INTERNATIONAL APPROACHES TO CREDENTIAL ASSESSMENT

ABSTRACT

The approaches taken to assess and recognize foreign credentials vary from country to country, with each country experiencing varying degrees of success in terms of the integration of recent immigrants into the labour market. As Canada increases its efforts to improve these processes, it is helpful to learn from the experiences of other countries. Based on research conducted by the Policy Research Analysis Division of Human Resources and Social Development Canada, this paper explores the approaches to Foreign Credential Recognition taken by Australia, New Zealand, and the United States.

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Like Canada, many industrialized countries are facing a demographic shift with aging populations and declining birth rates, and they are looking to attract highly skilled immigrants to help meet labour market shortages and foster economic growth. It has been reported that one of the main barriers immigrants face in integrating into the economy of their adopted country is a lack of recognition of their foreign-earned qualifications (Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada, 2003). In response, several immigrant-receiving countries have increased their efforts to develop and improve their approaches to foreign credential assessment and recognition. Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC), which is responsible for the Government of Canada's Foreign Credential Recognition (FCR) program, has conducted reviews of the approaches to foreign credential recognition in several countries around the world. Three countries that provide an interesting comparison to Canada's approach to FCR are Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. These countries are some of Canada's main competitors for immigrants and have similar immigration systems. There are lessons that can be learned from the experiences of these countries because all have taken different approaches to the assessment of international qualifications. This article will examine the mandate, organizational structure, and FCR activities in these selected countries and determine how Canada can benefit from this information.

With respect to FCR specifically, there are a number of similarities between these countries and Canada. Each uses referral and web-based information services that are mostly organized through national government departments (Immigration, Labour and Education, for example). In most cases, the assessment of foreign credentials focuses on academic equivalency, and all three countries are bound by the 1997 Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning higher education in the European Region (UNESCO/Council of Europe). Additionally, the recognition of credentials for occupations that require special licensing or regulation is primarily done by professional associations.

Australia

In Australia, foreign credential assessment and recognition is required for permanent immigrants prior to immigrating. The overall objective of this policy is to ensure that those who are selected are able to integrate rapidly into the Australian workforce.

Under the *Australian General Skilled Migration Program* (GSM), a prospective immigrant to Australia is required to identify one occupation from the Skilled Occupation List (SOL) in which they intend to practice and will subsequently be assessed to determine if they meet Australian standards for their chosen occupation. The SOL is composed of 410 occupations.

Immigration policy in Australia is the responsibility of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. In some cases, where countries have been designated as having high immigration potential, Australia provides direct service to prospective immigrants through migration agents overseas. However, there is no single government authority that assesses or recognizes international qualifications.

Referral and information services

There are three national organizations in Australia that provide referral services to prospective immigrants. The Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) is responsible for an online service known as Australian Skills Recognition Information. Trades Recognition Australia is an online referral service provided by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR), and the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) is responsible for the

National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition. In this case, all three government departments (DIMA, DEWR and DEST) have recognition issues as a focus for internationally trained workers. These three referral services work in cooperation, linking with one another to direct potential immigrants to the most appropriate information.

Australian Skills Recognition and Information (ASRI) is a service that provides information on assessments, licensing and registration authorities, including regulatory bodies to those with international credentials. Trades Recognition Australia (TRA) provides occupational skills assessment services for people intending to migrate to Australia as well as domestic skills assessments for Australian residents. TRA operates an online referral service and phone line to provide prospective immigrants with free information and directions for having their trade skills assessed. The TRA provides a fee-based assessment service for 101 trades and associated professional occupations.

The National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (AEI-NOOSR), a branch of the Department of Education, Science and Training, provides services to internationally trained individuals to help them work and study in Australia. AEI-NOOSR belongs to international recognition of qualifications and mobility networks including the National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC) network and the European Network of Information Centres (ENIC). AEI-NOOSR operates two divisions, the Professional and International Recognition Unit and the Overseas Qualification Recognition Unit. They offer several services to prospective immigrants including an information and referral service through the internet and a telephone hotline. Information, such as descriptions of the country's education system and assessment guidelines, and recommendations on how overseas qualifications might be compared to Australian qualifications, are all available through this organization. AEI-NOOSR is involved in some capacity development and monitoring with universities, state and territory agencies and organizations that assess and/or recognize overseas qualifications. The two divisions will also provide written and oral advice to applicants concerning the assessment process.

Several immigrant receiving countries have increased their efforts to develop and improve their approaches to foreign credential assessment and recognition…. Three countries that provide an interesting comparison to Canada's approach are Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

Assessment

In Australia, the responsibility for conducting assessments of foreign credentials is delegated to a variety of assessment bodies at the federal and state or territorial level. There are six independently governed states and two territories in Australia's federal system, and the legislation governing the recognition of credentials varies between each state and territory. It is the immigrant's responsibility to contact the assessing authority for their occupation to obtain a skills assessment. In some professions, registration or licensing is required at the state and territory level, and each state and territory has its own rules for certain occupations. Generally, each occupation has its own distinct pathway to recognition and each assessing authority has its own assessment procedures. However, the *Mutual Recognition Act*, which was introduced in 1993, facilitates the recognition of qualifications for licensing and registration purposes across state/territorial jurisdictions. An initial assessment of this Act suggests that it has enhanced the mobility of people in registered occupations, enabling them to freely enter equivalent occupations in other jurisdictions as well as having increased the cooperation between regulatory agencies in harmonizing regulatory requirements (Australia Office of Regulation Review, 1997).

In addition to providing referral services, AEI-NOOSR, functions as the national expert and coordinating body for the assessment of skills and credentials obtained overseas. They are responsible for explaining the process in which individuals intending to immigrate to Australia apply to the appropriate assessing authority to have their skills assessed in their chosen occupation. Some educational assessments may also be performed by AEI-NOOSR. In order to conduct assessments, AEI-NOOSR researches education systems to establish a comparison to Australian standards. In this sense, the assessment of a qualification may be regarded as an indication of general education level, not a subject-specific formal recognition of the credential. Their assessments cover degree-level and sub-degree level educational qualifications, assessments for teaching occupations, technical and vocational qualifications and qualifications awarded by professional bodies. An AEI-NOOSR assessment is a helpful tool for immigrants, but it is still up to the discretion of professional and regulatory bodies to determine a qualification's professional standing. An assessment with AEI-NOOSR does not entitle a prospective immigrant to migrate to Australia, work, study, gain membership to a professional body, or obtain registration or licensing.

Australia has received a considerable amount of attention for improving the labour market integration of recent immigrants, particularly when most immigrant-receiving countries have experienced declining rates of success in this area (Richardson, Lester 2004). Much of Australia's success in this regard has been attributed to a more demanding selection policy for immigrants and the requirement to have qualifications assessed before entry to the country (Richardson, Lester 2004). Despite the success of Australia's system, it has received criticism.

The rigid standards, for example, prohibit many people from applying based on their qualifications, age or other characteristics, and this may be perceived as unfair.

Comparison to Canada

Many similarities exist between the foreign credential recognition processes in Canada and Australia. In particular, the authority to recognize foreign credentials rests primarily with employers, professional and regulatory bodies, and educational institutions. However, the introduction of the *Mutual Recognition Act* has moved Australia towards a national approach to the regulation of registered occupations, enhancing the mobility of people in these occupations. Australia also has a strong referral system for immigrants prior to arrival through their three national referral services, ASRI, TRA, and AEI-NOOSR. The most notable difference between the processes in Australia and Canada is the linkage between credential recognition and the immigration process, which exists in Australia, but not in Canada. Individuals intending to immigrate to Australia are required to have their credentials assessed by the appropriate assessing authority for their specified occupation before gaining entry to the country as a demonstrable indication of their ability to succeed in the labour market.

New Zealand

Unlike Australia, Canada, and the United States, New Zealand is not a federal state and does not have all the complexities that are associated with multiple provincial and state jurisdictions. In New Zealand, the authority to assess international qualifications lies with Qualifications Recognition Service (QRS) as delegated through legislation by the New Zealand government's Qualification Authority (NZQA). The NZQA is responsible for providing national and international leadership in the assessment of qualifications.

As in Canada, the assessment of foreign credentials is not a mandatory step in New Zealand's immigration process. However, through the Skilled Migrant Category points system, immigrants are awarded points for qualifications that are recognized prior to arrival. The authority to recognize foreign credentials in New Zealand lies with the Qualifications Recognition Service (QRS).

Referral and information services

New Zealand's Department of Labour operates Immigration New Zealand, an internet-based service providing prospective immigrants with information on a variety of topics from life in New Zealand, the skills that they require, a list of recognized qualifications for selected countries and links to registration authorities for occupations that require licensure. Also, the QRS branch of the NZQA operates a web service that provides prospective immigrants with all the information they need to have their qualifications assessed.

Assessment

Assessments through the QRS are based on comparisons between overseas educational institutions and current New Zealand qualifications. The QRS only assesses credentials from overseas educational institutions that are officially recognized by the NZQA. The NZQA was recently formalized as a Crown Agent and is headed by a board appointed by the Minister of Education. This organization is responsible for coordinating, administering, and quality assurance of all national qualifications in New Zealand and functions as a central credential assessment agency for the country.

The QRS conducts two different types of assessments. Individuals who are seeking residence, employment, professional registration or opportunities to study in New Zealand require a full assessment. In addition, there is a pre-assessment process in place for applicants who wish to immigrate to New Zealand under the Skilled Migrant Category. A pre-assessment may help advance the recognition of the prospective immigrant's qualifications, but the results are non-binding and do not guarantee future assessment results of the qualification.

Those who are intending to practice a regulated occupation, such as accountancy, medicine, nursing and teaching, still need to apply for registration or membership with the appropriate professional body. In many cases, applicants must have their qualifications assessed by NZQA and the appropriate professional body for their occupation as each professional body and registration authority has its own requirements. An assessment by NZQA is not binding on any institution or registration body.

Comparison to Canada

The credential assessment process in New Zealand is not as complex as Canada's, primarily due to the lack of jurisdictional issues. While New Zealand does not require a credential assessment to facilitate immigration to the country, extra points are awarded to skilled migrants if their credentials are assessed prior to arrival. Another notable difference is New Zealand's use of a central credential assessment agency. This contributes to their relatively simple assessment process. Through the Department of Labour, New Zealand offers substantive pre-arrival information for prospective immigrants and on-line services.

United States

As in Canada, the evaluation of foreign credentials in the United States is not performed or regulated by the federal government with the exception of some occupations that require professional licensure. Instead, the federal government relies on the evaluation of foreign credentials by the appropriate competent authority for the occupation in which the foreign-trained individual wishes to enter. In regulated occupations, the authority to recognize foreign credentials is the licensing body at the state level that is responsible for overseeing the occupation in question. For unregulated occupations, this responsibility lies with the hiring employer.

Referral and information services

Information and referral services about recognition of foreign credentials are primarily provided through the United States Network for Education Information (USNEI). This internet portal provides links to credential evaluation services, information on authorities who can

legally evaluate credentials, including information on the licensing authorities for regulated occupations. More detailed information is provided for regulated occupations regarding the licensure process for regulated occupations.

Assessment

In the United States, there are no national government standards for assessing international qualifications. However, the National Council on the Evaluation of Foreign Educational Credentials has developed national guidelines for the assessment of foreign educational credentials. While this is not a government agency, its guidelines are widely accepted by institutions and agencies in the U.S. However, despite widespread use, many individual evaluation agencies, colleges and universities have developed their own procedures for assessing foreign credentials. Assessments may also be performed by private credential evaluation agencies. These agencies must be registered with the U.S. Department of Education. The Secretary of Education determines whether the agency is a reliable authority in regards to assessing the quality of education or training provided by educational institutions. If the agency is determined to be reliable, it will be registered and published on the Department of Education's list of nationally recognized accrediting agencies. The Accrediting Agency Evaluation Unit, within the Department of Education, is responsible for conducting a continuous review of the standards, policies, and procedures implemented by private evaluation agencies.

There are three main organizations for credential assessment and evaluation services. The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers (AACRAO), through its Office of International Education Services, provides credential assessment services based on a course-by-course evaluation of educational credentials or a basic evaluation of the general educational level of an individual's credentials. The Association of International Credential Evaluators, Inc. (AICE) is a membership organization of credential evaluation service agencies. The AICE is a profit-based organization and is also a member of the AACRAO. Finally, the National Association of Credential Evaluation Services (NACES) is the main association of private credential evaluation services in the United States.

Comparison with Canada

The foreign credential recognition system in the United States shares many similarities with Canada. In Canada, licensure for regulated occupations is the responsibility of provinces and territories and, in most cases, this responsibility is delegated to professional regulatory bodies. Similarly, in the U.S., licensure is the responsibility of the individual states. The licensure process is complicated by the large number of states, as immigrants may be required to redo certification requirements if they move from one state to another. In the U.S., the responsibility to evaluate credentials is delegated to private sector evaluation services, which also means there is a lack of consistency and capacity between these services in each state and between the states.

Conclusion

Many countries around the world are bolstering their immigration programs to attract talented and skilled immigrants and meet emerging labour market shortages. Unfortunately, many immigrants arrive in their new home country to find that they are unable to access employment commensurate with their qualifications. While there are several contributing factors, the lack of recognition of foreign credentials is one that has been particularly problematic. As a result, these countries, including Canada, are putting significant efforts into improving the processes through which foreign credentials are assessed and recognized. The Government of Canada has been actively reviewing some of the approaches that other countries have taken to address this problem in order to learn from their experiences. The majority of these countries are using substantive information and referral services online to help prospective immigrants prepare prior to arrival. We have seen novel approaches to credential assessment such as Australia's requirement to have credentials recognized prior to immigration or the awarding of extra points to those who have their qualifications assessed prior to arrival in New Zealand. This gives immigrants a clear understanding of their employment potential before immigrating. In the United States, we have seen the use of several private assessment organizations which can mean faster assessments with clear service standards, while New Zealand uses a central agency for all assessments, which makes for consistent assessment processes.

The Government of Canada has been actively reviewing some of the approaches that other countries have taken… The majority of these countries are using substantive information and referral services online to help prospective immigrants prepare prior to arrival.

As Canada continues to strengthen its approach to credential assessment, there is an opportunity to learn from other immigrant-receiving countries and adopt components of their processes that work well and align with Canada's immigration system and humanitarian goals. This will require continued cooperation between jurisdictions to not only improve FCR processes but also to facilitate domestic mobility. How the differing approaches affect the labour market outcomes of immigrants entering these countries over the next few years will also continue to be monitored to further improve FCR in Canada. Improving FCR processes is

not only an issue of meeting labour market demands and contributing to the economic growth of the country, it is also a matter of improving the quality of life of those who choose Canada as their new home.

References

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Impact of Mutual Recognition on Regulations in Australia: A Preliminary Assessment, Office of Regulation Review, Industry Commission, 1997. http://www.obpr.gov.au/publications/information/mutrec/mutrec.pdf

Longitudinal Study of Immigrants to Canada (LSIC), Statistics Canada. 2003. http://www.statcan.ca

Richardson, S. and Lester, L. (2004). "A Comparison of Australian and Canadian Immigration Policies and Labour Market Outcomes." http://www.immi.gov.au/research/publications/comparison_immigration_policies.pdf

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Web Resources

GSM
Australian Government Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs
http://www.immi.gov.au/skilled/general-skilled-migration/index.htm

ASRI
Australian Skills Recognition Information
http://www.immi.gov.au/asri/

TRA
Trades Recognition Australia
http://www.workplace.gov.au/workplace/Category/SchemesInitiatives/TRA/

DEWR
Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
http://www.dewr.gov.au/

DEST
Department of Education, Science and Training
http://www.dest.gov.au/

AEI-NOOSR
Australian Education International
http://aei.dest.gov.au/AEI/QualificationsRecognition/Default.htm

NARIC
National Academic Recognition Information Centres
http://www.naric.org.uk/

ENIC
European Network of Information Centres
http://www.enic-naric.net/

PIRU
Professional and International Recognition Unit
http://aei.dest.gov.au/AEI/AboutAEI/AEIContacts/InternationalPolicy/Default.htm

OQRU
Overseas Qualification Recognition Unit
http://aei.dest.gov.au/AEI/AboutAEI/AEIContacts/InternationalPolicy/Default.htm

NZQA
New Zealand Qualification Authority
http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/

QRA
Qualifications Recognition Service
http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/for-international/qual-eval/index.html

USNEI
United States Network of Education Information
http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ous/international/usnei/edlite-index.html

CEC
National Council on the Evaluation of Foreign Educational Credentials
http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ous/international/usnei/us/edlite-natcouncil-about.html

U.S. Department of Education
http://www.ed.gov/index.jhtml

AACRAO-OIES
American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, Office of International Education Services
http://www.aacrao.org/international/individual.cfm

AICE
Association of International Credential Evaluators, Inc
http://www.aacrao.org/international/individual.cfm

NACES
National Association of Credential Evaluation Services
http://www.naces.org/

Unesco.org
http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13522&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

Note

[1] The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Human Resources and Social Development Canada or of the federal government.