

Speaking Notes for WES: Naomi Alboim

International Labour and Academic Mobility

Laour Mobility and the Recognition of Academic and Professional Qualifications

I offer my own apologia:

Despite the fact that I teach at the School of Policy Studies at Queen's University, I am not an academic. Nor am I a professional in the narrow sense of working in a regulated profession.

Rather, I am a policy practitioner with three decades of experience at the federal and provincial levels of government who now teaches public policy at a school that prides itself in bridging the divide between the science of academic research and theory on the one hand and the art of the practice of public policy on the other.

That having been said, I must admit that in terms of standards of practice (as defined by Brad in his paper), I was astonished that when I began at the University almost five years ago, after retiring from the civil service, it was assumed that since I had done policy work for so many years that I could teach it. No assessment of teaching qualifications or teaching competency was required. No one approved my course curriculum or courseware reading package. No faculty member has ever sat in on any of my classes to assess my teaching methods.. No one has ever questioned my grading system...talk about academic freedom! It's

a good thing that at least students evaluate my course!

I read Brad Sinclair's paper with interest and chose to focus on one sentence in his section on the employment context. He asks the question "What kind of employment environment does a professional or an academic expect as a starting point?" He continues: "To push the point to the absurd, although it might happen from time to time, one would not expect to find a qualified accountant working in a kitchen of a diner as a dishwasher."

Well, we are living in absurd times, and this happens frequently, rather than from time to time, particularly in the case of immigrant professionals..

The issue that I have been exploring for a number of years now is the intersection of immigration and labour market policy and what I would like to talk about in the few minutes allotted to me is what role can be played by the academy, by universities and colleges to ensure successful labour mobility and no "brain waste". In other words, what can be done at the intersection where academic institutions and immigrant professionals meet to ensure that internationally trained skilled immigrants enter the labour market in jobs that utilize their education,

skills and experience effectively?

This is something that the province of Ontario is beginning to actively explore and that the current Rae task force could pursue further.

Most people would agree that people around the globe are on the move, and we can assume that this will continue as long as they feel that moving will enhance their lives and those of their children. The problem is that recent immigrants to Canada, despite their higher levels of education and work experience than ever before, are having a very difficult time. Higher levels of unemployment, under-employment, and poverty are being experienced, and recent immigrants have been added to the list of the persistently poor in Canada. They are certainly not using the skills they bring to this country to either their or our advantage.

Part of the reason for this is likely the lack of recognition of international credentials, but that is certainly not the whole story. I fear the singular focus on “FCR” is wrong headed. Solving the Foreign Credential Recognition problem will not be the panacea hoped for.

This is not to diminish the very important role that organizations like WES play in this first necessary step of assessing academic

credentials, but even in this regard, there are many players in this field, all assessing differently, often with different outcomes. And unless all end users of the assessments, including occupational regulatory bodies, employers and yes, educational institutions accept and recognize the assessments for multiple purposes, their value is diminished. We can certainly learn from Europe in this regard, in terms of the role of the state, constraints on institutional autonomy and pan-European models.

But even if the academic credential is assessed and recognized, this is rarely enough for entry to practice. Language skills and competencies relevant to the practice of the occupation need to be demonstrated, yet in this country we do not have an effective, comprehensive, competency - based approach to the assessment of academic, communication, and skill qualifications for immigrant professionals.

Couldn't this be a role for universities and colleges (whose bread and butter business includes the assessment of learning achieved by students), working in close collaboration with regulatory bodies and assessment organizations like WES?

In Ontario, there are a number of excellent bridging programs, developed collaboratively, for a variety of occupations, where this kind of assessment is done, at least in part, before providing the occupation-

specific language, refresher skill training and on-site workplace practicum necessary prior to attempting the licensure/registration process for regulated professions.

Why not make this kind of assessment available, for a fee, to others not participating in bridging programs?

A recent study by Statistics Canada shows that recent immigrants aged 25-54 were at least twice as likely as Canadian-born persons in this age group to be enrolled in post secondary education. Recent immigrants who had already completed a post secondary credential, were more likely that those with high school or less to attend post secondary education in Canada. This group accounts for a significant share of adult students in many CMA's. The pool is obviously there.

Rather than requiring these individuals to start from scratch, and retake and complete a full degree or diploma program, why not mainstream bridging programs that just fill the gaps identified in the assessment process, in communities where immigrants are settling in significant numbers, in those colleges and universities where courses are offered to individuals studying in order to enter those occupations for the first time? Building on the existing faculty, infrastructure and professional

networks would likely be more cost effective than establishing a parallel system. It would also contribute to a “lifelong learning” capacity at our post secondary institutions for others active in the profession who may need some refreshing or updating.

In order to assist internationally trained individuals to get the Canadian work experience they need, why not use existing co-op programs, and expand the field placement and clinical practicum infrastructure that colleges and universities already have, to address the needs of this client group? Why not develop alumni buddy/mentorship programs that help to develop the social networks necessary for smoother labour market integration?

While I agree that all of these initiatives will need the involvement of many of the players identified by Brad Sinclair, and likely some policy and funding changes as well, all of which adds to the complexity.. it also will make for a better system of labour market integration which has a better chance of contributing to successful labour mobility.

I would like to turn for a moment to this morning’s session on the links between academic mobility and immigration. I agree that more attention should be directed to facilitating permanent residence

status for those who originally entered Canada as international students. Much of this is beginning on a step by step basis as a result of Provincial Nominee programs.

This process should be expedited for a variety of reasons: international students are generally younger than most independent immigrants entering as skilled workers (this is good for our demographic and labour market needs), they have a Canadian academic credential which, research in Canada and Australia both show, will be fully recognized by all, removing an important barrier to labour market access; they have a head start on integration, and having made connections in the local community where they attended school, may be more likely to remain in that community than move to Toronto, Vancouver or Montreal.

However, this means that to a certain extent, colleges and universities become the first line of immigrant recruitment and by extension they take on the role of selecting and helping to integrate Canada's future citizens. This is a responsibility that should be recognized and supported by post secondary institutions so that it is done effectively.

In addition, the internationalization role of colleges and universities also includes the role that more and more of them are playing overseas,

providing education and training abroad, primarily in developing countries, many of which are also source countries for immigration to Canada.

Consideration should be given to enhancing that overseas capacity to expand the clientele served to include those already selected for immigration to Canada. Orientation, comprehensive assessment services, english and skills upgrading could all begin overseas before immigration, both in the classroom and online. Some may even arrive in Canada with a Canadian credential achieved abroad!

In short, our post secondary educational institutions could be playing a very significant role in a variety of areas to expedite the effective labour market entry of internationally trained immigrants in order to make their labour mobility successful.