



AUSTRALIA-CANADA ROUNDTABLE

ON FOREIGN QUALIFICATION RECOGNITION

SUMMARY REPORT
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Public Policy Forum

Building Better Government

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Like many developed countries around the world, Canada and Australia will face growing labour market pressures as a result of unprecedented demographic trends and increasing competition for skilled workers. As part of their response to current and emerging skill shortages, both countries are committed to improving qualification recognition processes to better facilitate internal mobility and skilled migration. With Canada and Australia functioning as federal systems, qualification recognition tends to involve a number of jurisdictions and a range of practices, creating an often confusing and lengthy process for many foreign trained professionals. While Canada is driving improvements in foreign qualification recognition through intergovernmental and stakeholder collaboration, Australia is restructuring internal systems to centralize and standardize qualification assessment and professional registration. Since both countries face a number of common issues and share similar policy objectives, there is an opportunity to not only share key lessons and emerging best practices, but also work together to advance further collaboration across a range of professions.

With support from the Australian High Commissioner to Canada and the valuable contribution of Professor Leslyanne Hawthorne, Associate Dean International at the University of Melbourne, the Public Policy Forum (PPF) organized the ***Australia-Canada Roundtable on Foreign Qualification Recognition***, which took place from April 13 to 15, 2011. Held in Melbourne, Australia, the roundtable was made possible through funding from Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), as well as a number of Australian government departments and organizations. To promote mutual learning and build stronger partnerships, the roundtable brought together some 50 Canadian and Australian stakeholders representing regulatory authorities, professional associations, assessment bodies, educational institutions, various levels of government, and other organizations involved in foreign qualification recognition. Sessions focused on recent developments in foreign credential assessment and recognition, strategies for improving overseas services, ongoing issues and best practices in pre-arrival assessment, and opportunities for establishing and expanding mutual recognition agreements for specific regulated professions.

Current Trends and Challenges

The roundtable served as a platform for sharing policy developments and key strategies to improve assessment and recognition processes. Discussions focused on skilled migration and offshore strategies given recent policy reforms and radical developments emerging in Australia. Promising practices in qualification assessment and recognition were highlighted across professions, with delegates also exploring progress on developments related to mutual recognition. Some common trends identified throughout the roundtable include the stronger emphasis on labour market demand and greater harmonization across jurisdictions. Despite the improvements that have been achieved, participants highlighted a number of key considerations in relation to such trends, as well as some of the challenges regarding language proficiency, offshore assessments, and bridging programs.

Prioritizing Labour Market Needs

As immigration flows through regional and temporary schemes continue to rise, Canada and Australia are also shifting towards more demand-driven policies targeting specific skilled occupations. Both countries are also conducting further evaluations of their skilled migration schemes to ensure greater responsiveness and better outcomes. While selection criteria for skilled permanent migration is being refined in both countries, with Australia placing greater emphasis on pre-migration qualification screening, some of the ongoing challenges include balancing national intake planning with regional needs, improving the alignment between



the Canadian points system and labour market realities, reconciling employer preferences with migration trends, and enhancing coordination between immigration policies and the occupational regulatory system.

Raising Language Thresholds for Migration

Language proficiency has become a common area of focus for immigrant selection in Canada and Australia, where governments and regulatory authorities have been reassessing policies to accurately reflect the standards for professional practice. To ensure adequate language skills for employment, the Australian government has increased the required threshold score for General Skilled Migration (GSM), with many professions specifying higher levels for registration. Recently, Citizenship and Immigration Canada also announced the introduction of mandatory *language testing* and proposed changes to the points system to place greater emphasis on language skills and proficiency for professional practice. Although language skills have been proven to be a key determinant of employment outcomes, some participants warned against oversimplifying the issue given the impact of employer preferences and the importance of cultural and workplace orientation. Other concerns raised at the roundtable include inconsistencies in language thresholds for temporary migration across Australian jurisdictions and applying language requirements as a mechanism for controlling labour market supply in a given profession.

Assessing Qualifications Offshore

While pre-arrival strategies have been developed by a number of regulatory bodies in Canada, offshore assessment has not only become integral to the success of skilled migration policies in Australia, but it has also been centralized for greater consistency and quality assurance through the establishment of a number of national bodies and organizations involved in offshore assessment. While a coordinated approach to pre-arrival assessment has been developed in Australia for migration purposes, professions in both countries, including accountants, physicians, and physiotherapists, have made significant strides through mutual recognition agreements, overseas assessment centres, computerized screening exams, fast-track recognition pathways, and offshore credential assessment processes. A number of promising offshore strategies are being explored; however, participants noted several barriers to expanding pre-arrival assessment options, such as inconsistent practices among assessment agencies in Canada, limited uptake of offshore services and programs, the significant investment needed to develop and administer offshore examinations, the variance in assessment terminology, and mandatory onshore competency assessments, especially in the health sector.

Enhancing Onshore Support

Australia has long been a pioneer in the development of comprehensive, occupation-specific bridging programs with positive outcomes, including a number of promising approaches that span across such fields as nursing, engineering, accounting, and the trades. Multiple program models have been developed across professions to meet a range of upgrading and assessment needs, and the Fee-Help scheme was introduced in 1996 to provide interest-free government loans for bridging programs. Onshore strategies to improve immigrant outcomes have also become a top priority in Canada, with a particular emphasis on enhancing bridging programs. Although increasing collaboration across professions and sectors is a promising trend in Canada, barriers to onshore performance assessment and skills upgrading continue to exist. As noted throughout the discussions, the sustainability of bridging programs is an ongoing concern among participants, who also emphasized the need to consider accessibility issues. Greater flexibility in Canadian bridging programs would facilitate a more targeted approach that would streamline learner pathways. A common issue for the health sector is the growing competition for clinical placements, as well as the lack of capacity and resources to provide supervision, especially given the rise in demand and the cost of preceptors.

Increasing Centralization and Harmonization

Both Canada and Australia appear to be moving towards greater harmonization of assessment and recognition practices, along with increasing centralization among regulatory authorities. In Canada, Chapter 7



of the Agreement on Internal Trade (AIT) establishes internal mobility through mutual recognition agreements between jurisdictions whereas the Pan-Canadian Framework provides a principles-based, collaborative vision for ensuring greater timeliness, fairness, consistency, and transparency in foreign qualification recognition. Relative to Canada, Australia is undertaking a more ambitious approach of restructuring internal systems to centralize and standardize qualification assessment and professional registration. Key federal bodies have been established to define the national education framework, ensure consistency in qualification recognition, enhance quality assurance, develop uniform registration and practice standards across the health sector, as well as authorize offshore credential recognition for trades and select professions. Although these developments help to advance mutual recognition, the challenge remains in defining practice, maintaining reasonable standards, and responding to unintended consequences. Of particular concern to regulatory bodies is the phenomenon of migrants finding the easiest point of entry as differences in competency assessment requirements still exist across jurisdictions and countries with mutual recognition agreements in place.

Key Outcomes

The progress achieved and the radical developments emerging in Australia provide key lessons for the Canadian context given the common challenges regarding skilled migration and qualification recognition. Some of the more significant trends to consider include stricter criteria and employer involvement in skilled migration selection, the emphasis on English proficiency and language standards for professional practice, offshore credential and competency assessment arrangements, the nationalization and centralization of qualification recognition, as well as the systematic collection and rigorous examination of data on immigrant outcomes. A key theme throughout the roundtable was the need to focus on similarities rather than differences in an age of globalization, especially given the advancements in educational and regulatory systems around the world. Beyond finding common ground, there is also tremendous value in embracing differences as diverse approaches can still lead to the same outcomes, but also inspire innovation.

Based on the feedback received, the roundtable served to increase understanding of foreign qualification recognition processes in Canada and Australia, with many participants mentioning that they also learned more about their own context in the process of contrasting policies and practices. From sharing overseas services and pre-arrival assessment strategies, participants were able to explore challenges and opportunities to build on existing practices. In terms of future collaboration, a number of priorities were identified as promising avenues for consideration, such as gap mapping of processes to support reciprocity and streamlining recognition through the competent authority model, which provides a fast-track pathway for professionals qualified in countries with comparable competence assessment systems. To follow up with some of the suggestions put forth, potential next steps could include further dialogue to examine specific issues, such as skewed recognition of educational qualifications between Canada and Australia, inter-professional working groups to build on promising practices and test innovations, as well as joint projects between Australian and Canadian regulatory authorities to explore collaborative approaches in accreditation, examination, and gap mapping.





INTRODUCTION

With support from the Australian High Commissioner to Canada and the valuable contribution of Professor Leslyanne Hawthorne, Associate Dean International at the University of Melbourne, the Public Policy Forum (PPF) organized the ***Australia-Canada Roundtable on Foreign Qualification Recognition***, which took place from April 13-15, 2011 in Melbourne, Australia, with an opening dinner held the night before. This event received funding from Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) and a number of Australian government departments and organizations.

Like most developed countries around the world, Canada and Australia will face increasing labour market pressures due to unprecedented demographic shifts and growing competition for skilled workers. To address current and anticipated skill shortages, both countries are working to expand opportunities for skilled workers by improving qualification recognition processes as a way to facilitate internal mobility and skilled migration. With Canada and Australia functioning as federal systems, qualification recognition tends to involve a number of jurisdictions and a range of practices, creating an often confusing and lengthy process for many foreign trained professionals. Due to international disparities in training and practice, regulatory bodies continue to face challenges in assessing substantial equivalency of overseas programs and identifying differences in the scope and regulation of practice abroad. Recent policy changes and new developments, however, demonstrate an increasing awareness that efficiency and consistency in qualification recognition is not only about ensuring fair treatment and the successful integration of immigrants, but also critical to meeting future skill demands and fostering economic growth.



In Canada, further harmonization of regulatory practices has resulted from Chapter 7 of the Agreement on Internal Trade (AIT) and the Pan-Canadian Framework on the Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Qualifications. The range of new initiatives in overseas services and pre-arrival assessment strategies across Canadian professions include enhancing information through portals and webinars, developing online self-assessment tools, providing exam study guides and readiness tests, building information databases to facilitate assessment, exploring options for offshore examinations, and establishing overseas assessment centres.

Relative to Canada, Australia is undertaking a more ambitious approach of restructuring internal systems to centralize and standardize qualification assessment and professional registration. Key federal bodies have been established to define the national education framework, ensure consistency in qualification recognition, enhance quality assurance, develop uniform registration and practice standards across the health sector, as well as authorize offshore credential recognition for trades and select professions. Collaborative approaches to pre-migration screening are also being explored in various sectors, along with potential opportunities to

expand mutual recognition agreements. These processes build on Australia's longstanding investment in developing Country Education Profiles to facilitate pre- and post-migration qualification assessment.

Given that Australia and Canada face a number of common issues and share similar policy approaches, there is an opportunity to not only share some of the key lessons and emerging best practices, but also engage in a dialogue on advancing international collaboration in specific sectors. With the goal of promoting mutual learning and building stronger partnerships, the roundtable brought together close to 50 Canadian and Australian stakeholders representing regulatory authorities, professional associations, assessment bodies, educational institutions, different levels of government, and other organizations engaged in the area of foreign qualification recognition. Sessions focused on recent developments in foreign credential assessment and recognition, strategies for improving overseas services, ongoing issues and best practices in pre-arrival assessment, and opportunities for establishing and expanding mutual recognition agreements for specific regulated occupations. The following summary captures some of the main themes that emerged from the discussions, as well as promising avenues for further development and collaboration. Please note that details on specific developments across professions and best practices in Australia can be found in the annexed sections to the backgrounder, which are available at www.ppforum.ca.





KEY THEMES AND ISSUES

The roundtable provided participants with an opportunity to share policy developments and examine key strategies to improve assessment and recognition processes. In particular, discussions centred on skilled migration and offshore strategies given recent reforms and innovations in Australia, which have included more targeted policies and centralized approaches. Promising practices in qualification assessment and recognition were highlighted across sectors and occupations in both countries. Delegates also explored important developments related to future Canadian and Australian mutual qualification recognition. Some common trends noted throughout the roundtable include the stronger emphasis on labour market demand and greater harmonization across jurisdictions; however, participants raised concerns regarding such developments, as well as additional issues related to language levels, offshore assessments, and bridging programs.

Prioritizing Labour Market Needs

Canada and Australia face some common questions as both are traditionally immigrant-receiving countries undergoing dramatic demographic change. What is the optimum population size? What is the appropriate intake range for meeting changing labour market needs? What is the right mix of skills and classes given multiple priorities, including permanent compared to temporary flows? While there are no perfect answers, both countries are mindful of the need to continually assess and adapt their policies to respond more effectively to current and emerging labour market pressures.

Coinciding with a significant rise in immigration flows through regional and temporary schemes, both Canada and Australia are shifting towards more demand-driven policies that focus on specific skilled occupations. As part of the Government of Canada's Action Plan for Faster Immigration, eligibility for the Federal Skilled Worker Program (FSWP) is now based on arranged employment, prior experience studying or working in Canada, or professional practice in one of the in-demand occupations, which changed from 38 to 29 occupations in June 2010. To ensure a more coordinated approach to determine appropriate intake levels, Canada has moved from annual to multi-year levels planning that emphasizes intergovernmental and stakeholder collaboration.



Corinne Prince-St-Amand, Foreign Credentials Referral Office, Citizenship and Immigration Canada

In Australia, many of the recent immigration reforms have been in response to employer and regional demand, as well as unintended consequences of providing access to permanent residency through student migration streams. After reviewing the 457 temporary visa category, the government enacted worker protection legislation in 2009 to address wage

and workplace abuses. The Student Visa program inadvertently led to a greater focus on migration rather than educational outcomes, which resulted in high flows but participation, for many, in less-demanding courses of study and low-skilled employment after graduation. To address the misalignment with economic priorities, the Migration Occupations in Demand List (MODL) was replaced in 2010 with a more targeted and tertiary-focused Skilled Occupations List (SOL), changes to the points test were introduced to tighten

eligibility for general skilled migration (GSM), and employer and state sponsored migration became the priority path for skilled worker selection.

Within the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), Skills Australia was established in 2010 as an independent Board that provides advice on current and emerging labour market needs, and oversees the development of the Skilled Occupation List (SOL) through extensive research and the use of detailed selection criteria. Following a review of the GSM Points Test in 2010, the Australian government is now focusing on stronger language skills, high level qualifications, and work experience, in addition to the SOL.

Currently, both countries are conducting further evaluations of their skilled migration schemes to ensure greater responsiveness and better outcomes. Australia is reviewing its Business Skills Program, Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme, and the Employer Nomination Scheme, as well as developing a comprehensive action plan to address health workforce needs, which has been defined as a national priority issue. Canada is also reassessing the allocation of points for the FSWP to provide a more accurate assessment of their potential to participate fully in the Canadian economy. Despite recent efforts to refine selection criteria for skilled migration to Canada and Australia, some of the ongoing issues and concerns raised at the roundtable include the following in relation to permanent economic programs:



Margaret Grant, Australian Physiotherapy Council and Jan Robinson, Canadian Alliance of Physiotherapy Regulators

- Challenges in intake planning in both Canada and Australia have been noted due to increasing migration flows through regional schemes and the need to respond to differences in labour market needs across jurisdictions.
- Recent immigrants to Canada are not faring as well economically as previous cohorts, which may be attributed to a disconnect between the points system and actual labour market conditions.
- Given significant differences between the top source countries for permanent and temporary migrants in both countries, it appears that employer sponsorship continues to favour applicants with language skills or comparable education despite increasing migration flows from Asia.
- Participants stressed that improving immigration outcomes in Canada will require better labour market information and further coordination between immigration policies and the occupational regulatory system.

Although Australia has faced some unanticipated challenges as a result of two-step student migration, immigrant outcomes improved significantly overall in the past decade with the introduction of language testing and qualification assessment as prerequisites to migration, as well as the focus on occupational demand and international student selection. Furthermore, current entrants through the employer nominated and offshore GSM streams demonstrate the most promising economic outcomes, with 99 percent compared to 83 percent employed at 6 months, including the use of qualifications in employment and high salary levels. Contrary to initial concerns over such reforms, demand from prospective economic migrants has not diminished and diversity has not contracted, with eight of the top 10 economic source countries being in Asia. Given the positive impact of pre-arrival strategies and demand-driven approaches in Australia, some participants noted that similar considerations could serve to enhance the outcomes of skilled migration programs in Canada.



Both governments are operating within an increasingly complex policy environment, with uncapped numbers of labour migrants currently entering through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) in Canada and the 457 Visa employer-sponsored program in Australia. Increasingly, the scale of employer-sponsored temporary arrivals is exceeding that of migrant workers selected under permanent economic categories. This trend is challenging in relation to foreign qualification recognition as substantial numbers of temporary residents practice on a limited registration basis in the first instance, but may ultimately transition to permanent resident status. While much of the roundtable discussions focused on skilled permanent residents, this significant trend should be factored into foreign qualification recognition planning in both countries.

Raising Language Thresholds for Migration

Proven to be a key determinant of labour market integration among immigrants, language proficiency has become a common area of emphasis for immigrant selection in Canada and Australia, where English is increasingly framed as a competency critical to successful employment outcomes. In fact, governments and regulatory authorities in both countries have been focused on reassessing policies to accurately reflect the standards for professional practice.



L-R: Natalie Miletic, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Yves Poisson, Public Policy Forum, Professor Lesleyanne Hawthorne, University of Melbourne, and Lorraine Trotter, George Brown College, Canada

Despite the advantages of onshore education, Australia's two-step student migration inadvertently led to a noticeable decline in the quality of private sector technical training and English language skills among international students due to testing exemptions. In response to this unexpected phenomenon, the Australian government has increased the required threshold for GSM to International English Language Training System (IELTS) Band 6, with significant bonus points for higher scores. To ensure that applicants have the language skills necessary for practice, many professions now specify higher levels for registration or require the completion of workplace communication training.

As of June 26, 2010, Federal Skilled Worker and Canadian Experience Class applications received by CIC must be accompanied by *language test* results from a designated agency, but proposed changes to the FSWP include increasing points awarded for proficiency and establishing minimum language requirements according to occupation skill level. While there may be a strong rationale for increasing language thresholds, some participants warned against oversimplifying the language issue and raised the following concerns:

- Although some employers may see language proficiency as a legitimate proxy for other soft skills, discriminatory hiring practices based on applicant names have also been observed.
- Employers continue to recruit temporary migrants from comparable systems despite large permanent migration flows from non-English-speaking countries.
- Inconsistencies have been noted in language thresholds for temporary migrants in some fields and across state jurisdictions in Australia.
- Some professions may be using language requirements as a control mechanism to mitigate oversupply.
- While language is important, differences in workplace culture and communication could also have serious implications for public safety, especially in the health sector.



In response to the increasing emphasis on language proficiency upon arrival, a number of alternative perspectives were also shared among participants. While there is the concern of undersupplied regions imposing softer selection requirements to attract immigrants, some participants raised other considerations regarding regional labour market contexts. For instance, employers operating in multicultural contexts may actually value diversity over language, and companies in larger cities may prioritize skills and languages more relevant to global markets. Rather than overcorrecting around language, leveraging the capacity of



Robert Broadbent, Australian Dental Council and Robert Lees, Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario

educational institutions to provide soft skill training may address communication gaps more broadly. In fact, New Zealand may offer some key lessons given their success in developing strategies for building cultural competence; however, such developments are in addition to stringent English requirements, which have been mandated for the past decade and associated with exceptionally high early employment outcomes.

Assessing Qualifications Offshore

Although pre-arrival strategies have been developed by a number of regulatory bodies in Canada, offshore assessment has not only become integral to the success of skilled migration policies in Australia, but it

has also been centralized for greater consistency and quality assurance. The roundtable presentations highlighted a number of recently established national bodies and organizations in Australia that are involved in offshore assessment. Part of DEEWR, the Australian Education International – National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (AEI-NOOSR) serves as the national information centre on the comparability of the Australian higher education system with its international counterparts since the signing of the Lisbon Recognition Convention in 2002. For migration purposes, AEI-NOOSR assesses equivalency based on the levels established under the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), which provides a national quality-assured system of educational recognition based on 10 levels of qualification. With the development and ongoing management of Country Education Profiles, AEI-NOOSR has largely moved from away direct credential assessment to focus on the national training of assessment officers and to support the offshore qualification assessment process conducted by national professional bodies authorized by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC).

Also included in the DEEWR portfolio is Trades Recognition Australia (TRA), which has delegated assessment services to select registered training organizations (RTOs) both onshore and offshore. Vocational Education Training and Assessment Services (VETASSESS) is Australia's leading vocational qualification assessment and skills development organization with representation in over 20 countries. In addition to providing onshore and offshore recognition and gap training services in the skilled trades, VETASSESS also conducts qualification assessments for GSM and temporary 457 visa programs on a user-fee basis, and can provide participants with Australian qualifications pre-migration. While not a recent development, peak national bodies in the key professions also advise DIAC and economic applicants on their level of recognition within the Australian professions, which is another user-pays service that usually takes up to 12 weeks.

While a coordinated approach to pre-arrival assessment has been developed in Australia for migration purposes, it is important to note that professions in both countries, including accountants, physicians, and physiotherapists, have made significant strides through mutual recognition agreements, overseas assessment centres, computerized screening exams, and offshore credential assessment processes. A particularly



noteworthy approach is the Competent Authority (CA) Assessment Model used by the Australian Medical Council to provide a fast-track pathway for physicians qualified in countries with comparable competence assessment systems. Through the CA pathway, international medical graduates who have successfully completed one of the six approved global assessment processes may bypass licensure screening examinations and simply complete one year of supervised clinical practice to obtain full licensure. The CA model clearly avoids redundancy in assessment processes, but more importantly, it is a significant shift in mindset as the focus is on finding common ground rather than emphasizing difference.

Additional initiatives such as the Canadian Immigrant Integration Program (CIIP) and the Orientation to Canadian Health Care Systems have leveraged partnerships across sectors and professions to improve overseas services and access to information concerning the immigration process, qualification assessment and recognition, as well as the professional context in Canada. Currently, a number of promising offshore strategies are being explored by governments, regulatory bodies, and other stakeholders; however, included below are some of the potential barriers and limitations to expanding pre-arrival assessment options that were discussed at the roundtable.

- Despite accepting applications and conducting credential assessment overseas, a number of occupations still require clinical or competency assessments that must be completed onshore for licensing purposes.
- Different approaches across assessment agencies in Canada have led to inconsistencies in credential assessment.
- Limited uptake of offshore assessment services and gap training has been noted as a common issue, with some participants concerned with applicants prioritizing migration over securing recognition.
- Computer-adapted testing requires a lot of work at the front end as it takes time to develop, implement, and securitize such systems.
- The range and interchangeable usage of assessment terminology creates further confusion when determining the equivalency of processes and requirements.

Moving towards a two-step process that involves qualification assessment prior to immigration application may be feasible in Canada as some professions already have national approaches and use third-party services. For instance, the International Qualifications Assessment Service (IQAS) in Alberta has developed an information guide similar to the country education profiles managed by AEI-NOOSR. Given that the success of offshore assessment ultimately depends on employer acceptance, the high level of employer satisfaction indicated by Industry Skills Councils in Australia further reinforces the advantages of pre-arrival strategies. As onshore clinical exam requirements and different scopes of practice can lead to delays in assessment and recognition processes, providing streamlined recognition pathways and facilitating the movement of non-clinical professions in the health sector could open up more opportunities for skilled workers, resulting in greater economic efficiency, as well as social justice benefits. For example, Australia's introduction of the CA pathway in medicine significantly increased the number of UK trained medical graduates within a few years.



Ian Frank, Australian Medical Council



Enhancing Onshore Support

In addition to the establishment of national competencies in key professions, Australia has long been a pioneer in the development of comprehensive, occupation-specific bridging programs with positive outcomes, including a number of promising approaches that span across such fields as nursing, engineering, accounting, and the trades. Multiple program models have been developed across professions to meet a range of upgrading and assessment needs, such as the identification of learner pathways, workplace orientation, access to supervised clinical training, structured assessment procedures, exam preparation, specialized technical training, English for specific occupations, employment preparation, industry experience, and customizable options.

While bridging programs in Australia were initially funded by the federal government, the Fee-Help scheme was introduced in 1996 to provide interest-free government loans that are repaid when reasonable full-time salary status is achieved. There has been strong immigrant and community acceptance of this model, with courses delivered Australia-wide in cities with substantial immigrant populations. Although language training tuition and associated services are available through the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), additional financial support related to qualifications recognition is provided by the Assessment Subsidy for Overseas Trained Professionals Program, which supports exam preparation targeting the language skills essential to succeed in field-specific pre-accreditation tests.



Tim Owen, World Education Services, Canada

By increasing investment in settlement services to over \$600 million this year, the Government of Canada is also prioritizing onshore strategies to improve immigrant outcomes. The focus is on expanding and enhancing the quality of language training, employment services, family supports, and other approaches that facilitate integration. In particular, opportunities to improve bridging programs are being explored by federal and provincial/territorial governments through a joint foreign qualification recognition working group. Although increasing collaboration across professions and sectors is a promising trend in Canada, barriers to onshore performance assessment and skills upgrading continue to exist as noted by a number of roundtable participants. Some of the key issues raised throughout the discussions include the following:

- While the sustainability of bridging programs is an ongoing concern, participants also emphasized the need to consider access issues related to demand, geographical, and income constraints.
- As current programs tend to be quite rigid, greater flexibility in programming would enable the option of targeting specific competency gaps and streamline learner pathways.
- The assessment process can often be delayed due to growing competition for work experience and clinical placements.
- With the reporting and monitoring demands of clinical placements, a common challenge in the health sector is the lack of capacity and resources to provide such supervision, especially given the rise in demand and the cost of preceptors.

Addressing such barriers will be critical to improving employment outcomes among skilled immigrants, however, participants also made a number of other suggestions regarding areas for further exploration. As demonstrated by the impact of bridging programs in Australia, focusing on field-specific communication and



workplace orientation is vital to program effectiveness. It will also be important to move beyond traditional program models to consider online and modular options to enhance access. Some participants also added that bridging programs could be used to determine alternate professional pathways. While the roundtable focused primarily on best practices in the Australian context, bridging programs have evolved in both countries, resulting in significant economic efficiency and social justice outcomes; therefore, a detailed comparison of new developments in key economic migration fields would help to drive further improvements.

Increasing Centralization and Harmonization

Both Canada and Australia appear to be moving towards greater harmonization of assessment and recognition practices, along with increasing centralization among regulatory authorities. In Canada, Chapter 7



of the AIT establishes internal mobility through mutual recognition agreements between jurisdictions whereas the Pan-Canadian Framework provides a principles-based, collaborative vision for ensuring greater timeliness, fairness, consistency, and transparency in foreign qualification recognition.

Increasing federal involvement and growing emphasis on quality assurance in Australia is demonstrated by the recent creation of such national bodies as Skills Australia, the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Council, the Tertiary Education Qualifications and Standards Agency (TEQSA), and the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA). Considered one of the more radical developments,

TEQSA will become the national regulatory body for public and private higher education providers through federal jurisdiction over corporations. To ensure public safety, AHPRA has been established to harmonize registration and practice standards across state authorities; national boards for ten health professions were established last year with the addition of four more boards in 2012. Similar to the AIT, political buy-in has been critical to the advancement of AHPRA; however, the centralization of oversight and nationalization of standards make it more ambitious than Canada's approach to harmonization.

Although mutual recognition schemes exist in both Australia and Canada, the challenge is in defining practice, maintaining reasonable standards, and examining unintended consequences. Some of the concerns and constraints discussed at the roundtable have been highlighted below.

- In Canada, jurisdictional differences in competence assessment requirements for some professions could present opportunities to abuse the system.
- AIT may have shifted to a focus on principles rather than process, but the range of categories for provisional licensures in some professions continues to complicate mobility, especially as restricted licenses may be used to control regional labour force supply and demand.
- With the Trans-Tasman Mutual Recognition Agreement between New Zealand and Australia, the issue of migrants finding the easiest point of entry is a concern for regulatory bodies given that stricter requirements in one country could be bypassed through initial migration to the other.
- While joint accreditation may serve to simplify assessment processes, it remains a time-consuming process, especially with countries that may not have harmonized internal systems.



- Skewed arrangements could result when international agreements are between accreditation authorities rather than regulatory bodies, and when such agreements focus on the mutual recognition of licenses instead of qualifications, which could change over time.

Based on key initiatives and new developments across a wide range of fields, participants assessed progress on mutual recognition of qualifications between professions in Canada and Australia. Regulatory bodies have played the lead role in relation to these, with notable examples from engineering, medicine, dentistry, physiotherapy, and accounting. To date, a trend toward 'skewed reciprocity' has been defined, with Australia facilitating immediate access to practice for Canadian-qualified professionals in a number of fields. There is clear potential to establish mutual arrangements in the future given the number of Australians working temporarily in Canada, as well as Canadian students qualified in the Australian tertiary system.



Professor Glyn Davis, University of Melbourne

Instead of focusing on differences, most participants agreed on the benefits of drawing from the diversity of expertise available and building on similarities to advance opportunities for mutual recognition, especially as educational institutions and professional regulatory systems around the world continue to improve and adapt to common standards. With the range of strategies to facilitate international mobility, it is also important to recognize mutual recognition agreements as merely one end of a continuum and to continue to share effective approaches by enhancing collaboration within and across professions.





MOVING FORWARD

The successful outcomes achieved and the radical developments emerging in Australia offer a number of key lessons that may be relevant to the Canadian context given the common challenges regarding skilled migration and qualification recognition. According to some Canadian participants, the more significant trends include stricter criteria and employer involvement in skilled migration selection, the emphasis on English proficiency and language standards for professional practice, offshore credential and competency assessment arrangements, the nationalization and centralization of qualification recognition, as well as the systematic collection and rigorous examination of data on immigrant outcomes. On the final day of the roundtable, participants shared their thoughts on the issues and strategies for further consideration. As the roundtable sessions focused primarily on overseas information and services, pre-arrival strategies, and mutual recognition, below are some of the key recommendations for each thematic area that emerged from the discussions.

How can overseas information and services be improved?

- Better collaboration in information dissemination among stakeholders would improve clarity regarding immigration, as well as assessment and recognition processes.
- The government-commissioned Registered Training Organization (RTO) model exemplified by VETASSESS could be used to provide assessment services, gap training, and practice exams overseas.
- While the Canadian Immigration Integration Project (CIIP) is a promising development, there is an opportunity to take a more aggressive approach to expand networks and promote a more client-centred mindset among educational institutions.
- Given the tendency of immigration consultants to focus solely on migration, more active outreach is needed to promote the value of orientation tools and programs that are available overseas.
- Although online resources improve access, evaluating the actual impact of web-based programs compared to other delivery approaches would serve to enhance outcomes.
- The development of overseas information and services should involve actual immigrant professionals in design and delivery to ensure their relevance and effectiveness.
- The adaptability and sustainability of overseas tools, services, and programs have been emphasized as key considerations.

What are some promising practices in pre-arrival assessment?

- Given Australia's success with offshore assessment, Canada may benefit from considering a similar model to ensure better immigration outcomes and manage expectations more effectively.
- There is merit in exploring the value of the regulatory bodies establishing national bodies in key professions for the purpose of pre-migration qualification screening.
- Some specific strategies that could be adapted and replicated in Canada include the centralized approach to Country Education Profiles managed by AEI-NOOSR, the VETASSESS model of offshore assessment services, as well as the Competent Authority Assessment Model.
- Moving assessment services online, especially applications, and document centralization could expedite and streamline the foreign qualification recognition process.
- Similar to overseas services, addressing the issue of sustainability will be critical to the development of offshore assessment strategies.



What opportunities exist to advance mutual recognition?

- Gap mapping for reciprocity could lead to better bridging options and mutual recognition discussions.
- Future dialogue could include a focus on skewed reciprocity between Australia and Canada in the recognition of some educational qualifications for access to practice.
- In pursuing mutual recognition with Australian professions, Canadian regulatory authorities will need to consider the implications of the Trans-Tasman Agreement.
- The key to moving towards competent authority pathways is building trust between professional bodies.
- With increasing inter-professional collaboration in Canada, there is an opportunity to develop a combined strategy to set up an assessment modeling group, as well as other pilot projects to test innovative approaches to assessment and recognition.
- With common issues and new developments in both contexts, ongoing dialogue between Australia and Canada may lead to more points of alignment and shared learnings from existing strategies.

Following the roundtable, Canadian participants were asked to reflect on some of the key priorities for improving foreign qualification recognition. While most of the responses echoed the recommendations put forth at the event, some participants provided further insights and detailed perspectives on current gaps and challenges to contextualize the changes proposed. The importance of changing attitudes was a common theme throughout the roundtable. Participants emphasized the need to focus on similarities rather than differences in an age of globalization, especially given the advancements in educational and regulatory systems around the world. Improving knowledge of foreign credentials and licensing practices among stakeholders has been suggested as a way to increase familiarity and build trust. Beyond finding common ground, others have noted the value of embracing differences as diverse approaches can still lead to the same outcomes and also inspire innovation. As some jurisdictions may prevent alternate licensing processes

for foreign-trained professionals in specific fields, it may be important to consider legislative reforms to enable greater flexibility in qualification assessment and recognition.



Further to the suggestion of gap mapping, developing pathways to licensure and MRAs where there is greatest equivalency and labour market demand has been proposed as a possible short term strategy. Some participants, however, stress the need to continue harmonizing internal practices across professions as international collaboration and further innovation in assessment can be limited by inconsistencies in entry to practice requirements, application forms

and processes, documentation verification, and terminology. As for professions that have already established a centralized approach to foreign qualification recognition, there is an opportunity to move away from self-assessment and take a more rigorous approach by piloting pre-arrival assessment to determine appropriate economic migration selection criteria and subsequent pathways. Being mindful of the potential for skill atrophy in many professions, recognizing qualifications prior to migration will help to expedite the licensing process after migration, and providing opportunities for onsite workplace orientation, internships, and mentoring will also enable ongoing professional development and a smoother transition into the Canadian context. Ensuring the sustainability and accessibility of bridging programs has been underscored, with a particular focus on developing programs for occupation-specific language and workplace orientation.



As the FSWP is currently undergoing an evaluation, Canadian participants have also proposed some specific changes to selection criteria for further consideration, such as granting points for pre-arrival assessment if it is not compulsory, rewarding points for equivalency rather than years of education, establishing language proficiency as a requirement for application, and prioritizing regional selection to better respond to labour market differences and changing economic cycles. While skilled migration policies can help to improve labour market outcomes among immigrants, it is important not to overlook the importance of onshore integration strategies, which will require ongoing multi-sector collaboration.

Based on much of the feedback from participants, the roundtable served to increase understanding of foreign qualification recognition processes in Canada and Australia, with many participants indicating that they were able to learn more about their own context in the process of sharing and contrasting policies and approaches. From the various overseas services and pre-arrival assessment strategies presented, participants were able to share challenges and explore opportunities to build on existing practices. In terms of future collaboration, a number of key priorities, including gap mapping and competent authority pathways, were identified as promising avenues for consideration. To follow up with some of the ideas proposed, possible next steps could include further dialogue to examine specific areas and issues, inter-professional working groups to build on promising practices and test innovations, as well as joint projects between Australian and Canadian regulatory authorities to explore collaborative approaches in accreditation, examination, and gap mapping.





Appendix A – Acknowledgements

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Appendix B – Participant List

AUSTRALIA-CANADA ROUNDTABLE ON FOREIGN QUALIFICATION RECOGNITION

April 12-15, 2011
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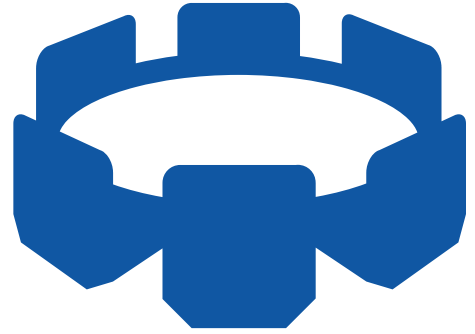
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