FOREIGN CREDENTIAL RECOGNITION AND HUMAN RESOURCES AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT CANADA

ABSTRACT

Foreign credential recognition has been identified as a major contributor to the employment outcomes of internationally trained professionals in Canada. This article discusses the Government of Canada's approach, and progress, to ensuring that internationally trained professionals have access to credential assessment and recognition processes that are fair, accessible, coherent, transparent and rigorous.

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Canada's ability to sustain the capacity required to compete in an increasingly knowledge-based, global economy is dependent on the skills of its people. Globalization and the shift towards knowledge-based economies have placed increasing importance on ensuring the Canadian labour force is equipped with the skills and education needed to secure Canada's global competitiveness. The pressing need to improve the quality, quantity and efficiency of the Canadian labour force is further intensified by the shrinking pool of labour that has resulted from an ageing population. To partially offset pressures created by increasing global requirements and a diminishing pool of labour, the Government of Canada has placed a focus on increasing the quantity of available labour resources, while strengthening the quality of Canada's domestic labour force. While Canadian graduates will continue to account for the majority of our domestic labour force, their volumes will soon be surpassed by those exiting the labour market. To ensure that Canada has the labour resources that it needs to compete in the international marketplace, we will need to look to other sources of labour, including internationally trained professionals.

Data from Statistics Canada reveal that by 2011 immigration will account for 100% of Canada's net labour force growth and all net population growth in the next 25 years. However, outcomes for new immigrants have been decreasing for some years. Several factors have contributed to this decline, including lack of recognition of foreign credentials, lack of Canadian work experience, language abilities, timely and specific labour market information, and literacy and essential skills requirements among others. As a result, the income of skilled worker immigrants has been deteriorating since the early 1990s. A report undertaken by Statistics Canada found that in 2002, low-income rates among immigrants during their first full year in Canada were 3.5 times higher than those of Canadian-born people. By 2004, they had edged down to 3.2 times higher. These rates were however higher than at any time during the 1990s, when they were around three times higher than rates for Canadian-born people (Picot, Hou and Coulombe, 2007). These findings are particularly troubling considering that of the approximately 235,000 immigrants who came to Canada annually during the past several years, 20,000 (8.5%) self-identify as having the intention to work in a regulated profession in Canada for which their credentials would have to be recognized.

Attracting and retaining the best talent, including those with foreign education, training, and work experience, and ensuring that they are able to reach their full potential, is critical to the country's long-term economic success and prosperity. There is a large and growing population of newcomers whose labour market potential is under-utilized, despite possessing higher levels of education. For example, in 2002, 46% of all recent immigrant workers had a university degree and a further 13% held some other form of post-secondary credential such as a non-university diploma or trade certificate. However, approximately 60% of employed immigrants do not work at the same level of occupation they were employed in prior to coming to Canada, regardless of the education level.

Foreign credential recognition in Canada

Significant attention and cooperation from a multitude of players is required to effectively contend with labour market inefficiencies resulting from issues related to foreign credential assessment and

recognition. Each of these players has a distinct role to play in assessing or recognizing the credentials of internationally trained professionals. The government role is a shared responsibility of the federal, provincial and territorial governments and is defined by the *Constitution Act*. Provincial and territorial governments have jurisdiction over the regulation of skilled trades and most professions, and have delegated authority to regulate most professions, including determining licensing and certification requirements, to provincial regulatory bodies. The Government of Canada's role is situated within its responsibilities for the immigration system, national labour market policies, and providing leadership and national tools to strengthen the economic union. In addition to this broad-level involvement, the Government of Canada is also responsible for maintaining occupational competency standards for certain regulated occupations in Canada, such as some professions in the transportation sector.

In addition to the roles played by the federal, provincial and territorial governments, there are several other players involved in the assessment and recognition of foreign credentials in Canada. More specifically, there are currently five provincial assessment agencies, more than 400 regulatory bodies, over 200 accredited post-secondary institutions and a myriad of employers, each of which have a distinct role in foreign credential assessment and recognition. The responsibilities of these different bodies vary according to the purpose of the assessment or recognition. In the most general sense, universities, colleges, regulatory bodies, and provincial assessment agencies tend to be concerned with formal recognition related to educational credentials while the remaining groups are more involved in informal recognition from training and work experience. Institutions that conduct formal assessments typically do so to meet their organizational needs. In the majority of cases, post-secondary institutions conduct their own assessments of foreign credentials and grant recognition for academic placement in their institutions, while regulatory bodies may conduct assessments of foreign credentials for licensure or certification. In the case of the regulatory bodies, foreign credentials are only a part of the licensure process, and organizations may therefore lack the capacity to undertake assessment. In these instances, regulating authorities may rely on other organizations, such as provincial assessment agencies, to interpret foreign education. Employers, sector councils, and NGOs are typically concerned with whether applicants with foreign credentials have the skills necessary to meet the criteria of the position for which they are being considered. These bodies often use the results of an informal recognition or assessment as a proxy for competence. For employers, methods of assessment are done very practically in that they hire internationally trained workers and determine the results based on their performance.

There can however be overlap in the work of these distinct bodies which is why some choose to work in collaboration with one another. For example, the provincial assessment agency in the province of Alberta, the International Qualifications Assessment Services (IQAS), undertakes three types of assessments, one of which is for entrance into post-secondary institutions in Alberta or Saskatchewan. By working with IQAS, provincial post-secondary institutions are able to speed up the admittance process while maintaining the reputation of their institutions.

The large number of organizations involved in the process adds a level of complexity to the way in which foreign credentials are assessed or recognized. Internationally trained professionals are often unaware of how and by which body to have their credentials assessed or recognized. For example, immigrants wishing to obtain licensure to practice in one particular province would typically approach the provincial regulatory body responsible for granting licenses for that profession to attain approval to work in that occupation. In contrast, immigrants wishing to obtain a Canadian interpretation of their credentials would typically approach a provincial assessment agency. Many immigrants arrive in Canada only to find they need to have assessments completed. They are not aware of Canada's complex labour market and the impact jurisdictional differences may have on their ability to secure licensure or approval to work in a particular profession.

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Distinct jurisdictional roles and responsibilities have created a clear need to ensure that each of these bodies works in cooperation to make systemic improvements to foreign credential systems and processes. The Government of Canada has committed to working with partners and stakeholders to ensure that the roles and responsibilities stemming from jurisdictional obligations are respected and that the safety and security of Canadians is maintained. Its overarching role is therefore to support improvements to the systems and processes of assessment and recognition to ensure that they are fair, accessible, coherent, transparent and rigorous across the country.

Barriers

Despite nation-wide efforts to improve FCR systems and processes, barriers still remain. One of the most difficult challenges that must be addressed is providing up-to-date information to immigrants before they arrive in Canada. The lack of specific information available to prospective and new immigrants on Canada's foreign credential systems

and processes is a barrier to their successful integration into the Canadian labour market. Most immigrants are under the impression that they will be able to resume employment immediately in their profession or field once they arrive in Canada, regardless of their educational qualifications or language abilities. In many cases, these immigrants will need to have their credentials assessed to become licensed to practice in Canada. Furthermore, in some cases, the issue may be further complicated when the education of immigrants is not equitable with that of their Canadian counterparts. To contend with the issues resulting from unrealistic expectations, the Foreign Credential Recognition (FCR) Program has made investments to help prepare immigrants in their country of origin. The program is working with post-secondary education institutions to pilot the development and delivery of overseas integration services. These services include credential verification, skills and language assessment to determine any gaps, résumé writing and Canadian workplace orientation. The objective of these activities is to allow immigrants to begin to address some of these gaps before coming to Canada and to ultimately speed up their integration into the labour market.

The Government of Canada is also working to reduce barriers created by a lack of information on credential recognition through the Going to Canada immigration portal, which is a collaborative project between Human Resources and Social Development Canada and the Department of Citizenship and Immigration Canada. The Portal is an online tool for prospective immigrants, new Canadians, and those who interact with them, to learn about integration into the Canadian labour market. With the assistance of this tool, immigrants can learn about job search and preparation, foreign credential recognition, online skills assessments, information, services, and tools supporting learning opportunities towards attaining Canadian credentials and other topics related to integration into the labour market.

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Another barrier that has been identified as having an impact on the way in which international credentials are assessed or recognized is the lack of capacity that some Canadian institutions have to analyze the qualifications of immigrants. A number of institutions have limited organizational financial or human resources dedicated to this function. Furthermore, similar to educational institutions, regulators in the same occupation, but in different provinces or territories, may arrive at different assessments of the same degree or diploma. Requirements and procedures vary by jurisdiction, and few professional bodies or employers have a coherent or systematic approach to the assessment and recognition of foreign credentials. Within each jurisdiction, many organizations provide assessments for a wide variety of purposes and often follow very different procedures for assessment of foreign qualifications. Inconsistent processes mean qualified immigrants can undergo multiple assessments unnecessarily and, in turn, remain underemployed or unemployed for long periods of time.

To effectively address this barrier, the federal government has committed to continue working with provinces, partners and stakeholders to improve the consistency of assessments and the capacity to do assessments. Activities to facilitate the harmonization of foreign credential recognition and assessment practices across the country have been primarily implemented through the FCR Program. Through projects supported by the program, the Government of Canada has been able to make improvements to the way organizations across Canada assess the credentials of internationally trained professionals.

Foreign Credential Recognition Program

In recognition of these factors, the Government of Canada has developed and implemented targeted programming to facilitate the recognition of foreign credentials. Through Human Resources and Social Development Canada's FCR Program, the government has made improvements to the systems and processes that underlie the assessment and recognition of foreign credentials in Canada. The FCR Program has been allocated $68 Million over six years to implement the program and to engage organizations in activities that will achieve systemic improvements in the way in which their professions assess or recognize foreign credentials.

Progress to date

The FCR Program has worked with a multitude of national regulating authorities from across Canada. In collaboration with these groups, the FCR Program has worked to make the systems and processes that govern these professions fairer, more transparent, and consistent in assessing the international credentials and experience of immigrants. Making amendments to these systems and processes does take time as rigorous standards need to be maintained to protect the health and safety of the Canadian public and the integrity of professions. The FCR Program is also working with the provinces and territories to share the best practices emanating from these projects and strengthen FCR capacity across the country.

Early work of the FCR Program was aimed at doctors, nurses and engineers because of shortages in the healthcare field and an oversupply of engineers. The FCR Program has since expanded its focus to other health occupations including: physiotherapists, occupational therapists, medical laboratory technologists, medical radiation technologists, pharmacists, cardiology technologists, and midwives. The FCR Program has also directed efforts towards non-regulated occupations. Given that 85% of Canada's labour force works in non-regulated occupations, the FCR Program has supported a number of initiatives aimed at increasing employer awareness of the value of

the skills and experience that internationally trained professionals bring to the workplace.

The FCR Program works with employers primarily through the National Sector Council Program. The relationship that sector councils have created with employers, labour, and educational institutions positions them to serve as an initial point of contact in the program's work in credential assessment and recognition for non-regulated occupations. The FCR Program has already negotiated agreements with close to one-third of all the sector councils in Canada.

Future work of the FCR Program

The FCR Program continues to tabulate labour market demand statistics and explore the capacity of certain industries to absorb employees to determine the next occupations it will target for process improvements. The Government of Canada is currently working with provinces and stakeholders to augment the capacity of foreign credential recognition systems and processes.

This article is also available in French. Please contact Justin Ikura at Justin.ikura@hrsdc-rhdcc.gc.ca or 819-934-5610 to obtain a copy.

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.



Immigration and Families
L'immigration et les familles

Special Issue of / Édition spéciale de
Canadian Issues / Thèmes canadiens

Metropolis has continued its successful partnership with the Association for Canadian Studies to produce special issues of the magazine *Canadian Issues / Thèmes canadiens* on immigration and diversity topics. This issue (Spring 2006) focuses on immigration and the family. It features an introduction by Madine VanderPlaat of Saint Mary's University, an interview with the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Canada, and twenty articles by knowledgeable policy-makers, researchers and non-governmental organizations. Like earlier issues, it has been assigned as course readings in many disciplines at several universities.

Le partenariat entre Metropolis et l'Association des études canadiennes continue de porter fruit, avec la production de numéros spéciaux de la revue *Thèmes canadiens / Canadian Issues*, portant sur l'immigration et divers thèmes connexes. Ce numéro (printemps 2006) met l'accent sur l'immigration et la famille. Il comporte une introduction signée Madine VanderPlaat (Saint Mary's University), une entrevue avec le ministre de Citoyenneté et Immigration Canada, ainsi qu'une vingtaine d'articles rédigés par des responsables des politiques publiques, des chercheurs et des organisations non gouvernementales spécialisés dans le domaine en question. Ce numéro de la revue, comme les numéros précédents, compte parmi les lectures obligatoires de nombreux cours universitaires de disciplines variées.

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