INTERNATIONAL CREDENTIAL EVALUATION AND THE LABOUR MARKET INTEGRATION OF IMMIGRANTS

ABSTRACT

There is increasing public awareness about issues related to the recognition of international credentials. Research shows a current and growing labour shortage and that labour force growth will be nil or negative without immigration, but few employers are aware of the value of international credentials. This article discusses the nature and role of credential evaluation and the steps that World Education Services, one of major credential evaluation services in Canada, has been taken to broaden the understanding of this service, and to offer innovative solutions to encourage its use.

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There is increasing public awareness about the need to better facilitate the labour market integration of immigrants, especially those with post-secondary education. Three of the most significant barriers to finding appropriate employment are credentials not being recognized, inadequate language (or communication) skills, and lack of Canadian experience. Determining the equivalency of international credentials can be relatively straightforward, as there have been reliable credential evaluation services in Canada for more than thirty years.

Research, including that done by employer associations such as the Canadian Federation of Independent Business,[1] shows a current and growing labour shortage in critical skill areas; labour force growth will be nil or negative without immigration, and while employers see the need to better recognize the skills of immigrants, few know how or where to have credentials evaluated. Many highly trained individuals arriving in Canada continue to be underemployed.

World Education Services (WES) is the official credential evaluation service of the province of Ontario. For the past six years, it has been working with a wide spectrum of stakeholders across Canada to broaden the recognition and use of credential evaluation. Recently, it has developed new tools that make it faster and simpler for individuals, institutions, and employers to make use of their service and facilitate the recognition of international credentials. These include a Preliminary On-line Equivalency tool that provides an immediate indication of a credential's Canadian equivalency and a document "bank" or "clearinghouse" for verified documents that WES has received directly from issuing institutions.

Background to issue

Over the past decade, the level of education that immigrants bring to Canada has been increasing. In 2005, 70% of the 204,000 immigrants of age 15 years or more who arrived in Canada had more than a high school education. The demographic shift that is taking place in Canada (aging population, low birth rates) makes it crucial that the education of immigrants is recognized appropriately and that they contribute early and effectively in the labour market.

The 2003 Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants reported that immigrants considered a lack of Canadian work experience and the non-transferability of their credentials as the most critical hurdles they faced in getting work in Canada.[2] Among respondents, 76% had earned at least one credential overseas, 61% had not yet started the process of having their credentials evaluated, and 6 in 10 were working in different occupation fields in Canada than they had been in their home country.

Over the past decade, governments and non-government organizations across Canada, as well as post-secondary education institutions and regulatory bodies, have collaborated to develop, fund and offer programs specifically designed to assist highly educated professionals find work best suited to their expertise.

Among the services that have been developed are credential evaluation services, which assess the comparable value of academic credentials earned abroad and provide reports that can be used by immigrants when they are applying for jobs, as well as to post-secondary institutions or licensing bodies.

WES has been offering credential evaluation services in Canada since 2000, when it was contracted by the Government of Ontario to be its official credential evaluation service.

WES is an international not-for-profit organization, whose mission is to facilitate the integration of immigrants into the employment and academic settings of their new country by providing credential evaluation services. The service was established in 1974 by a group of individuals at New York University and is the largest credential evaluation service in North America. It now has a staff of 19 people in Toronto. Along with the provincially recognized services in Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, and Quebec, WES is a member of the Alliance of Credential Evaluation Services of Canada (ACESC).

The establishment of WES as Ontario's official credential evaluation service was one of the steps taken by the Ontario government to address a number of issues arising from the inadequate recognition of education earned overseas. In 2006, WES prepared evaluation reports for approximately 7,600 individuals and sent out nearly 12,000 reports to individuals and the employers and institutions to which they were applying.

The lack of appropriate recognition of international credentials continues, despite the 30-year history of independent credential evaluation services in North America. This, along with a number of other barriers faced by recent immigrants, has coincided with their high rates of unemployment and under-employment and persistent low-income levels.

Credential evaluation

Credential evaluation is a tool to compare formal educational credentials earned in one jurisdiction to that which would have been earned in another. Standard methodologies for developing consistent "equivalencies" and facilitating appropriate recognition have been in place for many years. While no two credentials, even those earned at the same institution, can be described accurately as identical, there is a high level of comparability that allows for them to be recognized across jurisdictions.

The European experience in moving beyond a narrowly defined idea of equivalence provides a useful comparison.[3] The purpose of credential evaluation within the European context has developed from being primarily geared toward academic mobility to now supporting labour mobility, and this experience has provided useful lessons to Canada.

In the period leading up to the early 1970's, the practice of comparing credentials focused on trying to find identical equivalence between international and domestic curricula. Not surprisingly, this practice did not lead to much success and, as international mobility increased, the equivalence approach became impractical. Attention shifted from requiring absolute "equivalence" to recognition. Recognition was possible if the level, the function and the rights granted by the international credential were comparable to those of the domestic credential. It was possible to allow small differences as long as the general purpose and rights of the qualification were comparable. More recently, in the 1990s, another shift occurred. There is now an assumption that there will always be differences in curricula, but that these should not always be seen as problems; sometimes they are enrichments and should be accepted, so long as the differences are not too great.

All of the provincially mandated credential evaluation services in Canada adhere to a common set of guidelines and principles that were agreed to in 1998,[4] and which are consistent with those articulated by UNESCO and the Council of Europe's Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region[5] (for the purposes of UNESCO, Canada participates in activities as part of the European Region).

These services prepare reports for individuals who apply to have their credentials evaluated, reports that contain key information about the credentials (admission requirements, length of program, year awarded, and so on), as well as a statement of comparability, or equivalency, to Canadian credentials. In some cases, the reports also contain converted grade averages and course credit information. Individuals receive a copy of the report, and, if requested, so do the institutions to which they are applying.

The evaluation reports are multi-purpose. They can be used to apply for employment, for admission to a regulated profession, or for admission (sometimes with advanced standing) to higher education. Individuals can use their evaluation reports at any time in the future and so do not have to pay more than once to have their credentials evaluated.

Since these credential evaluation services operate independently of a regulatory body or academic institution, their reports constitute neutral, third-party opinions.

Increasingly, regulatory bodies and academic institutions use or recognize the evaluation reports prepared by third-party services, such as WES, although many continue to assess international credentials themselves. More than 100 regulatory bodies and professional associations, nearly 150 post-secondary institutions, and thousands of employers use one or more of the provincially mandated services in Canada. In total, these services assist nearly 30,000 individuals a year.

Due to the availability of high-quality credential evaluation services, the real issue in credential recognition is not in determining the Canadian equivalency of international credentials, but rather how Canadian institutions and employers recognize these credentials, and the evaluation reports produced by these services. If the work of the provincially mandated credential evaluation services were more broadly understood and recognized, some of the barriers faced by skilled immigrants could be overcome immediately.[6]

Non-recognition

Surveys of employers done by the Public Policy Forum in 2004,[7] the Canadian Labour Business Centre in 2003,[8] and Pricewaterhouse in 1998,[9] paint a common picture: employers' opinions, while generally positive towards immigrants, are not always well informed.

In 1998, Pricewaterhouse undertook a survey to establish the business case for the establishment of a centralized credential evaluation service in Ontario. This survey looked at the needs of employers, post-secondary institutions, and occupational regulatory bodies. At that time, employers indicated that educational attainment was a mandatory requirement for employment in at least 60% of their organizations and in more than one job category, yet approximately 40% of employers indicated that they would screen out internationally educated applicants because they did not know how to assess their education. Only 15% of employers had heard of a credential evaluation service, and most did not think that such a service could meet their needs.

In 2003, a study done by the Canadian Labour and Business Centre found that the biggest issues for employers in recruiting immigrants were understanding foreign credentials and determining language skills. Almost half thought more emphasis should be given to improving the recognition of foreign credentials, but at the same time only 10% saw hiring immigrants as a solution to pending skilled labour shortages.

A 2004 survey, undertaken by Environics for the Public Policy Forum, showed that only 18% of the 2,000 employers surveyed could name an organization that evaluated foreign credentials. Sixty percent thought that the education level of their immigrant employees was high school or less, yet 46% had never verified this. Employers in this survey also did not believe that hiring skilled immigrants was a solution to future labour shortages.

The 1998 Pricewaterhouse report also surveyed occupational regulatory bodies and post- secondary institutions about their credential recognition needs. They expressed similar opinions about the ability of independent evaluation services to fully meet their needs. They required specific details on education, including course content information, and information on clinical or practical learning, which they believed was not available from existing credential evaluation services. Many were developing in-house expertise to do their own assessments, but financial constraints and lack of up-to-date and comprehensive information on other education systems were leading others to consider the use of alternatives. Some indicated that they might request some information from an external provider (e.g. verification of documents, or equivalency of degree), but continue to assess the course content themselves.

In short, the major stakeholders in the recognition of international credentials (employers, occupational regulatory bodies, and post-secondary institutions) have struggled with developing the means to consistently, efficiently, and effectively assess and recognize the qualifications of immigrants. Many have taken steps to build relationships and partnerships to assist in this work, but many others have either not been aware – or are reluctant or unsure – of how to utilize the available expertise of independent credential evaluation services.

Focus groups with employers held by WES in 2000, its first year of Canadian operation, confirmed that employers had little idea of how an evaluation service could help them, but when they were informed about the nature of a service such as WES, they expressed great interest in its potential use. As a result, WES hired a Business Development Manager to focus on building relations with employers, employer associations, and staffing services, to broaden their understanding of credential evaluation, and to develop ways in which WES could better meet their needs. This work has involved increasing awareness about the nature of credential evaluation, suggesting how a credential evaluation can fit into the recruitment cycle, developing referral systems, providing one-on-one advice, and building credibility and trust.

At the same time, we have taken a number of steps to build and participate in partnerships with all stakeholders, including regulatory bodies and post-secondary institutions, and to adapt our services to their needs. This has resulted in an increase in the recognition and use of our services over the past six years.

Labour force growth will be nil or negative without immigration, and while employers see the need to better recognize the skills of immigrants, few know how or where to have credentials evaluated.

Some positive signs

In Ontario, government and community-led initiatives to assist skilled immigrants find appropriate employment have been flourishing. The government has funded many "Bridge Training Programs" which are designed to bridge the gap between the skills that newcomers have already acquired and those required to practice in their profession. These have resulted in many successful pilot projects that have assisted internationally trained professionals in becoming licensed in their field. Recently, the province passed legislation that aims at ensuring fair access to regulated professions for those trained abroad.

The federal governments' Foreign Credential Recognition program has funded projects across the country with regulatory bodies, employer groups, post-secondary institutions and credential assessment services and is examining the potential for a national body that can provide services to immigrants to help them get their credentials assessed and gain access to their profession. They have also provided funding to help the Alliance of Credential Evaluation Services of Canada work together to increase the portability and recognition of credential evaluation.

The Maytree Foundation and the Toronto City Summit Alliance created the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC), a multi-stakeholder partnership of linking employers, regulatory bodies, community groups, post-secondary institutions, and credential assessment services, which has generated an enormous number of activities to assist skilled immigrants

in finding appropriate employment. The model is being adapted and replicated across Canada. One of their initiatives is to actively engage and inform employers in developing the tools and knowledge to recruit and retain skilled immigrants.

The Ontario Community College sector is in the midst of a series of projects that are aimed at improving immigrants' access through the college system and into employment; the university system is beginning a similar process. And the Association of Community Colleges of Canada, with federal support, is piloting an overseas project that aims to start the process of assessment and training while people are still in their country of origin (see the article by Katrina Murray in this edition of *Canadian Issues*).

New services from WES

WES realizes that the traditional way of providing a credential evaluation report may not serve the needs of all potential users. WES has pioneered the use of on-line services in the field of credential evaluation with on-line applications, joint on-line applications with language assessment and translation services, the ability to check one's application status on-line, and the ability to transmit evaluation reports electronically to institutions, if preferred. Wanting to keep pace with changing needs and the growing number of partnerships and initiatives underway, we have developed new ways for individuals and institutions to access our services.

The most recent service WES has introduced is the Preliminary On-Line Equivalency (POE). Many individuals want to know immediately what their credentials are worth in relation to a Canadian degree or diploma, even before undertaking a formal assessment. Since official documents need to be sent from the issuing institution, and this may take a few weeks, individuals want to get started on applying for work or further studies right away. At the same time, some universities or licensing bodies in Canada may already have received official documents from abroad, and do not need or want to go through the steps of getting a formal evaluation report from an independent service. They just want to know what the degree or diploma is worth. Employers, too, may only want to know whether an individual has the minimum qualifications to be screened into their own formal recruitment process. They can do a more formal check with their short list.

The POE allows users to look up the Canadian equivalency of university degrees issued outside of Canada. Through a series of pull down menus, one can select the university(ies) attended, and the degree(s) earned. The equivalency that WES would normally give for each credential is displayed. The nominal fee for this service ($30) becomes a credit if one proceeds to an official evaluation. It is possible to print out the statement of equivalency, but there is a disclaimer saying that this preliminary equivalency has no official status, because no actual documents have been reviewed.

This service is also available for institutions and employers through subscription. Credentials from over 35 countries are accessible with 150 in progress.

We have also "unbundled" the determination of document authenticity as a stand-alone service. Many universities and regulatory bodies do not have the expertise, or do not want to take the time, to arrange for the receipt of official documents from an overseas institution. They would prefer that an independent evaluation service confirm the authenticity of documents and the status of the institution. They can then focus on determining the Canadian equivalency of the credential.

WES maintains an electronic database of all the scanned documents it has received directly from the institutions that issued them, which is the most reliable way to authenticate documents. Electronic copies of these verified documents can either be attached to credential evaluation reports, or sent on their own to institutions at the request or with the permission of the individual who earned them. This service serves two purposes. For individuals, it allows them to store official, validated copies of their transcripts with WES, who can send them to institutions in Canada upon request, saving individuals time and fees. For institutions, it gives them the choice to determine the equivalency of international credentials themselves, while ensuring that they are basing their decision on authenticated documents.

WES provides other on-line tools for institutions, which can assist them in determining grade point averages, course credit conversion, and doing research. WES' own research reports are also available through our website.

For information on WES, visit www.wes.org/ca.

Notes

[1] Bourgeois, Andreea (2006). *Help Wanted*. Canadian Federation of Independent Business.

[2] Chui, Tina (2003). *Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada: Process, Progress and Prospects*. Statistics Canada. http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/89-611-XIE/index.htm

[3] Scholten and Teuwsen (2001). http://www.nuffic.nl/ice-plar/pdf/adviesevcidw-en.pdf

[4] Alliance of Credential Evaluation Services of Canada, (1998). http://www.canalliance.org/PDFs/GuidingPrinciples.pdf

[5] UNESCO-CEPES (2001). http://www.cepes.ro/hed/recogn/groups/criteria.htm

[6] It should be noted that the problems of credential recognition and mobility also apply across Canadian jurisdictions. Degrees or credits earned in one post-secondary institution in Canada are not consistently recognized elsewhere, and professionals who are licensed to practice in one province, are not necessarily able to practice in another province. This impacts immigrants and non-immigrants alike.

[7] Lopes, Sandra (2004). *Bringing Employers into the Immigration Debate*. Public Policy Forum.

[8] Lochhead, C. (2003). *Perspectives on Immigration: Findings from the Canadian labour and Business Centre's Survey of Canadian Business, Labour and Public Sector Leaders*. Canadian Labour and Business Centre.

[9] Pricewaterhouse (1998). *Foreign Academic Credential Assessment Services Business Assessment Final Report*. Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation.