

University bridge program helps immigrants

Educated newcomers can acquire Canadian credentials, skills at York

KATHARINE ROBERTSON
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Before moving to Canada in 2009, Sunitha Kshatriya's life in Dubai was going very well. With an MBA and a PhD in

human resources from India's Osmania University, the 46-year-old was working at the management level at Dubai's Institute of Management Technology. Her husband, a chartered accountant, was also enjoying a successful career. The couple had a swimming pool and a maid to help in the kitchen. Their two chil-

dren, born ten months apart, were deciding where to attend university.

But when they saw posters around town advertising jobs for professionals in Canada, they thought emigrating would be a great opportunity. The kids enrolled in undergraduate programs at York University and the University of Toronto, and Kshatriya's husband transferred to the Toronto office of his firm.

With her credentials, Kshatriya expected to find work. But that wasn't the case. Job applications didn't yield a single call for an interview, and programs at local agencies offered minimal assistance.

"I was depressed and I hated Canada," she says. "I came to Canada only be-

cause I wanted to be here for my kids, who were doing university. I was having a great career, great future, great salary, great lifestyle (in Dubai). But I wanted to be with my children."

Even though her husband, who was also unhappy, returned to Dubai, Kshatriya was determined to stay. And that determination has paid off.

On Nov. 8, she celebrated with fellow graduates of York University's Bridging Program for Internationally Educated Professionals.

According to the province, 70 per cent of Ontario's immigrants are highly skilled and have post-secondary degrees, but lack certain requirements in order to secure employment. York's program, for marketing, finance, IT and

human resources professionals, is one of 31 provincially funded programs designed to fill in those requirement gaps — such as gaining Canadian work experience in their field, acquiring credentials in regulated professions or learning soft skills, like profession-specific language and Canadian workplace customs.

Hyder Hasan, a graduate of York's bridging program, offers an example. "When you meet someone, you always talk about the weather," he says. "People always talk about sports here, too. I'm in marketing and sales, so we always start the conversation with weather and sports."

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HYDER HASAN
ON A SOFT SKILL HE LEARNED FROM THE YORK BRIDGE PROGRAM

Hasan, 30, worked in marketing at Thal Ltd., a large manufacturing conglomerate in Pakistan. Even with an MBA and help with his resumé from his wife, a Schulich School of Business graduate, he estimates he sent out 700 job applications before signing up for the bridging program. Now, he is the marketing manager at TWI Foods, Inc., in Mississauga.

Nora Priestly, York's bridging program manager, says the most successful students are those who have a clear goal that they want to achieve. She also says that the less time professionals spend in Canada unemployed or working as a cashier, the better.

"Typically, they should have been in Canada for less than two years," she says. "That works out well for us and for them. I do worry about the individuals who have been here for many years and have, perhaps, become understandably jaded. I hope they haven't settled for less."

Gigi Mathews, 41, was not prepared to settle for less. In Kuwait, he was a senior marketing manager at conglomerate KAPICO Group. In Canada, he could only secure odd jobs. Through the bridging program, he says he learned more about how his industry differs in Canada. In Kuwait, marketing professionals have a broad portfolio; in Canada, he says marketing is much more specialized. He also says networking is quite different here — in Kuwait, family connections are more significant and business is conducted through family meetings. Though he still has one more credit to go before he completes his course, Mathews is now a pricing analyst for Rheem Canada Ltd., a heating and cooling company in Brampton.

Sunitha Kshatriya has also made great strides. She is a program leader for the undergraduate recruiting faculty at London School of Business and Finance, a private college. And in January, she will join the part-time faculty teaching at Seneca College's school of business and human resources. Eventually, she'd like to conduct research in her field at a Canadian university.

"I don't hate Canada anymore," she says. "There are so many beautiful, wonderful things. But you can only learn to love those things when you have food on the table and you aren't struggling. Only then can you appreciate what this country has to offer."