Barriers of Racial Discrimination for Foreign Credential Recognition

Canada has a long history of immigration as an integral part of economic growth. Many immigrants acquire skills abroad that make them an asset to Canadian labour markets. Unfortunately, immigrants face challenges in getting their foreign credentials recognized before they are able to find employment in Canada. This paper will examine whether systemic racism is a debilitating factor for the assessment and recognition of foreign credentials, as well as a possible factor for diminished employment opportunities for visible minority immigrants in Alberta. Through conducting a literature review and interviews with the settlement sector, this analysis examines race-related barriers in the process of obtaining foreign credential recognition (FCR) and employment. Specifically, this paper will outline the FCR process, racial discrimination against visible minority immigrants and country of origin as a possible barrier.

Newcomers face issues that may impede the recognition of their credentials and work experience, which consequently affect their performance in the Canadian labour market. When foreign credentials are not recognized, immigrants are prevented from accessing professional jobs and acquiring Canadian work experience. Immigrants living in Alberta report having a lower probability of credential recognition in the country than their counterparts settling in other provinces. Potential factors impeding the validation of foreign credentials may include foreign education credentials being deemed as less relevant to the needs of the Alberta and Canadian labour market, language proficiency barriers and lack of familiarity of work experience among employers. Another potential obstacle may come from racialized discrimination in validating foreign credentials of visible minorities. The assessment and recognition of foreign credentials of visible minority immigrants pose the question; does FCR and the opportunity to obtain employment in Alberta vary depending on whether immigrants are part of a visible minority?

Process of Foreign Credential Assessment and Recognition

Obtaining employment is an important aspect for the successful integration of newcomers in Canadian society. In order for foreign-skilled immigrant workers to obtain employment in their related fields of expertise, often times they must have their foreign credentials recognized by a provincial assessment agency in the province where they choose to settle.

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<sup>a</sup>Visible minorities as defined in state policy as “persons who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour and who do not report being Aboriginal”.

<sup>b</sup>There are over 200 ethnic groups in Canada, with almost 20% of the total population identifying themselves as visible minorities and 63% of the total population in Alberta.

<sup>c</sup>Foreign skilled and foreign trained are used interchangeably in this paper.
Foreign credentials can be defined as any formal education higher than a high school diploma, including professional or technical qualifications and any other degrees, diplomas, or certificates received outside Canada. Jobs that require a license registration need to apply to regulatory bodies and have their foreign credentials assessed. Other industries, although not regulated by provincial governing bodies, might also require that foreign credentials and work experience be evaluated and recognized as an equivalent to that of other Canadians.

Both the federal and provincial governments have complementary roles in the recognition of foreign credentials. The federal government plays facilitating and coordinating roles, whereas provincial governments have regulatory bodies in place that are responsible for the licensing process and credential evaluation within their jurisdiction. The purpose of assessing credentials is to meet the requirements of the different provincial professional regulatory bodies, which dictate standards for FCR.

For this reason, any skilled immigrant seeking employment in their respected field of expertise in Alberta must have their foreign credentials assessed and recognized by the appropriate assessment and licensing bodies. The primary decision-makers in the FCR process are professional regulatory organizations, academic institutions and employers. One of the principal assessment agencies in Alberta is the International Qualifications Assessment Service (IQAS). The outcome of the evaluation may serve the purpose of general employment, studying in Canada, and obtaining professional certification or licensing in Canada. The evaluation of foreign credentials usually considers the level and type of education, duration of the study program, status of issuing institutions, the education system of the issuing country, and the authenticity, relevance, trustworthiness, and transferability of the credentials obtained.

**Racism as a Barrier: Literature Review and Settlement Perspective**

Since FCR often depends on different organizational bodies, racism could be a potential barrier for refusing an applicant’s credentials based on their ethnicity or race by country of origin. Despite the positive changes made to eliminate the racial discrimination found in previous immigration policy, the argument lies in that the racial intent was not lifted but rather the language was adjusted to seem unbiased for visible minority immigrants. Racism is manifested in a systemic level, through immigration policies that have a differential impact on racialized groups, that otherwise lead to discrimination against newcomers.

Racism refers to subtle discriminating behavior, unconscious prejudice, and its presence has been used to explain a great number of social inequalities in Canada. Discrimination of visible minority immigrants is hard to
both measure and quantify. Societal disapproval of overt racism lends itself to the manifestation of subtle racism as a tenacious and pervasive obstacle to measure.\textsuperscript{19} Hence, it is a challenge to obtain quantified statistics on any discriminating practices for visible minority recognition of foreign credentials and employment status.

In order to overcome the limitations in data, ten settlement practitioners were consulted throughout Alberta to obtain a deeper understanding of whether visible minority immigrants face more challenges in having their credentials assessed and recognized, as well as whether they experience discrimination in obtaining employment. Practitioners completed a survey questionnaire that measured the barriers that visible and non-visible minority immigrants have reported. In particular, the following areas were explored:

- The difficulty of the assessment of immigrants’ foreign credentials,
- The amount of time immigrants wait to get their credentials recognized by assessment agencies,
- How long it takes immigrants to find employment in Alberta,
- Which industries are more sought after,
- Racialized discrimination for visible minority immigrants obtaining FCR, and
- Racialized discrimination for visible minority immigrants obtaining employment.

Respondents argued that systemic racism and ethnocentrism do exist in Alberta, which places barriers for visible minorities to integrate in the Alberta labour market. Immigrants of visible minorities bring forward issues of getting their foreign credential recognized and the difficulties they face in finding employment.\textsuperscript{19} Canadian immigrants often feel they receive points for their foreign credentials and work experience that allows them to immigrate to Canada but not to practice their professions while they are here.\textsuperscript{20} In fact, educational credential assessment frequently fails to accurately predict labour-market performance among immigrants, especially those of visible minorities.\textsuperscript{21} In particular, the assessment process prevents visible minority women from accessing high-skilled jobs.\textsuperscript{22} It is still common for this specific group to be underemployed, working in occupations that do not correspond to their education and training. Visible minority women are among the highest group that continue to be found in low paying and part-time work such as manual labour, sales or service jobs.\textsuperscript{23} Reasons may stem from discrimination against certain foreign credentials and work experience by Canadian employers and regulatory bodies, which would then prevent access to professional jobs.\textsuperscript{24} Overall, settlement practitioners expressed there is no racialized difference for visible minorities in getting their FCR. The time commitment and challenge of FCR depends on where individuals obtain their credentials. Often immigrants have a difficult time finding employment because of their language skills. A few respondents added that immigrants seem to be discriminated by their English pronunciation. Those who have a more pronounced accent are seen with lesser value.

Even though FCR does not vary between visible minorities and non-visible minority immigrants, obtaining employment is a more challenging task for the former. Approximately 80% of interviewed settlement practitioners agreed that employers are simply reluctant to hire immigrants of visible minorities. On average respondents agreed that visible minorities wait approximately three to six months more than non-visible minority immigrants in finding employment in their field of expertise. All professionals interviewed agreed that racial discrimination was a barrier to finding employment in Alberta. One settlement practitioner in Edmonton responded by stating that most
employers would not agree to racial discrimination in the hiring process of their organizations but instead they find most immigrants from visible minorities unqualified to hire.

One respondent, working in the Medicine Hat region, noted that visible minority immigrants tend to be attracted to unskilled work in the service and labour industry sectors. The respondent added that immigrants seek employment in the same industries as their compatriots because they find it easier to be referred and obtain employment while getting Canadian work experience. Another settlement worker in Edmonton pointed out that work sought after immigrants of distinct ethnic types is contingent on traditional work ethics from country of origin. Particular traits and work habits based around cultural experience or values become salient and attractive to different industry sectors.

However, it is difficult to determine whether racial discrimination is truly a barrier for FCR without quantitative data. Recent government data concerning employment outcomes based on country of origin is currently unavailable. Statistics Canada last examined the recognition of foreign credentials and work experience from the perspective of immigrants through the 2005 Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada.8

In a study using this survey, researchers found that newcomers who were part of a visible minority had a lower probability of having their work experience recognized compared to non-visible minority counterparts at 42% versus 52%.26 This study also showed that even though a visible minority immigrant has lived in Canada for over 17 years, he or she is still more likely to receive a lower pay grade than a non-visible minority immigrant.26 The authors agreed that visible minority immigrants are more vulnerable to experience challenges transitioning into Canadian mainstream society than their counterparts and experience less success in getting their foreign credentials recognized.27

Additional research that explores this issues suggests that visible minorities tend to believe that prejudice affects the employment opportunities of visible minority immigrants. It has been reported that almost one quarter of visible minority workers experience racial harassment or discrimination while looking for employment.26 Discounting the skills of visible minority immigrants may appear as a legitimate practice rather than a manifestation of prejudice by excluding certain groups from entering a particular field or occupation through non-recognition of their credentials by employers. Overall it is possible that discrimination occurs as employers may not be aware of their hiring practice and lack of obligation to execute appropriately the Employment Equity Act.

In another study, participants were asked to evaluate an applicant for a marketing position in a Canadian firm on the basis of the information provided on their résumé. The applicants were presented with either an immigrant who had received his education and training in South Africa, or a native-born Canadian. Based on the applicant’s name and credential information available on the résumé, participants we were able to infer the applicant’s race.

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8The survey followed a cohort of new immigrants during their first four years of settlement in Canada. The survey captured both the pre-immigration and post-immigration trajectories of these immigrants by providing information on their occupation prior to landing, intended occupation, credentials received prior to landing and plans for credentials assessment. In addition it reported their actual occupation in Canada, the education obtained or training taken after landing, and their labour-market outcomes such as earnings, participation, employment and unemployment.26 A few of the limitations from this survey would be the undocumented related work experience from immigrants in their fields of expertise.
Participants evaluated significantly less favorably applicants that seem to be part of a visible minority than those from non-visible minorities, despite comparable or equal credentials for all applicants.\textsuperscript{29}

With the type of data available, it is not possible to know whether visible minorities are prejudiced over their foreign credentials or not. Census and survey data do not directly measure prejudice, and often, visible minority status and country of origin are inextricably linked, so that either one may be the driving force for skill discounting. Additionally, immigrants may vary in the degree in which they feel part of a certain visible minority group. Therefore, it is inappropriate to deduce any racialized difference from assessing a link between visible minority immigrants and country of origin.

**Country of Origin as a Barrier**

It has been argued that systemic racism is not an issue facing newcomers, but rather the process of recognizing differences of work and educational experience based on the country of origin.\textsuperscript{30} Furthermore, a Calgary settlement practitioner stated that integration depends on socio-cultural conditions and English language skills. Several studies suggest that immigrant professionals from the United States, United Kingdom and Western Europe are far more successful in the Canadian labour market than their counterparts.\textsuperscript{31} People emigrating from developing countries encountered more difficulties with the recognition of their foreign credentials and work experience than those from developed countries, who have a relatively successful experience. Immigrants from developed English-speaking nations, notably United States, Australia, Britain or New Zealand, have an 83% success rate in finding employment in their field of occupation.\textsuperscript{32} This means that those that come from the former British Empire have an advantage in the FCR process. This may suggest that the quality of education is not the only factor involved in the assessment of foreign credentials and work experience in Canada.

Perhaps Canada has not deviated far from its early immigration policy where immigrants from Europe and the United States were viewed more favorably than those from developing nations. The favorable treatment of immigrants from developing countries gives rise to adverse labour market integration outcomes for newcomers from developing countries.\textsuperscript{33} Knowledge acquired from the developing world is, at times, considered incompatible with the cultural and social fabric of tradition in Canada by foreign qualification assessors.\textsuperscript{34} The high value placed on education obtained from the developed world, combined with a lack of familiarity with foreign credentials promotes the exclusion of foreign trained workers from the developing world.\textsuperscript{35}

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

Canada has a long history of immigration and will continue to reform its immigration policy to foster a more inclusive and diverse society. Immigration policy reform is an attempt to encourage growth in the population and keep Canada active in the global economy. With regards to the selection of immigrants the Government of Canada is within its right to select individuals and families whom it regards as suitable potential citizens. Even with in light of previous reforms to reduce racial discrimination, unfavorable attitudes and beliefs about visible minorities and immigrants still persist, although less blatant than in the past. Racism represents a unique challenge for a society seeking universal equality and justice. It is difficult to examine if racial discrimination is a barrier for FCR because there is no quantified data available to clear the debate about the quality of foreign
credentials versus prejudice against visible minorities. The government should reintroduce the longitudinal survey of immigrants to Canada, place emphasis in methods to detect levels of racism, develop more thorough and precise terms and methods of diagnosis, and seek expert opinion to identify and address the impacts of racism. This will help establish policy to reduce prejudice against immigrant populations.

Since the Government of Canada has identified immigration a strategy in addressing labour shortages, it could play a role in accelerating the process of assessing foreign credentials and continue to increase flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of the Canadian labour market. Immigration policy should be adjusted to make the assessment of foreign credentials prior to arrival a requirement for the approval of Economic Class applications. A recommendation for the federal and provincial governments would be to continue working collaboratively to agree upon a national standard for assessment providers. Federal and provincial governments should introduce new bills that will make regulatory bodies accountable for how they assess foreign credentials and ensure their admission procedures are transparent and equitable. It is also imperative for government agencies to further their work with employers and incentivize them to create internships or co-op opportunities that assist immigrants in acquiring Canadian work experience.

Federal and provincial governments would benefit from continued efforts in educating the public and employers about added benefits of inclusion and diversity in the workplace, and the contribution immigrants make to Canadian society. The perceived ambiguity in foreign qualifications makes it easier to discriminate against visible minority immigrants. Therefore, raising awareness about other countries and cultures is a good step to increase the value of diversity and break down cultural barriers.

Immigrant serving agencies in Alberta can help reduce racism by providing employers with the cultural competence training required to increase awareness and appreciation of diversity in the workplace. The settlement sector can continue to advocate for racial equality by gathering successful integration stories from visible-minority immigrant communities as examples of their positive contributions to the province and the labour market. By promoting the benefits of having a diverse workforce, the settlement sector will be positioned to encourage better employment outcomes for visible minority newcomers.
References

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