

## Foreign Credentials Recognition and Federal Public Service Employment

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On January 24, 2003, Metropolis hosted a closed-door conversation sponsored by the Public Service Commission (PSC). Participants sought to explore policy options that would facilitate the entrance of skilled immigrants into the Public Service and help it to compete for foreign-born talent. This summary provides an overview of the key debates.

To access the full report, please visit the *Research and Policy* section of <http://www.canada.metropolis.net>.

### *Why is foreign credentials recognition an important issue?*

Over half of Canada's 200,000 immigrants enter as independents or skilled immigrants each year. Canada's immigration system gives more points to immigrants with higher skills and education, however upon arrival, these immigrants encounter a variety of barriers that often lead to their under-employment or unemployment. This results in a decline in social capital and in Canada's overall economic well-being. According to a recent Conference Board study, underemployment costs the country four to six billion dollars annually. In the 2002 Speech from the Throne, the Government promised to break down the barriers to foreign credential recognition.

The PSC must learn how to compete for foreign-born talent, especially as the labour force becomes increasingly composed of workers with foreign education and experience. It could also be an important way to replace its core of ageing babyboomers.

### *Distinguishing between potential roles*

Although the PSC currently limits its involvement in accreditation by directing potential applicants to contact an external agency; there are both possibilities and constraints to a new expanding role. To explore this issue, participants explored the distinctions between the needs of immigrants employed in regulated occupations (those that require

### Metropolis Conversation Series

The Metropolis Conversation Series brings together researchers, public servants, business leaders, policymakers and community leaders to identify and explore current public policy debates. Each conversation is a closed and highly focused meeting promoting candid face-to-face exchanges. The gatherings are small – usually 15 to 20—consisting of carefully chosen people who share common interests, but whose perspectives vary substantially. The reports resulting from the conversations are available at: <http://www.canada.metropolis.net>

### About Metropolis

The Metropolis Project was conceived in 1994 and launched in 1996. It aims to improve policies for managing migration and diversity by bringing scientific expertise to bear on policy development; and by involving policymakers, researchers and NGOs in all of their initiatives. Metropolis' goals are to:

- enhance academic research capacity;
- focus academic research on critical policy issues and policy options; and,
- develop ways to facilitate the use of research in decision-making.

The project has been structured as a partnership with both domestic and international components. It holds national and international conferences, workshops, seminars and roundtables to encourage communication between interested stakeholders. To register for upcoming events visit:

[www.metropolis.net](http://www.metropolis.net)

certification or membership in an association) and unregulated occupations (those without such requirements) and between formal credentials (ie. Degrees, diplomas) and informal credentials (ie. work experience). Although complex, the development of policy options to ensure the timely and accurate accreditation of immigrants' skills employed in regulated occupations and/or with formal credentials is manageable because of the existence of comparable documents, organisations and associations in an immigrant's country of origin. Where official documents cannot be obtained, as is often the case with refugees, or do not exist because the occupation is unregulated, there was consensus that recognition would be more challenging. It is also important to note that assessing skills is a distinct process from assessing credentials, but that skills-testing might be more useful because it can be used for individuals without formal certification.

*What barriers do immigrants face?*

The Public Service currently hires in both the regulated and unregulated occupations. There are several barriers to foreign credentials and skills recognition:

*Language:* Inadequate knowledge of English or French can make practising a profession impossible and/or make communication between employers and employees difficult. Even if an immigrant can speak English or French at a basic level, s/he may not be able to adequately express his/her skills to an employer.

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*Immigrants face language barriers, racial discrimination, time constraints and organisational barriers in the accreditation process.*

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*Discrimination:* This is a factor when immigrants are being hired and when promotions are being offered.

*Time:* The longer that an immigrant is out of his/her desired profession the harder it is to enter it. The citizenship requirement for employment in the public service means that immigrants cannot become employed by the public service as soon as they arrive in Canada. (The citizenship process takes three years.)

*Money:* Since the Public Service Commission puts the onus on an immigrant to get accreditation from an outside institution, a financial burden is placed on the individual. On the flip side, employers who are unsure about the validity of an accreditation may favour the Canadian-born because they perceive this as more time and cost effective.

*Organisational:* There are no national accreditation bodies, and educational and occupational standards vary by province. Canadian professional associations, which in some cases are the sole "accreditors" within the Canadian system, often lack the necessary information on both education systems abroad and work experience equivalencies.

*How can we overcome these barriers?*

Participants agreed that addressing these barriers requires an approach that encompasses more than just 'credential recognition' of regulated occupations or of formal qualifications. Although this recognition is important, it should be complemented with language training that is occupation-

specific, competencies achieved through work experience need to be recognised; and an immigrant must be educated in the Canadian context relevant to his or her profession.

To address time constraints faced by both managers and employees, participants suggested that the Public Service offer conditional employment in cases where credential recognition procedures are still outstanding and where training or testing is required. In some cases, participants suggested that immigration policies themselves need to be addressed. For example, a participant pointed out that in the 1970s Filipino men and women immigrated as nurses, now these individuals (mostly women) immigrate as domestics and must work as such for 24 months, delaying their entrance into their profession. Some participants suggested that the government should remove the citizenship requirement currently demanded of Public Service employees through legislation.

*Who are the key actors? What new roles can they play?*

Key actors including the Public Service as an employer, managers, immigrant employees, the private sector, NGOs, immigration officials and government were identified and their roles debated.

Participants suggested that the PSC can take the lead in addressing misconceptions that immigrants and minorities do not want to work in the public service. Managers should attend to the specific needs of immigrants, be trained to recognize their skills despite language barriers or thick accents; be encouraged to view immigrants as a potential resource for replacing ageing babyboomers; and, be accountable for public service equity goals. To reach immigrant employees, e-recruiting was emphasised, as well as promoting the fact that there are employment opportunities in the public service outside of Ottawa. It was agreed that the private sector is an emerging potential partner because they too would benefit from an effective skills and credential recognition policy. NGOs, which are sometimes specific to an ethnic group, can help immigrants enter the workforce if they are adequately funded. Immigration officials need to be included because the immigration system can work hand-in-hand with these goals. Participants emphasised that for any initiative to be successful, governments would need to provide leadership and remain consistently committed to addressing the barriers facing immigrants.

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Although the public service is currently moving to a decentralised approach to hiring, participants suggested that this would have negative effects on equity goals. They encouraged a centralised approach with an emphasis on skills-testing for both immigrants and the Canadian-born. Standardised tests were hypothesised to have more equitable results for immigrants if they were not culturally biased. It was also suggested that tests would be useful for recognizing the skills of refugees for whom documentation is sometimes not available.

*Support, mentoring, programs and services*

Several mentoring initiatives, programs and services were recommended. These projects reflect a common sentiment: that the onus for credential evaluation should shift from the individual immigrant and their communities to the Public Service. Participants' contributions focussed on both attracting and retaining immigrants to the Public Service.

*Attracting Immigrants:* The PSC could provide services to facilitate the recognition process, even if they do not engage in credential recognition themselves. For example, they could publicise the use of a private accreditation service to legitimise the company and the process. If there is a delay in the accreditation process, a conditional offer could be made. The PSC could also provide bridge training, geographic-specific strategies with major local employers, develop work placements or internships specifically for immigrants; and, use a hiring committee to mitigate against discriminatory practices. Managers who are actively involved in recruiting more immigrants could be rewarded in their performance evaluations.

*Retaining Immigrants:* A development program targeting immigrants, or sectors where immigrants and visible minorities are concentrated, could be created to ensure that immigrants are fairly promoted and that horizontal segregation does not persist. Participants also suggested a network of recent hires, mentors or coaches to ensure that immigrants feel welcome in the public service.

*Investments, Partnerships and Next Steps*

There was a short discussion about creating networks and partnerships with other countries to share information and to facilitate the accreditation process. These might be modeled after those in the European union. However, participants agreed that before the nature of Canadian partnerships could be explored, more research was needed. Small-scale, Canadian, comparative research projects with an international component were recommended.

**Other Metropolis Conversations**

Conversation ONE:	Absorptive Capacity
Conversation TWO:	Second Generation Immigrants
Conversation THREE:	Health
Conversation FOUR:	Brain Gain, Brain Waste, Brain Drain
Conversation FIVE:	Recent Economic and Social Performance Outcomes of Immigrants
Conversation SIX:	Growing up in Cities: Creating Better Cities with Children and Youth
Conversation SEVEN:	Ethnicity and Labour Markets in Canada: A Research Agenda

All reports are available online at: <http://www.canada.metropolis.net> in both official languages.

The views expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect those of the Metropolis Project or the Public Service Commission.