



ENGINEERS STILL AMONG LEADERS IN MEETING DIVERSITY CHALLENGE

THE FLOW OF INTERNATIONALLY EDUCATED APPLICANTS SEEKING LICENSURE MAY HAVE SLOWED IN RECENT YEARS, BUT ONGOING EFFORTS TO ACCOMMODATE THEM HAVE BROUGHT A NEW APPRECIATION FOR DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVENESS IN PEO'S OVERALL OPERATIONS.

BY MICHAEL MASTROMATTEO

In the days leading up to the Ontario government's implementation of the *Fair Access to Regulated Professions Act* (FARPA) in 2006, there was much attention on the plight of internationally educated professionals—engineering graduates among them—driving taxicabs or taking similar survival jobs to make ends meet in their newly adopted province.

In fact, FARPA marked a major shift in public policy aimed at accommodating the needs of internationally educated professionals as they sought to establish their careers in Ontario.

This act required certain regulated professions to have fair registration practices. The act also established the Office of the Fairness Commissioner (OFC) to make sure the professions comply with the law. The OFC's guiding principle is that regulatory bodies in Ontario must ensure their applicant assessments are transparent, objective, impartial and fair.

Although engineering was often unfairly targeted as the profession least receptive to the skill and talents of international applicants, PEO was actually a leader in accommodating internationally educated professionals in the licensing process.

As early as 2004, PEO's then CEO and registrar Kim Allen, P.Eng., FEC, was actively involved with immigrant advocacy associations,

such as the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC), to study what might be done to guide international engineering graduates, or IEGs, through the profession's complex licensing and registration processes.

This eventually led to the development of "bridging" programs to help IEGs overcome education-related gaps in their credentials, and even mentoring efforts, which now have helped hundreds of IEGs stay on the path to licensure.

The timing was just about right, too. Between about 1998 and 2006, the proportion of PEO members who were internationally educated and trained increased year over year, as a proportion of PEO's existing membership base.

However, according to Michael Price, P.Eng., FEC, PEO's deputy registrar of licensing and registration, the actual number of IEG applicants has remained steady at 1700 to 1800 per year during the past 10 years and they continue to represent more than one-third of the new licences PEO issues each year. "Ontario experienced inordinately high levels of immigration in the early 2000s, but those levels of immigration have declined in the past 10 years," Price says.

Despite a change in recent immigration patterns, the experience of the 10 years from 1996 to 2006 prompted PEO to not only consider registration barriers for IEGs but also how enhanced accommodation of immigrant applicants would better serve the interests of diversity and inclusiveness.

MAPS AND GUIDEPOSTS

Engineers Canada, the national engineering association, also responded to the needs of IEGs. With support from PEO and other Canadian engineering regulators, Engineers Canada developed the International Institutes and Degrees Database to provide timely information on various degrees and institutions around the world that have been compared to Canadian standards. The database is a tool that allows all Canadian regulators to fairly assess the academic qualifications of IEG applicants and determine if they meet the requirements to be licensed to practise in Canada.

With funding from Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Engineers Canada also created the Roadmap to Engineering in Canada website (newcomers.engineerscanada.ca) to provide a central location for IEGs to access information on entering Canada's engineering profession. This website has information on a range of topics such as getting licensed, finding the right employment, fitting into the Canadian engineering profession, and immigration to Canada, and is used by more international professionals seeking licensure than any other resource website in Canada.

So while the number of IEGs looking to register with PEO has not increased in recent years, and the number of Canadian engineering program licensing applicants has doubled, PEO and the current cohort of IEGs have reaped the benefits of initiatives put in place to accommodate the needs of their predecessors. In a way, previous efforts to respond to IEG needs has abetted the regulator's commitment to bring more diversity and inclusiveness into the profession (see sidebar, p. 33).

Prior to the fair access legislation, PEO began highlighting its efforts to accommodate IEGs. At the time, IEGs were described as a welcome addition to the talent pool for building a skilled and diverse Canada. In 2005, for the first time in its history, PEO licensed more IEGs than graduates of Canadian accredited engineering programs despite the fact that, on average, only one-quarter of IEGs typically apply for a licence. The situation was repeated in 2006 and 2007.



New Canadians are the talent pool for building a skilled and diverse Canada. For international engineering graduates seeking licensure in Ontario, PEO offers valuable guides, brochures and even mentorship opportunities to help them through the process.

By 2010, PEO championed a change in the *Professional Engineers Act* to eliminate the requirement for an applicant to be a Canadian citizen or permanent resident in order to be licensed as an Ontario P.Eng.

The Ontario regulator early on updated its website to provide IEGs and would-be applicants greater information on how to apply for the Ontario P.Eng., and what steps are required to have academic and experience histories evaluated for Canadian equivalency.

PEO also introduced opportunities for international applicants to begin the registration process prior to their arrival in Ontario. These efforts were combined with financial incentives to ease the initial costs of application.

One of the celebrated efforts was PEO's Engineering Intern Financial Credit Program (FCP), which combines financial incentives, mentoring, guidance and networking possibilities to help accommodate newcomers to the profession.

Instituted in 2007, the FCP was expected to boost membership growth, and was designed to complement activities such as raising employer awareness of the added value licensed engineers provide and increasing the public's confidence in the licence.

These efforts were seen as building blocks to engage unlicensed engineering graduates, retain non-practising licence holders, increase licence uptake by engineering graduates and to encourage IEGs to apply to PEO upon landing in Canada.

IEGs enrolling in the program were (and are) eligible to participate in a complementary Licensure Assistance Program (LAP), which was set up to link engineering interns with licensed professional engineer mentors who guide newcomers through the licensing process.

Operating predominantly through the PEO chapter system, the LAP has created greater access points between IEGs and the engineering regulator. Due to the tendency of IEGs to settle in larger urban centres, many PEO chapters in smaller communities have yet to set up a LAP. Those that have, however, are reporting impressive results.

George Dimitrov, P.Eng., of PEO's Etobicoke Chapter, has been a LAP volunteer for nearly four years. He arrived with his parents from Bulgaria in the early 1990s and recalls their struggle adjusting to life in Canada. "Helping today's IEGs in any way I can puts me in the mind of my own parents' struggles all those years ago," Dimitrov said in an interview. "These kinds of efforts are something most chapters should take to heart to help potential members. In this way, the chapters have a great opportunity to engage their local communities in a positive, socially committed way."

Similarly, Gareth Wood, P.Eng., a four-year volunteer with the Ottawa Chapter, began mentoring after serving as a committee member of the Institution of Engineering and Technology.

"There is a degree of complexity in the [registration] process and, of course, not only do IEGs have to face the cultural changes of Canada, but some are experienced engineers who now have to retrain and go through a whole new process. There is always some friction on this issue," Wood says.

BRINGING OUT THE BEST

Wood, a current director with the Ottawa Chapter, says that while the ongoing efforts work well, there are always new things to consider in bringing the best out of IEGs and, in turn, promoting more diversity within the profession.

"The Ottawa Chapter has been leading the way in the Licensure Assistance Program and our yearly applicants are testament to both the interest and the popularity of the program," he says. "I think each chapter should look at assisting the IEGs as early as we can and attempt to bring them into the engineering community as quickly as possible. Each chapter member certainly has a professional obligation to nurture the profession at a grassroots level and this helps our Ottawa Chapter to be diverse and connected."

Wood welcomes PEO's work with IEGs as an additional way of bringing new thinking and different experiences into Ontario operations: "As Canadian engineers, we should of course always embrace this invaluable perspective and continue to make the profession stronger."

Not all mentors working with IEGs are part of the LAP or the chapter system, however. For example, Saleha Hussain, P.Eng., a building engineer with the City of Toronto, became a mentor with the City of Toronto's own Profession to Profession Mentoring Immigrants Program.

Hussain says neither the engineering profession nor PEO has any official responsibility to adjust its licensing requirements to make

things easier for IEGs. Nonetheless, there are other things they might do in the interests of diversity and inclusiveness.

"The opportunity of helping out has mutual benefits for all," Hussain told *Engineering Dimensions*. "The helpers get the high from being able to do some good; those receiving the help feel taken care of and guided. Without an institution that connects these two groups of people, it is very difficult to create this caring society. This is where PEO can make the biggest impact, by offering the platform to connect on."

Hussain has mentored a number of new immigrants and is now helping Canadian students at the high school and university level. All groups—whether local or internationally educated—benefit from mentoring, she says.

"Ontario, being the most diverse province in Canada, it makes sense for the engineering profession of Ontario to reflect the same diversity in its numbers since it is a microcosm of the society at large," Hussain says. "Because half of all new immigrants to Canada settle down in Ontario, it is only fair if this diversity were reflected in all its professions, including engineering."

She suggests that ignoring the needs of IEGs could result in a two-tier society in which local graduates are given a lion's share of the jobs while disregarding the human potential in the new immigrant group.

"Other professions, including medicine and law, have similar needs of their IEGs and perhaps much insight can be gained by building bridges with other professional organizations and learning how they handle this challenge," she says.

Elmer Ting, P.Eng., head of the York Chapter's mentoring program, agrees and says he understands the struggles of IEGs looking to establish themselves.

"In my current role as mentorship and engineering intern (EIT) director, it's great to be able to help EITs towards licensure and help them make meaningful connections with engineers in the Licensure Assistance Program," Ting says.

Ting also says explaining the rigour of the PEO licensing process is another important step in accommodating IEGs. "Some of the steps to prove sufficient education and experience may be a bit onerous, but applicants and the public need to know that this is done to ensure that a licence upholds these standards," he adds. "All applicants into the profession should be treated equally, but fairly."

PEO's efforts at welcoming and accommodating IEGs is clear recognition that international applicants are a welcome addition to the Ontario workforce.

"We work in a global economy and IEGs bring a wealth of knowledge and experience from their countries that can benefit Ontario's engineering profession," Ting says. "IEGs can provide insight into markets and political systems that can allow engineering firms to compete outside of Ontario and Canada."

As recently as the October 26 engineering reception at Queen's Park, MPPs made note of PEO's work in this area. Michael Colle, Liberal MPP for the Lawrence-Eglinton riding, was minister of citizenship and immigration in 2006 when the fairness legislation came into being. "Many of you can recall the days when engineers of Ontario used to

be blamed for the fact that internationally educated engineers arriving in Canada couldn't get jobs," Colle said. "It wasn't your doing, but today I think we've worked that out. We now have one of the most progressive approaches to foreign trained engineers anywhere in the free world, with our fairness commissioner, and educating the public about the standards and the benchmarks we have here in Ontario. Subsequently, I think the number of graduates who are foreign trained is just remarkable, and a credit to all of you who are engineers in Ontario. You have taken that challenge on and done it very well." **e**

PEO COMMITTEE ANTICIPATED VALUE OF BRINGING DIVERSITY TO REGISTRATION PROCESS

Among regulated professions, PEO was an early adopter of best practices around diversity and inclusion. In 2004—two years prior to the provincial government's *Fair Access to Regulated Professions Act*—PEO established an Equity and Diversity Committee (EDC) with a mandate to recommend action plans to integrate equity and diversity values and principles into the general policy and business operations of PEO. In its latest strategic plan, PEO remains committed to integrating "equity and diversity values and principles" into general policy and business operations.

Márta Ecsedi, P.Eng., FEC, chair of PEO's EDC, believes PEO's efforts to welcome IEGs has spurred an appreciation for other ways in which the regulator can promote diversity among membership. She also believes PEO's work in support of internationally educated applicants has advanced the cause of diversity in its overall operations.

"As far as I'm concerned, we've won that battle," Ecsedi told *Engineering Dimensions*. "PEO has

worked hard to bring more equity to its administrative procedures and practices, and a lot of the work was motivated by the need to accommodate the internationally trained and to treat them fairly when they looked to become licensed in Ontario."

Ecsedi, whose parents were both internationally educated professionals from Hungary, is especially supportive of equity initiatives, not just for IEGs but for all under-represented communities—including women, aboriginals and persons with disabilities.

The EDC chair has gone the extra mile in helping applicants navigate the PEO system. On occasion, she serves as an advocate or ombudsman for selected applicants who require extra help in pursuit of licensure. Over the last decade, she has advocated for at least five applicants, IEGs and Canadian-born, who eventually attained their P.Eng.

"To make our system more equitable, we have to make it easier to evaluate applicants from differing backgrounds," she adds. "It's never going to be exactly the same way for each applicant but I think PEO has done a good job in being open and honest about the requirements, and has always looked to treat each applicant in the most even-handed manner possible."