus invalidating the knowledge of immigrant professionals, particularly from Third World countries. The study suggests that if these systems fail to become more inclusive in accommodating knowledge and experience from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, then "immigrants will continue to be alienated and barred from exercising the full range of their skills, citizenship and potential in their receiving societies" (Guo & Andersson 2006; see also Guo in this volume).

Given the systemic nature of this challenge and its implications for a society that strives to be as inclusive as possible, it is vital that the Department of Canadian Heritage begin to make sense of foreign credential recognition beyond its narrow status as a labour market issue. In his analysis of Canada's discourse on immigrant integration, Peter Li finds a consistent and unsettling trend in critical discussions, policy statements, and academic writings. Li observes that each of these spheres of the discourse tends to yield the same implicit endorsement with respect to the relationship between immigrant "diversity" and "integration." He asserts that, although cultural diversity, or multiculturalism, is of nominal significance, what is of much greater concern is that immigrants make adjustments to conform to Canadian values and traditions. With respect to the official rhetoric of a two-way street of integration in Canada, Li concludes that the country "has only succeeded in insisting upon a report card to show how immigrants have been changing or not changing in Canada, and not a similar report card to indicate the degree of institutional openness with which Canadian society is accepting newcomers as equal partners in nation building" (Li 2003, 11).

The Department of Canadian Heritage

The conclusions that Li draws from his research on the integration discourse in Canada provide us with a broader set of terms for considering foreign credential recognition federally as a cross-departmental policy issue. Li's characterization of our "two-way street of integration" speaks directly to the concerns of the Department of Canadian Heritage. One of Canadian Heritage's key goals is to build an inclusive society on the basis of intercultural understanding and citizen participation. This requires that policy and program development that aims to break down barriers to integration, barriers that may represent systemic challenges to Canada's multicultural population well-beyond the scope of immigrant settlement issues as they are often narrowly conceived. Indeed, one of the ongoing challenges in the Department is to support policy development at the crossroads of socio-economic integration and cultural diversity.

This is of particular concern for the Multiculturalism Program within the Department of Canadian Heritage. This program's legislative mandate requires that government foster the recognition and

IAN DONALDSON[1]

Ian Donaldson is Senior Research Officer in the Policy Research Group at the Department of Canadian Heritage.

appreciation of diverse cultures in society and encourage social and economic institutions to be respectful and inclusive of Canada's multicultural character. In short, if one of the key problems with respect to foreign credential recognition, according to recent research, is the failure on the part of Canadian institutions to accommodate the knowledge and experience of people from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, then the Department of Canadian Heritage has a role to play on this issue. Furthermore, if the systemic nature of barriers to integration on key issues, like foreign credential recognition, suggests the possibility of discriminatory practices, then the Multiculturalism Program in particular has a job to do in supporting forward-looking policy development in that area.

In an effort to illustrate the kind of government leadership and support that is required to initiate innovative policy development in the area of foreign credential recognition, it may be helpful to highlight the outcomes that are unfolding from a series of community-based projects recently funded through the Multiculturalism Program at the Department of Canadian Heritage.[2] These projects have helped immigrant groups develop the means necessary to articulate to Canadians the credentials recognition barriers they face and to develop policy tools and new organizational structures to influence the development of government policy and legislation on this important issue, now in Ontario and across Canada in the near future. These projects represent an important step toward establishing the kind of "report card" mechanisms that Li demands with respect to the degree of institutional openness with which Canadian society accepts newcomers. In doing so, these projects provide a new and exciting example of how to pursue innovative policy development at the community level in the area of foreign credential recognition.

It is vital that the Department of Canadian Heritage begin to make sense of foreign credential recognition beyond its narrow status as a labour market issue.

Establishing PROMPT

In 2001, the federal government's Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI) organized funding for sectoral involvement in departmental policy development. As a partner in the VSI, the Department of Canadian Heritage offered to participate by encouraging the effective involvement of ethnocultural communities in policy development on the recognition of foreign credentials across a range of professions and trades in Canada. In 2002, two VSI projects were approved and administered through Canadian Heritage's Multiculturalism Program.[3] The first project was with the British Columbia Internationally Trained Professionals Network (BCITP Net).[4] This network was formed out of a partnership between three immigrant-serving services in British Columbia: Immigrant Services Society of BC; MOSAIC; and Surrey Delta Immigrant Services Society. The second project was with the Council of Agencies Serving South Asians (CASSA) in Toronto.[5]

Project funding for the BCITP Net was provided to help develop associations and networks among internationally trained professionals in the region, as well as to encourage constructive dialogue between immigrant professionals, regulatory bodies, industry and government. The objectives for the CASSA project were similar but with the added goal of forming a specific roundtable mechanism for policy development on the integration of internationally trade professionals and tradespeople. To this end, project funding helped CASSA, under the leadership of executive director Uzma Shakir, establish the Policy Roundtable Mobilizing Professions and Trades (PROMPT) in 2003.

PROMPT has emerged as an important collective voice for Internationally Educated and Trained Persons (IETPs). The roundtable is made up of groups, associations and initiatives that are led by immigrants. In this way, PROMPT's model provides immigrant professionals and tradespeople with the opportunity to influence the policy agenda from an immigrant perspective. This is a key factor in developing a "report card" for assessing the institutional openness with which Canadian society is accepting newcomers on an equal footing. Indeed, since its inception, PROMPT has produced five policy research papers that address the goals of facilitating equitable access to professions and trades for IETPs, establishing transparent and fair licensing and registration processes, and creating a system that would result in skills-commensurate employment for all.[6] These papers have been extensively quoted in the media and widely used by municipal, provincial, and federal regulators and governments to address foreign credential recognition issues. What PROMPT research tells us is that individual and systemic barriers that prevent immigrants from gaining access to their professions remain a serious problem across Canada.

In a 2004 paper, "In the Public Interest: Immigrant Access to Regulated Professions", PROMPT identified six critical issues facing professional regulation in Ontario specifically:

1) lack of clarity and consistency in legislation;
2) lack of public accountability;
3) lack of coordination and coherence on access to professions and trades policy and foreign credential assessment;
4) lack of government leadership;
5) competing interests within regulation; and
6) unclear assumptions underlying the registration process (PROMPT, June 2004).

It is worth noting that this paper in particular made recommendations, which were adopted in Ontario's Bill 124,

Fair Access to Regulated Professions Act, which was passed into law on December 20, 2006.[7] Bill 124 was developed as part of the Ontario government's "breaking down barriers" strategy, which also includes a recent federal-provincial agreement to increase funding to help immigrants achieve success. The key accomplishments of Bill 124 are:

1) to ensure that the processes for licensing and registration that regulatory bodies have are fair, transparent, accountable, and applicant-friendly;

2) to establish a resource and access centre to offer counseling support to the internationally trained to assist in navigating the complex licensing system; and

3) to establish the office of a fairness commissioner, to oversee the province's 34 regulatory bodies and review registration practices to ensure that they are fair, transparent, and impartial.

It is also worth noting, however, that Bill 124 remains controversial and that its critics have viewed it as failing to answer the crucial barrier of "Canadian work experience" that IETPs continue to face in accessing the labour market in their chosen professions and trades. Critics suggest that Bill 124 goes some way toward making the credentials recognition process more equitable, but falls short of creating a mechanism to recognize foreign work experience. Foreign work experience, like foreign credentials, is therefore subject to the same barrier of "Canadian standards." Bill 124 does not address this crucial element of the immigrant integration process.[8]

Another issue that critics of the Bill have raised is that it fails to address concerns in the immigrant community over systemic discrimination that applicants from certain countries face in the credential recognition process. These criticisms were re-asserted by opposition members in Ontario's legislature during the final reading of Bill 124 and PROMPT's recommendations that credentials assessment workers be required to undergo anti-discrimination and cultural competency training were cited specifically.[9] Indeed, as recently as December 5, 2006, PROMPT provided a written submission to the Standing Committee on Regulations and Private Bills that was overseeing Bill 124 to propose certain amendments, the most important perhaps being that the Bill ensure that registration processes are carried out in compliance with the regulatory bodies' legal obligation not to discriminate against applicants on the basis of race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, nationality, citizenship, creed, gender, sexual orientation, age, marital status, family status or disability. In this way, PROMPT has played a significant role in influencing this important piece of legislation in Ontario as well as the critical debate concerning its scope and effectiveness, which will surely continue in the months and years ahead.

Meeting the larger policy challenge means developing a better "report card" method of assessing the degree of institutional openness with which Canadian society accepts newcomers.

Forming Capacity Canada

In addition to the remarkable policy work that CASSA's PROMPT initiative continues to undertake, CASSA and the BCITP Net received funding for a second project in 2004 through the Multiculturalism Program in the Department of Canadian Heritage. This project was designed to build provincial networks of immigrant professionals and bring these networks together within one overarching policy roundtable to create a national voice for IETPs on the issue of foreign credential recognition. From 2004-2006, PROMPT partnered with the BCITP Net in the West and began outreach work with internationally trained professionals in all provinces to form a national umbrella roundtable known as Capacity Canada.[10] Capacity Canada aims to help internationally trained professionals organizations in other provinces to work together, first within their provinces and then with other organizations throughout Canada. The goal is to build provincial capacity and to work with provinces where there are existing networks of immigrant professionals or where there is potential to build those networks. In terms of a first initiative, a two-phase national review of Access to Professions and Trades processes (APT processes) for immigrants was commissioned to clarify the future role of Capacity Canada. The final report of this national review, produced by the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services, was released on November 30, 2006 and is available on the Capacity Canada website (see also Janzen and Buhel in this volume).

In terms of Capacity Canada's evolving role in particular, the review recommends that the organization focus on a more strategic and effective approach to developing policy tools in the area of foreign credential recognition and APT processes. This recommendation is made specifically in light of the fact that Capacity Canada is not in a position to create or propose national standards. Rather, it is uniquely positioned to equip provincial partners to address priority areas and propose strategic directions at the national level that would best facilitate solution building at a provincial and local level. The review concludes, therefore, that Capacity Canada may be most effective in the following areas:

1. **Licensing**, or the call for more accountable relationships with regulatory bodies and trades,

2. **Employer engagement**, or bringing employers to the table to discuss access to professions and trades issues,

3. **Language training**, or helping to secure funding for additional training, and

4. **Local coordination**, or creating a national strategy that builds provincial and local capacity to find solutions to access barriers.[11]

Conclusion

Due to current and anticipated demographic and labour market realities, immigration and integration have become mainstream policy concerns in public and private sector jurisdictions alike. We face an emerging challenge with respect to power sharing between native-born and immigrant professionals across our professions and trades. This is a new challenge in which Canadian standards must become more open to the notion of adapting to accommodate global standards as efficiently and equitably as possible to allow for the recognition, appreciation and use of the disparate educational and labour market experiences that newcomers bring to Canada (PROMPT, October 2004). Meeting new global challenges with respect to the equitable integration of IETPs in the Canadian context will require better leadership across government and society, but will also require innovative strategies for policy development.

Government leadership must continue to build on the interdepartmental and intergovernmental momentum that has been created on the foreign credential recognition issue thus far. Meeting the larger policy challenge, however, means developing a better "report card" method of assessing the degree of institutional openness with which Canadian society accepts newcomers. To this end, the achievements of PROMPT, BCITP Net, and Capacity Canada, through the support of the Department of Canadian Heritage, set an impressive standard for emerging best practices in the area of foreign credential recognition at the community level. The unique policy capacity that has been established through these projects helps build an inclusive society on the basis of intercultural understanding and citizen participation and breaks down the systemic barriers to integration that Canada's multicultural population continues to face; these are both key goals of the Department of Canadian Heritage. Therefore, the remaining challenges for government in this context will be, first and foremost, to acknowledge the success of this type of community-based policy work and, secondly, to find strategic ways of building on this important policy development capacity to maintain and enhance its relevance and effectiveness.

References

Guo, S., and P. Andersson. 2006. "Non/Recognition of Foreign Credentials for Immigrant Professionals in Canada and Sweden: A Comparative Analysis". PCERII Working Paper Series No. WP04-05. (http://pcerii.metropolis.net/frameset_e.html).

Li, P. 2003. "Deconstructing Canada's Discourse of Immigrant Integration". PCERII Working Paper Series No. WP04-03.). (http://pcerii.metropolis.net/frameset_e.html).

PROMPT. 2004 (October). "Recasting Equity: A Conceptual Framework". A PROMPT Discussion paper. (http://www.promptinfo.ca/).

PROMPT. 2004 (June). "In the Public Interest: Immigrant Access to Regulated Professions in Today's Ontario". A PROMPT Discussion paper. (http://www.promptinfo.ca/).

Notes

1 The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Canadian Heritage.

2 The Multiculturalism Program has funded over 30 projects on foreign credential recognition issues since the early 1990s. The Program has participated in meetings on this issue at the request of Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC) since 2000.

3 Marcelle Gibson, senior program and policy officer in the Multiculturalism Program, was responsible for the successful management of these important projects. I would like to thank Marcelle for her help in providing information for this article.

4 http://www.bcitp.net/index.cfm?wp=en&page=25

5 http://www.cassa.on.ca/mainpageOrange.html

6 http://www.promptinfo.ca/

7 http://www.citizenship.gov.on.ca/english/about/bill124/b124.pdf

8 This commentary is meant to outline some of the facts, issues, and critical discussion that have arisen in the public domain surrounding Bill 124.

9 http://www.ontla.on.ca/hansard/house_debates/38_parl/session2/pdfL135A.pdf

10 http://www.capacitycanada.ca/

11 See "A National Review of Access to Professions and Trades Processes for Immigrants", Centre for Research and Education in Human Services, Final Report, November 30, 2006: 4-18. http://www.capacitycanada.ca/APT%20Review%20final%20report.pdf. Please refer to the report itself to learn more about the research methodologies employed in phases I & II of the review.