

The Institutional Context of Immigration Policy and Foreign Credential Recognition in Canada

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Abstract

Recognition of immigrants' foreign-acquired credentials has emerged as a particularly central issue for Canadian immigrant settlement policy, because of Canada's distinctive and continuing commitment to mass immigration in the emerging knowledge economy, because existing institutional means for assessing educational credentials so important in this labour market do not work well for foreign-acquired qualifications, and because at least partly as a result, the employment prospects of newly arriving immigrants have deteriorated relative to the native-born, even as immigrant educational qualifications have increased. This paper assess policy options arising for Canadian immigration, taking account of its broader institutional context, as well as the challenges created by the transition to the knowledge economy. It is suggested that creating the institutional capacity for effective foreign credential assessment is a priority for immigrant settlement policy, and that because of the complexity of the task, time pressures and also underlying racial attitudes, major institutional innovations will be required to achieve it.

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The fact that immigrant skill recognition has emerged as one of the significant issues in relation to Canada's immigration program is no accident. It is a direct consequence of the nature and present position of immigration in Canada today. Canada has for some time been committed to a program of mass immigration in a knowledge economy. This distinctive Canadian strategy is a product of Canada's institutional history and position in the North American context. Any by the same token, contemporary institutional changes – in particular the maturation of the knowledge economy – have focussed attention on the capacity of Canada to continue to make effective use of skilled immigrants in the labour markets of today and into the future. This paper examines these trends and the policy options confronting Canada in the present context. It assesses the need for immigrant skill recognition in relation to other policy options confronting Canadian immigration, and it examines some of the institutional constraints and obstacles confronting effective immigrant skill recognition.

The paper proceeds in three parts. The first part examines the significance of immigrant credential recognition in Canadian labour markets today. The second part discusses the impact of institutional context and specifically labour market change in a knowledge economy on immigrants in Canada. And the third part identifies some of the institutional obstacles and constraints which must be confronted in framing an effective policy on foreign credential recognition.

1. IMMIGRANT CREDENTIAL RECOGNITION: SIGNIFICANCE IN CANADIAN LABOUR MARKETS TODAY

The issue of immigrant credential recognition is visible and pressing today, though it is by no means new. It has long been mentioned when immigrant issues are discussed (Abella, 1984; Canada,

1984; Arnopoulos, 1979). And in some form, it has been the subject of research and policy initiatives in Canada (Goldberg 2000; McDade, 1988; Stasiulis, 1990; Mata, 1994; Conger, 1994; Skills for Change, 1995; Conger and Bezanson, 1996; Brouwer, 1999), and in other immigration countries such as Australia (Iredale, 1988a, b; Fry, 1989; Dawkins, 1989; Mitchell, 1989; Castles et al., 1989) for a number of years.

Two estimates of the economic impact of immigrant credential recognition are available, using quite different methodologies, and both point toward numbers in the range of about \$2 billion annually. Economic impact in both cases is defined as the reduced value of the work done by immigrants because their qualifications were not recognized in the workforce. An estimate by Reitz (2001a) is based on labour force data in the Canadian census. Reitz calculated that immigrants earned \$2.4 billion less than native-born Canadians with ostensibly comparable skills, because of working in occupations at lower skill levels, and suggested that most likely at least 2/3 of the ‘ostensibly’ comparable skills – worth \$1.6 billion – are in fact transferable. Watt and Bloom (2001) conducted a survey to get workers’ perspectives. Immigrants were very prominent among those reporting that they possessed skills not being used in their present job, and the value of those skills were assessed at a comparable amount.

This substantial economic impact in fact is only the tip of the iceberg. The significance is magnified by the overall trend toward declining immigrant earnings and overall employment success (Reitz 2001b). This trend – for many years discounted as cyclical and not a permanent change in the capacity of Canadian labour markets to integrate immigrants (e.g. Bloom *et al.* 1995; Grant 1999) – is now being recognized as a more serious and long-term problem (e.g. Dougherty 1999, Fellegi 2004). Whereas newly arriving immigrant men in 1980 earned perhaps 80 percent of the earnings of native-born Canadian men at the time, by 1996 this figure had dropped to 60 percent. Alarming high rates of poverty are being observed among a number of immigrant groups in cities such as Toronto (Ornstein 2000; Kazamipour and Halli 2000). Optimistic expectations that the trends might be reversed with the economic recovery of the later 1990s were dashed by poor employment and earnings figures for immigrants in the 2001 census (Statistics Canada 2003).

In this context, immigrant skill discounting obviously gains heightened significance. Despite these downward employment and earnings trends, educational credential levels among recent immigrants have been high and rising, and they remain higher than for the native-born workforce. This suggests that the real problem is not so much immigrant skill levels, as important as they are, but rather the extent to which they are readily accepted by Canadian employers.

The emphasis in Canadian government policy on human capital points-based immigrant selection, and in particular on ever higher educational standards, clearly is not having the desired impact. As alternatives, two other options have been suggested by observers of immigrant employment trends, but with significant and potentially negative collateral impacts even if they could be accomplished. One option is to accept downward employment trends as part of present-day reality, and hope for better prospects for the children of immigrants. The expectation for improvement in the second generation is based in part on the valuation of education that highly-educated immigrants might pass to their children, and the greater acceptance among employers (compared to the immigrant parents) because their education would be domestic rather than foreign. However, the downside of this option is that even if poverty among the parents does not impede educational aspiration for the children, as a 'collateral impact' it might be expected to generate negative social costs on the host society. Immigrants in poverty would create pressures on the social 'safety net,' or at least the perception of such pressures. This could lead to public demands for a reduction in social programs and supports, moving Canada in the direction of a more individualistic institutional framework such exists in the United States. The attractiveness of this option might depend on one's attitudes toward the American as opposed to the Canadian approach to social policy and poverty issues.

The other option – not necessarily mutually exclusive – would be to cut immigration levels to reduce the negative impact. This has been suggested by current critics of Canadian immigration such as Daniel Stoffman (2002) and Martin Collacutt (2002). The difficulty is that this abandons Canada's reliance on immigration, forgoing its potential future benefits. Canada more than other countries has relied on immigration as a development strategy. The small size of the country – particularly in relation to

its geographic neighbour the United States – as well as its currently low fertility rate means that Canadian development is immigration dependent. Demographic projections show that the largest part of labour force growth in Canada for the foreseeable future will come from immigration.

Interestingly, the Australian policy put in place by the Howard government illustrates the downside of cutting immigration. First, cutting immigration in the short term actually lowers immigrant educational levels. This is because political resistance to reducing family-class immigration opportunities means that the most easily reduced component of immigration flow is for skilled workers. And second, the current Australian return to accepting larger numbers of immigrants despite a reluctance to do so illustrates the pressures working against cutting immigration. Moreover, the experience of having cut immigration tends to reinforce a negative perception of immigrants which potentially aggravates domestic race relations. The currently comparatively positive view of immigration in Canada (Simon and Lynch 1999: 461) is a program resource. Over the past quarter century, and in the context of comparatively high levels of immigration, a majority of Canadians have supported either maintaining those levels or increasing them (Reitz 2004).

2. EFFECTS OF LABOUR MARKET CHANGE IN A KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

Canada's strategy of mass immigration in a knowledge economy is based largely on a theory of 'human capital' whose weaknesses in this context are now quite visible. Whereas human capital theory suggests that worker earnings reflect the productive value of their skills, recent experience contracts that expectation. The transition to a knowledge economy, or the 'post-industrial' society, involves the intensification of these trends (Bell 1973, Hunter 1988, Hunter and Leiper 1993). Immigrant skills have risen to unprecedented levels, yet immigrant earnings have fallen not only in relative but also in absolute terms (Statistics Canada 2003).

The reason for the weakness of human capital theory as applied to immigrants and in a

knowledge-economy setting is that human capital theory assumes an effective institutional mechanism by which employers may assess the productive value of prospective worker skills. It is precisely the absence of such a mechanism that is revealed by the under-utilization of immigrant skills (Li 2000, Reitz 2001a). Specific features of institutions for the assessment of foreign acquired skills, and how they may be developed to apply to immigrants, is considered in the next section. Here we consider briefly how the Canadian context has changed, and the impact of the transition to a knowledge economy.

Immigration in Canada historically has matched stages of economic development. When the economic priority was agriculture, Canada recruited immigrants for agricultural work. When priorities shifted to those of an industrializing economy, Canada recruited immigrants for urban construction and manufacturing. Now that Canada is moving toward a post-industrial or knowledge economy, immigrants are recruited to contribute in that context. Only in the latter phase are immigrant credentials significant. In the previous two phases – agricultural and industrial – it was sufficient to recruit immigrants on the basis of their capacity for physical labour and the acquisition of limited skills for manual work. Assessment of foreign credentials was essentially irrelevant. In a knowledge economy, such assessment is critical to the success of the program.

Although human capital theory does not accurately predict immigrant earnings, the theory does provide a framework for assessing the impact that rising native-born educational levels have on immigrant earnings. This is the methodology of statistical ‘decomposition,’ in which human capital earnings equations for immigrants and native-born can be used to project future earnings scenarios. In two previous papers (Reitz 2001b, 2003a), I have employed this methodology in Canada and also in comparing Canada with the United States. In both cases, the over-riding impact of native-born skill trends in reducing the impact of immigrant skills is demonstrated dramatically.

(1) In Canada, statistical decomposition shows that over the period 1991 - 1996, rising native-born educational levels account for about one-half of the decline in the earnings of newly-arriving immigrants (Reitz 2001b). There are three components of the impact of

trends in native-born skills. First, native-born educational levels rose more rapidly than those of immigrants. Second, rising immigrant skills have less significance because their labour market value was lower. And third, the value of education among the native-born increased whereas it did not increase for immigrants.

(2) The comparison of decomposition for Canada and the United States is interesting because the direction of change in the native-born education in the two countries was quite different over the same period. Historically, native-born educational levels were higher in the United States, but since the 1970s native-born educational levels rose more rapidly in Canada. As a result, immigrant earnings which had been relatively higher in Canada (cf. Reitz 1998b) have begun to decline to U.S. levels. This was true, despite the fact that immigrant educational levels rose in Canada but fell in the United States (see also Borjas 1999). In effect, the cross-national difference in trends in native-born educational levels had much more impact on comparative trends in immigrant earnings than the direction of change in the educational levels of immigrants themselves.

To understand fully how labour market change is affecting immigrants will require much further analysis. If as is often assumed, immigrants compete primarily with younger workers in urban areas, then because educational levels among these workers are changing most rapidly the impact on immigrants may be greater. Moreover as Green and Worswick (2004) suggest, downward trends in the earnings of all new labour market entrants over this period, including for the native-born, may compound the problems for immigrants.

Trends toward a knowledge economy may play themselves out differently in different occupational fields, with implications for immigrants. As the knowledge economy grows, occupations demanding the highest level of skills, such as professional fields and management of knowledge-intensive sectors of the workforce, also grow. Some have been concerned that institutional procedures, such as with regard to professional licensing. Census analysis shows that newly-arriving immigrants are in fact

encountering more difficulty in accessing professional occupations (Reitz 2003b). However, they have greater difficulty regarding access to positions in management. As well, earnings disadvantages are large not only within these knowledge occupations, but also outside them. In fact, negative trends in earnings outside the knowledge occupations contribute very substantially to the overall downward trend in immigrant earnings.

These occupation-specific trends suggest how institutional procedures may affect the skill-assessment processes. First, despite difficulties in professional fields, the relative success of immigrants in these occupations validates to some degree the value of their qualifications. In effect, the fields in which the credential assessment processes are most rigorous are fields in which immigrants find comparative success. Second, immigrants' difficulties outside professional fields indicate that addressing the problem of credential assessment must go beyond the issues of barriers to licensing. Policy approaches would involve sectors of the workforce in which the processes may be much less formalized.

These and other labour market trends suggest that the new knowledge economy is not entirely immigrant-friendly. Despite increased cultural sensitivity to diversity issues, and the universality of knowledge itself as an institutional domain, the validation of knowledge-based skills is inevitably performed by local institutions. The question is whether those local institutions can be adapted to develop the capability for global reach. Success increasingly depends on the possession of high levels of education, but only if that education is properly assessed and utilized. Both increased emphasis on education-based skills in many occupations both inside and outside the professions, and increases in the supply of domestically-educated workers, means that immigrants confront major competition in gaining employment, and cannot escape the problems of skills transferability. Hence, creating labour market institutions which are truly capable of handling a global workforce will require institutional innovation and change.

3. INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE ISSUES : COMPLEXITY, TIME, AND RACIAL ATTITUDES

Canada's immigration policy requires the creation of an essential feature of an emerging global labor market: namely institutions for the assessment of qualifications and credentials for workers from origins around the world. The effective functioning of any labour market presumes the existence of institutionalized means for employers to assess the productive value of prospective workers' skills. The necessary institutional arrangements include the following: access to accurate information about the skill-base reflected in credentials acquired from specific educational institutions, access to individuals in a position to provide reliable advice regarding the performance of individuals as they acquired those credentials, and access to assessments of the performance of similarly-qualified individuals in employment situations comparable to the one for which the employer is hiring. In a knowledge economy, the skills are increasingly education-based, and their significance to employment performance is increasing.

Although there are incentives in today's labour market for employers to participate in this process, and to develop its application to immigrants, these incentives may be insufficient for several reasons. Three types of challenges to institutional change must be addressed. The first concerns the complexity of the required changes, the second concerns the timing of those changes in relation to the priorities of employers as opposed to those concerned with the success of the immigration program, and the third concerns the impact of racial attitudes of the host society. Each of these requires careful consideration.

Institutional complexity. There are a number of components of the institutions for credential assessment, and the required institutional change involve participation of actors from a number of sectors. The process involves employers and immigrants, of course, and also organizations representing their collective interests. For immigrants the latter includes both labour groups and immigrant or ethnic community organizations. Greatly complicating this situation is the need for many innovations to be undertaken on an occupation-specific basis. Cooperation is required from licensing bodies for professions and trades, who control occupational access to a degree, and educational and other occupational training institutions who are needed to participate in bridging skill gaps. Leadership is required to bring these elements together, including by governments where the division of responsibilities at federal, provincial

and municipal levels itself requires coordination.

Employers' notorious demand for 'Canadian experience' reflects one aspect of the local character of existing institutions for certification of qualifications. As noted above, employers assessments of qualifications rely on assessments of similarly-credentialed applicants in other known employment situations. Of course over time employers may be expected to become more familiar with the specifics of foreign-acquired qualifications. On the other hand, rapid increase in the supply of highly-skilled native-born workers reduces the incentives for innovation in this field. Even private sector agencies to provide this service for immigrants -- charging immigrants themselves for credential validation -- have been slow to emerge and have required public start-up subsidy. For example, in Ontario the provincial government mandated World Educational Services -- a New York State based firm -- to provide immigrant credential assessment.

In cases in which immigrant qualifications do not fit employer expectation, educational institutions may be called upon to provide the necessary bridge between foreign and domestic qualifications. Yet educational institutions themselves are bureaucratic and slow to develop the means for immigrants to efficiently 'top up' their foreign-acquired qualifications, although there is significant progress recently in specific occupational sectors such as pharmacy. Bridge-training programs have also been developed by government itself, again in specific occupational groups. Ultimately, it may be necessary to get employers directly involved in this process, but with additional incentives beyond what exists in the labour market itself.

Timing. The question of timing is whether institutional changes to avert immigrant employment decline will occur before its negative consequences become irreversible. The urgency of this matter from the point of view of employers may be much less than its urgency from the point of view of those concerned with the negative consequences of declining immigrant employment.

On the one hand, historically, the development of inter-regional skill transferability in labour markets has been a fairly slow process. Within Canada even today, there are a number of specific occupations in regulated professions and trades where barriers exist. And although persons educated in one Canadian province are often quickly qualified for work in another, and basic secondary and post-secondary degrees are recognized across Canada, such has not always been the case. It has taken time for knowledge of educational qualifications from outside Canadian jurisdictions to be recognized. Such recognition usually occurs after inter-regional migration has been underway for a period of time. Today, many educational qualifications obtained in the United States are recognized in Canada. Again, however, this has not always been the case, and the recognition of such qualifications has been slow. Recognition of qualifications obtained in more distant lands still less familiar in Canada undoubtedly will be slow in coming without special coordinated efforts. Even the collective recognition of the existence of the problem has been slow in coming.

On the other hand, the most significant negative impacts of immigrant employment decline are also slow to develop. The decline itself has been fairly rapid, and this decline is continuing. These circumstances may translate into social problems in a number of ways. First, demands on the social safety net may be expected to increase. Although immigrants are known to be self-reliant and to be reluctant to request social assistance for which they may be eligible, high rates of poverty and social disadvantage inevitably translate into high rates of utilization of social services. Second, public perceptions of immigrants as a liability or a social problem may be expected to increase. This would be exacerbated by evidence of social problems associated with poverty. And third, ultimately a political response from immigrants themselves may become visible. The time frame for these various outcomes is undetermined, but the social risk is clearly present.

If a process of change is more urgent to governments than to employers, and the process must be 'kick-started,' one of the key requirements is for inter-governmental cooperation and collaboration. Federal immigration policy is designed to minimize involvement in matters related to the integration of immigrants into the labour force, and employment is regarded as a provincial responsibility. Little

coordination has ensued. Municipalities are confronted with needs for service-delivery, but they are resource poor and fragmented across metropolitan areas in which immigrants settle. In the case of Toronto, for example, only recently has the need for coordination in immigration-related issues emerged as an item on the local agenda, as part of a broader resurgence in attention to urban needs.

Racial Attitudes. Underlying these issues are questions arising from the inter-relation between immigration issues and the increasing ethno-cultural and racial diversity that is involved. The groups affected are primarily racial minorities, so there is an obvious potential for inter-group attitudes and prejudices to affect processes of change. There is much evidence of negative racial attitudes and employment disparities in Canada (e.g. Boyd 1992, Christofides and Swidinsky 1994, Reitz and Breton 1994, Li 1998, Baker and Benjamin 1994, 1997). Ethnic and racial stereotypes may affect perceptions of immigrant qualifications, cultural differences and misunderstandings may affect efforts at cooperation, and the minority status of individual groups may affect the attention they receive in the political process.

The issue of foreign qualification recognition generally has not been articulated as one of racial discrimination, although many specific instances may well involve such discrimination. Issues of race and employment in Canada have previously become explicit in the debates over 'employment equity.' The issue was highly controversial, and resulting policy initiatives have been weak, confused and fragmented. This is reflected in the anomalous situation that employment equity legislation has operated completely differently at federal and provincial levels. Employment equity at the federal level was introduced by a Progressive Conservative government, and including 'visible minorities' among other 'target groups.' It has been administered since that time with periodic adjustments within the (rather limited) federal employment jurisdiction. At the provincial level, specifically in the case of Ontario, an essentially similar piece of legislation introduced by the New Democrat government in the mid-1990s was scrapped by the subsequent Progressive Conservative government as constituting racial 'quotas.' This puzzling divergence of discourses regarding employment equity is evidence of the great difficulty that Canadian governments have in directly confronting issues related to race.

It may be presumed that racial attitudes will affect the process of institution-building related to immigrant qualification recognition. The question to which the answer is as yet unknown is to what extent inter-group barriers may be critical to success.

CONCLUSIONS

To sustain the success of Canada's distinctive institutional model for immigration requires adaptation. The model developed because of the country's very substantial commitment to immigration, dictated in part by reasons of geography and political economy. It consists of components including immigration selection, in particular the human-capital based 'points-system', and also the policy of 'multiculturalism.' Now, Canada pursues mass immigration in a knowledge economy context, and the attendant employment problems for immigrants raise questions about the sustainability of the immigration program. This paper suggests that a key problem is the lack of adequate institutional means for the assessment of immigrant qualifications and credentials. This is an essential feature of emerging global labour market which is still undeveloped. A number of institutional challenges have been identified, related to institutional complexity, timing, and racial attitudes. Institutional innovations are needed, to create something like a global knowledge-credentials network. Meeting this challenge will to a significant degree determine the continued success of Canadian immigration policy.

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