



Prairie Centre Regional Workshop

Workshop Presentation Abstract

Devaluation of Foreign Credentials as Perceived by Non-White Professional Immigrants

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Immigrants with professional qualifications trained outside of Canada often encounter barriers in the Canadian labour force. Sometimes, such barriers are described as immigrants lacking Canadian experience and linguistic abilities needed for Canadian jobs. Other times, barriers are depicted as institutions failing to recognize credentials of foreign-trained professionals, and professional organizations acting as gate-keepers to disadvantage professional immigrants. A fundamental debate has to do with whether individual attributes or institutionalized barriers are mainly responsible for immigrants' occupational disadvantages. The purpose of this study is to use survey data to highlight some of the individual and structural barriers, and to examine how foreign credentials are devaluated as perceived by foreign-trained Indo- and Chinese-Canadian professionals. The study emphasizes the importance of personal experience and perceptions in understanding individual and structural barriers. In particular, this study inquires into the experiences and perceptions of foreign-trained Indo- and Chinese-Canadian professionals and attempts to provide a better understanding of the reality and obstacles that non-white foreign-trained professionals face in the Canadian labour market. The study illustrates that systemic barriers with regards to devaluation of foreign credentials affect foreign-trained professionals in accessing professional jobs, and that individual barriers cannot be seen in isolation from social conditions and structural arrangements.

The data were based on a survey conducted in Vancouver in 1997. Since no comprehensive lists of foreign-trained professionals were available, respondents were obtained by snowball sampling method. In total, 404 foreign-trained professionals were interviewed, including 201 professionals originally from India, and 203 professionals from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China. "Foreign-trained professionals" refers to those who received their professional training outside of Canada and who entered this country as immigrants and resided in greater Vancouver at the time of the study. The data were obtained by self-administered questionnaires. The questionnaires were delivered personally by two trained research assistants to prospective respondents who were willing to participate in the survey. Since the total target population in Vancouver is unknown, it is difficult to assess statistically how representative the sample is. Considering the fact that most respondents (89 per cent) came to Canada in the 1980s and 1990s, the sampled respondents are probably more representative of recent foreign-trained Indo- and Chinese-Canadian professionals who came to Canada in these two decades.

The findings indicate that a large number of foreign-trained professionals have experienced downward social mobility after immigrating to Canada, and that the significant human capital brought in by immigrants has been under-utilized. The findings also demonstrate that foreign-trained professional immigrants perceived institutionalized barriers such as nonrecognition or devaluation of credentials as major factors that contribute to their occupational disadvantages. Perceived discrimination as reported from respondents does not necessarily mean that these professionals have been consciously and intentionally excluded from equal access to the professional jobs by professional organizations, government agencies, and educational institutions. However, it does reflect possible systemic racism which may be entrenched within the institutional framework of society, which although unintended, has the consequence to exclude immigrants, and in particular, non-white foreign-trained professionals from access to equality.

The survey data indicate a similar pattern of occupational disadvantages and perceived discrimination for the two ethnic groups when calculation is made separately for Indo- and Chinese-Canadian professionals. It demonstrates that non-white foreign-trained professionals, whether from India or Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China, encounter the same systemic barriers in accessing professional occupations in the Canadian labour force, and experience similar downward mobility and discrimination.

The study has shown how systemic barriers have disadvantaged non-white foreign-trained professional immigrants. The problem of transferring educational equivalencies and work experience across national boundaries results in professional immigrants taking jobs for which they are overtrained, resulting in downward occupational mobility relative to the occupations held before their immigrating to Canada. While some individual barriers such as difficulties in the command of English, adaptation to western culture, and lack of Canadian work experience might be overcome to some extent through personal efforts over time, any significant change are much more difficult, perhaps impossible, because of structural restrictions in Canada. It is evident that immigrants bring to the Canadian labour force significant human capital resources. However, a better understanding of how these human resources are actually used after the

immigrants' arrival in Canada is needed. It is essential for federal and provincial governments and professional organizations to understand how highly-educated foreign-trained professional immigrants establish themselves in the labour force and what systemic barriers they encounter. The study suggests that in order for Canada to fully benefit from international human capital transfer, a policy is needed to ensure that the credentials of foreign-trained professional immigrants are properly and fairly evaluated.