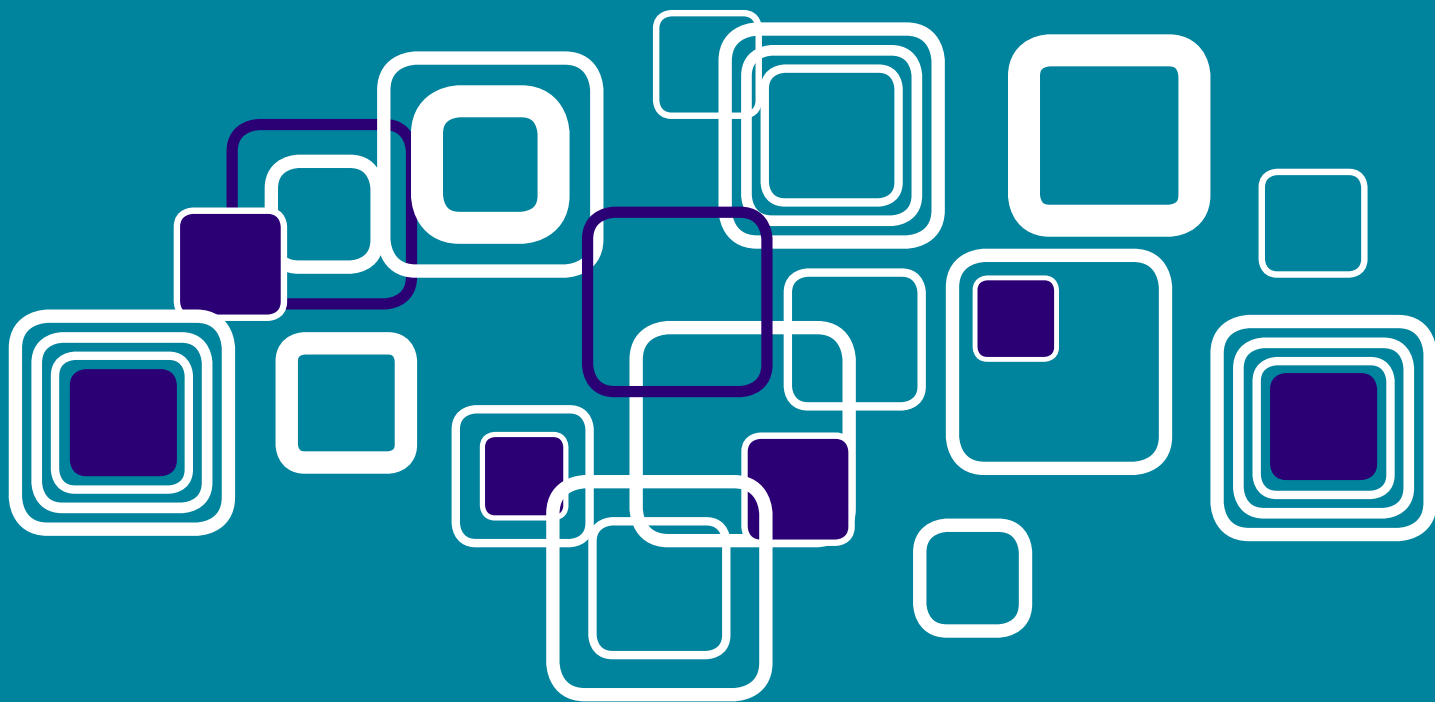


TACKLING BRAIN WASTE

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE THE RECOGNITION OF IMMIGRANTS' FOREIGN QUALIFICATIONS

By Madeleine Sumption



TACKLING BRAIN WASTE: Strategies to Improve the Recognition of Immigrants' Foreign Qualifications

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Executive Summary

Foreign-trained professionals often encounter difficulties putting their skills and experience to good use in the host-country labor market. Barriers to practicing the profession in which they are trained can arise for several reasons. For example, local employers may wish to avoid the risks of hiring a candidate with unfamiliar qualifications and no local work experience. Immigrants may possess relevant occupational skills but lack the language proficiency a job requires. International differences in education, training, and skills learned on the job mean that immigrants may require additional training or work experience, but may have few options for filling skills deficits without starting their training again from scratch. And some occupations require licensing or registration, creating barriers to entry in the form of examinations, application fees, or supervised training requirements. The sheer complexity of licensing systems and the vast number of different agencies and government departments involved, meanwhile, leave room for confusion and make it difficult for governments to ensure that policies are implemented consistently.

Immigrant-receiving countries have introduced a wide range of policies to improve the recognition of foreign qualifications. Several of them focus on providing information — both to help employers understand the nature and content of foreign qualifications, and to help immigrants navigate the system and understand their options. In many countries there is still scope for improving these services. That said, employers' and regulators' tendency to discount the value of foreign qualifications does not only result from a lack of information. Foreign professionals, especially the newly arrived, are often *not* completely interchangeable with their locally trained counterparts. As a result, effectively demonstrating that their training meets local standards may not be enough; they may also require opportunities to fill knowledge deficits without prohibitive time and expense.

Regulated occupations make up a minority of jobs in the labor market but they pose some particularly stubborn obstacles to foreign professionals.

Whether or not occupations are regulated, some immigrants require significant support to fill gaps in their skills, gain local work experience, and address other barriers to employment. A range of public and nonprofit programs has emerged to provide this support. Such programs — some providing valuable, individualized assistance — are often expensive and serve relatively small numbers. Experimentation with more innovative approaches to reducing costs of provision and participation is warranted; potential examples include the development of online training options, and low-cost student loans for immigrants funding their own retraining. More broadly, governments can also seek to make universal services such as public employment offices and adult education more flexible and more accessible, in order to accommodate people with nontraditional professional and education backgrounds.

Regulated occupations make up a minority of jobs in the labor market but they pose some particularly stubborn obstacles to foreign professionals, particularly in the health sector and for the self-employed. To address these barriers, some governments have reduced regulatory authorities' discretion to reject certain qualifications or candidates for registration. Policymakers in several countries have also pushed regulatory agencies to avoid an “all-or-nothing” approach to certifying foreign professionals, allowing partial or conditional registration that permits individuals to perform at least some activities within their occupation or to work under supervision while they wait to achieve full registration.

Voluntary cooperation among regulatory authorities in different countries has also been undertaken to speed up the registration process in several occupations, including engineering, architecture, and medicine. Cooperative agreements are based on the idea that countries may have equally high standards even if their certification processes are not exactly the same; in practice, most have taken place among small



groupings of similar countries and thus only benefit a small share of foreign-trained professionals (the EU Professional Qualifications Directive is a significant and unusual exception.) Nonetheless, incremental progress has been made toward extending their scope, and several models now exist on which future agreements can build.

I. Introduction

Immigrants' successful economic integration — and the benefits they bring for destination economies — depend crucially on their ability to put their skills to good use. But many immigrants cannot practice the occupations in which they are trained because their knowledge and qualifications are not readily recognized in the destination country. As a result, they may work in jobs that do not use their skills, spend long periods out of the labor force as they requalify to practice their professions, or, in some cases, not migrate at all.

Barriers to the transferability of foreign qualifications are both widely acknowledged and stubbornly persistent. Empirical studies often suggest that immigrants receive little or no return on education *or* professional experience acquired overseas, especially workers who come from less-wealthy countries or who do not speak the destination-country language fluently.¹ While various policies have emerged to improve the recognition of foreign qualifications, no country can claim to have “solved” the problem, and many of the efforts to address it are still in their infancy.

Barriers to the transferability of foreign qualifications are both widely acknowledged and stubbornly persistent.

Credential recognition touches upon multiple policy fields, including immigration, trade, immigrant integration, employment, and education. For example, nontransferable qualifications reduce individuals' ability to move abroad for work, as well as the ease with which governments can select employment-based immigrants who can put their skills to good use at destination. The recognition of qualifications also affects individuals' ability to sell professional services across borders and (to a lesser extent) multinational corporations' ability to move staff internationally, and thus is part of the debate on international trade and investment. At the same time, it is an employment and immigrant-integration issue, determining the ease with which immigrants — many of whom migrate regardless of whether they can use their qualifications at destination — can contribute economically and earn a decent wage. Within national governments, few experts are equally fluent in each of these policy areas, and often view the issues from different perspectives and with different interests in mind.

A major challenge for policymakers is the immense complexity of the problem itself. There are several barriers to skilled employment, including lack of language proficiency, the smaller size and depth of newcomers' professional networks, and discrimination on the basis of race or nationality. It is difficult

1 See, for example, for Germany, Leilanie Basilio and Thomas K. Bauer, “Transferability of Human Capital and Immigrant Assimilation: An Analysis for Germany” (IZA Discussion Paper 4716, Institute for the Study of Labor, Bonn, January 2010), <http://ftp.iza.org/dp4716.pdf>; for Canada, Joseph Schaafsma and Arthur Sweetman, “Immigrant Earnings: Age at Immigration Matters,” *The Canadian Journal of Economics* 34, no. 4 (2001): 1066-99, and Aneta Bonikowska, David A. Green, and Craig Riddell, “Immigrant Skills and Immigrant Outcomes under a Selection System: The Canadian Experience” (working paper, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ottawa, October 2010), www.socialsciences.uottawa.ca/grei-rgei/fra/documents/Bonikvowska_Green_Riddell_IALSSimmigrantpaperOct262010.pdf; for Israel, Rachel M. Friedberg, “You Can't Take It with You? Immigrant Assimilation and the Portability of Human Capital,” *Journal of Labor Economics* 18, no. 2 (2000): 221-51; for the United States, Sherrie Kossoudji, “Immigrant Worker Assimilation: Is It a Labor Market Phenomenon?” *Journal of Human Resources* 24, no. 3 (1989): 494-527; and for Sweden, Magnus Carlsson and Dan-Olof Rooth, “Is It Your Foreign Name or Foreign Qualifications? An Experimental Study of Ethnic Discrimination in Hiring” (IZA Discussion Paper No. 3810, Institute for the Study of Labor, Bonn, November 2008), <http://ftp.iza.org/dp3810.pdf>.



to separate out these barriers from the effects of having foreign (rather than domestic) qualifications. As a result, simple policy solutions are difficult to come by. Meanwhile, an enormous diversity of actors shapes foreign-trained professionals' access to employment, including millions of employers; regulators and professional associations in hundreds of different occupations; national and subnational government agencies; and a host of public, private, and nonprofit organizations such as universities and credential-assessment bodies.

*Many workers face the additional barrier
of occupational regulation.*

Efforts to reduce the barriers to using foreign qualifications have been uneven, varying substantially among countries and among occupations, industries, and types of skills. The scale of the challenge that policymakers face also varies widely, and some professionals have been able to transfer their qualifications abroad much more easily than others. This report examines the barriers that internationally mobile professionals may face, the policies that have been adopted to overcome these barriers, and the lessons that governments can draw from policy experiences to date.

II. What Does “Recognition” Mean?

Broadly defined, foreign qualifications can be said to be “recognized” if immigrants are able to demonstrate the relevance and value of foreign education, training, and experience to employers and — where necessary — regulatory bodies in the destination labor market. The term “recognition” is used primarily to refer to host-country actors' ability to *understand* what skills a foreign qualification confers. It can also be used in a broader sense, to refer to their willingness to *accept* that qualification as equal to domestic standards.² In other words, foreign-trained professionals may be unable to use relevant skills acquired abroad both because employers or regulators do not understand their qualifications, and because migrant professionals have actual deficits in their skills or professional language ability. This report addresses policy responses to both problems.

A. Recognition in Regulated and Unregulated Occupations

The main arbiters of the relevance of foreign qualifications and experience are employers, who must decide whether workers are sufficiently competent for the job, and what it would take (or how much it would cost) to address any gaps in their knowledge or skills. Depending on the employer, the occupation, and the country, employers may view certain qualifications as a prerequisite for employment. In other cases they may be more flexible — and even if they prefer a particular qualification over another one, not require it.

Many workers face the additional barrier of occupational regulation, which often makes a particular qualification not only useful but a legal necessity for professional practice. For example, medical professionals such as doctors, dentists, nurses, and pharmacists cannot practice in any Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) country without a license of some kind. In other regulated occupations, such as engineering and accounting, the right to use a certain *title* or perform certain func-

² The *process* of qualifications recognition can be defined as verifying that education, training, and job experience obtained in a foreign country are equivalent to the standards established for workers trained domestically. This definition is adapted from the Canadian government's Foreign Credential Referral Office (FCRO). See FCRO, “Why Credential Recognition Matters,” last updated May 3, 2013, www.credentials.gc.ca/recognition/why-matters.asp.



tions might be regulated by law, but individuals can otherwise work in their field without clearing regulatory hurdles. For example, unlicensed architects can generally be employed at an architectural firm, but certain official documents must be signed and stamped by a registered professional. Similarly, individuals may need professional registration if they plan to sell services directly to the public or be self-employed, but not if they work for a private firm.

Table 1. Terms Used in this Report

Term	Definition
Regulated occupation	An occupation for which the government has established qualifications criteria for the professionals who practice it. The severity of occupational regulation can vary substantially, as indicated by the next three definitions.
License	A license is a mandatory qualification that a worker must possess to perform certain work. Licenses may be required for an entire occupation, or just for certain tasks within it.
Certification	Certification is an official qualification that workers may pursue but that is not compulsory for practice. Some employers may require it (for example, public schools often require teachers to be certified while private schools might not).
Right to title	Some countries regulate the right to use a certain title (such as “chartered engineer” or “professional chemist”). Professionals may be able to offer services to the public on condition that they do not refer to themselves using this reserved title.
Access to practice	The ability to acquire licenses, certifications, or titles in a given profession.
Regulator (or regulatory body)	The institution that sets professional standards in regulated occupations. This may be a government department, an independent agency established by the government, or a professional association to which the government has delegated regulatory powers.

Source: Author’s compilation from various sources.

Policy approaches to breaking down barriers to skilled employment depend to a large degree on whether the occupation is regulated and thus which “audience” the policies should target — employers alone or the regulatory bodies responsible for licensing. In some cases, regulators and employers may have similar standards, allowing employers to “outsource” the assessment of professional competence (particularly hard skills) to regulators. In many cases, however, regulators may be more demanding than employers. For example, regulators might require uniformly good knowledge of all fields in which the individual might potentially work, while employers accept skill deficits for tasks they do not expect or require the individual to perform. As a result, regulation can erect an additional hurdle to employment. While regulation is a natural focus of the policy debate, it is important to remember that (1) most occupations are not regulated, and (2) the impact of regulation on access to employment varies between regulated occupations and is less significant in fields where certification is voluntary.

B. Dealing with Skills Deficits

Faced with uncertainty about the value of foreign qualifications, employers are naturally risk averse, since recruiting mistakes can be expensive. Regulators are also risk averse, albeit for different reasons, being tasked with a mission to maintain standards and prevent threats to public safety. At least in theory, these risks can be reduced in the presence of better and more-extensive information on foreign qualifications and the skills they represent.³

Imperfect recognition of foreign qualifications is not just a question of poor information or discrimination, however. Perhaps the central problem that makes credential recognition difficult is that foreign professionals, especially the newly arrived, are *not* completely interchangeable with their locally trained counterparts. Differences in formal education and training systems may be significant, and differences in the relevance of professional experience perhaps even more so. Professionals with the same job title

³ In practice, of course, employers may not be aware of or trust even high-quality sources of information about foreign credentials.



do not always perform exactly the same set of tasks in different countries, creating real differences in knowledge and skills gained on the job. In the medical field, for example, different medical procedures and responsibilities may be delegated to nurses as compared to doctors, and to generalists as compared to specialists; certain medical devices are not as widely available in all countries, giving practitioners less experience in their use; institutional or administrative functions such as medical referral processes can differ widely; and some health-care practitioners require relatively high levels of language proficiency to communicate with patients and colleagues.⁴

Selective skills deficits of this kind are not insurmountable and some can be addressed relatively quickly through work experience and mentoring on the job. However, they create costs in the form of additional training or lost productivity while workers come up to speed, and thus make these workers less competitive in the job market. Some analysts have argued that employers increasingly expect new hires to have the full package of skills a job requires and have become less willing to train people on the job.⁵ This trend risks raising barriers to entry for immigrants with nontraditional careers and qualifications, especially at a time of high unemployment when employers have plenty of candidates to choose from.⁶

In both regulated and unregulated occupations, finding ways to fill skills gaps on the job or through further formal training can be a challenge, because course offerings and on-the-job training opportunities tailored to the specific deficits migrants face may not exist. As a result, crucial questions for any system assessing foreign credentials include not only how effectively the system determines whether foreign professionals' training meets local standards, but also what happens to those who have real skills gaps and how those gaps can be overcome. These are discussed in the following sections.

Finding ways to fill skills gaps on the job or through further formal training can be a challenge.

III. How Are Foreign Credentials Currently Assessed?

The ease with which foreign-trained professionals can demonstrate their credentials depends on several factors. For example, do dedicated assessment procedures exist for the foreign trained? If not, what are the standard approaches to assessing competence, and how time-consuming, expensive, or difficult are they to complete from scratch? How important are formal credentials for employment, and how important are other assets (such as professional networks or local experience) that foreign-trained professionals may or may not possess? This section examines common approaches that employers and regulators have taken to assessing overseas credentials, and the challenges they raise for the foreign trained.

A. Assessing Formal Education and Training from Abroad

Degrees and diplomas do not guarantee professional competence, and graduates of the same academic programs may vary enormously in ability. But employers and regulators often require all candidates to meet a minimum threshold of academic education (for example, a bachelor's degree, or a specific profes-

4 For a detailed description of international differences in skills in health-care professions, see Ruth Young, Heather Weir, and James Buchan, *Health Professional Mobility in Europe and the UK: A Scoping Study of Issues and Evidence* (London: National Institute for Health Research Service Delivery and Organization, 2010): 71, www.netscc.ac.uk/hsdr/files/project/SDO_FR_08-1619-134_V01.pdf.

5 See, for example, Peter Cappelli, *Why Good People Can't Get Jobs* (Philadelphia, PA: Wharton Digital Press, 2012).

6 Discrimination may also increase when unemployment is high, as argued, for example, by Stijn Baert, Bart Cockx, Niels Gheyle, and Cora Vandamme, "Do Employers Discriminate Less If Vacancies Are Difficult to Fill? Evidence from a Field Experiment" (IZA Discussion Paper 7145, Institute for the Study of Labor, Bonn), <http://ftp.iza.org/dp7145.pdf>.



sional qualification) before they will consider other qualifications. As a result, recognizable educational diplomas are often a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for professional employment.

There is little evidence on the extent to which employers value or trust formal, third-party assessments.

In several countries specialized public, private, or nonprofit organizations issue certificates explaining how a given qualification compares to similar qualifications in the host country.⁷ These agencies maintain databases cataloguing all qualifications they have previously encountered, using this information to conduct case-by-case assessments of individuals' academic or professional education. While credential assessors are widely available in OECD countries, practitioners agree that the scope, quality, and timeliness of their work vary enormously.⁸ Even highly respected assessors face some inevitable practical constraints. They may be able to make basic comparisons of the level of a diploma to help immigrants meet regulatory requirements or demonstrate that they have achieved a certain threshold of academic attainment, but they are not necessarily well positioned to make nuanced judgments on the quality of education or what an individual has actually learned. There is also a risk that reliance on assessment agencies might inadvertently encourage a black-and-white "pass-or-fail" attitude to qualifications, making life difficult for those whose qualifications fall only slightly short of the benchmark required for employment or professional registration.⁹ Finally, agencies serve some groups better than others: immigrants from small countries, for example, may find that assessment agencies have little information on their qualifications, while refugees may not be able to document their credentials in order to obtain an assessment.

There is little evidence on the extent to which employers value or trust formal, third-party assessments for the purposes of their own recruiting. The fact that private firms buy services directly from some credential-assessment agencies (services that include reviews of diplomas and even hands-on consultancy — such as that provided by the UK National Academic Recognition Information Center [NARIC] — to help them understand foreign qualifications), suggests that employers do value their input for some purposes.¹⁰

B. Assessing Practical Experience

The greater the number of years since an individual's graduation, the more important practical experience becomes for his or her professional employment. In many cases, relevant experience is much more important than formal diplomas. But demonstrating skills learned on the job can be much harder than demonstrating the relevance of educational qualifications. Not all employers are well positioned to assess foreign work experience that took place in a different cultural and economic context and at an unfamiliar firm. (Exceptions may include those in more "globalized" occupations such as computer programming, petroleum engineering, or architecture, where services are traded internationally and companies work or collaborate across borders, gaining more exposure to workers trained in different countries.) Legitimate doubts may arise in occupations that require extensive local knowledge or where workplace technologies, staffing structures, and cultural practices vary significantly by country.

7 Major examples include independent or government assessment agencies such as the network of National Academic Recognition Information Centers (NARICs) in Europe, and private or nonprofit credential-assessment organizations such as World Education Services in the United States and Canada. Some of these organizations also authenticate the qualification by communicating directly with the issuing institution to verify its validity.

8 Interviews with credential-assessment agency staff and credential-recognition experts, conducted by Milica Petrovic and Madeleine Sumption in March, April, and May 2012.

9 Discussions at the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Foreign Qualifications roundtable, Brussels, September 20, 2012.

10 Of course, the value of credential assessments can be no greater than the importance employers themselves ascribe to the equivalent domestic credentials; if employers have little confidence in domestic formal qualifications (as is the case for many vocational certificates in the United Kingdom, for example), certificates of equivalence will be of limited use.



Faced with this problem, foreign-trained professionals may in theory be able to demonstrate their skills on the job by starting at a lower position and working their way up. This option is appealing because they can keep at least some of their skills current while acquiring the necessary occupational language skills and reducing gaps in their subject knowledge. But getting a “foot in the door” of the local labor market is not always easy. Employers may be used to hiring people with a traditional career path or from a particular age cohort — for example, through on-campus recruiting — and be less open to hiring experienced candidates whom they fear may consider themselves overqualified.¹¹ Nonetheless, working in a lower position remains a much more attractive option than starting again from scratch.

The path is rockiest for professionals who need professional registration to practice in any substantive way.

C. Assessing Professional Competence in Regulated Occupations

While employers can offset the risk of poor performance by paying workers with uncertain skills less (at least initially), the gatekeepers of regulated occupations generally aim to maintain uniform standards and thus often grant access to the profession on an “all-or-nothing” basis. The path is rockiest for professionals who *need* professional registration to practice in any substantive way — most notably, health-care practitioners, some lawyers, and a range of self-employed professionals who want to sell services directly to the public in fields such as architecture, engineering, or accountancy.¹²

Both educational credentials and professional experience are prerequisites to full licensing or registration in several regulated occupations. Regulators take three main approaches to admitting foreign-trained candidates who fulfilled these requirements overseas. First, they may simply accept a qualification or license from “trusted” sending countries as equivalent to their own, and register individuals from those countries automatically or with limited additional vetting. This approach is often (but not always) implemented in cooperation with the sending countries in question, and is discussed later in this report. Second, regulators can put candidates through aptitude tests to assess their competence directly. And third, they can issue a provisional license that allows the foreign trained to work under supervision to demonstrate their skills on the job before permitting them to work autonomously.¹³

I. Aptitude Tests

Assessment can take many shapes and forms, some of which are more burdensome for foreign professionals than others. In some cases, the foreign trained simply take the same examinations that local candidates do to qualify for practice after formal training. The drawback of this approach is that experienced professionals are not necessarily prepared for comprehensive early-career exams designed for people who have just finished their academic education. To address this concern, many regulators offer special tests to the foreign trained. Aptitude tests may include both written tests and interviews or practical assessments that simulate commonly used job skills. In the United Kingdom, for example, doctors dispense medical advice to actors in a series of role-play exercises, while lawyers are tested on their advocacy skills in a mock case.

11 In occupations where hard skills can become rusty or obsolete relatively quickly, a foreign professional who has worked in a managerial capacity for some time may no longer have sufficiently current technical skills to take a more junior position.

12 The extent to which activities are reserved to licensed professionals varies by country. A detailed review of EU-15 countries in 2003 found that almost all pharmacy activities and most legal advice are reserved to registered individuals; in most countries, accountants could perform at least some activities (e.g., accounting and bookkeeping services, but not statutory audits) without registration; and engineers’ ability to practice without registration varied dramatically between EU countries. See Iain Paterson, Marcel Fink, and Anthony Ogus, *Economic Impact of Regulation in the Field of Liberal Professions in Different Member States*, Study for the European Commission, DG Competition (Vienna: Institute for Advanced Studies, 2003), http://ec.europa.eu/competition/sectors/professional_services/studies/prof_services_ihs_part_1.pdf.

13 In some cases a combination of these strategies is used.



Aptitude tests are often cited as a barrier to professional certification. There is some debate over how difficult these tests need to be in order to guarantee sufficient professional competence, particularly with regard to occupational language tests, which can constitute a major barrier to practice.¹⁴ Exam preparation can keep foreign professionals out of the labor market for extended periods, during which their occupational skills may become rusty.¹⁵ This preparation can also be expensive, because of lost hours of work and because candidates may need to take formal courses (in the United States, for example, foreign-trained dentists are *required* to repeat the last two years of their dental training program, regardless of the training and experience gained abroad). Examination fees may also create obstacles for low-income immigrants.

A less onerous approach to practical experience requirements is to allow shorter training periods for practitioners who already have work experience from abroad.

2. Adaptation Periods

Professions for which registration requires supervised, on-the-job experience may require periods of supervised work experience or “adaptation,” instead of or in addition to any testing or interviews. In some cases, this means that immigrants must repeat the ordinary traineeships that domestically trained candidates complete early in their careers. In occupations where practical training lasts several years, such as medicine, foreign-trained candidates may thus find it difficult to “join” the career pathway as a mature practitioner. This can prevent timely progression to the level of seniority they held abroad. In the United States, for example, medical practitioners generally cannot be licensed without completing a long US residency even if they have held senior medical positions abroad. Putting doctors through extended periods of additional training that they may not need represents a loss both to the doctors (who earn less during their residency) and to the taxpayer who funds medical residencies.¹⁶

A less onerous approach to practical experience requirements is to allow shorter training periods for practitioners who already have work experience from abroad. The EU Professional Qualifications Directive, for example, allows regulators to impose adaptation periods of up to three years on candidates whose formal qualifications are not automatically approved, and the length must be “proportionate” to identified skill deficits. In Quebec, French nurses whose qualifications are not immediately recognized must undertake a 15-week period of supervised practice before being registered.¹⁷

In practice, this approach may require conditional licenses that permit the foreign trained to work without full registration. Several countries have experimented with variants of this model.¹⁸ In the United Kingdom, for example, foreign teachers trained outside of the European Union can work for up to four years as an unqualified teacher or instructor; during this period they can acquire certification by working

14 Less than one-fifth of nurses seeking to register in Australia, for example, passed the occupational English test there in 2010 and 2011. See Lesleyanne Hawthorne and Anna To, *English Language Skills Registration Standards for Australia* (Melbourne: Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency, 2012).

15 In the United Kingdom, for example, exams for doctors trained outside of the European Union test generalist skills of the kind required of first-year trainee doctors in the United Kingdom, which more experienced specialists may no longer remember. See Peter Cross, “How to Pass PLAB,” *BMJ Careers*, June 19, 2004, <http://careers.bmj.com/careers/advice/view-article.html?id=257>.

16 For more discussion, see Linda Rabben, *Credential Recognition for Foreign Professionals in the United States* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2013), www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/USCredentialrecognition.pdf.

17 A recent France-Quebec mutual recognition agreement recommends adaptation periods as the preferred way to assess competence where qualifications are not automatically recognized. Carole Mercier, “The Quebec France Agreement on the Mutual Recognition of Qualifications,” *Journal of Nursing Regulation* 2, no. 4 (January 2012): 53–57.

18 For a longer discussion, see Lesleyanne Hawthorne, *Recognizing Foreign Qualifications: Emerging Global Trends* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2013).



with an accredited institution that assesses performance on the job.¹⁹ In the Netherlands, foreign-trained teachers can also work under the supervision of a qualified teacher for a year before becoming fully certified,²⁰ and similar arrangements are in place for health professionals.²¹

Supervised practice programs such as these come in various forms. Some can be supervised by any licensed professional working for the same employer; others require a supervisor with a mentoring credential of some kind; and some require the involvement of a university or college to oversee and sign off on the individual's competence at the end of the adaptation period. These choices affect the number of employers willing and able to provide training, as well as the cost of supervised work experience for the individual, who may be required to pay tuition fees where universities are involved in the training or assessment. The extent to which adaptation periods are tailored to an individual's specific deficits also varies: some programs provide blanket requirements for topics that all trainees must cover, while others have used individual assessments designed to determine specific areas in which further experience is required. Finally, some programs use an "up-or-out" approach, by which workers must gain full certification after a predefined period, while others allow workers to remain on conditional licenses indefinitely (as is the case for some foreign-trained doctors in Australia, for example).²²

One problem with adaptation periods is that they may be hard to come by (employers may not be willing to offer adaptation periods, or there may be competition for a limited number of reserved places). They may also be unpaid or paid at very low rates — of particular concern if they last for significant periods of time. Nonetheless, where adaptation periods are offered as an alternative to extensive examinations or very long periods of practical training (such as the medical residency), they provide a promising way to reduce the barriers to professional certification or licensure. Applicants themselves often prefer adaptation periods to testing because they do not require intensive academic study *and* enable workers — at least in theory — to earn an income and develop professional contacts while waiting for professional licensure or registration.²³

IV. Cooperative Policies and Mutual Recognition Agreements

Most of the policies discussed so far are essentially "unilateral," in the sense that they assess an individual's competence and then seek to compare it to domestic standards. By contrast, in some fields regulatory bodies and practitioners have cooperated internationally to create recognized, shared standards to reduce the need for case-by-case assessment when professionals move between participating jurisdictions. Some agreements cover just the educational component of professional formation, while others seek to recognize professional registration itself (including any work experience included in the right to practice).

A. Examples of Mutual Recognition Agreements

Perhaps the best-known effort to develop international standards for professional education is the 1989 Washington Accord, an agreement signed by engineering regulators in 15 countries (a group that initially

19 Department for Education, "Overseas-trained teachers," undated, www.education.gov.uk/schools/careers/careeropportunities/overseas-trainedteachers.

20 Email correspondence with NARIC official, November 6, 2012.

21 Ministry of Health, Welfare, and Sport, "Working under Supervision," undated, www.bigregister.nl/en/registration/withaforeigndiploma/workingundersupervision.

22 Pamela McGrath, Anne Wong, and Hamish Holewa, "Canadian and Australian Licensing Policies for International Medical Graduates: A Web-based Comparison," *Education for Health* 24, no. 1 (2011), http://old.educationforhealth.net/publishedarticles/article_print_452.pdf.

23 Interviews with credential recognition experts in Germany and Quebec, conducted by the author in February and March 2012.



comprised primarily English-speaking countries, but has since expanded). Under this mutual recognition agreement (MRA), signatory bodies agree to accept graduates of programs accredited by any other signatory body as having met the educational requirements for registration as a professional engineer.²⁴ The European Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education (ENAE) is developing a slightly different system, known as EUR-ACE, which authorizes national accreditation agencies to endorse individual engineering programs with a common EUR-ACE “label,” enabling bodies in different countries to issue a mutually comparable qualification. Shared accreditation models for professional education are also under development in architecture, and include the Canberra Accord — an agreement signed by a small group of (mainly English-speaking) countries designed to recognize the equivalence of architecture degrees accredited in signatory countries.²⁵

Other agreements are designed to facilitate professional registration more directly by creating rules on access to practice for professionals moving between signatory countries. These agreements cover not just academic education but also accumulated professional experience that may be required for professional registration. The furthest-reaching and most-comprehensive such system is undoubtedly the EU Professional Qualifications Directive (PQD), which covers all regulated occupations in all EU Member States (see Box 1). Australia and New Zealand allow all registered professionals to access equivalent occupations in both countries without further training or testing.²⁶

Box 1. The EU Professional Qualifications Directive

The Professional Qualifications Directive (PQD) dramatically reduces regulatory authorities’ discretion to reject applications that fall under its purview. In some occupations, regulatory bodies can check whether the applicant possesses a certain qualification, but cannot assess whether that qualification meets domestic standards;²⁷ in others, regulators may assess the equivalence of training regimes and have some discretion to impose additional testing or periods of supervised practice if the duration of training/experience or the scope of the occupation substantially differs. The directive details the options that regulators must provide for immigrants who are not immediately relicensed (including a choice between an adaptation period and an aptitude test in most cases). Interestingly, it also requires EU Member States that regulate a given occupation to accept unregistered professionals from Member States that do not regulate that occupation, as long as they have at least two years of professional experience (or three to six years for craft occupations).²⁸

B. Mutual Recognition Agreements: Promises and Limitations

At their core, MRAs between governments or between regulatory authorities in different countries require confidence that the outcomes of regulation will be similar even if they are achieved through different processes. The agreements are based on the idea that once participating countries have established trust in one another’s standards, there is no need to assess individual qualifications case by case. Detailed scrutiny of any new members’ training programs and procedures, including peer review and harmonization requirements for new entrants to an agreement, aims to maintain this confidence.

It is perhaps not surprising that most MRAs have encompassed no more than a handful of countries with relatively similar educational traditions and a history of institutional cooperation or colonial ties (the European Union’s PQD is a notable exception in terms of its size). The most extensive recognition agree-

24 For more details, see Matthew Dixon, *Skills, Professional Regulation, and International Mobility in the Engineering Workforce* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2013), www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/Engineering-credentialrecognition.pdf.

25 Canberra Accord, “Signatories,” undated, www.canberraaccord.org/signatoriespublic/home.aspx.

26 Regulatory authorities may impose conditions on registration where the scope of the occupations is substantially different in the two countries. See Council of Australian Governments Committee on Regulatory Reform, “A User’s Guide to the Trans-Tasman Mutual Recognition Arrangement (TTMRA),” May 1998, www.dfat.gov.au/geo/new_zealand/ttmra_users_guide.pdf.

27 This regime applies to architects, dentists, doctors, midwives, nurses, pharmacists, and veterinary surgeons.

28 European Union, “Directive 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications,” September 30, 2005, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2005:255:0022:0142:en:PDF>.



ments governing access to professional practice — notably between Australia and New Zealand, and among EU Member States — have been parts of much larger projects of economic cooperation designed to build integrated single markets with shared policies and regulations. The PQD’s ability to bring together so many countries into a single mutual recognition system clearly relies heavily on this institutional backdrop, complete with monitoring mechanisms and European courts to enforce the rules. Other cooperative groups must rely much more on voluntary compliance and thus tend to take place among smaller groups of relatively similar countries.

MRAs raise several challenges. First, they directly benefit only those migrants trained in countries party to the agreement; extending them to encompass more countries, and thus to a greater share of migrants, may be difficult. As a result, MRAs inevitably introduce complexity into the recognition process by creating different rules for immigrants from different countries.²⁹

Second, the process of reaching agreements is difficult and labor intensive, since it requires detailed occupation-by-occupation analysis and negotiation. Even within broad occupations (for example, engineering), several subfields may exist with different training systems and standards that must be considered separately.³⁰ As a result, the political will may not exist to push through agreements outside of significant migration corridors and other than for major occupations. The effort and cost may discourage some authorities from participating.³¹

The most extensive recognition agreements governing access to professional practice have been parts of much larger projects of economic cooperation.

Third, regulatory bodies’ willingness to conclude recognition agreements varies considerably. Professional associations may be more open to admitting additional people to an occupation that is thought to experience a persistent shortage of professionals. They may also perceive greater benefits where migration between the countries concluding the agreement runs in both directions, thus benefiting domestic members who want to migrate abroad. This may in part explain the existence of a range of MRAs between Australia and other English-speaking countries in various health-care occupations, where there is a substantial two-way exchange of professionals.

A final challenge is implementation. Far-reaching and ambitious initiatives encompassing a diverse range of countries face the inevitable risk that competent authorities will implement agreements inconsistently. This is especially the case when agreements are “imposed” upon regulatory bodies or professional associations by national governments; it is perhaps not surprising that inconsistent application of PQD rules is a commonly cited concern. Evidence on the implementation of the PQD, much of which surfaced during an EU evaluation of the directive, includes several such examples. For example, three-month deadlines for responding to applications have often not been met, and government officials responsible for assessing foreign qualifications are in some cases insufficiently familiar with the complex new rules, rejecting applications that should have been accepted. In other cases, foreign-trained professionals who in theory have

29 Note that MRAs might indirectly benefit immigrants from nonparticipating countries if they lead countries to establish simpler assessment procedures and information services that are opened up to all immigrants, regardless of nationality.

30 Particular problems can arise where the level of regulation varies among countries; in Europe, for example, mobility is widely reported to be much more difficult for professionals moving from countries that do not regulate their occupation to ones that do.

31 For example, an international accreditation system for architects led by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Union of Architects suffered a setback when major countries including Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States did not expect to derive enough value from the system to justify participation. See Canberra Accord, “Canberra Accord History,” undated, www.canberraaccord.org/aboutus/history.aspx.



the right to an adaptation period or an aptitude test under EU law were in practice unable to find appropriate placements or experienced long delays because no appropriately qualified expert was available to assess their potential knowledge deficits.³²

V. What Can Governments Do?

A. Overarching Challenges

For policymakers trying to break down barriers to the recognition of foreign qualifications, two overarching challenges are worth noting. First, the credential-recognition problem itself is highly complex, with multiple drivers that cannot easily be disentangled: both employers and regulatory bodies may undervalue foreign education and professional experience for a range of reasons, as described earlier. As a result, simply providing employers with better information about foreign qualifications cannot singlehandedly solve the problem, not least because employers do not base recruiting decisions primarily on formal qualifications.³³ In particular, work experience is crucial to demonstrating professional competence, but getting a foot in the door of the occupation can be difficult for applicants with nontraditional career histories.

Second, institutional responsibility in this field is often highly fragmented. Numerous actors play a role in assessing international migrants' credentials, and several different government agencies and departments have a stake in the outcomes (sometimes with competing interests). Within a single destination country, regulations may vary by occupation, by country of origin, and among subnational governments

Simply providing employers with better information about foreign qualifications cannot singlehandedly solve the problem.

or territories. This creates ample room for confusion and makes it difficult for governments to ensure that policies are consistently implemented. Moreover, governments have limited control over the relevant policy levers when responsibilities are delegated to independent or semi-independent bodies or subnational governments. Regulatory bodies naturally play a gatekeeping role and are not necessarily motivated to reduce barriers to immigrants entering the profession, especially in occupations in which underqualified practitioners can pose risks for public safety or health. While many analysts suspect that professional associations, in particular, err on the side of protectionism and prefer to exclude newcomers from abroad, there is no easy way to distinguish between necessary and unnecessary barriers to entry. Governments have even less control over the decisions of private employers, the ultimate arbiters of access to the labor market.

32 European Commission, *Evaluation of the Professional Qualifications Directive* (Brussels: European Commission, 2011), http://ec.europa.eu/internal_market/qualifications/docs/news/20110706-evaluation-directive-200536ec_en.pdf; and Bettina Englmann and Martina Müller-Wacker, "Analyse der bundesweiten Anerkennungsberatung im Modellprojekt Global Competences," 2010, www.migranet.org/images/stories/pdf/20101208_analyse_GC.pdf.

33 Dixon, *Skills, Professional Regulation, and International Mobility in the Engineering Workforce*.



B. Policy Approaches

1. Providing Information

The most widespread government efforts to improve credential recognition have focused on providing information — both to help employers understand the nature and content of foreign qualifications and any differences between occupations and training courses in different countries, and to help immigrants navigate the system and understand their options.

Several governments have created or funded credential-assessment agencies for this purpose,³⁴ although some appear to be better respected than others. In particular, fees and long delays in issuing decisions are sometimes cited as barriers to access and effectiveness. Since application processes are often complicated, some countries have also established “one-stop shops” that provide information and coordinate different agencies’ input into the credential evaluation process or refer applicants to the right body, with the goal of making applications less onerous for immigrants and their employers.

2. Training and Support to Meet Domestic Standards

Many immigrants need much more than good information or a translated diploma. They may also need additional training to fill specific skills gaps; support in acquiring sufficient professional language proficiency; familiarization with the idiosyncrasies of host-country work practices; and mentoring or other support to help them bolster their professional networks and gain local, job-specific knowledge. In other words, gaining local recognition for qualifications is not an isolated task but part of a much wider process of acculturating to the destination labor market.

To address this problem, several governments have supported public, private, or nonprofit training and mentoring programs that help foreign-trained professionals gain skills, work experience, or local qualifications that make them more employable or give them access to regulated occupations. These activities may be part of a broader, coordinated immigrant-integration strategy in the host country (as in Canada and some European countries), or they may spring up on a more ad hoc basis where public or private resources are available (as in the United States).

Gaining local recognition for qualifications is part of a much wider process of acculturating to the destination labor market.

A major challenge faced by many of these programs is cost. Since the content of training and the process for gaining employment and/or any mandatory qualifications vary by occupation, programs are often occupation specific, and it may be difficult to achieve economies of scale. This is particularly the case for occupational language instruction; programs must juggle the need to provide courses both at the right proficiency level *and* with the right occupational focus.³⁵ In some countries, such as Canada, programs such as these receive substantial public support.³⁶ However, financial constraints on providing language instruction services are significant in many countries, especially in the current economic environment, making *cost-effective* interventions a strong priority. Such interventions could involve limited support, in the form of technical assistance to encourage the development of new programs (such as support for curriculum development) and initial funding to catalyze partnerships between publicly funded training

34 Under EU law, Member States are required to provide for a NARIC to be established.

35 Margie McHugh and A. E. Challinor, *Improving Immigrants’ Employment Prospects Through Work-focused Language Instruction* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2011), www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/workfocusedlanguageinstruction.pdf.

36 For a review, see Tim Owen and Sophia Lowe, *Labour Market Integration of Skilled Immigrants: Good Practices for the Recognition of International Credentials* (World Education Services-Canada, 2008), <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0017/001798/179835e.pdf>.



providers and employers, labor unions, or civil-society organizations.³⁷ Governments could also explore ways to help individuals fund their own training by providing access to low-cost student loans; and to use technology to reduce the cost of filling skills deficits, such as through online training accessible to students with little time to complete full-time, classroom-based courses.

3. Working with Regulators to Simplify Requirements

Not all occupations are regulated, and regulatory barriers are only part of a much broader challenge. Nonetheless, recertification barriers can be particularly formidable in some occupations, and under the right conditions they *can* be simplified — as the wide variation in requirements for the same occupations in different countries shows. To do this in practice, governments must often encourage or require regulatory agencies to comply with certain rules or principles when assessing foreign qualifications. These efforts focus on two major areas: how regulators assess foreign qualifications or foreign-trained individuals, and what options they leave open to those whose qualifications are not immediately recognized.

As this report has described, recertification processes vary enormously in the burden they impose on foreign-trained professionals, leaving substantial scope for regulators to streamline policies. Specific practices that governments may encourage regulators to follow include:

- Providing flexible options for aptitude testing and examination requirements (including in-work assessment), which keep additional education and training costs to a minimum for individuals who do not need to be fully retrained.
- Avoiding an “all-or-nothing” approach to certifying foreign professionals, by allowing individuals who have most, but not all, of the necessary skills to work with conditional or partial registrations on the route to full certification.³⁸
- Creating user-friendly procedures for assessing formal diplomas, with deadlines for regulators to respond, and/or obligations to evaluate certain types of credentials.³⁹ The trans-Tasman agreement between Australia and New Zealand, for example, stipulates that applications for professional registration for nationals of the two countries are deemed automatically recognized if individuals receive no response within a month.⁴⁰

Recertification processes vary enormously in the burden they impose on foreign-trained professionals.

The level of control that national governments can in practice exert over regulators varies widely. Independent, national-level regulators that derive their power from national legislation can, in theory, be directed by national governments to use their power in certain ways, even if they may encounter political resistance from organized professions in practice. National governments may be able to direct subnational governments to adopt certain policies with relative ease in some countries, while in other cases they must rely on voluntary cooperation or financial incentives. On one end of the scale, for example, the European Union’s PQD is legally “imposed” upon regulatory bodies and professional associations; on the other, various agreements in the engineering field under the auspices of the International Engineering

37 McHugh and Challinor, *Improving Immigrants’ Employment Prospects*.

38 In its evaluation of the PQD, the EU Commission noted that regulators have historically been reluctant to provide “partial” registration where an individual’s foreign training prepares them for some — but not all — tasks that a practitioner would typically undertake in the host country. Proposed revisions to the PQD include creating an explicit requirement for regulatory authorities to do this. See EU Commission, *Evaluation of the Professional Qualifications Directive*.

39 The 2012 Recognition Act in Germany, for example, creates a legal requirement for the relevant chambers of commerce or regulatory bodies to formally assess most immigrants’ credentials in a host of regulated and unregulated occupations.

40 Council of Australian Governments Committee on Regulatory Reform, “A User’s Guide.”



Alliance are undertaken on a voluntary basis, largely independent of national governments.

While professional associations and regulatory bodies do not necessarily need national governments' imprimatur to conclude agreements with their counterparts abroad, some governments have sought to facilitate this process. A notable example is a recent agreement between France and Quebec that is designed to encourage regulatory bodies in the two countries to cooperate. It provides a suggested methodological framework for concluding MRAs, which regulatory bodies have followed to varying degrees.⁴¹ While some bodies had already concluded such accords before the intergovernmental agreement was in place (including in engineering and accounting), this political agreement arguably provided the impetus for regulatory bodies in dozens of other occupations to negotiate agreements shortly thereafter.⁴²

In addition, some governments have supported projects for creating international benchmarks or improving mutual understanding of other countries' qualifications — efforts that may improve the prospects for concluding more concrete agreements later on. For example, the European Commission has supported a number of these projects, including EUR-ACE in engineering (described earlier) and sectoral dialogues under the “Tuning” project.⁴³ Projects such as these have been criticized for their inability to lead to binding agreements or legislative changes that would directly affect international mobility.⁴⁴ That said, by increasing mutual understanding they may encourage a gradual convergence in practices and increase the likelihood of more concrete agreements in the future.

4. Screening for Credential Recognition at Entry

Finally, some governments have attempted to improve the recognition of foreign qualifications by making it more difficult for people to immigrate if their qualifications are *not* recognized. Australia, the country best known for this approach, requires all immigrants intending to work in regulated occupations to undertake at least the initial stages of the recertification process before they can qualify for a work visa. The US H-1B visa also requires applicants to possess any license or certification that is necessary for them to practice legally. In Canada, where poor recognition of qualifications for many employment-based immigrants has been a persistent problem, mandatory credential assessment for all educational qualifications is being introduced into the federal points-based immigration program from May 2013.⁴⁵

In occupations that do not require licensing, governments have successfully reduced the risk that immigrants will not be able to practice their intended occupation by relying on employers to select them. Immigrants who come to a country to perform a specific job tend to perform much better than those who do not. In addition, an employer's willingness to employ a particular foreign professional is the best indicator that it understands and values that person's skills.⁴⁶ Of course, credential screening is only possible where immigrants enter through employment-based channels, and large shares (often a majority) enter through other routes such as family unification and humanitarian channels.

41 Interview with Immigration Ministry official, conducted by the author in February 2012. For more information, see www.mri.gouv.qc.ca/en/grands-dossiers/reconnaissance-qualifications/entente-quebec-france.

42 Interview with Immigration Ministry official, February 2012.

43 For information, see Tuning, “Educational Structures,” undated, www.unideusto.org/tuning/.

44 See, for example, Colin Howat, Daniela Ulicna, and Paul Harris, *Study Evaluating the Professional Qualifications Directive against Recent Educational Reforms in EU Member States* (Brussels: GHK, October 2011), http://ec.europa.eu/internal_market/qualifications/docs/policy_developments/final_report_en.pdf.

45 Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), “Revised Federal Skilled Worker Program Unveiled,” (news release, August 17, 2012), www.cic.gc.ca/english/department/media/releases/2012/2012-08-17.asp

46 Demetrios G. Papademetriou and Madeleine Sumption, *Rethinking Points Systems and Employer Selected Immigration* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, June 2011), www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/rethinkingpointssystem.pdf



VI. Conclusions

To direct policy decisions more effectively, much more detailed evidence is needed on the costs and benefits of the range of possible interventions. For example, relatively little is known about how employers value formal assessments of equivalence (or indeed are even aware of the various types of policy designed to facilitate recognition internationally), and many of the programs to support retraining have never been evaluated. The likely costs and benefits of policy measures vary widely, not least because barriers to practicing abroad are much higher in some occupations and for some types of workers than for others.⁴⁷

Nonetheless, several promising policies have now been implemented to improve access to professional occupations for the foreign trained. These include a stable of information services; programs to help immigrants top up their skills to meet domestic standards; and efforts to simplify qualifications requirements, provide more flexible assessment options, and encourage early access to work for individuals who have not yet received full local qualifications. Particularly in unregulated occupations, broader labor-market-integration policies and measures to adapt mainstream services (such as public employment and vocational training) to accommodate the needs of overqualified immigrants with nontraditional training backgrounds may have an important role to play in improving immigrants' employability.

To direct policy decisions more effectively, much more detailed evidence is needed on the costs and benefits of the range of possible interventions.

In regulated occupations, there is substantial scope to simplify requirements both domestically and through international cooperation. Despite the particular barriers to accessing health professions in many countries, for example, these occupations *have* been amenable to faster registration in several jurisdictions as a result of mutual recognition agreements, several of which now exist among OECD countries. Binding agreements across jurisdictions require substantial time and political will to negotiate but are a promising instrument to improve qualifications recognition, particularly along some of the most heavily travelled migration corridors.

⁴⁷ As noted earlier, some professionals move with relative ease, particularly if they are employees in international companies and work in occupations where professional registration is optional (e.g., because only certain tasks or official duties are reserved for registered practitioners). By contrast, significant barriers to mobility are found among the self-employed, in the health professions, and in fully licensed occupations where differences in working practices between countries are coupled with understandable risk aversion among regulators.



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