

Fully Utilizing the Skills and Talents of Immigrants in Alberta

Alberta's economy continues to develop and in 2014, according to the Conference Board of Canada, the province will be the fastest growing economy in Canada. Alberta's real gross domestic product (GDP) is forecast to expand by 3.4% this year¹. At the same time, the province maintains low rates of unemployment, which in October 2013 reached 4.4%². Alberta Human Services estimates that by 2021 *Alberta's labour market will grow by approximately 607,000 workers at an annual average rate of 2.4%. A net increase of 492,000 workers will join the labour force, as occupational supply will increase at an annual rate of 1.9%. Therefore, the province is expected to experience a shortfall of 114,000 workers by 2021.*³ While Alberta's population is younger in comparison to the rest of the country, by 2026, 20% of Albertans will be age 65 or older.

Immigration is a potential solution to address the Alberta's labour market challenges and thus the immigration system needs to be adapted to attract the best and the brightest from around the world. In 2012 Alberta welcomed 36,902 immigrants with 47% of them settling in Calgary and 33% in Edmonton. In addition, Alberta is still a main destination of internal migration in Canada and in 2012 attracted over 100,000 in-migrants, which stands for one third of total internal migration.⁴ . With the benefits that immigrants bring, overwhelmingly as skilled labour, the Alberta Chambers of Commerce supports the provincial government's efforts to attract and retain immigrants to help alleviate labour shortages. However, a number of challenges to full employment of immigrants continue to exist.

Foreign Qualification Recognition (FQR)

Unnecessary barriers to foreign qualification recognition exist in many professions and sectors. New Canadians need the shortest, most practical route to obtain Canadian qualifications in their professions, without sacrificing standards. The ultimate goal is to give new immigrants the tools to become self-reliant and to take full advantage of the opportunities that Alberta offers. By failing to properly recognize foreign qualifications and experience, immigrants will continue to remain unemployed and/or under-contributing members of the Alberta economy – ultimately earning less income, paying less in taxes, and unable to afford the goods and services necessary to build their new lives in Canada. It is important that government, business and qualification-granting bodies work together to improve the processing time and policies for the qualification recognition of internationally trained professionals, alleviating the problems of labour shortages but also creating a society where everyone can become a contributing member.

¹ Conference Board of Canada, *Provincial Outlook: Autumn 2013*, on: www.conferenceboard.ca/press/newsrelease/13-12-09/better_days_ahead_for_most_provincial_economies_in_2014.aspx (Retrieved on January 5, 2014).

² Statistic Canada, *Labour Force Survey*, October 2013, on: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/131108/t131108a003-eng.htm> (Retrieved on January 6, 2013).

³ Government of Alberta, *Alberta's Occupational Demand and Supply Outlook 2011-2021*, on: <http://eae.alberta.ca/documents/occupational-demand-and-supply-outlook.pdf> (Retrieved on January 5, 2013).

⁴ TD Bank, *Interprovincial Migration Shifts in Canada*, June 17, 2013, on: http://www.td.com/document/PDF/economics/special/jb0613_interprovincial_migration.pdf (Retrieved on January 8, 2013).

At the same time, the province needs to raise the profile of its International Qualifications Assessment Service (IQAS) to ensure businesses and immigrants are aware of the opportunity to access assessments of foreign educational qualifications relative to provincial educational standards. It needs to be easy to find guidelines and other pertinent information on these websites as this is usually the first step for many potential immigrants.

There are nearly 500 professional regulatory authorities and numerous credential assessments bodies, hundreds of vocational institutions which are involved in assessing foreign credentials in 13 jurisdictions in Canada. At the same time immigrants still encounter difficulties to obtain transparent, accountable and systematized information about the regulatory requirements. Generally, the provinces are responsible for licensing and certification in approximately 55 regulated professions (15 per cent of Canada's labour market), while the employers determine if a worker possesses the appropriate qualification in the rest of occupations which remain unregulated (85 per cent of Canada's labour market).⁵ Meantime, the governments of Australia and New Zealand have carried out the reforms which aim to centralize the assessment of credential recognition through National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (NOOSR) and New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) respectively.⁶

The credential assessment has become more complicated since the range of immigrant source countries has broadened significantly, with the non-English speaking countries the majority. In addition, immigrants, on the whole, have a higher level of education. In 2011, 38.1% of immigrants reported having a degree, compared to 24.2% of non-immigrants.⁷

English language skills

English language skills are an additional concern. As stated in the 2011 Census of Population, more than 56% of the immigrant-language population in Canada have a mother tongue of Asian origin, being the Chinese, Indo-Iranian and Romance languages the most numerous immigrant mother tongue families.⁸ In a 2007 survey of Calgary based businesses, 90 per cent of respondents indicated that a professional immigrant must speak, understand, read and write English well enough to be easily understood by others in person, on the telephone, and to understand peers. Even if a person has the necessary skills but not the ability to communicate, their given skills cannot be adequately utilized.

In 2012 nearly 28% of permanent residents spoke neither English nor French, with most of these residents coming in to Canada from the Family Class and Economic Immigrants – Spouses and

⁵ Becklumb, Penny and Elgersma, Sandra, *Recognition of the foreign credentials of immigrants*, Parliamentary Information and Research Service, October 8, 2008, on: <http://www2.parl.gc.ca/content/lop/researchpublications/prb0429-e.htm> (Retrieved on December 12, 2010).

⁶ Business Council of British Columbia, *Labour market needs, Immigration programs, Foreign credential Recognition & Employment – LIFE in Ireland, New Zealand, Australia and Canada* (Vancouver: Business Council of British Columbia, 2007), on: http://www.bcbc.com/Documents/LE_20070412_Submission_LIFE.pdf, March 2007 (Retrieved on December 5, 2010).

⁷ CBC news, *More women than men have post-secondary education*, on: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/more-women-than-men-have-post-secondary-education-1.1358656> (Retrieved on January 7, 2014).

⁸ Statistic Canada, *Immigrant languages in Canada*, on: http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/as-sa/98-314-x/98-314-x2011003_2-eng.cfm (Retrieved on January 7, 2014).

Dependants, where respectively 41% and 31% did not speak either official language.⁹ There should be more discussion on what the minimum language requirements of Economic Immigrants needs to be, as the cost to the Canadian taxpayer to train foreign workers in the official languages is quite high.

Moreover, the immigrants themselves who search for work in the Canadian labour market cite language barriers as their major problem (32 per cent).¹⁰ The profile of immigrant-source countries has not changed much in the last few years, with Philippines, China and India, representing one third of all new permanent residents admitted to Canada on an annual basis.¹¹ In many cases, the existing English language skills of immigrants need to be improved (such as grasping idioms or social convention) so as to be appropriate for the workplace. In order for these immigrants to succeed as a part of Alberta's labour force, English language skills training are a must.

Integration services

To fully utilize and engage the skills of immigrants in Alberta, it is necessary to have suitable integration services. Without knowledge of the customs and culture of the place that they have chosen to settle down, immigrants cannot truly become contributing members of the community. This lack of engagement can lead to social and financial costs, such as discouraged worker syndrome and taking on lower paying jobs (many of which are not in the same occupational sector as the ones that they were trained in).

Presently, there is a wide range of government supported and non-profit programs that try to cope with different aspects of immigration, albeit the number of them makes it hard for a potential immigrant to get precise information. There is no centralized integration service organization on a provincial level in Alberta, nor a federal one that would coordinate the integration policy towards newcomers. The existing integration services are represented by non-profit organizations (with limited budgets) or by the heritage centres that concentrate their work only on particular nationalities. Community-specific integration services, run by local non-profits or the municipality, should be established to truly harness the growth and productivity that immigration can bring.

The Alberta Chambers of Commerce recommends that the Government of Alberta:

1. Work with Citizenship and Immigration Canada to provide potential immigrants with accurate information about career prospects and the realities of the Canadian education and qualification system.
2. Improve the overseas pre-arrival preparation of immigrants, enabling a pre-arrival credential assessment as well as establishing a National Qualification Framework, using the credentialing agencies of Australia and New Zealand as a successful reference.

⁹ Citizenship and Immigration Canada, *Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration, 2013*, on:

<http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/publications/annual-report-2013/index.asp> (Retrieved on January 8, 2014).

¹⁰ Schellenberg, Grant and Maheux, Helene, *Immigrants' perspectives on their first four years in Canada: Highlights from three waves of the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada*, Social Trends. Catalogue NO 11-008, on: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2007000/9627-eng.htm#9> (Retrieved on January 20, 2011).

¹¹ Government of Canada, *Facts and figures 2011 – Immigration overview: Permanent and temporary residents*, on: <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/statistics/facts2011/permanent/10.asp> (Retrieved on January 8, 2014).

3. Work with business and professional credentialing bodies to develop more flexible approaches to recognizing credentials and experience, while maintaining Canadian standards.
4. Develop an education profile of the main source countries of immigrants in order to have a transparent and comprehensive description of their educational systems available for business and other hiring entities.
5. Raise the profile of the International Qualifications Assessment Service to ensure businesses and immigrants are aware of the opportunity to access reliable assessments of foreign educational qualifications relative to provincial educational standards.
6. Work with businesses to extend the mandate of Citizenship and Immigration Canada to develop more comprehensive English literacy and language training programs for new immigrants and those wait-listed to arrive in Canada.
7. Encourage communities, along with support from Citizenship and Immigration Canada, to develop integration programs for new immigrants.

RENEWAL