THE CANADIAN CENTRE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

Linking Foreign Credential and Competency Recognition with the Environmental Profession – A Developing Model

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the evolving initiatives being taken within Canada's environmental sector to address the critical issue of providing foreign credential and foreign competency recognition to recent and potential immigrants. It examines the underlying problems in these areas and goes on to outline the work of the newly established Canadian Centre for Environmental Education (CCEE) to develop structures and procedures to harness existing, but disparate, resources and to provide one national centre for these activities.

The environment sector is one of Canada's more dynamic and fastest growing fields of employment. The *Environmental Labour Market (ELM) Report*, published by the Canadian Council for Human Resources in the Environment Industry (CCHREI) in 2004, indicated a workforce of 251 000, a figure that had increased by 13.7% over the four-year period since 2000. Of this workforce, 66% were identified as environmental practitioners, a figure that grew from 102 000 in 2000 to 166 000 in 2004 (CCHREI 2004). The *ELM Report* also identified serious problems in recruiting people to mid- and upper-level positions. In 2004, there were 12 000 environmental practitioner vacancies. This situation remains critical to the sector.

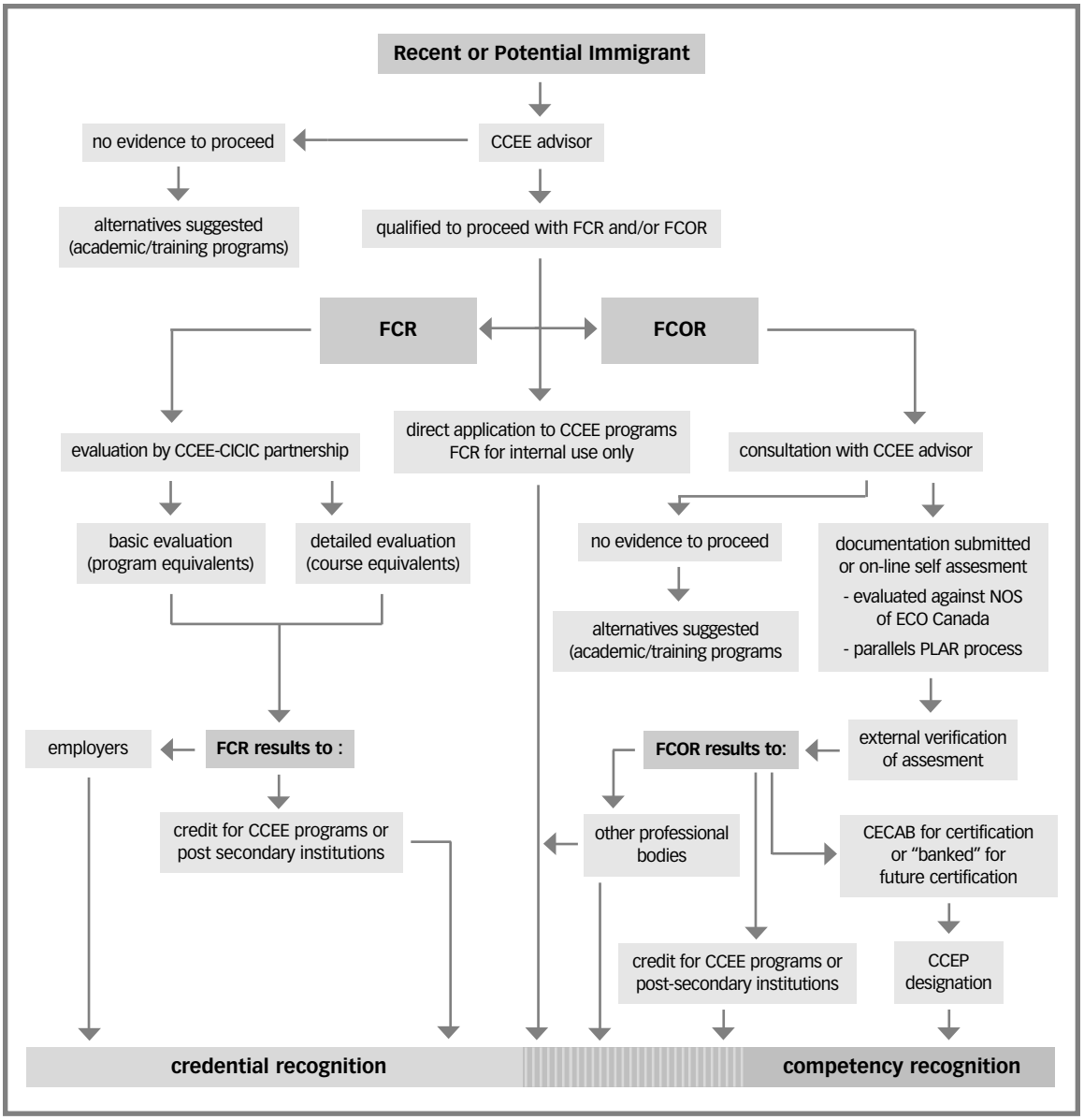
Given Canada's evolving demographic situation, the environmental sector, like virtually all other employment sectors, will confront serious and increasing labour shortages over the next decade. Immigration will be one means of satisfying this shortfall. Many immigrants have the knowledge and skills required to meet industry employment standards and yet, a major stumbling block in matching industry needs with the aspirations of both recent and potential immigrants is the fact that our procedures for recognizing their education and skills – their credentials and workplace competences – remain inadequate. It is a problem that governments, employers and the post-secondary educational sector must address. It is also an issue that must be addressed collectively by all the parties involved.

To address this problem for the environmental sector, the Canadian Centre for Environmental Education was established in 2006. The Centre is a partnership between Royal Roads University and Environmental Careers Organization of Canada (ECO Canada), which is Canada's national sector council for environmental employment. Funding and support for this initiative is provided by the federal government, through the Foreign Credential Recognition program of Human Resources and Social Development Canada.

Partners and procedures

Figure 1 outlines a model, currently in development at the Canadian Centre for Environmental Education (CCEE), which could satisfy the well-documented needs of immigrant practitioners in the environmental sector. It is based on a strategy that will rely on cooperation between the post-secondary education sector, the environmental industry sector, and governments to satisfy Canada's future needs for recognizing the credentials and competences of foreign-born and educated practitioners. It is a strategy that will bring together many existing, but so far disparate, agencies and procedures.

Figure 1: The links between the Canadian Centre for Environmental Education (CCEE) and the process for foreign credential recognition (FCR) and foreign competency recognition (FCOR) in the environmental sector.



The agencies involved are:

1. Royal Roads University, which is a provincially funded university mandated to provide applied and professional programs. Royal Roads University currently offers the Certificate Program in Environmental Practice through the Canadian Centre for Environmental Education. This program is built upon collaboration with the over 30 universities and colleges across Canada that provide access to their distance-based courses in the environmental field (www.royalroads.ca).

2. ECO Canada (formerly the Canadian Council for Human Resources in the Environmental Industry) was established by the federal government in 1990 under the Government of Canada's Sector Council Program as one of 30 national sector councils to bring together governments, educators, employers and workers in the environmental field. It is an autonomous organization whose mission is "to ensure an adequate supply of people with demonstrated skills and knowledge to meet the environmental human resource needs of the public and private sectors" (www.eco.ca).

3. CCEE, which is a partnership between Royal Roads University and ECO Canada, was established in 2006 to provide education and training activities related to the professional development and certification of members of the environmental profession. The Canadian university and college sector supports the Centre by providing courses for inclusion in the programs of the Centre (www.ccee.ca).

4. Canadian Environmental Certification Approvals Board (CECAB), which was established in 1997 by the Canadian Council for Human Resources in the Environmental Industry (now ECO Canada), is responsible for the professional certification of environmental practitioners in Canada using the national occupational standards developed by ECO Canada. ECO Canada is accredited as an ISO 17024 body; it thus meets stringent international quality standards and is eligible to perform audits. Individuals with at least five years of on-the-job experience and demonstrate that they meet or exceed the national occupational standards can be certified as a Canadian Certified Environmental Practitioner (CCEP). The standards use specific, employment-related competences. Persons who do not yet meet the five-year period or the full range of competences may be designated Canadian Environmental Practitioner in Training (CEPIT) while acquiring the necessary additional knowledge and skills (www.cecab.org).

5. The Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials (CICIC) collects, organizes, and distributes information related to credentials. It also acts as a national clearinghouse and referral service supporting the recognition and portability of educational and occupational qualifications. Provincially mandated evaluation services actually undertake the process. These are: the Academic Credentials Assessment Service in Manitoba; the International Credential Evaluation Service in British Columbia; the International Qualifications Assessment Service of Alberta, Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories; the Service d'évaluation comparative in Quebec; and World Education Services Ontario (www.cicic.ca).

The environmental sector, like virtually all other employment sectors, will confront serious and increasing labour shortages over the next decade.

The proposed model is based on several procedures, which could be adapted, but include:

1. Foreign credential recognition, or FCR, which is the process of evaluating the academic record of a non-Canadian against Canadian standards. This may be undertaken by a college or university, in which case the evaluation is recognized by that institution alone. More common, however, is for an individual to submit their transcripted credentials to a credential assessment agency, such as those listed above, to receive an evaluation at the program level rather than on a more detailed course-by-course basis.

2. Prior learning assessment and recognition, or PLAR, is the procedure used to award academic credit for the demonstrated skills and knowledge that a person has gained in their workplace through experience, development, attending workshops, training courses, seminars, and so on.

3. The national occupational standards are the 250+ competency statements documented by the profession through ECO Canada against which individuals' competencies are assessed. Individuals must demonstrate that their competency meets or exceeds these standards, which are the basis of assessment for professional certification, such as a designation as a Canadian Certified Environmental Practitioner.

4. Foreign competency recognition, or FCOR, is a new term, which we introduce here to distinguish foreign *competency* recognition from foreign *credential* recognition. It is similar to prior learning assessment and recognition, but unlike PLAR, it recognizes that a person from overseas may have been unable to acquire certain Canadian-based workplace skills, such as those related to regulatory, legal and compliance issues. Furthermore, it is recognized in this process that the external evaluation or peer review process of non-Canadians' competences will require source-country input. Two key principles will, however, guide this process. The first is that the same standards that apply to PLAR will apply to FCOR, and the second is that the process must be transparent, verifiable, and unbiased.

The current situation

Although each of these components exist in other sectors and contexts, few cohesive models exist to guide the developments needed to resolve problems in this critical human resource field, whether on a national, provincial or industrial sector basis. Apart from being bedevilled by inter-provincial barriers, industry (both employers and employees), governments, and the post-secondary education sectors have very limited connections. This is particularly the case in non-regulated professions. In non-regulated professions, there are few connections between industry and the post-secondary sector, although this varies between colleges – where there are perhaps more links – and universities. Nonetheless, non-regulated industries generally have few defined occupational standards and, in practice, these industries remain disorganized. On the other hand, universities, in particular, are loath to surrender their individual "rights" to define their own curricula. Employers often have a great deal of difficulty, for example, in determining what an environmental science or an environmental studies graduate may have experienced in their undergraduate programs. There are quite stark, inter-provincial differences for college graduates wishing to "ladder to," or obtain, degree status.

Problems become compounded for the immigrant. Despite having agencies that deal specifically with credential recognition, assessments produced for immigrants, while

valid, are often treated with skepticism by academic institutions and employers. Universities, for example, often prefer to undertake their own foreign credential assessments and, whereas these assessments have validity within the institution, they have little or no transferability. Furthermore, foreign credential assessment is more commonly only undertaken at the program level. It is often difficult for immigrants to obtain more detailed course-by-course evaluations, and this limits their ability to obtain specific course recognition. This often leads to a requirement to repeat a course.

However, the real difficulty arises for immigrants in seeking competency recognition for their acquired work-place skills and experience. Prior learning assessment and recognition opportunities are often in place within academic institutions but, with few exceptions, these are rarely used within universities, even by domestic students. There is little or no opportunity for foreign competency recognition. Procedures are not in place, there are few occupational standards to use as benchmarks, and where recognition is given, results are treated with a high degree of skepticism by employers. It would be rare indeed for a university to award credit for any foreign competences recognized under PLAR.

Consequently, if Canada is going to meet its future human resource needs through immigration, and if the education and experience of these immigrants is to be formally recognized even prior to arrival in Canada, then new and innovative procedures must be developed. Outlined below is a proposal to address these concerns within the environmental sector. Implicit in this proposal is the need for a single body, in this case the Canadian Centre for Environmental Education, to bring together government, employers, employees and the education fields. It is not a proposal to generate another layer of administration, but one in which the various components, which for the most part already exist, can develop effective interrelationships. It will be able, as a single body, to develop the skills and expertise needed to provide a transparent and verifiable set of procedures that are relevant to the environmental sector. It could be the one point of contact for all components of the sector, hence simplifying – and making more visible – the procedures and related information.

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Foreign credential recognition and foreign competency recognition in the Canadian Centre for Environmental Education

Foreign credential and foreign competency recognition must be treated with equal effectiveness. Currently there is little or no competency recognition for immigrants. This wastes time for the new immigrant, and it invariably results in the neglect of their skills, which requires a "relearning" in a Canadian setting. Without documentation from an accrediting body, employers are left to make unsubstantiated judgments on immigrants' skills and accomplishments.

The CCEE will shortly be appointing an advisor for PLAR, FCR and FCOR. This will be the first point of contact for immigrants who are seeking recognition of their credentials, competencies or prior learning (see Figure 1). The initial advice, based on a discussion of their available documentation and/or work experience, will outline the possibilities and options available. Where this evidence is not available, alternative routes will be suggested whereby the applicant can be informed of courses, programs and training opportunities available in Canada. This is an additional function of the CCEE as a national body.

The applicant may proceed to FCR by one of two routes. In the first case, an individual who is applying to the CCEE's programs may request FCR through Royal Roads University. This is a simple process requiring submission of authenticated transcripts. The applicant may be accepted into the CCEE on this basis alone, but the recognition limits that person to using their foreign credentials within Royal Roads University.

In the second case, an individual may apply to one of the provincial bodies for FCR. They will be given a Canadian equivalent of their degree or diploma, and this documentation can be used fairly extensively for entry into Canadian institutions. The provincial bodies have extensive documentation and expertise on foreign credentials, so it is not necessary for the CCEE to attempt to duplicate their existing functions.

However, of more critical concern is the recognition of specific course levels. Such detailed assessments require extensive, in-depth knowledge of subject areas that are likely to be beyond the capacity of the provincial bodies. To deliver the required course-level assessment, it is proposed that the CCEE make use of its national network of university and college partners to seek the recognition of foreign standards and content. The CCEE would, under this proposal, develop a partnership with one or more of these provincial assessment bodies, which as partners would become the focal point for all environmental foreign credit assessment. Through a partnership based at the CCEE and the Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials, applicants would receive documentation attesting to both the scope and the standards of their qualifications. This process would have the advantage of delivering documentation from a recognized source within the employment sector, and the Centre will become known to both employers and immigrants as *the* place to gain all relevant information on FCR. Comparative standards will become increasingly recognized and, by using an extensive network of academics in the detailed aspects of

the process, the value of FCR should become even more widely accepted within the academic community. The results of this assessment process can then be widely used by the applicant for entry into programs and courses at post-secondary institutions across the country, as well as for employment purposes. Employers will have a documented standard, awarded by a national body, upon which to base their employment decisions involving immigrants.

The situation for competency recognition is more complex. This situation nevertheless presents a unique opportunity to build upon the synergies in the environmental field between the industry, as represented by ECO Canada through its professional certification functions, and the education sector. Applicants seeking competency recognition will initially be counseled by a CCEE advisor to determine whether they have reached the required level of work experience and related activity in the field, and CCEE will shortly have in place a PLAR process for domestic practitioners. This will be primarily an on-line self-assessment process using the national occupational standards, which relate industry-based competences in the 19 sub-sectors in which practitioners are employed. Following the self-assessment, the applicants' responses are subjected to a three person peer review for verification. Normally, this is the process employed for professional certification as a Canadian Certified Environmental Practitioner, which can only be attained after five years of professional experience in environmental practice and by meeting or exceeding the national occupation standards.

For recognition of foreign competencies, a modification of this process will be employed. The variation will come in the elimination of those national occupational standards that require in-Canada experience. Moreover, the external, peer verification of the self-assessment will include home country expertise appointed by Canadian Environmental Certification Approvals Board. Positive results may be used toward meeting certification standards, and deficiencies can be identified for the individual who can then seek academic or on-the-job training. In the meantime, these results can be "banked" toward future evaluations for certification. Competences met will be identified and provided to the applicant, and these can be used by the applicant in seeking employment. It is quite likely that many potential immigrants will be able to demonstrate Canadian competency in many areas before arriving in Canada, thus giving them valuable "Canadian experience."

What is of particular interest is that the standards used to evaluate immigrants' competences are the same as those for Canadians. The procedures have common standards and results have been generated by one national body. This body is the CCEE using the national occupation standards developed by ECO Canada and procedures mandated by the Canadian Environmental Approvals Board. The results support a nationally recognized, Canada-wide certification so that portability issues between provinces become irrelevant. Moreover, because ECO Canada is ISO 17024 accredited, its standards conform to an international standard for accreditation.

Since the proposed procedures for evaluating foreign competences are essentially the same as those used for domestic competences through the PLAR process, and since the PLAR process is in place to generate academic credit, the immigrant may be awarded relevant academic credit within Canada for their home-based work experience. The use of the national occupational standards permits a more structured, consistent and verifiable process for justifying the award of such credit. Credit gained in this way may be used for both CCEE programs or for entry or credit in other Canadian post-secondary programs. The development of laddering opportunities to both baccalaureate and master's degrees is a key element in the mandate of the CCEE.

Concluding comments

The proposed structure outlined in this article should be fully operational by the summer of 2007. The model brings together, within one entity, the support mechanisms needed to provide immigrants with the procedures necessary for obtaining, in the most expeditious manner, foreign credential and foreign competency recognition relating to the environmental sector in Canada. It is a model that equates standards for immigrants with those for Canadians, and by linking academic requirements with professional competences and certification, career pathways are clearly documented. Building upon the existing relationship between the environmental industry, which is represented by ECO Canada, and the post-secondary education sector through the Canadian Centre for Environmental Education, the structure can form the natural bridge between the environmental sector as a whole and the federal government's initiatives to make the immigration process more seamless, efficient and rewarding. With the CCEE becoming *the* Centre for credential, competency and prior learning recognition for the environmental sectors, governments, industry and the academic field will have one clear point of reference wherein expertise may be collaboratively developed. It should provide an interesting model for those other employment sectors within the Canadian economy which will inevitably become increasingly reliant on immigration to satisfy their future human resource needs.

References

Canadian Council for Human Resources in the Environment Industry (CCHREI) (2004). *Environmental Labour Market (ELM) Report*. Calgary; CCHREI.