

The Non-Accreditation of Immigrant Professionals in Canada: Societal Dimensions of the Problem

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September 21, 1999

Paper presented to a panel discussion organized by the Maytree Foundation during the conference “Shaping the Future : Qualifications recognition in the 21st Century”, October 12-15, 1999, Toronto, Ontario. The views presented in the paper are of the author and not necessarily represent those of the Department of Canadian Heritage.

Abstract:

This paper explores issues related to the problem of the non-accreditation of foreign-trained professionals in Canada. It touches on the major societal impacts of the problem plus the stages and barriers in the immigrant accreditation process. It also examines some policy initiatives presently being undertaken by the major stakeholders such as provincial and federal governments, post-secondary educational institutions, professional bodies and employers. The paper concludes by a brief list of possible four policy elements of a concerted national strategy to deal more effectively with this issue in Canada.

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INTRODUCTION

Due to the increasing international mobility of labour in the context of globalization pressures, issues associated with the accreditation of immigrant professionals in the host country are now paramount in the social policy agenda of many receiving countries. The problem of the non-recognition of the educational credentials brought by immigrant professionals has profound implications in terms of labour market adjustment, the ability to compete in the international marketplace and the socio-economic integration of immigrants and ethnic minorities. An optimal utilization of human capital brought by immigration is singled now as another pre-requisite factor in competing successfully in the international marketplace. In the global economy, complex entry procedures to trades and professions represent significant obstacles diminishing the level of international competitiveness by hindering a freer flow of professional services within and between countries.

In his typology of highly educated international migrants moving during the "brain" movement era of the XX century, Kunz (1976) identified three typical flows: managerial-executive scientific-academic and professional. . The managerial-executive group includes people with experience in administration, business and management such that their immigration does not necessarily involve a change in occupation, only a switch of corporate position or of citizenship. Scientific-academic migrants fill short term research and teaching appointments around the globe. Professional inflows are composed of permanent settlers who hold a wide range of post-secondary and university degrees in different disciplines. The employment chances of the last two groups are affected by labour market determinants of different sorts and are specially contingent on administrative/political factors such as "potential accreditation blockages exerted by licensing bodies of entrenched fellow professionals acting as a pressure group" (Kunz, 1975:188).

Upon their arrival to the host country, most immigrant professionals seek acceptance in the new country as rank and file members qualified for one of the professions. Their professional credentials, however, may become irrelevant in view of the presence of various obstacles which interfere in achieving a favourable accreditation outcome in the host country. Information, language-related, institutional and attitudinal barriers are omnipresent at all stages of the immigrant accreditation process. As a consequence of these barriers, one major socio-economic outcome occurs: *a large number of highly qualified immigrant professionals are sub-utilized or non-utilized either through unemployment, welfare*

assistance or performance in low-income menial types of work.

The non-accreditation of foreign professionals in Canada has been described as a problem rooted in multiple barriers which cut across a wide range of institutional layers (McDade, 1988). In recent years, institutions such as educational bodies, immigrant groups and ethnocultural organizations have expressed concern regarding the pervasiveness of these barriers in the immigrant accreditation process. During the late 80's and early 90's several ad-hoc task forces reviewed the different accreditation processes in the Canadian provinces. The reports from these provincial task forces recommended a change in the current procedures and called for active participation of the different stakeholders in eliminating all barriers to the accreditation of immigrant professionals. Different accreditation-related initiatives designed and implemented in the late 90's are rooted in the principles of these recommendations

The purpose of the paper is to briefly reflect on some issues and policy choices surrounding the problem of the non-accreditation of immigrant professionals in Canada, particularly on the societal dimensions of the issue, barriers to accessing the professions and courses of action undertaken by the various stakeholders of the accreditation process. The focus here is on problems faced by immigrant professionals rather than tradespersons or other skilled labourers. The paper has four sections presented as questions to be answered: the picture of the problem, societal dimensions of the issue, selected policy initiatives and a brief reference to policy elements which could move us forwards towards a more fair accreditation process for immigrant professionals in Canada.

WHAT IS THE IMMIGRANT ACCREDITATION PICTURE IN CANADA?

Canada has been relatively successful in attracting immigrant professionals coming from all over the world. Between 1981 and 1991, Canada received at least 300,000 immigrants with non-Canadian post-secondary education and training. The national pool of foreign-trained immigrants is estimated to be growing by at least 60,000 a year (OLA, 1993). Independent class immigrant projections according to the 1997 Immigration Plan estimates the admittance of between 82,000 to 90,000 skilled workers. This number is likely to remain stable in the coming years. As Canada admits more immigrants, the country becomes responsible for ensuring that appropriate mechanisms are in place to facilitate their integration

into the labour force at levels which are appropriate to their competence and training (Huggins, 1997:3).

Contrary to public belief, the problem of the non-accreditation of immigrant credentials in Canada is not necessarily an “immigrant” problem. Interprovincial barriers also diminish the fluidity of the provision of professional services. Questions regarding how “portable” (mobile) and how “transparent” (Canadian-situated) professional degrees affect Canadians who have moved between provinces or those who have obtained their degrees abroad as well. Out-of-province professionals and immigrant professionals have to comply with specific occupational regulations and provincial requirements in order to become fully licensed/accredited.

For foreign-trained professionals, at the outset of the immigration experience, poor information on accreditation procedures is the first major barrier to be faced. Immigration officers overseas often do not have the necessary knowledge in identifying occupational designations and/or about specific certification requirements for the various trades and professions. When immigrant professionals arrive in Canada they find out that:

- 1) there is no national body responsible for the recognition of foreign degrees, professional accreditation and licensing;
- 2) Canadian professional associations, who are the sole “accreditors” within the Canadian system, often lack the necessary information on both education systems abroad and work experience equivalencies;
- 3) educational and occupational standards vary by province and occupational characteristics of the labour market and;
- 4) each Canadian province and territory has a different standard of setting educational qualifications, training and certification of professionals.

For immigrants, seeking accreditation of their professional degrees in Canada means undertaking a personal “journey” involving complex interactions with several institutions. Four major institutional players are involved: 1) *post-secondary education institutions*, 2) *provincial governments*, 3) *professional self-regulating bodies* and 4) *employers*. Each of these players, at some point, decide the types of inputs and outcomes of the accreditation process. *Provincial governments* legislate and fund post-secondary

institutions and establish close linkages with occupational and professional associations. *Post-secondary educational institutions* design and deliver programming services in order to grant formal certificates of academic achievement.. *Professional or licensing bodies* have the power to certify/license persons as competent to practice a profession. *Employers*, despite not being accrediting bodies in themselves, play the primary role of providing the accreditation applicant with Canadian work experience, which is a basic pre-requisite for membership in a professional association.

The admission to a profession in Canada requires the completion of post-secondary education; a professional degree; professional training; work experience during or after training; and, a successful completion of certification examinations specified by a provincial licensing body. In the Canadian context, accreditation is formally defined as "the process by which an agency or association grants public recognition to a training institution, program of study or service which meets certain pre-determined standards" (EIC, 1993:39). Accreditation entails an auditing of the training institution to ensure certain Canadian requirements are met, and the systematic review of training items such as course contents, time of training, methodologies, training staff, etc.

The function of professional licensing in the provincial context is based on the principle of protection of the public from several forms of malpractice and ensuring health and safety criteria are met. The control of entry to the professions, combined with standards of conduct and disciplinary procedures for practising are ?intended to ensure the professional competency of practitioners? (McDade, 1988:12). Given the diversity of licensing arrangements across Canada, generalizations cannot be easily made regarding the occupations covered by specific regulations or the degree of regulation imposed. Some standards are of a voluntary nature and may be accepted, recognized or enforced differently by accrediting bodies or employers while some others may not. The diversity of licensing regulations, coupled with frequent skill requirement changes, makes it extremely difficult to classify or document specifics on trade, professional and employment barriers.

The professional accreditation process involves a systematic examination of pre-migration human capital factors such as foreign education certificates, language competencies and work experience (i.e. what the individual has learned through structured education and job experience in the country of origin). In order to move towards the first accreditation stage, after obtaining sufficient information on accreditation

procedures, immigrant professionals must obtain an adequate academic recognition of their educational degrees (Canadian equivalency) and have accumulated sufficient skills/competencies to increase their accreditation chances.

The general assessment of immigrant qualifications comprises a formal review of the academic and work related training by professional accrediting bodies. Qualifications are assessed to determine if the candidate is adequately prepared for certification examinations. Traditionally, the most expedient way to determine the training level has been to administer comprehensive evaluating examinations in combination with assessment of pertinent documentation. Licensing bodies may refuse to grant equivalencies to candidates who are accredited outside their jurisdiction. In addition, they have the prerogative of restricting the granting of equivalencies to candidates accredited by known schools. Occasionally, a candidate who is not a graduate of an "accredited" school will be examined by a review panel which will give him/her the chance to demonstrate his/her professional competence.

One of the typical problems for professional bodies at the general assessment stage is related to what economists have called the "statistical" discrimination of professional credentials (Kaufman, 1991; CTFMH, 1988; McDade and Wright, 1992). Accreditation assessments are often made on the basis of "imperfect" information regarding the international markets of professional credentials. Uncertainties in estimating with precision the professional merits of non-Canadian applicants are correlated with possible unfavourable accreditation outcomes. "Statistical" discrimination is a problem for educational institutions, government and employers as well. The lack of systematic information on international degrees has led to the proliferation of numerous and sometimes "subjective" methods of evaluation used by professional review panels (McDade, 1988:viii).

In addition to "statistical" discrimination problems, often the licensing bodies make accreditation related decisions based on their views on the prevailing conditions of supply and demand within their professional labour markets. Present examples of these criticisms are found in the items of debates surrounding the exercise of the medical profession in Canada (Barer and Stoddard, 1991). Proposals such as sending immigrant doctors to work in rural areas, determining the number of medical internship quotas for foreign graduates and dealing with the issues of "over-supply" of *graduates from foreign*

medical schools (GOFMS's)¹ have been points of conflict between professional bodies and immigrant professional lobbying groups. Restrictions to medical internships for foreign trained doctors by professional bodies has prompted also a heated debate in the media and in the courts.

From the perspective of the immigrant, the accreditation process is a test of personal endurance. Not only are his/her academic credentials are brought to question but also the working experience accumulated in the home country may be simply ignored. Many immigrants are “trapped” at different stages of the accreditation cycle. *Employers do not hire foreign-trained people unless they have attained membership in appropriate professional associations while professional associations do not grant membership unless the individual applicant has some proven amount of Canadian work experience* (Government of Manitoba, 1992; Government of Alberta, 1992). To break this "vicious" circle, provincial task forces have recommended the implementation of accreditation policies which will move the present system towards a multi-measurement testing procedure rather than one based on the sole reliance on "paper-pencil" tests in both the areas of language and prior learning assessment.

Overcoming language barriers seems to be a major step in the immigrant accrediting process. In addition to certification examinations, in Canada, candidates for accreditation must show an ability to communicate in either English or French. At present, the assessment of language proficiency and prior learning experience are extremely controversial subjects. The TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), which is the most widely used standardized test of English competency, has been criticized in terms of its "cultural" bias and its inadequacy to reflect the written and oral tasks demanded by professional jobs. The development and use of tests measuring occupationally relevant language competencies are seen as better options than the use of rigid standardized tests (Government of Ontario, 1989).

¹ Now these are called “International Medical Graduates”.

After the review of qualifications, a large number of foreign-trained candidates may be asked to repeat the educational requirements of their profession and undergo retraining at a school within the province. For instance, foreign-trained lawyers may be required to return to school for one or two years, article with a law firm, then enter a provincial bar admission program. Foreign-trained doctors must undertake a rigorous period of pre-internship and internship training designed to evaluate and upgrade clinical skills. Engineers of "non-accredited" universities must prove that they have a fixed period of satisfactory practical experience in order to be considered for accreditation, even after completing the examination requirements. To get "accredited", dental practitioners trained abroad have to undertake taxing certification exams (written, pre-clinical and clinical skill testing) accompanied by a minimum period of practical experience.

Immigrants from "not-accredited" professional programs (generally from schools outside the U.S. or U.K.) are required to retrain before they can take the certification examination although they may, "technically" speaking, be able to pass certification examinations immediately. Immigrants who are required to undergo retraining are frequently asked to do so at institutions which are not appropriate to their age, needs, experience and qualifications. The cost of academic training and the entrance examination fees tend to be prohibitive for many immigrant professionals. There is also limited financial support available while the applicant obtains the required retraining.

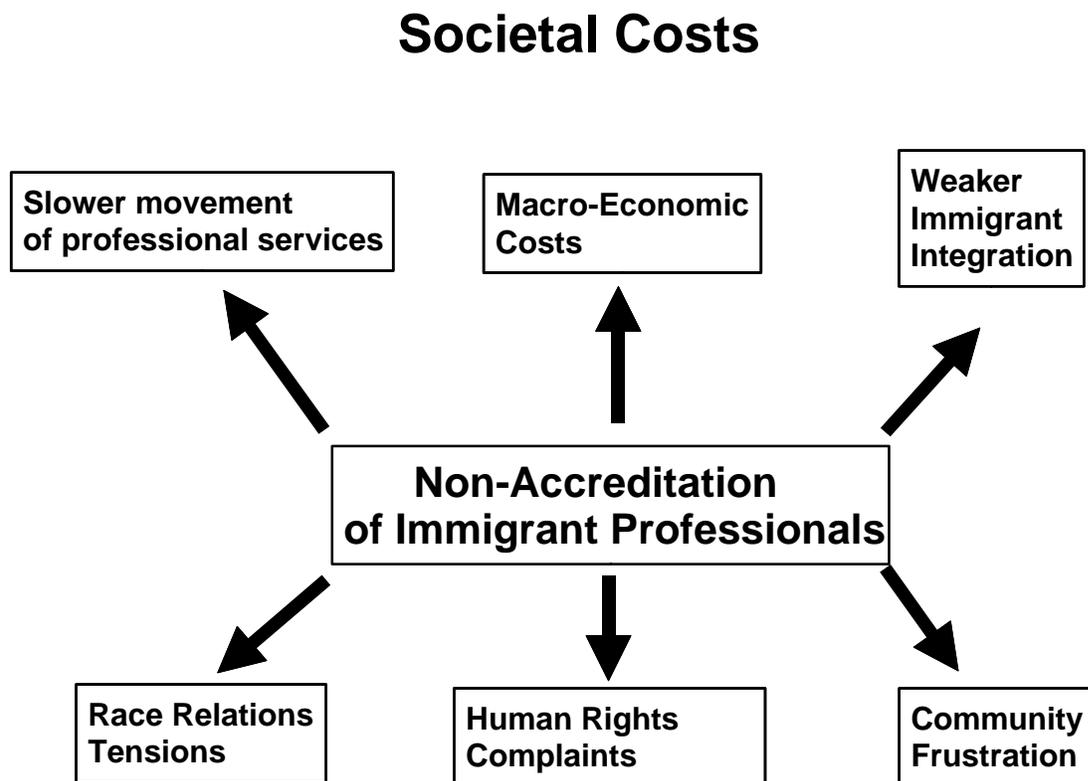
If some form of professional retraining is not required, the final stage of the accreditation process involves certification examinations in combination with language testing and a required period of professional practice (e.g. internship). Many provincial associations have already established a national body to conduct a common certification examination across Canada (e.g. professions such as medicine, nursing, dentistry, and architecture). In the last instance, the provincial regulatory body is the only institution which determines who is qualified to write the examination and assesses results according to provincial standards of certification.

Immigrant professionals who reach their final objective are successful in obtaining a certificate or license to practice their professions. This means they are granted public recognition of their degrees and become official members in a recognized professional association. If the final accreditation decision is unfavourable, applicants may still appeal the decision to the relevant professional organizations where

they are seeking membership. The final appeal, however, rests with the courts, which are able to determine if the accrediting body has erred in the interpretation or application of its governing act and resolutions. If some form of employment discrimination may be proven, the applicant's case may also be examined by human rights commissions or councils of the Canadian provinces.

WHAT ARE THE SOCIETAL COSTS OF THE PROBLEM?

Why does Canada need to tackle the problem of the non-accreditation of immigrant professionals? The research literature on the subject and empirical evidence in Canada suggests there are six major societal costs of both an economic and non-economic nature: 1) slower movement of professional services, 2) macro-economic costs, 3) weaker immigrant integration, 4) race relations tensions, 5) human rights complaints and 6) community frustration.



complaints and 6) community frustration. All these six societal costs have direct impacts on *productivity levels* as well as on *societal cohesion*.

Slower Movement of Professional Services

The present present global trends are moving Canada towards a freer provision of professional services is making the immigrant accreditation question an important social policy item for Canada. Given the

present concerns regarding the national ability to adjust to new market conditions, the challenge is to make more efficient use of its domestic pool of academic and professional credentials and “speed-up” the movement of professional services. This effort requires dismantling external and internal forms of professional labour and professional protectionism , while at the same time, ensuring that training competencies and public safety remain social policy concerns. Comprehensive policy strategies in the area of immigrant accreditation barriers are, more than before, vital to Canada and the rest of the industrialized world in keeping pace with the new market conditions set by the always changing and dynamic global economy.

The magnitude of the immigrant accreditation problem has compelled most countries of the industrialized world to enforce some legislative measures to develop new standards for occupational regulation and to review policy guidelines on certification, the licensure processes and professional training programs. At present, the European countries, Australia and the U.S. are among those who are undertaking the most definite policy steps to deal with the issue. These international policies of accreditation are encouraging the signing bilateral or multilateral national agreements, providing rules for the international recognition of diplomas and establishing information networks on the international standards of trade and professional certification. While the Australian system tends to be the relatively centralized (through a National Office of Skills Recognition) those in European countries tend to give more autonomy to professional bodies in their licensing decisions (Jasmin and Bouvin, 1992). Canada must define its policy role given these two ways of approaching the problem.

Signed international agreements play a significant role also. In the fall of 1989, Canada signed a UNESCO convention designed to promote the international mobility of teachers, students, researchers and professional workers by ensuring that their professional degrees/competencies are recognized as widely as possible. Canada's accession to this convention represents a symbolic step in recognizing the need to address the immigrant accreditation problem in Canada and to reform the socio-institutional mechanisms responsible for the barriers impeding an adequate mobility and use of professional services. Global economic integration processes demand substantial international mobility of capital, property, goods, technology and professional services. To increase competitiveness, steps toward increasing capital mobility and liberalizing international trade should be, in principle, accompanied by "freer" professional services. An optimal movement of professional services is instrumental not only in making

easier the movement and access of enterprises to the Canadian market but in making more efficient use of human resources and in achieving a higher level of economic output (ITO, 1993).

Although the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and other trade agreements are fundamentally intended to increase market access and facilitate the flow of capital in the North American region, they will certainly have a long-term impact on the liberalization of professional services across international labour markets and on the number of applicants seeking accreditation in Canada. In principle, world or regional trade agreements such as GATT, the Pacific Rim or an Hemispheric Free Trade Area could, directly or indirectly, affect the volume and demographic characteristics of the pool of foreign-trained immigrant professionals, the backlog of professionals seeking professional recognition and the rules of admission of foreign-trained individuals to specific trades and professions.

Macro-Economic Costs

The non-accreditation of immigrant professionals has also macro-economic costs to Canada. The annual revenue loss derived from labour market inefficiency (i.e. non-utilization or poor utilization of foreign-trained human resources) may be approximated by the sum of foregone income, taxes lost and income support given to unemployed professionals. Although this information is not currently available in Canada it may be roughly estimated to be hundreds of millions of dollars. In Australia (a country which is very similar to Canada in several demographic, socio-economic, cultural and immigrant composition characteristics), for instance, the number of immigrants who have failed to gain recognition and never returned to their pre-migration occupations in 1990 was estimated to be close to 200,000. Losses to the Australian national economy due to the non-recognition of foreign degrees ranged between US \$100 and 350 (Stasiulis, 1990).

Race Relations Tensions

Undoubtedly, the lack of accreditation of foreign-trained professionals has negative impacts on the state of race relations in Canada. When a large numbers of individuals from particular ethnic or racial backgrounds are blocked in their entry into the trades or professions there is an accumulated societal effect of higher levels of inter-group tensions, individual and collective alienation as well as generalized perceptions "institutional" discrimination. Accreditation blockage imposed on foreign-trained professionals has another deleterious effect on minority youth whose parents were trained abroad: "it

sets limits to the likelihood that minority professionals could serve as effective role models for succeeding generations” (Hall, 1975).

As a result of shifts in the source countries of immigration more visible minority professionals from Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa are seeking recognition of their degrees in Canada (DeVoretz and Maki, 1983). Immigrant professionals of visible minority backgrounds are dissatisfied with the accreditation process in Canada. A recent study of 404 Indo and Chinese immigrant professionals residing in the Vancouver area found only 18% of them presently worked in their own profession in Canada (Basran and Zong, 1997). Only 6% agreed that the provincial governments had conducted a fair recognition of their foreign credentials. These percentages were 9% and 12% with respect to professional bodies and educational institutions. When asked about the possible sources of discrimination in the accreditation process, 65% reported colour, 69% nationality or ethnic origin and 79% the inability to speak English.

The most typical collective response to the accreditation blockage imposed by professional self-regulating bodies has been the formation of immigrant professional lobbying groups. These groups are mobilized to challenge the views, regulations and standards set up by Canadian professional bodies. Members of these lobby groups are concerned with the presence of systemic biases and discrimination throughout the different steps of the accreditation process. Prejudice and discrimination by accrediting bodies is said to be directed, in particular, towards visible and ethnocultural minority members (OWD, 1987).

Accreditation blockages are seen as responsible for a "waste" of valuable cross-cultural professional skills which are badly needed by immigrants during settlement and post-settlement stages in the host country (e.g. immigrant physicians who could provide culturally sensitive health-care for recently arrived immigrants).

Human Rights Complaints

Some immigrant professionals feel legal provisions of the 1982 Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms do not provide sufficient protection from discrimination on the basis of country of training (Government of Alberta, 1992). In a 1988 case, *Jaworski vs. Ontario Ministry of Health*, the Ontario Supreme Court held-up legislation which allowed graduates from certain "accredited" (American and

Canadian) medical schools to proceed directly to internship, whereas foreign graduates of "unaccredited" schools had to complete a pre-internship program. It was ruled that this procedure did not infringe any sections of the Charter. The rationale for the decision was that graduates of foreign medical schools were not similarly academically "situated" as graduates from American schools.

The distinction between "accredited" and "non-accredited" schools is seen by immigrant medical professionals as a form of discrimination which contravenes the equality rights of section 15 in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. More recently, this has been illustrated by the complaint of systemic discrimination made to the Manitoba Human Rights commission by a refugee doctor from India. The Winnipeg Free Press reported that, in 1999, there were about 1,500 foreign-trained doctors in Canada who do not practice medicine in the country because of many "administrative and financial barriers" (Winnipeg Free Press, September 10, 1999: A1)

Weaker Immigrant Integration

Foreign-trained professionals face serious occupational and socio-economic integration problems in Canada. Unable to work in their professions or fields of study, they end up undertaking professional and occupational roles not commensurate with their education and very different from the occupational roles performed previously. Economic survival in the host country means, often, accepting manual work, clerical jobs or starting a business "venture" as self-employed labourers. The inevitable results of these new roles are socio-occupational dislocation, lower rates of income return and downward social mobility (Chapman and Iredale, 1993).

Econometric research has revealed that lower rates of income returns are positively correlated with the possession of a foreign academic degree. Studies based on census microdata found large differences (controlling for human capital related factors) in the rates of income returns between the Canadian-born and those who, being born abroad, had obtained their professional credentials before immigrating (Wright and McDade, 1992; Boyd, 1994). Income differences were attributed to the under-evaluation of academic credentials and possible credential "discrimination" by employers. The country of birth constituted a significant explanatory variable in the prediction of income differences between immigrants from developed and developing countries. Both foreign-born men and women, particularly those from

visible minority groups, were especially prone to experience earnings "discrimination" based on their types of academic degrees.

The professional accreditation barriers for immigrant women and refugees are often insurmountable. Women are seriously disadvantaged by factors associated with their legal entry status (entitled settlement assistance) as well as from the overburdening nature of gender and family roles. For refugees, on the other hand, accreditation means presenting original certificates and other related documents. Many of these documents may have already been destroyed or lost in the flight from refugee camps. Political/military upheaval at home may mean there is nowhere to appeal for replacements or transcripts of these documents (CTFMH, 1988). As a consequence of the prohibition of a physical re-entry to the country of origin and the associated difficulties in either locating or contacting the professional school, refugees may simply abandon their hopes of having their professional credentials recognized in Canada.

Community Frustration

Despite being the most harmful to society, the psycho-social impact of the non-accreditation of immigrant professionals has been the most underestimated one. The 1988 Report of the Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues singled out the barriers to trades and professions as major factors leading to an "erosion of skills, loss of technical idiom and diminishing confidence in one's capabilities" (CTFMH, 1988:33). The slow pace in resolving the accreditation issue has created anxiety and frustration among professionals from different immigrant and ethnocultural backgrounds. To date, expressions of group unease have included letters and petitions addressed to provincial or federal institutions, complaints made to national and provincial human rights commissions, organization of professional lobbying groups, hunger strikes, etc.

Expression of immigrant frustration has been most public in the medical profession. In April 1989, a group of 16 foreign trained physicians (comprised of refugees and Canadian citizens) began a hunger strike in Montreal to protest the medical internship quotas established by the Ministère de la Santé et des Services Sociaux and the "indifference" of the Corporation des médecins du Québec to the pleas of foreign doctors. In the same year, five immigrant doctors undertook a hunger strike in Vancouver in order to force the British Columbia Health Ministry to establish new hospital internship positions, while

in Alberta, disputes over medical internship quotas pitted the medical schools of Alberta against "refugee" doctors. Strikes and other expressions of community discontent are not likely to disappear in the coming years.

WHAT ARE THE STAKEHOLDERS DOING?

At present, major stakeholders in the issue are slowly moving in several policy directions to correct the socio-institutional imbalances present in the system. These policy initiatives, which are becoming over time much more coordinated, are aimed at improving the accreditation "routes" for immigrant professionals and may be succinctly summarized in the following orientations:

- 1) reviewing the accreditation barriers in specific professions and standard requirements for certification/licensing;
- 2) setting-up information/data bases on international credentials and other information networks;
- 3) providing foreign credentials referral and evaluation services;
- 4) providing financial support to help accreditation applicants with their retraining costs and other logistical aspects of the accreditation process (exams, fees, books, etc.);
- 5) creating jobs which to provide applicants with the necessary Canadian experience demanded by the practice of their professional tasks;
- 6) improving the access to academic equivalency services and to obtaining academic credit for foreign degrees/experience.

The following section provides a brief summary of selected policy initiatives addressing immigrant accreditation issues known to the author at the time of the writing of the paper². It should be noted that these policy initiatives listed here are not exhaustive and are listed only to illustrate the reader about the different ways in which stakeholders are responding to the issue. Provincial government initiatives are listed first, followed by post-secondary institutions, federal government, licensing bodies and employers.

² Circa September 1999. The author would like to thank representatives from the Provincial Ministries, post-secondary education institutions and accreditation agencies in providing information on their programs and activities.

Provincial Governments

In 1992, an **Alberta** Task Force on the recognition of foreign qualifications released the report entitled "Bridging the Gap". This report recommended that the provincial government form a central agency to assess foreign academic credentials and provide information on how to qualify and apply for trades and professions in Alberta. The Professions and Occupations Bureau was given responsibility for the logistics and the development of the business plan for the qualifications assessment service. The International Qualifications Assessment Service (IQAS) was opened in 1994. After a slow start, the strong backing of the UCC (Universities Coordinating Council) has moved this service from simple academic equivalency services into counselling on requirements for admissions to post-secondary institutions and credit transfer decisions. IQAS comprehensive database is also instrumental in aiding the Government of Saskatchewan in its accreditation related activities. The agency has an agreement with 30 licensing bodies of the province to share information and assessment procedures.

The **Manitoba** Task Force on immigrant credentials produced in 1992 a report entitled "Issues, Trends and Options". In response to the Task Force recommendations, the Manitoba Credentials recognition program was created within the Citizenship, Settlement and Labour Market Services Branch. The program provides assistance and counselling for immigrants on various stages of the accreditation process. It has two basic components aimed at supporting immigrants seeking professional accreditation: wage assistance and training assistance. In conjunction with employers, the wage assistance component creates a position for the foreign professional until his/her degrees are recognized. The training assistance component helps those applicants being trained by the employer and covers expenses such as exams, fees, translations, etc. In close partnership with the licensing bodies of the province, the Branch now offers an "Academic Credentials Report" which, although does not provide equivalency, describes in detail the academic achievements of the applicant in his/her accreditation quest.

Sketchy depictions should be attributable to the author only.

The 1989 **Ontario** Task Force report on the *Access to Professions and Trades* had acknowledged the presence of several professional accreditation barriers in the province. One of the most important recommendations of the report was the need to move from an accreditation "certificate-based" system to a "competency" based one. On the issue of trades and professions, the Ontario task force recommended that a prior learning assessment network (PLAN) be implemented. PLAN involves simultaneously assessing both foreign education certificates and experience, that is, what the individual has learned through structured education and personal experience.

The *Stephen Lewis Report* followed the wake of the 1992 riots in Toronto. It recommended increased accessibility to the trades and professions for immigrants. In December 1992, the provincial Ministry of Citizenship provided financial support for a series of "demonstration" projects in partnership with licensing bodies, professional and community organizations to develop new licensing exams, vocationally-specific language training and to create new assessment processes and technologies to reduce accreditation barriers. Based on the experiences of the "demonstration" projects, new accreditation related approaches have been developed. These involved the creation of training "modules" which identify (for the applicant) the set of specific skills necessary to access particular professions. The information packages of the modules are now used to provide labour market information about particular occupations and trades, sector specific terminologies and in the identification of possible training "gaps" in professional development.

The Government of **Quebec** has one of the longest established foreign credential assessment services of the country. Through the Direction des équivalences et des ententes de sécurité sociale (within the Ministère des Relations avec les Citoyens et de l'Immigration), the province establishes norms for the recognition of foreign diplomas in light of the corresponding equivalencies to the Quebec educational system. Since 1971, the Direction offers translation services to immigrants and submits recommendations to the Education Department about the educational equivalence of a particular professional degree. Each "Avis d'équivalence d'études" (equivalency proof) lists diplomas and other documents attesting to studies outside Quebec and is used by the applicant to seek work, entry into a trade, admission to a college, university or another educational institution. Equivalency proofs are normally required by different types of professional bodies and employers in Quebec. The Avis does not, however, automatically grant the practice of certain trades or professions.

The province of **British Columbia** has investigated the issue of foreign credentials assessment in response to community concerns on the matter. The B.C. Council of Admission and Transfers, which has been dealing with issues related to the transfer of students from and to post-secondary institutions has developed versions of a prior language assessment for students which will provide them with an assessment of educational backgrounds and experience. Another interesting work in the accreditation area is currently undertaken by the Open Learning Agency of B.C. The International Credential Evaluation Services (ICES) has been providing equivalency services to immigrants since 1995. It provides four types of evaluations: basic, detailed, comprehensive and supplemental. User organizations include 22 regulatory bodies, police forces, government organizations, educational institutions and even U.S. immigration. ICES applications are also available outside Canada.

Although the **Atlantic** provinces have expressed an interest in dealing with the employment mobility issue within the region, there have not been moves comparable to that of other provinces. Interest in the immigrant accreditation issue, however, had already appeared during the meetings between professional organizations with the Steering Committee of Maritime Ministers in the early 1990's. Accreditation counseling services based on the PLA (Prior Learning Assessment) philosophy were recommended. With the support of several stakeholders (including Ministries of Education, the Maritime Higher Education Commission, universities and other post-secondary institutions) PLA-inspired counselling services are now available in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. These services are not only available for immigrant professionals but also to international students and Canadians who want to change their professional or occupational field.

The Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials (CICIC), which was established in 1991 under the auspices of the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada (CMEC), has been instrumental as a referral service and major information resource for the provinces in terms of the provision and dissemination of information on foreign credentials. CICIC oversees the implementation in Canada of the *1979 UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Degrees and Diplomas Concerning Higher Education in the States Belonging to the European Region*. Canada acceded to this convention in 1990. CICIC uses the international database TRACE on foreign degrees to develop a Canadian "higher education" database. Fact-sheets and electronic newsletters in its website promote a better understanding

of the domestic importance of the issue as well as the international scope of activities and obligations of stakeholders.

Federal Government

Given that the Canadian provinces have constitutional jurisdiction over education, the federal government has limited participation in the immigrant accreditation process. Aside from the establishment of the Canadian Labour Force Development Board as a major policy initiative, some minor initiatives are developed through federal-provincial cooperation and partnerships with community organizations and professional bodies. In 1992, a federal inter-departmental group headed by Human Resource and Development Canada was established to bring together representatives from within federal Departments. The group's purpose was to monitor developments on the assessment of foreign degrees in Canada and to share information on the selection and integration process of immigrants. Due to the federal government re-structuring and other factors, the group discontinued its activities during 1995.

Federal Departments such as Citizenship and Immigration (CIC) and Canadian Heritage (PCH) have funded research and community development projects with immigrant professional organizations to identify community needs and bring different stakeholders to discuss issues and propose avenues of cooperation. Professional groups comprised of foreign-trained doctors and other health disciplines have been particularly interested in developing these partnerships. A recent example is a survey of the accreditation problems faced by immigrant women in the nursing, teaching and social work professions in partnership with the National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women in Canada (NOIVMWC). The report coming out from the survey revealed that immigrant women with professional degrees, in addition to the common problems faced by male counterparts, were more negatively affected by “lack of services and resources in the areas of childcare and language training” (NOIVMWC, 1999:7)

Post-Secondary Institutions

A strong emphasis has been placed by Canadian community colleges and universities on the need to strengthen mechanisms of post-secondary educational accreditation (ACCC, 1992). The basic aim of these strategies has been to provide credential transferability within educational systems and to help

immigrants with their academic placement and course enrolment. Within credential-updating programs, applicants may benefit from prior language assessment evaluation procedures (e.g. through a portfolio of competencies, demonstration routes, etc.) which improves their educational accreditation chances and professional competencies. Skill-upgrading programs have a strong language instruction component (ESL/FSL) and may include cultural orientation aimed at facilitating the professional transition from outside-province certification to in-province certification.

There are also several educational institutions (public and private) which are working in the area of the provision of education equivalents of foreign degrees. The Ontario Ministry's Educational Evaluation Services assesses out-of-province elementary and secondary school credentials for employment purposes. The University of Toronto's Comparative Education Services (CES) provides academic equivalency certificates which could be used by immigrants when applying for jobs. Similar types of services are provided by the Academic Credentials Evaluation Service of York University and the International Credential Assessment Service located in Guelph, Ontario. In Alberta, a basic foreign credential evaluation service is provided by Document Evaluation Services Canada Ltd. (DES) which makes available a comparative assessment of non-secondary qualifications in non-licensed occupations.

Licensing Bodies

Professional bodies have concentrated most of their attention on developing better credential evaluations by developing comprehensive data banks on foreign degrees. For instance, the Medical Council of Canada (MCC), the Canadian Council of Professional Engineers (CCPE), the Canadian Council of Technicians and Technologists (CCTT) and the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) have developed banks containing detailed information on professional schools and their academic program contents. Providing assessment and information services on professional standards, competencies and relevant Canadian academic equivalents have also been part of their professional activities in Canada and abroad.

Pro-active measures have also been important. Pre-migration credential assessment services are offered to offset information barriers present at the outset of the immigration experience. On the request by the overseas applicant, the CCPE and CCTT offer a general credential assessment service which enables an

early identification of the status of the "accrediting" overseas institution, Canadian academic equivalents and general information on engineering and technical schools in Canada. For foreign-trained medical practitioners, the MCC offers a medical evaluating exam which is used as an indicator of the level of medical competency according to Canadian standards and a rough measure of potential "retraining" needed in the host country.

Employers

The participation of employers (mostly the private sector) in professional accreditation-related initiatives has been, at most, sporadic. This is troublesome, in view of the fundamental role played by employers in granting the Canadian work experience required to obtain professional certification or licensure. This has been illustrated in a recent in-depth study of 72 immigrant professionals residing in the Montreal region. Employers had the last word in deciding who to hire regardless of the provincial educational equivalents held by job applicants (Mansour, 1995).

The participation of employers is more likely to occur through the offering of on-site professional training to immigrant professionals who are perceived to be in "shortage" or are relevant to their specific manpower needs. Employers strongly adhere to "acculturation to the workplace" training philosophy. At present, there are some interesting initiatives co-partnered with community organizations, provincial/local governments and professional bodies. In Ottawa, for instance, the "Engineers in Canada" training projects addressed the various barriers that foreign trained engineers face when they seek employment in Canada. In partnership with Employment and Immigration Canada, the Ottawa-Carleton Learning Foundation and the CCPE, Digital Equipment of Canada provided intensive technical upgrading and professional orientation to foreign-trained engineers to learn about the engineering employment market, gain relevant work experience and placement in engineering-related jobs. Working with small cohorts of 12 trainees per project, the project had relative employment success.

WHAT MAY BE THE ELEMENTS OF A CONCERTED NATIONAL STRATEGY?

After the brief review of the societal outlooks on the issue and selected policy initiatives undertaken here it becomes apparent that, regardless of the type of policy initiative undertaken to tackle the problem

of non-accreditation of immigrant professionals, Canada is ready to move into a second stage in addressing the problem. After the first stage of acknowledgment of the problem and experimentation (late 80's and most of the 90's), there is an implicit recognition that a concerted national strategy is the best choice to move forward. *The creation of strategic "alliances" of provincial assessment services is an indicative of the degree of maturity that stakeholders have achieved in dealing with the issue.* To move into the second stage it is necessary, however, to leave behind short-term courses of action, limited policy scopes, jurisdictional sensibilities and dispose of the apathy that has plagued some stakeholders from time to time. These have been major impediments in achieving a national strategy to articulate approaches into a common framework of action and better service delivery.

The following are four elements that, in the view of the author, should be the most successful in order to tackle the issue within the framework of a concerted national strategy in the next millenium: .

Creating more multi-partner projects

Regardless of the "accreditation" model followed, dealing effectively with the problem means developing more multi-partner policy strategies aiming at dismantling major barriers present in the accreditation process of immigrants. Educational institutions, licensing bodies, community organizations and all levels of government should be integral to the development and implementation of the different policy initiatives that emerge from these frameworks. *Involvement of employers are critical to the success of these type of projects.* Multi-partner projects should be founded on the harmonic balance of the principles related to public safety and civic participation of immigrants to the professional life of Canada.

Minimizing "statistical" discrimination problems

An adequate standardization of educational credentials and better data banks, alone, will not solve the immigrant accreditation issue in Canada. The will, however, *minimize* the risks of under-evaluations of foreign academic credentials. Under-evaluations are more likely to occur when information on these credentials is scarce, costly or unavailable. Experiences of Australia, the U.S. and European community countries are excellent "inspirational" sources for Canada in modeling these types of policy responses.

Abolishing exclusionary procedures and practices

These barriers are *systemic* ones and should be treated as such. Some institutional measures (i.e. in post-secondary institutions, government and licensing bodies), although not necessarily discriminating in themselves, have an aggregate effect of exclusion or of "trapping" highly qualified accreditation applicants in some of the stages of the process. Formal and informal norms (laws, manuals, unwritten understandings, customs, etc.) followed by licensing and other accrediting bodies may be responsible for exclusionary effects. Policies aimed at reforming accreditation processes and changing the institutional "ethos" require implementing some form of corporate change and institutional re-structuring.

Confronting prejudice directed at applicants

If the lack of accreditation is not the result of "confused" accrediters or of exclusionary procedures but of ethnic/racial prejudices, then the barriers are more serious in nature. For several years, immigrant groups and ethnocultural organizations representing immigrant professionals have argued that accrediters cannot distinguish the academic credentials from the ethnic, racial and social characteristics of the "holders" of these credentials. Impartiality in the credential assessment is seen as an impossible outcome in the current conditions of a "discriminatory" Canadian labour market. To deal with these types of barriers there must be a concentrated policy effort using, perhaps, using employment equity approaches or human rights legislation as enforcement mechanisms.

A final thought. Successful policy initiatives in the area of immigrant accreditation will necessarily involve an active participation of all stakeholders in the accreditation process, regardless of their positioning within various levels of government and/or their administrative jurisdictions (federal and provincial governments, post-secondary institutions, professional bodies and employers). Well-designed intensive training projects which recruit small cohorts of professionals (at the beginning stages and then expanding later), perhaps, are the most promising avenues for multi-partner cooperation. Regrettably, many policy initiatives presently being undertaken are not attaining this cooperation goals. For instance, the lack of participation of the private sector (future employers of accredited professionals) in most initiatives is alarming. Favourable accreditation outcomes will be tremendously enhanced only when successful certification exams are accompanied by professional "business" cards (i.e. employers' proof

of Canadian experience). Incentives are also needed to increase the level of participation of employers in accreditation-related projects through job cost-sharing schemes and possible public education campaigns.

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