



Submission by World Education Services to the United National Global Compact on Migration with respect to the 6th Informal Thematic Session: “Irregular Migration and regular pathways, including decent work, labor mobility, recognition of skills and qualifications, and other relevant measures”

We are submitting this document on behalf of World Education Services (WES), an international non-profit organization that operates in the United States and Canada to facilitate recognition of academic credentials from over 190 countries through its credential evaluation services. Our mission is to reduce barriers that lead to “brain waste” in destination countries and to facilitate labor mobility and integration through recognition of skills and qualifications. Brain waste reflects the failure to match the skills that migrants bring with the skills that society needs.

According to Migration Policy Institute, 25 percent of all college-educated immigrants in the United States are affected by brain waste.¹ A comparable percentage are similarly affected in Canada.

Our statement will focus on the impact of recognizing the qualifications of highly-skilled individuals who leave their countries or origin either as migrants or refugees and have the desire and ability to make significant and needed contributions in the countries of destination in which they arrive.

WES supports the recognition of foreign qualifications by verifying and comparing the academic credentials an individual has earned in one country to academic credentials in another country. The assessment analyzes the relative value of secondary or post-secondary credentials for the purposes of employment, further education or licensing. A U.S. or Canadian “degree equivalency” gives migrants, many of whom immigrate at mid-point in their careers, a starting point for suitable employment, career progression or the opportunity to begin a new career. It also gives them a tool for self-advocacy: the “right to

¹ Batalova, Jeanne, Michael Fix, Michelle Mittelstadt, and Angela Marek Zeitlin. 2016. *Untapped Talent: The Costs of Brain Waste Among Highly Skilled Immigrants in the United States- Report in Brief*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, New American Economy and World Education Services.



decent work” surely includes the opportunity to utilize the qualifications they earned in their country of origin.

The number of university and college educated migrants on the move globally has increased dramatically in the last decade. For example, according to the Migration Policy Institute, almost half (48 percent) of immigrant adults who entered the United States between 2011 and 2015 were college graduates—a sharp rise from the 33 percent among those who arrived before the 2007-09 recession and 27 percent who arrived before 1990.²

The high degree of unemployment and underemployment among skilled immigrants indicates that their training and experience are not being recognized by employers, despite the need for precisely those skills in the labor market. Instead of utilizing the migrant talent available in their own backyards, many employers go to great lengths to attract talent from overseas.

Several recent studies have underlined the underutilization of immigrant talent. For example,

- In Canada a recent study of workers found that among university-educated workers, immigrants (27 percent) were more than twice as likely to be over-educated for their jobs than non-immigrants.³
- Migration Policy Institute, documenting the economic cost of immigrant skill underutilization in a report published last year,⁴ has created state-level fact sheets detailing the cost of brain waste among highly-skilled immigrants in California, Florida, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Texas and Washington, which could be used as blueprints for economic development in those states.⁵

² Ibid.

³ Frank, Kristyn and Feng Hou. 2017. *Over-education and Life Satisfaction among Immigrant and Non-immigrant Workers in Canada*. Statistics Canada.

⁴ Batalova, Jeanne, Michael Fix, Michelle Mittelstadt, and Angela Marek Zeitlin. 2016. *Untapped Talent: The Costs of Brain Waste Among Highly Skilled Immigrants in the United States- Report in Brief*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, New American Economy and World Education Services.

⁵ Migration Policy Institute. 2017. “Brain Waste and Credential Recognition.” Retrieved Sept. 19, 2017 (<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/topics/brian-waste-credential-recognition>).



On the other hand, other studies document the economic benefit of employing immigrant talent and the impact of a modest investment in bridging and workforce readiness programs. For example,

- Upwardly Global, a U.S. based organization dedicated to bridging skilled professionals to employment, analyzed data for about 500 foreign-trained immigrants and refugees who moved from unemployment or underemployment to jobs more closely aligned with their training and experience. They found that these individuals had an average annual salary increase of 900 percent (about \$3,500 to about \$35,000) within one to two years and contributed to the creation of nearly 700 additional jobs, increased federal income tax revenue by nearly \$1.8 million annually, and increased consumer spending by \$16 million to \$17 million annually.⁶
- Professional licensing remains an enormous challenge for immigrants despite the need for their services especially in rural and poor communities. The Welcome Back Centers, a U.S. initiative operating intensive courses in 10 cities to bridge foreign educated health professionals to employment, reports 25 percent of students at its New York Center were unemployed on admission but achieved a 98 percent retention rate over the last 6 years, and a cumulative pass rate of 93 percent for both LPN and RN classes, doubling their wages once employed. In their Maryland Center in 2015, 57 participants passed the nursing licensure exam and 47 had obtained work as RNs in Maryland, reporting an average wage increase of 167 percent from when they began the program.⁷ Comparable impact is reported for Canadian bridging courses.
- A fact sheet issued by the NYC Economic Development Corporation's Immigrant Bridge program reported a 720 percent return on investment on the intensive job search support placement services to 600 immigrant professionals, and \$8.2 million in annual new income directly attributable to the program. Over several months,

⁶ National Immigration Forum. 2016. **Skills and Training for New Americans: Creating a Thriving Economy That Works For All of Us.** Washington, DC: National Immigration Forum.

⁷ McHugh, Margie and Madeleine Morawski. 2017. **Unlocking Skills: Successful Initiatives for Integrating Foreign-Trained Immigrant Professionals.** Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.



program participants achieved an overall job placement rate of 42 percent, with a 56 percent job placement rate for individuals in high-demand industries who had been in the country for less than a year.⁸

- In Canada, models of best practice, such as the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council which convenes employers and key stakeholders to focus on reducing immigrant employment barriers, and the Immigrant Access Fund which provides loans to individuals to meet licensing and educational fees, are being replicated across Canada with government support.

These successes begin with foreign credential recognition as the foundation and make the case for investing in programs and promising practices that recognize the talent that migrants bring and then create access to viable education and career pathways for them to succeed.

Approaches to the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications

Credential recognition is a process that involves the engagement of multiple stakeholders at various points in the settlement process, including governments and civil society. Credential recognition in Canada and the United States are not managed by a national education ministry as is true in other countries; the collaboration of many actors is required if migrants are not to 'fall through the cracks.' We would like to cite a few WES initiatives where migrants gain an understanding early in the immigration and settlement process of the value of their foreign qualifications, with the hope that such insights can contribute to the guidelines to be established in the Compact.

Since 2012 World Education Services has been designated by the Government of Canada as an agency to provide an Educational Credential Assessment (ECA) as part of the pre-immigration screening process for skilled workers. Should that individual be invited to settle in Canada, they have been advised about the relative value of their previous education and can make informed choices about employment or upgrading their education? WES has

⁸Hamaji, Kate and Christian Gonzalez-Rivera. 2016. *A City of Immigrant Workers: Building a Workforce Strategy to Support All New Yorkers*. New York: Center for an Urban Future, The Center for Popular Democracy.



developed agreements with many professional licensing bodies and academic institutions to ensure that these assessments are recognized when they wish to use them. Similar strategies for assessing qualifications early in the settlement process now exist in Germany through a regional system of government-supported qualification assessment that connects migrant skills to industry sectors needing skilled labor.

As we apply a “whole of society” approach to the Global Compact it is not impossible to imagine credential assessment at the point of entry as a normative practice to facilitate recognition of foreign qualifications, with customized guidance based on real-time data as to destinations and markets that require migrants’ skills. Policy coherence could be achieved by making sure that immigration, education, employment and licensing sectors coordinate their recognition efforts.

At the same time, we must acknowledge systemic barriers, particularly entrenched attitudes towards immigrants and refugees, racism and discrimination, xenophobia and other barriers, that impact on skills recognition but needs to be addressed more broadly by civil society. This includes the bias for “Canadian experience” or “an American degree” which our research documents.⁹

A “whole-of-government” approach recognizes the stake that local and regional governments have in the settlement outcomes of immigrants, even if immigration policy is made primarily at the national level. Credential recognition is a highly-decentralized process in the hands of regulatory bodies and academic institutions for the most part; however, through immigration policy and investment in workforce training, adult and language education, governments at all levels signal their commitment to appropriate utilization, not exploitation, of immigrant talent.

This may require collaboration with non-governmental actors. For example, in the United States the Welcoming Economies Global Network comprises more than 20 regional economic development initiatives across the Rust Belt to tap into the economic contribution of immigrants. The WE Global Network’s Ideas that Innovate portfolio is a collection of state

⁹ Bergson-Shilcock, Amanda and James Witte. 2015. *Steps to Success: Integrating Immigrant Professionals in the U.S.* New York: World Education Services; World Education Services. Forthcoming. Assessing the Drivers of Workforce Integration in Canada and the United States. New York: World Education Services.



and local public policies that further its efforts to pursue immigrant economic development strategies.¹⁰ Similarly, Cities of Migration continues to be a platform for major immigrant-receiving cities to share information and exchange learning about best practice in local integration.

At the same time, national government policies play an important role in convening and funding research and pilot projects, and can also be surprisingly nimble when there is a good case to be made, for example with grants recently allocated by the U.S. Department of Labor to fund apprenticeships which immigrants can access; or the Government of Canada's Provincial Nominee program that invites immigrant selection to meet local labor market demand, or immigration policies that now enable international students to gain Canadian work experience and even a pathway to permanent residency under some conditions. There is no shortage of evidence that where governments have made a modest investment and developed coherent policy, and where foreign education and experience are utilized, skilled immigrants in the trades and professions are drivers of economic prosperity.

Refugees have additional barriers to credential recognition that may require yet a different approach. In 2016 WES began a pilot project to provide credential assessments to Syrian refugees entering Canada, many of whom are highly educated and highly-motivated to resume their careers. Our project directly addresses the problem that many refugees lack access to official academic credentials due to the collapse of the education system in areas of conflict. We find that most of them have fled with documents or some kind of credible evidence we can use to reconstruct and assess their qualifications. In the WES project, for the first time we are using local resettlement agencies as referral partners. Once refugees have their assessment, we will provide guidance for next steps to further education, employment or licensing. As such, assessment of their credentials provides a bridge to the future, a future we can facilitate by collaborating with partners at either end of the process. We will be scaling up this project shortly to the rest of Canada and to include some other countries where highly-skilled migrants are on the move. Our initial program evaluation indicates a wide acceptance by end-users of our methodology and expertise in reconstructing credentials where necessary. Our approach has also informed a set of best practices and guidelines for assessing refugee credentials soon to be published by the

¹⁰ WE Global Network. 2017. "Ideas That Innovate: State and Local Policies." Retrieved Sept. 19, 2017 (<http://www.weglobalnetwork.org/ideas-that-innovate/>).



Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials (CICIC) for use by credential assessors in institutions and third party agencies throughout Canada.

As the global community considers what constitutes safe and orderly migration of skilled talent, we are creating the infrastructure for credential recognition even where documents are missing or education has been interrupted, which includes millions of young Syrians. In Canada, we can anticipate that credential assessment may become even more vital as government cash subsidies to refugees expire, language skills improve and newcomers consider how to utilize their education. Governments can begin to consider how to cooperate with efforts to provide a path forward for these vulnerable individuals who, nevertheless, are immensely capable and resilient.

Finally, as we know from our research into the barriers to and facilitators of successful integration conducted by WES Global Talent Bridge, those individuals who have an assessment of their academic credentials as a starting point and then have access to accurate and timely information and support to make informed career decisions are eventually able to find their way. For example, we learned by surveying 4000 of our clients that immigrants who invested in additional education were more likely to be employed and successful than those who had only received education abroad.¹¹ We better understand, therefore, how a short term certificate course in a college can address the “made-in-America” bias of an employer, or how a short term internship in a Canadian company can satisfy the “Canadian experience” conundrum that immigrants face, or how an alternate career path may be wiser than the cost of relicensing. In short, there are integration strategies better than a survival job.

Research needs to inform public policy and program priorities in the areas of immigration, labor, education and social inclusion. This is not always evident. For example, we have overwhelming evidence that language proficiency is the key barrier and that skills upgrading fast tracks integration: even getting a short certificate in the country of destination increases the value of the home country credential in the eyes of employers. Yet, in the United States, immigrants with university degrees often find themselves in *years* of an adult

¹¹ Bergson-Shilcock, Amanda and James Witte. 2015. *Steps to Success: Integrating Immigrant Professionals in the U.S.* New York: World Education Services.



literacy program because of the lack of high level, contextualized English-language classes, and on a track to obtain a high school equivalency!

In summary, good research and best practices abound for improving the outcomes for skilled migrants and refugees, but policy coherence is critical to success. Recognition of skills and qualifications is only a first step, but an important one. Governments need the political will to connect the dots and prioritize investment in individuals who need a rather modest level of assistance in specific, targeted ways. World Education Services is ready to assist in this endeavor.

For more information please contact Timothy Owen, Deputy Director, World Education Services and Director of WES Canada at towen@wes.org.

About WES

Founded in 1974, World Education Services (WES) is a non-profit organization dedicated to helping individuals achieve their higher education and professional goals by evaluating and advocating for the recognition of international education qualifications.

With a staff representing 37 nations and speaking over 40 languages, WES has delivered evaluations to more than one million people worldwide that are recognized by more than 2,500 educational, business, and governmental institutions throughout the U.S. and Canada.

Through our Research and Consulting Services, WES is a leading provider of research regarding international education and trends. WES' Global Talent Bridge program helps skilled immigrants reach their educational and professional goals.