



Ignoring Qualified Immigrants Costly

By Dr. Lorne Foster

Nearly 40,000 skilled immigrants have arrived in Ontario in each of the past 10 years, yet many immigrants with Ph.Ds and advanced medical degrees have been left driving cabs or hustling pizzas, as opposed to being gainful employment in their chosen vocations. Thousands of individuals find their university degrees and trade diplomas of little value in Canada, creating an environment where untapped talent-pools can lie dormant and ineffective. Hence, as recent studies have disclosed, underemployed immigrants in Canada are losing approximately \$5 billion in annual income, which would generate \$1.5 billion in income taxes, assuming a 30% tax rate.

The 2004 Law and Diversity Conference (“*Making the Mosaic Work*”) held at the University of Toronto (on January 30, 2004) brought together university academics, community activists, and government regulators in one forum to examine the widespread phenomenon in Canada of discounting immigrant qualification, and to asked the question - What can be done?

In my last column on this unique conference, I detailed the first session which dealt specifically with foreign-trained physicians as a case study in the examination of the general difficulties and unresolved dualism in our society of striking a balance between standards of professional competence, and anti-discriminatory employment practices.

In this column, I will review the second half of the conference, which critically examined how we as a modern, hi-tech, knowledge-based society can begin to address the problem of achieving more effective consideration of the foreign-acquired credentials of immigrants. This session was organized around three distinct foci: [1] identifying the key policy issues and implications; [2] applying the best and most up-to-date research to help understand these issues; and [3] exploring the implications of this research for the design and conduct of public policy.

Conference panelist and sociologist Jeffrey Reitz, the Director of Ethnic, Immigration and Pluralism Studies at the University of Toronto, framed the institutional and occupational changes associated with the emergence of today’s knowledge economy, and argued that the attendant influx of skilled-immigrants to Canada can be analyzed in terms of three distinct categories: regulated or licensed professions (like medicine), managerial occupations and occupations where employees now have university degrees (BA-level qualifications).

According to Reitz’s research, although immigrant skills are frequently discounted in professional fields, the extent of such discounting is actually greater in the management of the growing knowledge-based industries, and greater still in occupations at lower skill levels. This seems to indicate that the underemployment of immigrants is magnified at various skill-levels, and exasperated by an escalating downward pressure and movement of immigrants from higher to lower skill-level occupations. As a result, in our increasingly knowledge-based economy, the non-recognition of immigrant qualifications is not only a prevailing workplace dysfunction, it is continuing to increase across the labour force, at a significant cost to Canada’s overall economic potential and social cohesion.

The second panelist, Faviola Fernandez, of the Policy Roundtable Mobilizing Professions and Trades (PROMPT), went further in affirming that earnings disadvantages can be particularly egregious for visible minority immigrants, whose backgrounds are most distant from the White mainstream population. Immigrants from Non-European, racialized communities face the steepest downward shifts in career mobility and the highest levels of poverty.

Fernandez recounted the personal baptism in social and economic inequities and the racialization of poverty she encounter in Canada that eventually shocked her into a greater community involvement. After immigrating to Canada three years ago in possession of an honours degree in Literature and Linguistics from the University of Singapore and a Masters degree in Applied Linguistics from the University of Essex, UK, Fernandez discovered her foreign-acquired degrees were not recognized toward the procurement of an Ontario Teaching Certificate. Instead, since her arrival she has struggled to work in part-time and contract positions as an ESL teacher, and after-school program co-ordinator and a recreation project co-ordinator for newcomer children.

As is common among visible minority job-seekers, both native and newcomer, Fernandez first experienced employment discrimination in a unique form of “low-grade racism,” embodied by (as she put it) “people who could be polite even when they were being impolite.”

Both visible minority natives and newcomers are regularly exposed to subtle and informal exploitation in the Canadian workplace that can lead to a demoralizing sense of despair and loss of dignity. However, visible minority newcomers are further exposed to the immobilizing catch-22 of the “Canadian experience” rule -- which holds that you need Canadian experience to get a job, but you can’t get a job because you don’t have Canadian experience. All of this means that immigrants from racialized communities, at the remotest distance from the White mainstream population, are typically relegated to the most “vulnerable place in society ... where there is a loss of control over your life ... with a limited right to participate in the processes to gain a right to participate,” as Fernandez put it.

The third and final panelist of the session, Naomi Alboim, a fellow and adjunct professor at the School of Policy Studies at Queen’s University and Associate of the Maytree Foundation, explored the implications of the social issues and research raised at the conference for the design and conduct of public policy.

From a policy perspective, as Alboim maintained, the under-utilization of immigrant skills has significant consequences at the individual, ethno-racial community and societal level, that recommend we should begin a public discourse in society by talking beyond “competency assessment” to “qualifications recognition,” in a collective bid to solve the problem and formulate workable strategies for implementing an action plan.

In this connection, Alboim disclosed her (Maytree Foundation) ten-point action plan aimed at some concrete initiatives that could be implemented by the New Ontario government, as well as by governments in other provinces, that will allow these jurisdictions to integrate immigrant skills into the Canadian economy:

1. Create an (Ontario) Internet portal to information for skilled immigrants.
2. Improve collaboration on the assessment of academic credentials to increase employer confidence.
3. Provide incentives for educational institutions and licensing bodies to develop competency based assessment tools.
4. Review post-secondary funding formulas and the statutory framework so educational

- institutions are encouraged to provide bridging programs as part of their "mainstream" services.
5. Work with the federal government to expand student loan programs.
 6. Fund labour market language training to be delivered by employers and educational institutions.
 7. Provide incentives to employers, employer associations, and labour to become more active in the integration of immigrant skills.
 8. Sustain the collaborative efforts of Ontario self-regulated professions to improve access for international candidates.
 9. Initiate multi-lateral discussions to create 5-party agreements on the labour market integration of immigrants [including governments, regulating bodies, employers-associations- unions, educational institutions and academic credential assessment servers]; and
 10. Support local initiatives to integrate immigrant skills.

In the end, the premise of societal action planning here is brilliantly simple. Assuming the "equity paradigm" that all who are qualified should be able to work, also assumes that all the jurisdictions who adopt this premise should be able to reap the full benefit of immigrant skills and experience.