

Stepping ^{up} meet the test

Admission practices of regulated professions are going under the microscope as governments seek to ease the transition of highly educated immigrants into the Canadian labour force. In this atmosphere, PEO must be ready to ensure its requirements and procedures stand the test.

By Michael Mastromatteo





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A proliferation of legislative initiatives, reviews of regulators' appeal processes, and agencies dedicated to foreign credential assessment has added spice to the gumbo that is the access to the professions issue in Canada.

Spurred on by repeated media reports of internationally educated professionals failing to find career-related employment in their adopted country, the credential assessment and recognition debate continues to present challenges and opportunities to all Canadian regulators, including PEO.

Clarity on what are the root causes of some immigrants' failure to integrate smoothly into the Canadian economy, however, is not helped by the federal government's "point system" immigration policy, which for years has encouraged highly educated professionals to settle in Canada without providing them a proper appreciation of the requirements to become licensed in a self-regulated profession such as engineering or medicine. Some critics have described the system as lit-

tle more than enticing educated newcomers to Canada, and then abandoning them to the caprices of a competitive labour market.

Although the engineering community has played a leading role in helping educate international engineering graduates about Canadian registration and licensing requirements, there continue to be news reports and television documentaries highlighting the frustration and disenchantment of recent immigrants who opt to return to their native countries after striking out in their efforts to find meaningful work in Canada.

Some immigrant advocacy associations have described problems in foreign credential recognition in human rights terms. In its October 2004 paper *Recasting Equity*, the Policy Roundtable Mobilizing Professions and Trades (PROMPT) sees the practice of measuring the credentials and experience of each immigrant against a provincial or national standard as the cause of this human rights issue. "By failing to see and accept equivalence, prescribing norms of sameness, and rejecting norms of 'complementarity,'" PROMPT says, "these institutions have not only failed to grasp the larger vision in which immigrants have an intrinsic role to play, they create punitive outcomes by the expectation of sameness, thereby failing the human rights test of equity or fairness."

Explaining requirements

These words—and images of frustrated immigrants working at menial jobs—are of particular concern to engineering regulators, which have long tried to provide potential immigrants with a clear picture of licensing and registration requirements and procedures. In fact, PEO today licenses more international engineering graduates than graduates of accredited Canadian engineering programs, and fully one-third of its 68,000 members were educated outside of Canada.

Against this backdrop have come several recent federal and provincial government initiatives.

In May 2006, the federal gov-

ernment announced plans to establish an agency to assess and recognize the credentials of new immigrants. It is an extension of the government's three-year-old Foreign Credential Recognition Program, which is aimed at ensuring that credential assessment processes are "fair, accessible, coherent, transparent and rigorous [and] preserve high standards for public safety."

About the same time as the federal initiative, the Ontario government introduced the *Fair Access to Regulated Professions Act, 2006*, which is aimed at "breaking down barriers" so that more internationally trained professionals can work in their chosen fields. Finally, the government of Quebec is toying with legislation to create one-year work permits for internationally trained professionals. If the permit plan goes ahead, it could put pressure on the province's regulators to revisit their licensing and registration procedures.

Earlier, the Ontario government released the report of Judge George Thompson's review of Ontario regulators' admission appeal processes. The *Fair Access to Regulated Professions Act* is an outcome of that report.

Colin Smith, P.Eng., past president, Canadian Council of Professional Engineers (CCPE), responded to news of the federal government's foreign credential agency with a reminder that credential recognition has long been a priority for the engineering community, and that regulators are prepared to work with governments to shed more light on the process.

"This approach can be consistent with our own goals, provided the new agency respects the regulatory bodies' legislated obligation to assess licensure applicants' qualifications and avoids duplicating credentialing processes already in place," Smith said in a statement.

"The engineering profession needs to have a meaningful role in the immigration selection process, including responsibility for assessing the credentials of prospective immigrants who declare engineering as their field of practice. Because the engineering regulatory bodies have exclusive authority for licensing engineers, the profession is uniquely qualified to assess the

educational and skills background of prospective engineering immigrants.”

Smith's views echo efforts by PEO to ensure information about application and registration processes is available to potential immigrants prior to their decision to immigrate. Information on all of PEO's licensing requirements and associated application forms is available from the PEO website and potential immigrants are encouraged to begin the licensing process before leaving their countries of origin so that they have a clear idea, based on an assessment of their qualifications by PEO, of what is required for them to become licensed once they arrive in Ontario.

Demonstrating fairness

CCPE and PEO have welcomed opportunities to work with federal and provincial governments to clarify credential assessment and licensing requirements and procedures, yet are still continually called on to defend the provincial regulatory bodies' authority, jurisdiction, and requirements. As

PEO President Pat Quinn, P.Eng., noted in his published response to a recent editorial in a Toronto newspaper, “There are no confusing and

unwieldy assessment processes in PEO and no need for forcing fairness and transparency on a profession lauded for its generosity in assisting foreign-trained engineers to become reg-

istered...Engineers are not driving cabs because of credential difficulties; they are driving cabs because of the competition for jobs in their fields. Before asserting that we all lose when skilled immigrants cannot use their expertise, you could consider the morality of inviting skilled people to marketplaces where they cannot immediately be absorbed, and whether all this ado about credentials is masking the real dilemma.”

In fact, PEO greeted the introduction of the Ontario government's recent *Fair Access* legislation in May as an opportunity to demonstrate that its licensing practices are already transparent and fair. “This legislation provides the public an open and transparent means to validate these practices and demonstrates a commitment by the government to self-governance of the profession,” President Quinn said at the time.

Despite the emphasis on credential recognition, those involved in Canada's immigration and employment sectors see clearly that there are other factors preventing new immigrants from full

lack of Canadian work experience account for part of this problem, she said, delays in credential recognition still present a formidable obstacle to employment.

Prince-St-Amand, whose directorate is heading up consultations with regulators

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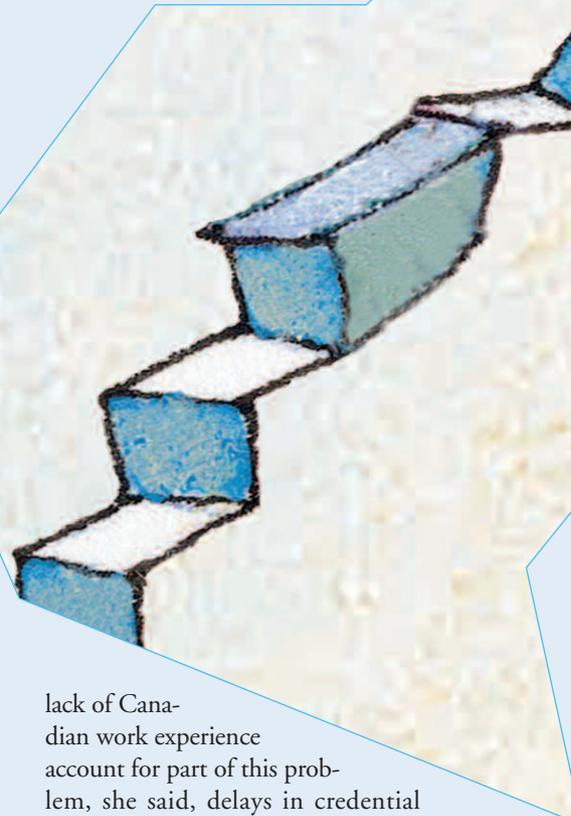
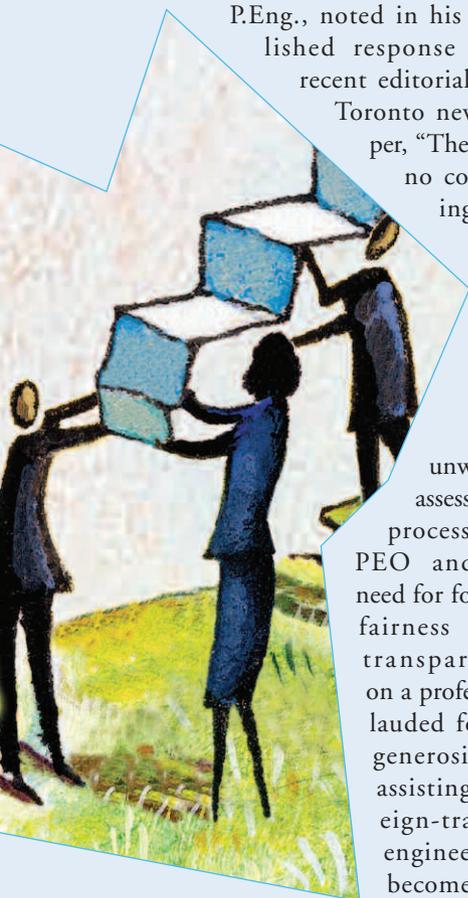
President Pat Quinn

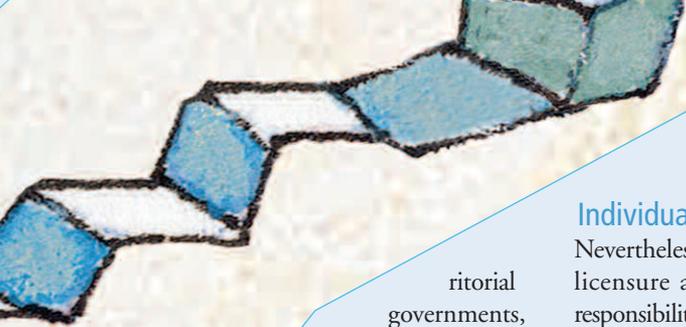
employment opportunities in both regulated and non-regulated occupations.

Corinne Prince-St-Amand, director general of the federal government's Foreign Workers and Immigrants Directorate, recently told a Toronto audience that while 80 per cent of immigrants find full-time work within two years of their arrival in Canada, only about half that number obtain work in their chosen fields. Although insufficient language skills and

in advance of establishing the federal foreign credentials recognition agency, said the delay in credential assessment is but one of the problems preventing a smooth integration of internationally trained professionals in the Canadian labour force.

“Foreign credential [recognition] is a priority for this government, but it is one piece of the broader immigrant-labour market integration puzzle,” she told *Engineering Dimensions*. “If together, provincial and ter-





ritorial governments, along with all the stakeholders involved, can address issues of credential recognition, but can also address issues of language, work experience, along with a myriad of other issues, such as networking and making our workplaces immigrant friendly, all of these things together [form] a comprehensive picture, and as a country we can address the issue of immigrant labour market integration.”

Prince-St-Amand cited the Foreign Credential Recognition Program’s support of CCPE’s From Consideration to Integration (FC2I) program, which since 2003 has been gathering information on easing the integration of internationally trained engineers in the Canadian labour market.

Now in its third phase, FC2I is implementing recommendations developed with the input of all Canadian engineering regulators. The recommendations aim to integrate international engineering graduates into the Canadian workplace without compromising public safety or lowering professional standards.

One pilot project under the FC2I umbrella involved international engineering graduates (IEGs) enrolling in a special course at the University of Manitoba’s engineering school to complete a “Practising Engineering in Manitoba” course. After four months of study, the engineers were then placed in a four-month paid internship in industry. At the end of the entire eight-month program, the graduates were deemed academically qualified for licensure by the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Manitoba and had obtained four months of the required one year of Canadian experience required for the P.Eng. licence.

“To me, this is a very efficient way of integrating foreign-trained engineers into the work force,” Prince-St-Amand said. “After the four-month in-class session and the four-month practicum, the graduates are very well suited to then write the provincial licensing exams and gain licensure.”

Individual’s role

Nevertheless, international applicants for licensure are also well advised to take responsibility for their licensure success into their own hands by being well prepared for the process going into it. IEGs can help in avoiding credential recognition delays by doing some realistic self-assessment.

Noreen Calderbank, P.Eng., manager, pre-licensing at PEO, suggests the following set of questions that might be useful in this self-assessment before applying for a professional engineering licence: What type of work were you doing in the five years prior to coming to Canada? Was it hands-on engineering or management level? Did you require a licence or something similar to an engineering licence to do that work in the country you were working in? If not, what credentials were needed? Were these readily transferable or recognized in Canada? Did you research this before coming to Canada?”

Successful IEGs tend to do their homework before coming to Canada, resulting in either a job offer in advance of their arrival, or in finding a position shortly after settling in. Others might require adjustment and upgrading, such as English language proficiency, before they can be absorbed into the workplace.

The value of advance preparation and persistence is borne out by the

career of engineer-in-training Mukund Padhye, who is now working in waste water treatment for the Toronto Water Department of the City of Toronto.

Padhye, who has an engineering degree from MGM College of Engineering in Nanded, India, took on a series of survival jobs after arriving in Ontario in 2004. In addition to extensive networking efforts, he made the effort to understand the basic licensing and registration procedures in order to apply for an Ontario P.Eng. That effort, coupled with his involvement in the Career Bridge employment and mentoring program, eventually led to his current internship with the City of Toronto. What was originally a short-term assignment, however, recently became a full-time position.

“I think, especially for internationally educated engineers, they should work on finding out the different opportunities in their respective fields through extensive research,” Padhye said, “but research should be directional. At the same time, they should start finding out information regarding how to get the P.Eng. in Ontario.

That is what I did, and through my research and networking I came to know about Career Bridge and how I could get my credentials evaluated.”

Padhye admits to having thoughts of returning to his native India before his fortunes seemed to improve. But now, with the security of a full-time position in his chosen field and area of practice, he intends to pursue a professional engineer licence once he has completed a series of technical exams.

Despite Padhye’s success, there is no doubt PEO and other professional regulators have to be attuned to the growing clamour for openness and transparency in credential evaluation. “My point of view is that PEO is not really being threatened by these initiatives, but at the same time we are being called on to show that we are interested in fairness in all of our procedures,” Pat Quinn says. “Even if some of the criticism of our procedures is misguided, or is being done for political purposes, we should be prepared to cooperate and do our part.”

