SOCIAL CAPITAL:

A Key Dimension of Immigrant Integration

ABSTRACT

Foreign credential recognition, though important, can remove only part of the barriers to economic integration of immigrants. Emphasis must be placed on bonding social capital in immigrants' integration into the receiving society, through which immigrants can expand their social and economic opportunities.

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The proverbial immigrant taxi driver who holds a PhD from a developing country reflects a paradox of immigration trends in Canada since the 1990s. On the one hand, immigrants are increasingly skilled and highly educated. On the other hand, they seem to be partially penalized by the qualifications that gained them entrance in the first place. Foreign credential recognition, or the lack thereof, has been identified as a barrier to labour market integration among immigrants. To alleviate the discounting of foreign-earned qualifications, governments, regulatory bodies, and other stakeholders have concerned themselves with improving the assessment and recognition process of foreign-earned credentials. With an integrative and transparent process of foreign credential recognition, it is hoped, skilled immigrants will be able to work in jobs commensurate with their qualifications.

An effective process of foreign credential recognition, though important, can remove only part of the barriers to economic integration of immigrants. In addition to formal recognition of foreign credential by regulatory bodies, skilled immigrants face the challenge of getting their qualifications recognized informally by their employers. This is so for two reasons. First, not all immigrants are trained in regulated professions. It is usually up to the employer to determine the value of immigrants' qualifications. Second, evidence has suggested that, with education and other social demographic factors being equal, immigrants of non-European origin earn less than do their European counterparts[1]. Hence, the value of a degree is dependent upon the individual attributes of its beholder. Success in the labour market depends as much on one's human capital as it does on the social capital one is able to accumulate.

Broadly defined, social capital refers to "networks together with shared norms, values and understanding which facilitate co-operation within or among groups"[2]. Unlike human capital that is observable through diplomas and certificates, social capital is less tangible because it exists in the relations among individuals.[3] Two types of social capital are essential in the social and economic integration of immigrants: bonding and bridging[4]. Bonding social capital refers typically to relations among members of families and ethnic groups. Bridging refers to relations between ethnic groups as well as between immigrants and the native-born.

There is ample evidence showing the importance of bonding social capital in immigrants' integration into the receiving society. Bonding social capital has already been identified as a possible contributor to the concentration of immigrants in urban areas. Through generations of migration, some ethnic groups have developed an infrastructure such as shops, restaurants, and social services that often parallel those in the mainstream society, hence the term, 'institutional completeness'[5]. These ethnic ties can provide a social safety net by meeting material and financial needs during lean times and caring for children and elders[6]. For example, immigrant dual-career couples often prefer to sponsor their parents to the receiving country to take care of their children or, failing that, send their children back home with the grandparents. More importantly, newly arrived immigrants often rely on ethnic and family ties for valuable information on the local labour market.

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That said, most people do not intend to stay within their own ethnic enclave, but rather, to be a part of the mainstream society. Bridging capital is therefore essential for immigrants to expand their networks beyond their own ethnic community and to acculturate into the receiving society. By doing this, they will have more social and economic opportunities. Recent studies have suggested that, in terms of employment, ethnic network is useful mainly in finding jobs with low human capital requirements[7]. For those who are highly skilled and educated, it is the bridging capital that enables immigrants to advance economically and socially. In other words, bonding social capital is critical in increasing the economic returns on human capital.

Clearly, in Canada, English/French language proficiency improves one's chances of accumulating bonding social capital. Language proficiency clearly enables immigrants to navigate through the mainstream society more easily. Generally, those who have knowledge of English or French are expected to do better in the labour market than those who do not have such proficiency. More importantly, immigrants need to understand the Canadian way of doing business. While no studies have been done in Canada, research in the United States has suggested that Asian professionals are not as upwardly mobile as their European counterparts due to a lack of familiarity with the corporate culture in North America. For example, their perception of job performance management is often different from that of their supervisors[8].

Integration, however, is a two-way street. While knowledge of the receiving society facilitates immigrants' transition initially, the warmth of welcome by the receiving society is critical to immigrant inclusion in the long run. Employers need to be aware and utilize the skills of immigrant employees. This is not always the case. A study conducted in the United States suggests that managers tend to think more highly of staff from Europe than of those from Asia[9]. According to a recent study in Canada among Muslim women in manufacturing, sales and service sectors, women who wear hijab still experience discrimination when applying for jobs[10]. Equally important is for the general public to be more receptive towards a diverse society.

In sum, foreign credential recognition is not the silver bullet that can remove all barriers to the social and economic integration of immigrants. Social capital can play a key role in the successful integration of immigrants. What does that mean? For immigrants, it means the ability to expand their social network beyond their ethnic boundaries. For the receiving society, it means a greater awareness of the benefits of immigration and acceptance of diversity. Only then can immigration be a win-win situation for immigrants as well as their receiving country.



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