

ACCESS TO EXPERIENCE

Changing demographics and increased emphasis on equality are exerting new pressures on licensed professions. Engineering regulators, in particular, are feeling the heat, due to the high number of new Canadians looking to work in the profession. In the interests of facilitating access, has the time come to reconsider the need for Canadian experience?

The question of access to licensed professions, particularly for those educated outside of Canada, has gained prominence in political and social discourse over the past 25 years. More recently, the issue has taken on increased significance as Canada continues to be the destination of choice for many of the world's immigrants.

The question of access in 2004, however, is different from the situation of 50 years ago. The challenge in Ontario, and across Canada, is to deal with access in light of fundamental societal shifts, including changing demographics resulting from federal immigration policy. There is also a changing legal context that puts more emphasis on basic human rights. These changes have brought internal and external pressures and an increased call for a different approach to professional registration. Rather than opening the door to lower standards, the issue of access to the professions is forcing a rethinking of the way things are done.

Immigrant voices

Internationally educated professionals play a critical role in this movement for change and in identifying solutions for access. Over

2002, is an Ontario-based umbrella group representing 20 immigrant professional and trade associations, community initiatives and related organizations, working to increase access of immigrants into their fields of expertise. Representing more than 20,000 immigrant professionals, PROMPT has two primary objectives:

- to build and enhance the capacity of internationally educated professionals and tradespeople to become the collective immigrant voice on policy issues related to access to professions and trades; and
- to develop policy recommendations to increase access to professions and trades, and to advocate for changes based on these recommendations.

These objectives are driven by a long-term vision of improved economic and social integration of immigrants. The model is designed to provide diverse representation of immigrants from differing occupations, and to utilize the leadership, expertise and creativity of immigrants themselves.

One of PROMPT's members is the Council for Access to the Profession of Engineering (CAPE). CAPE is a membership-based organization supporting integration of internationally trained engineering graduates (ITEGs) into Ontario's engineering workplace. It operates to:

- mobilize funding and resources, based on ITEGs' population ratio, for training opportunities designed to bridge cultural gaps between ITEGs and the mainstream engineering community;
- facilitate effective dialogue among all stakeholders in the engineering community, including employers, educational institutions, professional associations, advocacy groups and ITEGs to create a process and methodology for better recognition of international

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the past 20 years, many groups of immigrants have organized within their communities (both ethno-racial and professional) to provide support networks and to work toward increasing access to professions and trades. The Policy Roundtable Mobilizing Professions and Trades (PROMPT), which started in

engineering experience; and

- become a collective voice and the premium engineering resource organization for ITEGs and engineering industry.

As part of their respective mandates, PROMPT and CAPE encourage discussion



within PEO about the access issue from an immigrant perspective. Both organizations offer systemic and historical perspectives.

Systemic concerns

PROMPT was created because of what it sees as systemic difficulties in licensing and employment experienced by immigrants. A number of studies have identified issues of access in the professions, some of which apply to engineering. They include a lack of recognition of credentials and experience, licensing fees and examinations, requirements for training and upgrading, lack of both opportunities and financial support for upgrading, limited public accountability requirements for regulatory bodies, and the lack of a central coordinating agency or clearly accessible information to assist in the process of accessing professions and trades.

Other concerns identified by advocacy groups include gaps in employment support services, a lack of policy coordination among levels of government and their various departments, perceived language barriers, particularly in technical language, the requirement for Canadian work experience, concerns about immigrants' lack of familiarity with Canadian culture, and lack of the social and professional networks needed to tap into the hidden job market (Mata, 1999; Li, 2001).

Economic fallout from underutilization of immigrant credentials is well documented. Two recent studies estimate the extent of the economic loss represented by inadequate skills utilization. Professor Jeffrey Reitz, University of Toronto, estimates a yearly loss of \$15 billion, \$12.6 billion of this total due to pay inequity and \$2.4 billion due to skill underutilization (Reitz, 2001). As well, the Conference Board of Canada estimates the cost of the learning recognition gap to be between \$4.1 and \$5.9 billion annually. These figures include immigrants and native-born Canadians (Bloom and Grant, 2001).

Over the past 30 years, there has been a dramatic change in the face of Canada. While federal immigration policy has always had a profound impact on who is granted citizenship, for most of Canada's history the traditional sources of immigration have been the United Kingdom, United States and

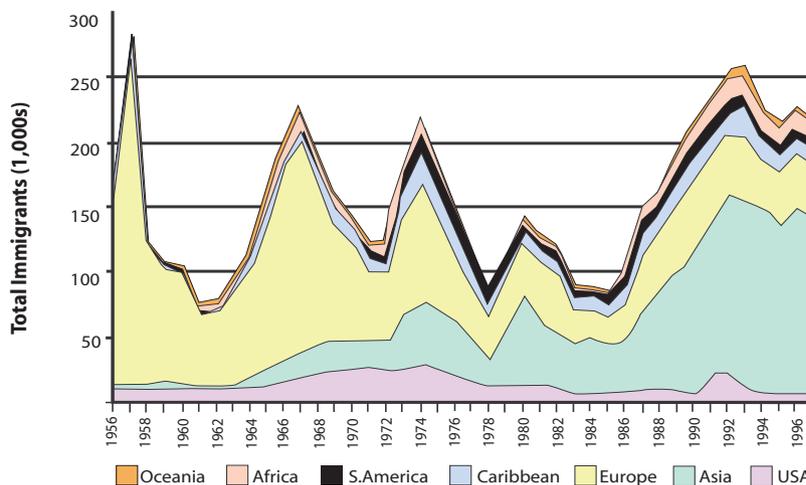


Figure 1. Immigration by region of origin

Source: Citizenship and Immigration Canada, *Facts and Figures 1998: Immigration Overview*

Europe. Hence, “new” Canadians looked much like “old” Canadians. Since the reshaping of immigration through the introduction of the point system in 1967, there has been both increased immigration and a favouring of the skilled worker class in selection criteria. Source countries are now primarily from south and southeast Asia (many countries of which are former British colonies with education systems based on the British model). Immigrants primarily are people of colour and are from diverse educational and professional practice backgrounds. This has significant implications for the role and capacity of regulatory bodies.

Today's society has evolved significantly in enshrining notions of human rights and equity into legal frameworks. For example, Canada is a signatory to the *United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights* adopted in 1948. In 1982, Canada enshrined the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* in the *Constitution Act*. Legal frameworks of society should be reconsidered with a view to human rights and equity. An equity approach to the regulated professions would ensure not only that licensed people are competent, but that all qualified people are licensed. This should not be a question of elevating human rights over safety, but rather of ensuring that human rights are not sacrificed in the pursuit of safety.

PEO example

PEO is an excellent study of the challenge of access because of the “critical mass” of engineers who have come to Ontario. The Landed Immigrant Data System indicates

that between 1997 and 2001, 64,918 immigrants who came to Ontario identified themselves as members of a regulated profession. Of this total, 39,145 (60 per cent) identified themselves as engineers; a further 9,627 identified themselves as engineering technicians and technologists (bringing the total to 48,772, or 75 per cent). In recent years, PEO has almost doubled the number of P.Eng. licences granted to internationally trained applicants, more than 60 per cent of whom meet the academic requirements for licensure without writing technical exams (*Engineering Dimensions*, November/December 2003, p. 14).

Immigration has had a profound impact on the role of PEO as a publicly mandated, self-regulating body. PEO, like other regulatory bodies, created a system of assessing the academic qualifications of those educated within Canada or within similar systems (such as the UK). Entry to practice requirements include defined academic and experience qualifications and passing a Professional Practice Exam. The access of Canadian educated engineers is seamlessly facilitated through this system because it is based on the Canadian context. This system cannot work in the same way for those educated outside it. The challenge is to assess the credentials and competence of those educated outside the Canadian system. Rather than asking how applicants “fit” into the Canadian system, it's more productive to consider how their education and experience are equivalent to the Canadian system.

The process of assessing equivalency should be guided by access principles. This in turn calls for development of parallel

and equivalent systems of assessment. It also means recognizing that different does not necessarily mean inferior.

In its current research on the accountability of regulatory processes, PROMPT recommends that accessibility be measured on the basis of having a regulatory

employers. The fundamental challenge to both the provisional licence and the OSPE program centres on “employer buy-in.” Requirements for Canadian work experience to link employment to licensing must fall within PEO’s mandate. In the quest to ensure that all competent practitioners are

Regulators for Access offer information, tips, promising practices, and guidelines for Ontario regulatory bodies.

All stakeholders

The Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) is another

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process whose requirements can reasonably be met by all applicants. The onus should be on regulatory stakeholders to ensure that applicants have access to all elements of the licensing process/requirements that must be or can only be obtained in Canada.

Canadian experience

Canadian work experience is one of the most significant challenges for immigrants. PEO requires that all licence applicants have at least one year of experience obtained in a Canadian jurisdiction so that they have sufficient exposure to Canadian engineering codes, legislation, technical standards and regulations.

There have been a number of attempts to facilitate the achievement of this requirement by internationally educated engineering graduates. Examples include PEO’s recent provisional licence and the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers’ (OSPE) Pathways program. As well, the Canadian Council of Professional Engineers (CCPE) is currently looking at the issue. Such opportunities to obtain Canadian work experience have been designed with the best of intentions; the challenges occur in their implementation.

In one example, the provisional licence—lobbied for by CAPE—is valid for only 12 months from the date of issue, with only one renewal if deemed necessary by the Registrar. This initiative has unintentionally created a new obstacle by placing a time limit on the acquisition of the required experience. As a result, the provisional licence still does not fully address the issue of access to the workplace and the engagement of

licensed, PEO should help to bring employers to the table. This is critical to making achievable the acquisition of one year of Canadian experience.

Advocates for internationally trained workers suggest the time has come to re-examine the idea of Canadian work experience and break down its components. As part of this re-examination, it’s useful to review the historical context for including this requirement into the licensing process. Several questions then arise: Is this context still valid? Is one year of experience really essential to get exposure to Canadian engineering codes, legislation, technical standards and regulations? Could it be facilitated in different ways, or over other lengths of time? Could a mandatory course be offered to ensure that all applicants for licensing learn Canadian engineering codes, legislation, technical standards and regulations?

Immigrant engineers who meet PEO’s requirement for four years of experience overall have already demonstrated their ability to apply the codes, regulations and standards from their country of training, and indeed multiple countries, into their work. All that is missing is knowledge that can be gained through classroom learning. These are questions that need to be considered.

The voices for access include a wide range of stakeholders. Within the regulatory community, the Regulators for Access initiative is an example of change from within. This group, of which PEO is a member, has come together “to help Ontario regulatory bodies improve access by international candidates to self-regulated professions in Ontario while maintaining standards for public safety” (see <http://www.regulators4access.ca/>). The

example of change. This initiative brings together representatives from government, community, regulators, labour, and the corporate sector to identify problem areas and devise solutions (see <http://www.triec.ca/>). PEO Registrar/CEO Kim Allen, P.Eng., chairs the TRIEC Occupation and Licensing Bridge working group. Through this working group, PROMPT and CAPE members sit side by side with regulators, government, credential assessment services, examining bodies, and employers to tackle issues of access. Such initiatives reflect a new era of multi-stakeholder cooperation and collaboration, and a willingness to grapple with complex issues.

PROMPT believes changing demographic and legal contexts compel reconsideration of the way things are done. With respect to engineering, a new way involves taking apart the requirement for Canadian work experience, examining the need for it, and considering other strategies to ensure practitioners from other countries are familiar with Canadian legislation, codes, standards and regulations.

New multi-stakeholder initiatives on access are an important and positive step, and they hold the potential for new perspectives and approaches to be tested. The fundamental challenge is to ensure that these initiatives address systemic issues, such as Canadian work experience, in order to make access a reality.

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PEO BALANCES ACCESS ISSUES WITH PUBLIC SAFETY

As Ontario continues to be the primary destination for foreign trained engineers immigrating to Canada, Professional Engineers Ontario is working to address issues of access while protecting the safety of the public, ensuring only qualified individuals can obtain a licence.

"Public safety is the priority, which is why we have legislated licensing requirements to practice professional engineering in Ontario," says Michael Price, P.Eng., deputy registrar, licensing and registration.

Specifically, those seeking to be licensed as engineers in the province must satisfy the following criteria: be 18 years of age or older; be a citizen or permanent resident of Canada; be of good character; hold a bachelor's degree in engineering from an accredited Canadian university, or equivalent academic qualifications, and possess at least four years of engineering work experience, with at least one of those years obtained in a Canadian jurisdiction.

"The one year of experience is a national requirement to ensure that professional engineers are familiar with the engineering codes, technical standards and climates of Canada," Price says. "It's different practising in Canada than it is in other jurisdictions."

Enforcing these standards is critical at a time when ever larger numbers of skilled immigrants are settling in the province.

According to a 2001 report by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities called *The Facts Are In!*, over the last few years, 60 per cent of all skilled immigrants to Canada settle in Ontario. Ministry data also show that from 1997 to 2001, a total of 65,000 skilled immigrants arrived in Ontario, of whom 60 per cent, had indicated their field was engineering. Yet according to Statistics Canada, fewer than a quarter of internationally educated professionals in Ontario actually work in their chosen field.

Stats Canada figures also show that immigration accounted for 70 per cent of total growth in the labour force in the decade between 1991 and 2001. If current immigration trends continue, by 2011, immigration could feasibly account for 100 per cent of labour force growth. In such a case, says Stats Canada, "the potential exists for shortages in certain occupations."

PEO recognizes the significance of this trend, and is collaborating with the community of regulated professions to address issues of access.

Price and Roger Barker, P.Eng., PEO deputy registrar, regulatory compliance, have been working with Ontario Regulators for Access, a coalition whose members represent the province's 38 regulated professions.

Jan Robinson, a member of the group's steering committee, and registrar of the College of Physiotherapists of Ontario, says its main goal is to maintain standards of public safety in the regulated professions, while developing proactive approaches to internationally trained professionals seeking access to regulated professions in Ontario. "We want to make sure that we have fair, transparent, reasonable processes that are accessible and competency-based," Robinson says. "We in the regulatory community know that we have a role in the economic growth of the

province, and we want to work toward that end, but we want to make sure that it occurs safely."

Barker also sits on the group's steering committee, which late last year released the results of its Access Solutions Project. PEO has two of its practices highlighted in the ministry-funded compendium of 29 promising practices that "have improved, or have the potential to improve, access to internationally-trained candidates while maintaining standards."

The first is the provisional licence, which was instituted with changes to the *Professional Engineers Act* in February 2003. The provisional licence tells employers that the holder has met all of the requirements for licensure except for one year of Canadian experience under a licensed professional engineer. Last year, PEO approved 104 provisional licenses, which are valid for two years. "In total, there's a two-year period for holders to obtain one year of employment. We believe it's enough time," Price says. The second is the consideration of licence applicants' experiential knowledge by a panel of PEO's Experience Requirements Committee to ascertain whether relief from assigned technical examinations is warranted. Price says about 60 per cent of internationally educated applicants interviewed have had their exams waived.

PEO's other recent initiatives include enabling prospective immigrants to begin the licence application process from outside Canada, and continue it once they arrive in Ontario, via full information and application forms available from PEO's website, which has been in place since April 2001.

On other fronts, PEO CEO/Registrar Kim Allen, P.Eng., is a member of the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC), a multi-stakeholder group working to improve access to employment for immigrants in the Toronto area (see news item, p. 11). Among TRIEC's other members is the Ministry of Education, Training and Universities, which is actively engaging employers on the issue of access, after having previously concentrated on disseminating accurate information to prospective immigrants about working in Ontario, by collaborating with the professions, including engineering, to develop fact sheets and publish them on its website. The ministry has also set up a training hotline to provide information updates, and implemented an orientation program that familiarizes individuals with their chosen sector, including labour market trends, occupational terminology and contacts in the field.

Recently, it has been investing in bridge training programs, and is "currently evaluating a proposal to develop a bridging program for engineering that addresses the requirement of one year of Canadian experience," says Shamira Madhany, manager, access to professions and trades unit, in the ministry's skills investment branch.

At the national level, PEO has been working since 2002 through the Canadian Council of Professional Engineers on the From Consideration to Integration project (see feature on page 34).

By Sharon Aschaiek