INTRODUCTION

The issue of highly skilled and trained migrants not being able to practice or find employment in their chosen profession has become an increasingly relevant and public issue in recent years. In many major immigrant destination countries, unemployment and underemployment rates for immigrants have continued to creep upwards and immigrant outcomes have declined in comparison to native-born workers. This is while immigration regimes have become ever more restrictive, demanding higher levels of educational attainment, work experience, and language proficiency. What countless academics, practitioners, policy workers, and immigrants themselves have discovered is that there is often a significant labour market integration gap between the skills and training migrants bring with them to their new country and their ability to market and apply their qualifications in the labour market.

The issue of foreign qualification recognition (FQR) has implications for all stakeholders within the migration process. Receiving countries have an interest to ensure that immigrants they have received in their country, and have invested in, maximize their contribution to the labour market and economy through the effective use of their skills and knowledge, and source countries have an interest in emigrants maximizing their earning potential as well as improving their skills and professional network in the expectation that such developments will reap returns in the form of remittances and knowledge transfer. Furthermore, employers have an interest in immigrants being able to use their skills and knowledge to fill key labour market gaps. Of course migrants themselves have an interest in maximizing their earnings as well as their professional satisfaction by applying their existing skills and training in the destination country. Too often though, these stakeholders have found themselves frustrated by systemic gaps and regulatory bottlenecks that have prevented the smooth professional transition from source to destination country.

This paper will discuss some of the key challenges relating to foreign qualification recognition, identifying both the formal and informal obstacles migrants often encounter when looking to practice their occupation in a new country, with a special focus on the impact of these challenges on migrants and their families. The paper will conclude with several recommendations relating to policy and programming designed to facilitate the labour market integration process and enhance the value of migration to all stakeholders.
**REGULATED AND UNREGULATED OCCUPATIONS**

When looking at FQR, it is important to distinguish between both the formal and informal barriers that may exist to having one's skills and knowledge recognized in a new country. Indeed, the term 'Foreign Qualification Recognition' has been favoured over 'Foreign Credential Recognition' by most stakeholders, partly in recognition of the importance of the more informal elements of labour market integration. Successful integration into a new labour market is about more than just having your academic credentials formally recognized, it is also about getting employers to recognize the value of the skills and experience immigrants bring with them, and how these skills can be identified and harnessed within the labour market.

The formal recognition of skills and credentials is of critical importance to migrants practicing a regulated occupation, i.e., an occupation requiring a license or permit from a designated authority in order to be legally practiced within a certain jurisdiction. In the case of regulated occupations, migrants will need to go through a formal credential recognition process in order to be able to practice their profession in their new home or to know what additional steps or training may be required before they are able to practice their profession. Given this requirement for formal credential and training equivalencies to be established, and for a centralized authority to grant permission to practice in the profession, regulated occupations pose a host of unique challenges to the FQR process that will be discussed below.

Unregulated occupations do not require the legal recognition of one's credentials by a designated authority and thus, migrants practicing unregulated occupations are not faced with the same formal legal barriers as those looking to engage in a regulated occupation. However, as will be discussed below, migrants in unregulated occupations encounter a number of challenges that may be characterized as ‘informal’, that can prevent their effective integration into the labour market. It should be noted as well, that these informal factors to FQR can be experienced not only by practitioners of an unregulated occupation but also by those in regulated occupations. Thus, migrants in regulated occupations can face a ‘double barrier’ of needing first to be legally authorized to work in the occupation and then having to navigate the more informal obstacles to successful labour market integration.

**BARRIERS FACED BY MIGRANT WORKERS**

**Regulated occupations**

The regulation of occupations is not a new phenomenon, nor is it a phenomenon unique to specific countries. All countries regulate certain occupations under their jurisdiction, and migrants practicing in regulated professions over the decades have had to navigate the process of qualification recognition. What has changed, and what has brought the issue to the fore of immigration policy in many countries, is that the flow of transnational migration has increased, significantly increasing the volume of requests for recognition, and testing the capacity of designated authorities. Additionally, the range of source countries has expanded significantly, with immigrants to a number of major destination countries now coming from countries where the education and training systems are either not well understood, or differ significantly from those of the country of destination. These two issues have resulted in delays and obstacles for immigrants in terms of getting their credentials recognized and their licenses to practice in countries of destination.

**What’s regulated, where, and by whom?**

There are, of course, perfectly good reasons why certain occupations should be regulated and why it is important to ensure those coming to a country with the aim to practice a certain profession meet a set minimum standards before being able to practice. The main arguments for occupational regulation are based on concerns regarding individual and public health, public safety, and quality assurance in occupations that require certain specialized (and often
jurisdictionally-specific) knowledge. Most of us would not want, for example, a medical doctor to treat us without some previous assurance that they are qualified to an accepted minimum standard. Likewise, occupations such as architect, engineer, pilot, or truck driver, or even skilled trades such as plumber, electrician, and carpenter, raise concerns from a public safety perspective regarding the safety of the services they are providing or of the integrity of the structures they are involved in building. For this reason, licensing is often required to practice these professions. Other professions, such as legal or accounting professions, can require specific knowledge relating to a jurisdiction’s legal or tax codes, for example, and for that reason require licensing in order to ensure quality of service.

However, while occupational regulation can serve a valuable purpose in protecting consumers and the general public, licensing requirements can also serve as a form of protectionism, limiting supply and competition within a given occupation. The past decades have seen a proliferation of occupational regulation, in many cases with limited justification from a health, public safety, or quality assurance perspective. Thus, the challenge with FQR is not just that more and more people are migrating from different countries and need their credentials to be recognized, but also that more and more occupations are becoming regulated, requiring specified training and licensing in order to practice.

In his work on occupational licensing, Morris Kleiner has documented the substantial growth of occupational regulation within the United States, noting that the percentage of the workforce engaged in a regulated occupation has increased from 5% in the 1950s to 23% today, with the number of occupations regulated within the United States ballooning to over 800. Kleiner also notes significant inconsistencies between jurisdictions within the United States on what types of occupations require licensing, with decisions to regulate often appearing more as the consequence of successful industry lobbying than any argument relating to public benefit. As Kleiner documents, in 2006, approximately 50 occupations were regulated in all 50 US states with an additional 800 licensed in only one or more states. A handful of states require licensing for occupations such as interior designers, florists, hairdressers, pet groomers, manicurists, and more. Similar trends in the expansion of regulated occupations can be seen in most OECD countries.

The expansion of regulated occupations as well as the international and intra-national (in many countries occupations are regulated at a sub-federal level) protocols around occupations requiring licensing lead to two broad FQR challenges for immigrants: (1) more occupations now require official procedures for credential recognition and licensing, adding a layer to the process of labour market integration that is often cumbersome and time-consuming, and (2) inconsistencies in occupational regulation from one region to another mean that immigrants are often not aware that their occupation requires licensing and are unprepared when confronted with the fact only once they begin to seek employment in the country of destination.

Inflexible licensing procedures

Another challenge immigrants practicing regulated occupations are often confronted with in the FQR process is the inflexibility of licensing systems in accepting foreign credentials. Licensing is conducted by a designated body that is responsible for professional administration and quality control usually within a certain geographical jurisdiction—such as at the federal level or the state level—and is based on that jurisdiction’s particular training system. The challenge with this model, whereby licensing is derived from a specific training program rather than a competencies-based approach, is that the system then has problems to integrate alternative training paths or training models into the licensing system. This leads to challenges when immigrants who have developed the required competencies through a different training system seek to have their credentials recognized. In some cases, training programs that may be superior or more comprehensive than those of the destination country are not recognized, and
immigrants are required to re-do their training in the destination country in order to obtain a license. This process can represent an impossible financial and personal burden for the migrant.

Where a certain flexibility does exist in licensing programs, and equivalencies between training programs can be determined, migrants are often faced with three key challenges:

1. The length of time it takes authorities to determine equivalencies can result in deskilling and reduced competitiveness in the labour market once the license is finally received. As mentioned above, the increase in the volume of requests as well as the growing variety of source countries and training institutions from which migrants have graduated has strained the capacity of authorities to respond to requests for credential recognition, leaving some immigrants waiting for years before their credentials are recognized. During this period, without the ability to practice, immigrants may lose their skills and be less attractive to employers once they are finally legally able to practice their profession in the destination country.

2. The application process and requirements can be confusing, taking a number of twists and turns along the way. Identifying who is responsible for licensing and how to apply for a license can often appear as a labyrinth to immigrants who may be required to contact institutions in their home country for documentation and prepare translations and certifications of official documents. Information on procedures and requests for documents often come in bits and pieces at various stages of the licensing process, leading to significant delays and frustrations and in some cases, preventing immigrants from completing the equivalency procedures.

3. Where equivalencies have been determined and gaps in the immigrant’s training have been identified, often courses do not exist to fill the specific, identified gaps. The result is that, even when credentials are recognized by the authorities, immigrants may still be required to redo a significant portion of their training simply in order to cover certain gaps that existed in their original training. In some cases this can mean that a training gap that could be filled within a specific course of several weeks or months instead takes a year or more.

Challenges in the credential recognition and licensing process can thus result in significant barriers for immigrants, and the proliferation of regulated occupations means that these challenges impact ever more immigrants. As will be discussed further in the final section, many of the challenges relating to delays and requirements for paperwork could be solved or eased if prospective migrants could be made aware of licensing requirements and begin procedures for credential recognition prior to arriving in the destination country.

UNREGULATED OCCUPATIONS

While migrants working in unregulated occupations do not face the same legal constraints to employment that those working in regulated occupations do, the informal barriers to employment can be significant and severely limiting, resulting in high rates of unemployment and underemployment.

Lack of employer recognition of qualifications

Even in a globalized world with an unprecedented rate of international trade and international communication, employer awareness of foreign education programs and the value and quality of credentials from institutions beyond their borders is surprisingly limited. The problem, however, is less about being able to evaluate the qualifications, and more about risk aversion more broadly. Faced with a choice between bringing in an unknown component (someone with foreign credentials) and sticking with a tried and trusted brand, just like most consumers, most employers will choose to hire an individual with qualifications from schools and employers they recognize. This places migrants at a significant disadvantage in the labour market. Even when their credentials are equivalent or superior to those of native-born
candidates, lack of employer awareness, and a tendency to avert risk in the hiring process results in poorer labour market opportunities and outcomes.

Numerous studies have been conducted that demonstrate employers' preference for hiring national staff, particularly in higher skilled occupations and professions. A recent Canadian study involved submitting resumes to employers with certain variables, including Anglo-Canadian versus "ethnic sounding" names, Canadian or foreign education, and Canadian or foreign work experience. Employer callback rates were compared against the resume with an Anglo-Canadian name, Canadian educations and work experience. The results of the study indicated that the greatest factor impacting callback rates was the candidate's name. Persons with names common to China, Pakistan, and India, were much less likely to receive a callback than were persons with identical qualifications but with Anglo-Canadian names. Nevertheless, the study did demonstrate variables that favoured both Canadian education and work experience over foreign options. Similar studies in Europe and the United States have identified similar trends, with employers showing a strong preference for candidates with similar backgrounds to their own in terms of ethnicity, education, and work experience. Results of studies have indicated callback rates between three and nine times greater for native-born candidates when compared to immigrants.

Lack of employer awareness of the value of foreign qualifications, therefore, fits within a broader theme of employers' hiring tendencies that limit labour market opportunities for immigrants. While such practices can often seem discriminatory, from the employer's perspective, the objective is to avert risk by contacting and employing those candidates whose background is most familiar and whose "brand" is understood, so when faced with 20 good resumes and only wanting to conduct five interviews, employers are likely to select those five whose backgrounds are most familiar.

Ironically, at times, this type of hiring practice can result in immigrants from specific source countries dominating the labour market in certain occupations, as a "brand" and reputation within a field is developed. Employers within certain sectors may seek out candidates with educational qualifications or work experience from a specific country based on the positive experience they have had with previous immigrants from these countries, or on a reputation that is spread by word of mouth across an industry. To give just a few examples, Filipino workers are sought out globally within the health sector as well as in maritime transportation; Indian workers are prevalent in the IT field throughout the world; and Mexican workers in the United States are highly regarded by employers in the construction sector. These "niche" labour markets, far from demonstrating enlightened hiring practices, in fact represent the same type of "risk aversion" strategy that limits immigrants' opportunities in other occupational fields. In these cases, foreign qualifications are recognized and valued, but only those from specific countries that have built up their brand and their reputation.

Cultural differences, language ability and soft skills

In addition to the hard skills and qualifications that can be put down on paper, so-called 'soft skills' play a vital role in determining any individual's success within the labour market. In this area as well, immigrants can find themselves at a significant disadvantage as cultural misunderstandings and a lack of 'soft skills' unique to the corporate culture of the destination country, can lead employers to misread and undervalue a candidate's skills and knowledge. For example, whereas in some countries it is common or indeed expected that candidates will highlight their experiences and past professional achievements, in other cultures such practices are frowned upon as boasting. A candidate, then, who enters an interview and does not highlight his past achievements may be seen by the employer as either lacking confidence or lacking the skills and experience required for the position. Maintaining eye contact, shaking hands, speaking about past achievements, and using humour in interviews, are all common examples of soft skills
that, if not understood by immigrant candidates, may lead employers to misread the candidate's broader qualifications for the position.

Language ability is another vital component to an immigrant's labour market success—indeed, a number of recent studies have identified language ability as the single most important factor for immigrants' successful integration into the labour market. Perspectives on effective communication, language ability, particularly in technical areas related to a specific occupation or sector, can become, beyond their actual merit, key signals that employers use in determining an individual's professional competence. Thus, immigrants who can communicate fluently in the language of the destination country still find their skills and competence negatively misread by prospective employers if they are not familiar with the technical vocabulary specific to their occupation.

Language ability and soft skills, rather than being unique components that employers evaluate separately from a candidate's hard skills and qualifications, instead act as signs that employers use to determine a candidate's broader skills and competence. Such soft skills become all the more important when an employer is faced with a candidate with an unfamiliar educational or employment background. Immigrants' lack of cultural know-how and limitations in language ability can thus act as important impediments to having their skills and qualifications objectively valued and appreciated by employers in the destination country and can negatively impact their integration into the labour market more broadly.

IMPACT OF BARRIERS ON MIGRANTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

The barriers migrants face to having their qualifications recognized both formally and informally, as listed above, can have significant and long-term impacts on both the economic and social well being and development of migrants and their families.

Economic Impacts

The economic impact of labour market barriers are obvious and take two broad forms: direct costs relating to applications for licensure and training programs, and the costs relating to lost opportunities, unemployment, and underemployment.

The costs of applying for a license within a regulated occupation or of having one's credentials evaluated for equivalency within unregulated occupations, in addition to being a lengthy procedure, can also involve significant direct and indirect costs. Costs relating to the process can include the direct costs of application, registration and licensing fees, as well as the indirect costs such as requests for transcripts and academic records, certified translation of documents, verification services for document authenticity, and courier costs. Over the course of the application procedure, these costs can quickly spiral into the hundreds or even thousands of dollars. Where additional training or courses are required in order to meet licensing standards, costs can spiral even further into the tens of thousands, making the process financially out of reach for many migrants and their families.

More significantly though, unemployment and underemployment are experienced by many immigrant families, particularly in the early years of the migration process, and can have long-term consequences for the family unit. In most cases, immigrants do not arrive in their new country with sufficient funds to sustain themselves and their families over an extended period while they await licensing, re-train for their occupation, or seek employment in their field. Economic pressures are often such that new immigrants are required to find 'survival jobs' in occupations well below their skill level while they continue to look for opportunities more closely aligned to their training. However, far from being a temporary condition, many immigrants find themselves stuck in survival jobs for years as the economic necessities of the present, limit
their capacity (both in terms of time and economics) to build their skills and qualifications for future success, and the skills and knowledge they brought with them begin to deteriorate in what is known as 'brain waste'. Several recent studies have demonstrated how long spells of unemployment or underemployment in the initial stages of the migration process have long-term repercussions for the economic outcomes of migrants.

Further, extended periods of employment in lower income occupations have an obvious negative impact on the immigrant family unit as a whole and on the family’s ability to effectively integrate into their new community. In many cases, one parent may be required to take on two jobs or both parents may be required to work full time in order to meet the family’s economic needs, often leaving children at home alone without supervision. Several studies have demonstrated how such circumstances impact children's educational outcomes and the ability of immigrant children to adapt to a new education system. The consequences of underemployment are therefore not only short term but can reach even into the second generation as the entire family unit feels the social and economic impact.

The case of temporary foreign workers

The case of Temporary Foreign Workers (TFW) is somewhat unique and separate from those of permanent immigrants. Whereas most permanent immigrants arrive in their country of destination without a job, in most TFW cases, the worker arrives with a job offer in hand and indeed the job offer is a condition for receiving the work permit in the first place. While different systems and circumstances exist throughout the world, in the majority of cases, particularly for lower skilled occupations, TFWs arrive alone, with the family remaining in the country of origin and dependent to a greater or lesser degree on the remittances received from the working spouse.

In the case of TFWs arriving with a job offer, there is clearly no concern about the recognition of one's qualifications as the employer has already positively evaluated the applicant and offered a position. In many ways though, the greatest FQR challenge for TFWs is the opposite of those experienced by permanent immigrants, whereby an employer positively evaluates an individual's qualifications abroad only to discover upon arrival that the worker does not possess the skills or training to the level the employer had expected. This mismatch occurs because of an ignorance on the part of both the employer and the worker on the level of qualifications expected within a given occupation in the source and destination countries, and the lack of any transnational system to effectively evaluate and compare skills and training systems between source and destination countries.

The economic consequences of this type of skills mismatch can be severe for TFWs; the worker may be fired and returned to their country of origin, or offered a lower-level position with a reduced salary. In extreme cases, where the worker may have taken out large high-interest loans in order to pay the costs associated with recruitment, this may result in devastating and dangerous consequences for the migrant and his/her family if they are unable to repay the loan. Even in less extreme cases though, TFWs and their families can experience long-term negative impacts as the TFW may not be able to remit sufficient funds for the family’s needs or achieve the level of savings needed for his/her longer term development plan. In many of these cases, ultimately, the worker ends up remaining abroad for a significantly longer period than they had originally anticipated as the length of time it takes to repay debt obligations and reach savings targets is increased. As numerous studies have demonstrated, these long-term separations between migrant workers and their families have an important impact on family cohesion and childhood development.
Psycho-social impacts

In addition to the negative economic impacts immigrants experience from challenges relating to FQR and labour market integration, there are also a number of negative psycho-social consequences that can result from the process. The single greatest emotional challenge identified by most new immigrants is stress resulting both from challenges in the adaptation and integration process, as well as from economic concerns linked to periods of unemployment and underemployment. The stress immigrants can experience from economic pressures and challenges to penetrate the labour market can have an important impact not just on their psychological well being and that of the family, but also on their broader health condition.

Loss of social status and of self-esteem is a second psychosocial consequence that is commonly identified by immigrants who struggle to integrate into the labour market and experience periods of unemployment or underemployment. The phenomenon goes beyond the simple economic challenges of having to take up lower-remunerated employment, as immigrants begin to question their own self-worth and their own competence when they are unable to find employment that matches their skills. Immigrants in many qualitative studies have indicated going through periods of profound self-doubt due to the challenges they face in successfully integrating into the labour market and in having their qualifications recognized by employers.

In addition to the emotional challenges one may experience as a consequence of taking on employment of a lower social status, the same qualitative studies also indicate a level of frustration simply in not being able to practice what one has been trained for; that is, a lack of professional satisfaction in not being able to practice one's chosen occupation. Put simply, a lawyer who moves abroad and only finds work as a waiter will be dealing with a very different set of emotions than a waiter who moves abroad and finds work as a waiter, even if they are in the same economic circumstances.

A final and unsurprising psychosocial consequence of FQR challenges commonly identified by immigrants is a profound sense of frustration. While the frustration with delays in licensing, or with employers not responding to applications, or in unsuccessful interviews, are perfectly natural and experienced by native-born and immigrant job seekers alike, immigrants can begin to interpret these obstacles or cases of rejection as instances of xenophobia or racism and generate an impression that they are being discriminated against by a xenophobic training and the labour market system more broadly. The danger of this is that immigrants enter into a ‘no solutions mentality’ and gradually lose their determination to achieve their initial objectives. Immigrants who develop a sense of systemic discrimination due to the frustrations of the FQR and labour market integration process will stop looking to improve their soft skills for interviews or applications, improve their language skills in technical areas, or engage in other activities that may improve their chances of labour market success.

Improving FQR and migrant outcomes

The above sections have identified several of the common challenges migrants face in the foreign qualification recognition and labour market integration process, as well as some of the more significant economic and psychosocial consequences of these challenges for migrants and their families. What should be clear by now is that any attempt at a solution to these issues will not be easy and there is no silver bullet that will solve the myriad challenges immigrants face in the labour market. Instead, what is required is an array of programs and policy developments, along three broad lines, that will facilitate migrants’ ability to have their skills recognized and to effectively navigate the labour market:

- Improving qualification recognition systems to reduce unnecessary and overly-protective barriers
- Improving employer awareness of foreign qualification equivalencies and of the value of employing a multicultural workforce
• Providing direct assistance for migrants to better navigate the labour market within the barriers that exist

**Improving Recognition Systems**

The proliferation of regulated occupations is one issue that was identified as a growing barrier for immigrant integration. Unnecessary regulatory controls can limit job growth and are an obvious obstacle for foreign-trained workers to enter the labour force. Clear guidelines that identify the legitimate reasons for occupational regulation could prevent the growth of regulation as an instrument for occupational protection. Additionally, the use of less arduous regulatory systems such as linking licensing to use of a specific title rather than the ability to practice a certain occupation, or operating a registration system rather than requiring specific training for occupations where individual or public safety is not a significant factor, would reduce the level of obstacles immigrants face in entering regulated occupations.

Where occupational regulation does exist, Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRA) between states or specific occupational authorities of given states are the ideal way of breaking down the barriers of qualification recognition. While the authority in the destination country may still require some time to determine the authenticity of an immigrant’s credentials and issue a license, MRAs can greatly reduce the time and paperwork involved in the process, and significantly facilitate the FQR process by foregoing the analysis to determine the equivalency of credentials. With MRAs, the equivalency of credentials is determined for the relevant occupations in advance.

While the majority of MRAs in existence still place the burden of proof on the immigrant to demonstrate they meet the criteria for qualification, more advanced MRAs, such as the Lisbon Recognition Convention, instead place the burden of proof on licensing authorities; in such cases, the migrant is allowed to practice his/her occupation in the country of destination unless the relevant authority in the destination country can establish a legitimate argument otherwise.

One of the greatest obstacles to developing MRAs at the state level is the broad and far-reaching implications of such an agreement, requiring the approval and cooperation of multiple stakeholders responsible for labour relations and certification. Such agreements can therefore take years to establish and can easily breakdown due to disagreements within certain economic and professional sectors. For this reason, from a results perspective, sector-specific or institution-specific MRA initiatives, though not as comprehensive, can often be more productive, achieving higher success rates and establishing agreements in a shorter amount of time. They can also serve as the seeds for FQR on which further cooperation and broader MRAs may be built at a later stage. Multilateral MRAs between professional associations of accountants, architects, and engineers, for example, have been built up over decades and provide examples on which new agreements may be built.

Finally, unilateral initiatives by institutions or professional associations can be established to recognize credentials awarded by foreign training programmes or specific foreign institutions. Such initiatives, however, usually only materialize when a sector is experiencing an acute labour shortage and the need for foreign labour is significant. The process can be extremely costly and time consuming, involving a planning process that goes beyond typical business cycles and, as the financial burden of the initiative is usually assumed by a smaller group of actors (employers and practitioners) within a certain sector, employers and sector associations are often reluctant to take on this burden. Governments can facilitate these initiatives, however, by working in cooperation with sector groups and providing support and financial incentives to develop recognition systems. An example of this is the Government of Alberta’s recently established FQR Innovation Fund, which provides financial support to sector-based initiatives in FQR.
Improving employer awareness of foreign qualifications and equivalencies

As noted in the previous sections, even when one's qualifications may be officially recognized as equivalent in the destination country, in many cases, employers may still be reluctant to hire an individual with foreign credentials due to a lack of awareness about the quality of education and its equivalency to qualifications in the country of destination. As it is, employers ultimately hold the cards in labour market integration. Improving employer awareness of foreign qualifications and of the value of hiring a multicultural labour force is an essential component to reducing the barriers immigrants face to successful labour market integration. Here, there are several steps governments can take to assist the process:

- Establishing broad, unofficial equivalency benchmarks or Education Overview Guides for foreign training programs, and communicating this information to employers in a user-friendly, easy-to-understand format, can help employers better understand the education systems of other countries and better evaluate immigrant candidates' credentials when they receive CVs.
- As private sector employers are often sceptical of government understandings of skills/equivalencies in a labour market context, developing a platform for information exchange between employers or soliciting employer participation and including employer experience in the Education Overview Guides themselves can be a useful way for employers to exchange experiences and to receive employer buy-in for the product and the initiative as a whole.
- Raising employer awareness about cultural differences and providing tools for creating a successful multicultural work environment can help to alleviate employer anxiety about hiring immigrants and can help them effectively address certain challenges if and when they arise.
- Developing incentive programs for the short-term hiring of new immigrants can help not only alleviate any concerns or misunderstandings employers may have about hiring someone with foreign qualifications, but also allow employers to see firsthand the potential benefits of a multicultural workforce, such as an improved ability to serve immigrant clients or greater knowledge and capacity to penetrate foreign markets.

Programs to facilitate labour market transitions

While working to reduce or eliminate the systemic barriers that immigrants face when they look to enter a new labour market, it is important to realize that immigrants will always be faced with specific integration challenges and that, in addition to developing policies and programs to reduce the number of challenges encountered, direct assistance programs are required to help immigrants navigate and adjust to the realities of the labour market.

The creation and expansion of targeted ‘bridging programs’, that allow immigrants to ‘fill in the gaps’ between their previous training and the licensing requirements of the destination country without undergoing lengthy training courses that duplicate their previous training, are essential for effective immigrant integration within regulated occupations. Bridging programs can dramatically reduce both the financial and personal commitment immigrants are required to make to achieve licensing in their occupation, reducing the amount of time immigrants must remain in survival jobs and, indeed, reducing the proportion of immigrants who take an alternate career path altogether because qualification in one’s previous occupation is overly arduous.

Programs can also be developed to help immigrants better understand the labour market and work environment of the destination country and build the necessary ‘soft skills’ for success. This can include occupation or sector-specific language programs, and training in job searching, CV and cover letter writing, as well as interview skills. Additionally, establishing mentorship and job-shadowing programs can help immigrants create professional networks and build local experience. In much the same way internship programs help young people first enter the labour
market, mentorship programs assist migrants (as entrants into a new labour market) to gain experience and build a local network within their field.

Finally, programs must be designed and developed to help immigrants address the financial challenges associated with FQR and labour market integration, challenges that too often result in immigrants permanently underemployed in a field outside of their previous profession and skill set. In regulated occupations, developing a system that allows prospective immigrants to begin the FQR and licensing process prior to arriving in the destination country can dramatically reduce the opportunity costs borne by immigrants. In most cases, prospective migrants are gainfully employed in the country of origin prior to immigrating and, thus, do not face the same type of economic challenges encountered when they arrive unemployed in the country of destination. By beginning the FQR and licensing process in the country of origin, authorities can dramatically reduce the amount of time immigrants must remain unemployed or underemployed in the destination country before being authorized to work in their occupation or to enter a bridging program to fill any training gaps. In effect, beginning the licensing process in the country of origin allows immigrants to ‘hit the ground running’ in the destination country, instead of beginning to navigate a complex system upon arrival.

Costs associated with re-training or taking on unpaid internships to gain experience in one’s field can also be prohibitively high for many immigrants, particularly those immigrants who arrive with dependent family members. Such financial challenges can be overcome by finding employer ‘sponsors’ to share the costs of bridging programs or by providing immigrants with interest-free or low-interest loans to cover the costs of licensing, equivalency assessments, or bridging programs. A number of major destination countries have begun to roll out these types of financial assistance programs to great success both in terms of uptake and labour market outcomes of participants.

FQR and labour market integration is a two-way process, requiring shifts both in how licensing authorities and employers in destination countries operate and in how immigrants interact and work within their new labour environment. Given the important role labour market integration plays in the overall economic and psychosocial well-being of immigrants and their families, it is no exaggeration to say that the degree to which destination countries address this issue will be the determining factor in the success or failure of economic immigration programs. By developing programs and policies that reduce the formal barriers to employment, promote inclusive hiring practices among employers, and provide immigrants with the tools they need to adjust to the new labour market, governments can significantly improve immigrant outcomes, reducing incidents of brain waste. This benefits employers, immigrants, and their families.

Endnotes:
1. See P. Oreopolous in References
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