



World Education Services

Reducing Brain Waste: Skilled Immigrants and the Recognition of Foreign Credentials in the United States

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Skilled immigrants — defined as those holding at least a bachelor's degree — represent a substantial, but generally overlooked, talent pool whose contributions to our nation's economy are not fully realized. Especially in this time of economic challenges, it is important to examine the barriers that these individuals face and to strengthen efforts to integrate them more fully into the knowledge-based economy.

SKILLED IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES

According to a report¹ by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), there were almost 7 million immigrants with a bachelor's degree or higher in the United States in 2009. This group of skilled immigrants constitutes almost one-third (31.8 percent) of the entire immigrant labor force (an increase from 28 percent in 2000). It would surely surprise many to learn that by comparison, immigrants with less than a high school diploma constituted a much smaller share (26.7 percent).

Yet, while many immigrants in the United States arrive with impressive resumes, far too often their education and training are overlooked or undervalued in the job market. The 2010 BLS report shows a minor differential (1.8 percent) in unemployment rates for unskilled immigrants (meaning those with a high school degree or less) compared to their native-born counterparts, but for high-skilled immigrants the figure is far greater (32.8 percent).

This gap between skilled immigrants and natives is most commonly ascribed to two related factors:

- i Foreign academic credentials in the United States are undervalued, not fairly evaluated, or too difficult to assess.
- i Knowledge and use of foreign credential evaluation services is limited among employers and immigrant job seekers.

UNDERUTILIZATION OF THE IMMIGRANT WORKFORCE

The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) estimates² that more than 1.3 million college-educated immigrants were unemployed or underemployed in 2005-2006, and identifies four key contributing factors to this underutilization of talent:

- i Limited English-language skills
- i Poor familiarity with the US job market
- i Limited US work or academic experience
- i Lack of recognition for foreign academic credentials

While the first three challenges noted are widely acknowledged and well understood, issues concerning foreign credential recognition in the United States are not well known.

This article explains how the system of foreign credential evaluation and recognition works in the United States and highlights recent policy initiatives aimed at helping highly educated immigrants gain better access to professional opportunities.

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010), Labor Force Characteristics of Foreign-Born Workers in 2009. Report can be found online at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/forbrn.nr0.htm>

² Migration Policy Institute (2008), Uneven Progress: the Employment Pathways of Skilled Immigrants in the United States Report can be found online at www.migrationpolicy.org/news/2008_10_22.php

FOREIGN CREDENTIAL RECOGNITION IN THE UNITED STATES

No single authority governs the recognition of foreign qualifications in the United States. Instead, three major actors are involved in credential recognition: institutions of higher education, employers, and state boards of professional licensing. Some of these authorities conduct their own evaluations, but most rely instead on specialized credential evaluation agencies (see below).

Specific procedures for recognizing foreign credentials vary by profession. In regulated professions such as nursing, engineering, accounting, and social work, the authority to recognize foreign qualifications and issue professional licenses rests with state licensing boards. Regulations vary widely, with each state operating its own system and each individual licensing board setting different credential recognition standards. On the other hand, in unregulated professions the recognition of foreign qualifications rests with each employer. Unfortunately, the lack of common policies and practices between employers often makes it difficult for immigrants to understand and navigate the system.

THE ROLE OF CREDENTIAL EVALUATION SERVICES

Evaluation services analyze non-US academic credentials and issue recommendations as to how a particular credential compares to a similar credential or set of credentials in the US education system.

Foreign credential evaluation services are usually independent organizations, although in some professions there are specialized credentialing services that are affiliated with professional associations. Additionally, some licensing boards conduct in-house evaluations as part of the licensing process.

Many independent credential evaluation services belong to the National Association of Credential Evaluation Services (NACES), established in 1987 in response to a lack of government regulation with the aim of promoting professional standards. Organizations are invited to join the group after successfully completing a comprehensive review process.

RECENT US POLICY TRENDS IN FOREIGN CREDENTIAL RECOGNITION

Governors of five US states (Illinois, Massachusetts, Maryland, New Jersey, and Washington) have signed executive orders that address the needs of immigrant communities. As a first step, each governor has ordered the creation of an advisory commission to complete a needs assessment of their state's immigrant populations. So far, four of these commissions have published comprehensive policy recommendations to improve immigrant integration in areas related to citizenship, health care, education, and workforce development. Each commission has specifically referred to foreign credential recognition. While their recommendations have varied somewhat, they have generally suggested the following steps be taken:

- i Create clear processes and standards for evaluating prior training, skills, and education by establishing a specific office for foreign-trained professionals.
- i Develop programs and online resources that assist professionals in meeting state licensure requirements, including guidance in navigating the licensing process.
- i Encourage collaboration between public/private partnerships, credentialing agencies, employers, and state agencies.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The data suggest that highly educated immigrants are less likely to find employment commensurate with their training, skills, and education than US-born individuals. Policies designed to improve the recognition of foreign credentials — and the confidence of employers in those credentials — are central to better integrating skilled immigrants into the US economy and workforce.

World Education Services (WES) is a nonprofit organization, founded in 1974, that has evaluated the academic credentials of more than 750,000 individuals from all around the world. WES is committed to helping newcomers overcome the barriers that often prevent them from fully leveraging their skills and talents in the US. To that end WES partners with community-based organizations, employers, academic institutions, and government agencies that support the professional integration of skilled immigrants. To learn more about WES, please visit www.wes.org/community