THE INCLUSION OF SKILLED MIGRANTS INTO THE CANADIAN LABOUR MARKET

Research Relevant to the Development of More Person-Centred Policies

ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of two studies that will be published in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of International Migration and Integration*. The studies look at the employment barriers faced by skilled immigrants and document their personal experiences using a variety of quantitative and qualitative approaches by researchers from different theoretical persuasions and disciplines in different immigrant-receiving countries. The two studies suggest that a person-centred approach to policy development is needed to address the structural barriers that foreign-trained migrants face.

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The Canadian government has made considerable efforts to recruit highly skilled immigrants over the last 15 years. As such, it is hardly surprising that the 2001 Census shows that native-born Canadians tend to be less educated than Canadians born in another country (Mulder and Korenic 2005). By and large, the majority of these highly educated individuals did not emigrate from Western Europe as in the past, but rather from Asia (58.2% versus 19.5% for immigrants arriving between 1991 and 2001). Indeed, the most recent census shows that in 2001, 9% of the Canadian population was composed of immigrants who could be described as racialized Canadians of mostly Chinese (28%), South Asian (24%), Black (13%) or Filipino (8%) ethnic origin (Ibid.). That is, the policy of recruiting highly skilled immigrants from around the world has made Canada both more competitive and more culturally diverse.

Since 1967, people have been admitted as economic class immigrants to Canada under a points system which, for most, emphasizes the value of both their educational qualifications and their work experience. Therefore, foreign-trained, skilled personnel receive the implicit message that Canadian employers and professional accreditation bodies will recognize and value their credentials and work experience should they decide to immigrate to Canada. Unfortunately, this implication is unfounded as the Canadian government has no mechanisms in place to ensure such recognition. Indeed, the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that Canadian employers and professional accreditation bodies are not up to the task of evaluating the merit of foreign qualifications and work experience obtained in countries from very distant parts of the world. Specifically, a human capital approach to research investigating this issue has shown that foreign qualifications and work experience are consistently undervalued resulting in initial wage gaps that for recent immigrants, particularly immigrants of colour, are much larger than in the past (Grant and Sweetman 2004, Li 2003, Picot 2004). Further, a recent, fine-grain analysis of income differentials by field of study (Anisef, Sweet and Frempong 2003) illustrates a particularly pernicious aspect of this problem. It shows that immigrants tend to be trained in prestigious professions that are associated with the highest incomes within the Canadian labour market (e.g., engineering, physical sciences and commerce). Yet racialized Canadians with foreign training in these fields of study were the ones who tended to be most underpaid relative to White, native-born Canadians. Further, other research suggests that the initial wage gap for racialized immigrants is an important pay equity issue because it results from both an undervaluing of the immigrant's professional credentials and from discrimination, with women being especially adversely affected (Boyd 1999, Li 2003, Reitz 2001).

Essentially then, many highly skilled immigrants, particularly immigrants who are members of a visible minority, suffer considerable downward mobility upon their arrival in Canada. That is, they are often unemployed or underemployed with disproportionate numbers living below the low income cut-off relative to native-born Canadians. Here, a recent analysis by Picot (2004) is pertinent as it shows that the proportion of Canadians born in another country who were living below the low

income cut-off increased from 24.6% in 1980 to 35.8% in 2000, while the proportion of native-born Canadians living below the low income cut-off declined from 17.2% to 14.3% during the same period. Further, these proportions vary substantially by source country, such that increases in the proportion living below the low income cut-off are confined to immigrants from Asia, Africa and the poorer European countries outside of Western Europe.

Clearly, a human capital approach has great value in documenting the nature and extent of the barriers to economic integration faced by highly trained immigrants from Asia and other regions of the world. In my view, however, policies developed to allow them access to higher echelons of Canada's labour market must be grounded in the experiences of the immigrants themselves. That is, the human capital approach is limited because, while it can document the impoverishment of recent skilled immigrants in terms of income and employment status, it can only detail how or suggest why these negative outcomes occur in very broad terms. Thus policy designed to address this important social issue is hamstrung by a lack of relevant detail. The papers in an upcoming special issue of the *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, which will be published this year under my editorship, provide such detail and, therefore, can offer an empirical base for new policy directions that are more person-centred than those developed in the past. The studies in this special issue document the personal experiences of skilled immigrants facing employment barriers using a variety of quantitative and qualitative approaches by researchers from different theoretical persuasions and disciplines in different immigrant-receiving countries. I find it both interesting and heartening that, in this special issue, the findings, the conclusions, and the policy recommendations described in the articles are both compatible and complementary. This provides triangulation of the broadest kind. In the remainder of this brief article, I will describe two articles that have been accepted for publication in the special issue (some are still under review) to illustrate this point by drawing out similarities between their findings, conclusions, and recommendations. In this way, the reader can gain some feel for the general policy directions suggested by this new body of work and, hopefully, will gain an appetite for more.

Many highly skilled immigrants, particularly immigrants who are members of a visible minority, suffer considerable downward mobility upon their arrival in Canada.

A questionnaire study by Grant and Nadin (in press) focuses on the psychological reactions of a sample of highly skilled, foreign-trained personnel (mostly skilled migrants) who had recently emigrated from Asia or Africa (N = 180) and experienced credentialing problems. The sample was obtained from a moderate-size city in the Prairies using the extensive local contacts of trained research assistants, who themselves had recently emigrated from Asia and Africa. The typical respondent was in her or his thirties, was married with at least one child, and of Christian (46%) or Islamic (25%) faith. Although English was not the mother tongue of any of the respondents, about half had been educated in English and even more had learned to speak English as a child (60%). Given their ongoing credentialing problems it was shocking but not surprising to learn that 83% had a personal income of less than $30,000 a year. This stark fact can be juxtaposed against the respondents' considerable skill level and work experience: most (91%) had a university degree in a wide range of fields spanning natural and applied sciences, health, education, social sciences, and business and finance, and they had worked in their profession, on average, for nine years prior to emigrating. Respondents had made a great deal of effort to obtain a suitable job in their profession, but to no avail. Indeed, about half stated that it was "very difficult" or "impossible" to obtain recognition of their credentials from Canadian employers, or to find a job that fully utilized their training and experience. Almost a third had never worked at a job that drew on their professional skills and two-thirds had had to take one or two unskilled jobs because their family needed the money. All in all, the evidence showed that these highly skilled professionals have experienced considerable downward mobility since coming to Canada.

Recognizing that their unsatisfactory employment situation was partially due to a lack of recognition of their foreign credentials, many respondents felt forced to repeat their training or to obtain training in a related field at a Canadian university. While this was not felt to be difficult, it did cause considerable financial hardship. Indeed, respondents who retrained in this way suggested that increased financial assistance, more advanced language training, and more opportunities to retrain would be of most help. Of course, some respondents (20%) also suggested that recognition of their foreign credentials should be made a priority, and this suggestion has added poignancy given that a formal credentials assessment by a Canadian assessment agency was judged to be of little use (only 12% felt that it helped them find a job).

A major section of the questionnaire asked respondents for their psychological reactions to their situation. Most (74%) were surprised that they were finding it so hard to obtain a suitable job in Canada. Just over half of the respondents stated that their experiences with Canadian employers were more negative than they expected, that their credentials and work experience were not valued, and that Canadian employers treated immigrants unfairly. Furthermore, almost 90% of the respondents felt that immigrants faced discriminatory barriers as they tried to enter the Canadian labour market. It is unsurprising that the situation the respondents faced evoked strong negative emotions which were a mixture of disappointment, sadness and hurt, with frustration, resentment and anger. In a separate paper, I show that these feelings, together with the belief that Canadian employers discriminate against immigrants in general, predict intentions to

engage in protest actions such as lobbying, attending meetings, signing partitions and taking part in peaceful demonstrations (Grant 2005). That is, the current barriers to accessing the Canadian labour market for foreign-trained personnel in Canada represent a waste of skilled human capital and have the potential to create social unrest. Clearly, this is an undesirable situation.

In Switzerland, there is also an increasing number of skilled immigrants, with national statistics collected in 2000 showing that 62% of recently arrived foreigners to Switzerland are university-trained. The underlying assumption seems to be that skilled, better-educated workers will assimilate into the labour market more easily than the unskilled but, like Canada, this is clearly not the case. Noting this, Riano and Baghdadi (in press) studied foreign-trained immigrant women for four specific reasons. First, skilled labour migration has been increasingly feminized, but this fact has been largely ignored by researchers who have concentrated on the exploitation of unskilled women. Second, labour market statistics from several immigrant-receiving countries show that highly skilled immigrant women fare less well than immigrant men in the host country's labour market. Third, there is a need to investigate skilled, foreign-trained personnel who enter the host country as family-class immigrants, many of whom are women, as often they face special problems (e.g., Switzerland does not allow family class immigrants a permanent work permit, which severely limits their employment opportunities). And fourth, existing research is focused mostly on science and technology, to the relative neglect of health, social services and education, the segments of the labour market where skilled immigrant women are concentrated.

It is important to develop flexible immigration policy initiatives that can address structural barriers to the skilled labour market in the context of the career goals and the financial circumstances of foreign-trained migrants, themselves.

The researchers, who are geographers, used a feminist theoretical framework and a qualitative methodological approach in contrast to the approach used by Grant and Nadin (in press). Specifically, they constructed detailed case studies of 57 skilled immigrant women from Latin America, the Middle East, and South East Europe (Kosovo, Bosnia, Montenegro) of both Islamic and Christian faith. This population has not been studied in Switzerland, but represents current migration trends in Switzerland. Using theoretical sampling, the authors chose cases that represent a wide range of situations for women of different categories: immigration status (refugee, immigrant, family class, and so on), age (28 to 60 years), length of residence (3 to 30 years), and family situation. Very few emigrated for work-related reasons (most were family class immigrants), although the Latin American women usually entered Switzerland through marriage, while the others usually came to escape political strife in their countries of origin. Most in the sample were highly trained, university-educated women (largely trained in business, commerce or social sciences). Proportionately more Latin American women emigrated to Switzerland with foreign credentials and work experience, while the others tended to come at a younger age and completed their university education in Switzerland.

Riano and Baghdadi (in press) used an interpretive biography method in which, through discussions, groups of respondents would interpret each person's life history just prior to and following emigration with the participants and the researchers producing this knowledge jointly. Then individual interviews were used to obtain a more detailed and accurate narrative of each person's history.

In spite of the fact that this study is so different from that of Grant and Nadin, the findings of the two studies are largely complementary. For example, Riano and Baghdadi find that the three most common types of labour force participation by their respondents were a) not in labour market (30%), b) employed below skill level (25%), and c) employed at appropriate skill level (45%). Further, employment was usually short-term and intermittent with only 10 (18%) of the respondents holding a permanent, full-time position in which they could fully utilize their professional skills. As well, both studies showed how repeating their education in the host country was a strategy for gaining access to the labour market, but that this was hard to finance. Finally, both studies showed that many immigrants volunteer as a way to circumvent the "catch-22" they face: the need for work experience in their new country in order to convince employers to give them work experience in their new country!

While reinforcing each other's main findings, these two studies illustrate the complementarity provided by using different theoretical and methodological approaches. This is illustrated most clearly when examining the different policy recommendations stressed by these two sets of researchers. Riano and Baghdadi choose to discuss various specific strategies adopted by the different women in their sample as a way to illustrate how class, ethnicity and gender combine to disadvantage (and sometimes advantage) different women in different ways. In particular, they discuss four strategies that women commonly use in response to the labour market barriers they face. These are 1) re-skilling (gaining qualifications in the host country), 2) taking any, often part-time job for financial and family reasons (often their cultural knowledge gives them an advantage), 3) using available, non-traditional resources to gain further qualifications (e.g., put children in day care or rely on husband to care for the children), and 4) abandoning career goals and becoming stay-at-home mothers. Riano and Baghdadi's general point, derived from a detailed examination of individual life stories of very different women, is that women follow different

strategies when faced with different life circumstances. For example, they note that in Switzerland, "paradoxically more opportunities were available to women who entered as refugees, became single mothers and had low incomes," illustrating the importance of developing social policies which address the particular employment-related barriers to the skilled Swiss labour market. It is instructive to note that the main policy recommendation made by Grant and Nadin complements this general point. This new policy direction is to give skilled immigrants clear career paths to follow so that they can regain their professional qualifications in a reasonable length of time. Adopting this policy direction would mean that more women would pursue the re-skilling strategy than before. Clearly, this is the desired option from a human capital perspective, but as importantly, it is likely to be practically useful because, as Riano and Baghdadi show, this is the option that all their highly trained respondents strongly desired when they first immigrated to Switzerland. Together, the two studies suggest that it is important to develop flexible immigration policy initiatives that can address structural barriers to the skilled labour market in the context of the career goals and the financial circumstances of foreign-trained migrants themselves. I believe that this more person-centred approach to policy development is what is needed if Canada is to fully realize the benefits of recruiting talented, highly trained personnel from around the world.

For information on the *Journal of International Migration and Integration*'s special issue on Foreign Training and Work Experience: The Skilled Immigrants' Perspective, please visit http://transactionpub.metapress.com/link.asp?id=120165 or www.jimi.metropolis.net.

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