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II. SABABC Scholarship Essay

Statistics show that in Canada, the average new immigrant takes a year or more to find a job, and when they do, it is most likely not in the field or at the level they were expecting. There is much ongoing debate about the recognition of foreign credentials and accreditation of foreign trained professionals. This issue has been highlighted by Honourable Member of Parliament Ruby Dhalla, especially from the standpoint of South Asians, who are making up a larger and larger component of educated immigrants to the country. With low population growth and a high retirement rate, Canada's policy-makers must recognize the critical need to re-assess this topic to ensure the country's future competitiveness and sustainability.

Since the 1980s, there have been prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) practices in Canada associated with experienced adults getting academic credit for their prior learning. Parallel evaluations of formal credentials through *General Guiding Principles for Good Practice in the Assessment of Foreign Credentials* using qualification recognition (QR) were also developed. In 2001, at a joint conference of practitioners, combining both PLAR and QR was proposed and subsequently funded by HRSDC. Since then, practitioners have been creating joint models known as Recognizing Prior Learning (RPL) systems, and HRSDC is currently launching pilot projects to assess their effectiveness.¹

As assessment methodologies are put through a much-needed streamlining process, on the public administration side, there is no national agency for credential recognition. The various provincial / territorial departments, academic institutions, accreditation boards, and professional regulatory bodies often assess credentials from other countries and other Canadian jurisdictions using separate procedures. The current government has recently created a Foreign Credentials Referral Office to recognize work and educational credentials

¹ Riffel, Margaret. *Recognizing the Prior Learning (RPL) of Immigrants to Canada: Moving Towards Consistency and Excellence*. Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment, June 2006.

of newly arriving immigrants. However, as an "information, path-finding and referral services" unit, this program may not address some of the more systemic problems.²

For example, an obvious problem that immigrants may face is difficulty navigating a diverse and complex set of rules and procedures rather than a single bureaucratic process. If comprehension of one of the official languages is weak, this can pose a considerable hurdle. A prolonged chain of websites, phone numbers or contacts may dissuade a potential immigrant to Canada, especially if they can find a country with direct information avenues.

For occupations regulated by professional associations, such as law, medicine, or engineering, applicants must often undergo examinations and show they have a certain number of years of work experience in Canada and good knowledge of English or French. This can be a potential hurdle for those who want to learn on the job so as to have an income to sustain themselves. This especially applies to those individuals from developing countries where their accumulated savings may not hold much value when compared to the expenses they are incurring in Canada. If they studied recently in their home country, moreover, potential immigrants may be facing similar or heavier loan repayments as their Canadian counterparts.

Another problem may be professional bodies resistance due to their placing priority on existing members / professionals. Under the current system, assessments can be subject to the bias of a particular community of professionals. Related to this problem are professional and social networks and institutional barriers. In any area of work, the right contacts and factors decreasing search-costs can lead to employment opportunities, such that often immigrants perceive greater ease of entry / less hurdles to positions occupied by others sharing some of their cultural traits and settle for a lower rung of the social and economic ladder than they would occupy in their homeland. Furthermore, nuanced and impenetrable discrimination may exist on the part of an employer, but may be difficult for an immigrant to define or challenge. Indicative of this potential are several studies that show a double disadvantage for recent immigrants who are also visible minorities.

So far, the official concentration has remained turned to the issue of methodologies used and the relations between bodies that control assessment and/or oversight, but perhaps it is

² Foreign Credentials Referral Office. *About Us: Helping foreign-trained workers succeed in Canada*. (Ottawa: Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2007). Available at: < <http://www.credentials.gc.ca/about/index.asp> > .

time to re-focus on the social context of recent skilled immigrants and their potential employers. In 2001, the recent immigrants who were most likely to have a university degree but be employed in a job requiring no more than a high school degree were from South or Southeast Asia, had a mother tongue other than English or French, were members of a visible minority, and were women.³ A recent Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants by Statistics Canada reported that the lack of Canadian work experience and transferability of foreign credentials was named by immigrants as the most critical hurdles to getting work.⁴

Furthermore, despite political attention, the lack of awareness and understanding of credential evaluation continues, especially among employers. A recent study of RPL usage in Saskatchewan reveals 78% of employers surveyed had problems implementing this approach.⁵ 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 ascertaining language skills.⁶ Furthermore, in the knowledge economy, written and oral communication takes on an added importance, and are the quick determinants of resumes / interviewees that are not to be selected.

My first recommendation to policy-makers involved in this area is to reconsider a national system to recognize learning, skills and competencies earned both internally and externally, with the assistance of information technology and internationally accepted methods. The agency responsible for this process could track provincial labour market needs, actively pursue employers in particular sectors or regions and also provide the necessary information to new immigrants, particularly those who face more acute difficulties in finding adequate employment. This agency should also have a complaints / appeal mechanism to ensure against potential discrimination or biased judgment.

My second recommendation is for the federal government to provide further funding to research regarding why well-educated South Asian (and Southeast Asian) women have a tendency to end up in low-education occupations upon their arrival in Canada. Although I have a few hypotheses, this research could have relevance to other social sectors and social trends, and could further enhance not only the economic vitality but also the social well-being of growing immigrant communities, leading to their better integration and inclusion in Canadian society.

³ Galarneau, Diane and Rene Morissette. "Immigrants – Settling for less?" *Perspectives* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, June 2004).

⁴ Owen, Timothy. *The Labour Market Experiences of Immigrants*. World Education Services, June 2005.

⁵ Saskatchewan Recognizing Prior Learning Co-ordinating Group. *Recognizing Prior Learning in Saskatchewan: Current Practices, Challenges and Future Directions*. January, 2007.

⁶ Owen, Timothy. *The Labour Market Experiences of Immigrants*. World Education Services, June 2005.

Canada is a nation of immigrants. Part of our richness as a country is the diversity of ideas, insights and skills that people bring here. As a wealthy country with a respected global reputation, we attract many skilled immigrants. However, many arrive only to find that they cannot obtain meaningful employment in their field, despite needs in the workforce market. Although efforts have been made to address issues with respect to foreign credential recognition by provincial governments, the federal government and some professional associations, overall there has been a demonstrable lack of leadership and ingenuity displayed. The federal government needs to step up to lead and implement a holistic, detailed action-plan to effectively deal with the situation.

The exact economic impact to Canadian society of not recognizing foreign credentials is unknown but a report by the Conference Board of Canada estimated that a half-million Canadians are under-employed and could earn an additional \$5 billion per year if their education and skills were formally recognized.

Some initiatives are underway to address this issue. The federal government established the Foreign Credential Recognition (FCR) program; Ontario and British Columbia are developing foreign-trained-worker networks; and several professional associations (PAs) have tried to develop new ways to clear the backlog of accreditation applications. There are also a variety of small, targeted programs aimed at individual skill upgrades. Although these actions are necessary, they are not enough to resolve foreign credentialing issues in a fair or satisfactory manner for foreign trained workers in Canada, or for those who are planning to come to Canada.

There are three significant barriers. First, PAs are not efficiently credentialing foreign-trained individuals to work in Canada. Second, there is a lack of collaboration among stakeholders, including government departments, PAs and employers. Finally, there is a lack of communication with new immigrants regarding credentialing requirements, expectations and clear procedure for meeting these requirements.

There are a variety of associations that control professional accreditation, however, many are doing an inadequate job of accrediting foreign trained workers. There are several reasons given for this, among them: non-recognition of foreign accreditations and training; a lack of adequate equivalency/standards-testing; and a lack of clearly-defined remedial or 'upgrade' processes for bringing foreign credentials up to Canadian standards. Often times it is difficult to establish whether a foreign training institution is up to the standard of a Canadian training institution. This can vary widely even within an individual country. Working with PAs, government should develop a list of schools that are consistently inline with the Canadian standards and ensure that it is routinely up to date. PAs in Canada should also be required by law to have a prior learning assessment tool so that they can efficiently test foreign trained workers and direct them to the upgrade skills courses that they require if necessary. This would streamline the processing of foreign trained workers and allow a fair and consistent manner of testing them. New immigrants who arrive in Canada with a skill set that is slightly deficient of the Canadian requirements are often forced to retake their entire professional training rather than upgrade the small portion that they are deficient in. This issue is compounded by the fact that new immigrants often face economic situations that don't allow them to attend school full-time. This leads to a circular, chronic under-employment situation. In order to address the issues faced by PAs, resources should be devoted to developing equivalency standards and remedial 'upgrade' classes. Such courses, coupled with appropriate competency testing procedures can ensure standards are upheld while recognizing existing skills and experiences would help alleviate this issue.

The second issue that hinders progress is the lack of collaboration among the various stakeholders. In addition to the federal and provincial governments, each professional association has its own bureaucracy. This has resulted in a situation where decision making is decentralized to an extent that it is impossible to develop a cohesive plan that addresses the entire issue rather than small attempts targeting individual issues and problems. A clear leader needs to step up and create a structure for the collaboration. The logical group to take on such a role is the federal government. The FCR program recently developed by the federal government will bridge the understanding gap that exists in assessing and determining foreign qualification by funding associations to look into the equivalencies of foreign programs. It is a good first step, however it needs to be expanded and given the larger mandate explained above. They should build on the FCR and develop a centralized accreditations secretariat whose role it is to bring together all of the PAs and relevant provincial and federal government ministries.

Immigration is critical to ensure continued economic growth in Canada. Because of this we have developed a sophisticated points system for immigration to Canada. Our system rewards heavily for skilled training and language proficiency. In theory this system brings people to Canada who are able to contribute meaningfully to our economy. However in reality people who immigrate to Canada because of a high number of "points" in the skilled labour class are often unable to practice the skill for which they received these points. This undermines the intention of the immigration system while also impeding economic growth in Canada. A lack of formal communications between PAs, Immigration Canada and new immigrants has resulted in this situation. Each professional association should be required to develop a comprehensive outline for new immigrants detailing the process they will have to undertake in order to practice their profession in Canada.

With a growing economy, an aging-population and a burgeoning skill-shortage, the issue of foreign accreditation is one that will become even more vital to address in the near future. With strong leadership, the inclusion of foreign trained workers can again play a vital role in the Canadian economy. However, if no leadership is shown on this issue, it will continue to be a lost opportunity for Canada, and a social and moral failure of our system.