

Admission and Employment Criteria Discrepancies: Experiences of Skilled Immigrants in Toronto

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Abstract This research contributes to our understandings of the employment experiences of skilled immigrants in Canada by complementing and expanding upon statistical findings from previously published studies. Through in-depth interviews with 35 skilled immigrants from Bangalore, India living in Toronto, Canada, findings indicate that migrants experience employment frustrations stemming directly from the discrepancy between admission criteria (*foreign* education and work experience) and employment criteria (*Canadian* education and work experience). After summarizing the statistical data on the non-recognition of foreign credentials, we conclude that among our sample of immigrants, frustrations stem not from credential discounting in and of itself, but from Canada's point system for entry, which misleads these migrants about its existence and prevalence.

RÉSUMÉ Cette recherche contribue à nos connaissances sur les expériences d'emploi des immigrants qualifiés au Canada en complétant et développant les résultats statistiques d'études déjà publiées. Des entrevues approfondies auprès de trente-cinq immigrants qualifiés de Bangalore, en Inde, et vivant à Toronto, au Canada, indiquent que les immigrants connaissent des frustrations d'emploi qui découlent directement de l'écart entre les critères d'admission (études et expérience professionnelle *étrangères*) et les critères d'emploi (études et expérience professionnelle *canadiennes*). Après avoir résumé les données statistiques sur la non reconnaissance des titres de compétences étrangers, nous concluons que pour notre échantillon d'immigrants, les frustrations ne

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découlent pas de la non reconnaissance de titres de compétences en soi, mais plutôt du système de points d'appréciation pour l'entrée au Canada qui induit les immigrants en erreur quant à son existence et son importance.

Keywords Immigration · Skilled workers · Admission criteria · Canada · Foreign credentials · Indian diaspora

Mots clés immigration · travailleurs qualifiés · critères d'admission · titres de compétences étrangers · Diaspora Indienne

Introduction

In Canada, the deteriorating employment outcomes of recent immigrants have been well documented (Reitz 2007a, b; Picot and Sweetman 2005; Green and Worswick 2004). This decline in economic circumstances is evidenced in higher rates of unemployment, lower earnings and lower labor force participation, and is reported to be persistent (Grant and Sweetman 2004). One cause of this decline is the non-recognition of foreign credentials which refer to education, professional training, work experience and other work-related skills that immigrants bring with them. For a more complete discussion, see Li (2001) and Reitz (2005). The discounting of immigrant credentials has been attributed to the low-quality or limited transferability of those credentials, and the non-recognition of those credentials because of employer bias or ignorance, resistance by professional groups, or other bureaucratic obstacles (Reitz 2005). There are consequently unmet expectations among new immigrants in Canada, revolving specifically around these employment difficulties (Schellenberg and Maheux 2007).

This article complements, but also expands on our understanding of skilled immigrants in Canada by exploring the link between credential discounting and Canada's point system for entry. Through interviews with thirty-five skilled immigrants from Bangalore, India, residing in Toronto, Canada, we reveal how migrant employment frustrations over the non-recognition of their foreign credentials are fueled by what they perceive to be a misleading system of entry.

The discrepancy between admission criteria (*foreign* education and work experience) which grants them entry, and employment criteria (*Canadian* education and work experience) which leaves them underemployed is a major source of frustration. The Canadian point system misleads immigrants into thinking that their foreign credentials will be valued in Canada, by awarding points for these credentials. Upon arrival in Canada, immigrants discover that their foreign education and work experience are not recognized, and that Canadian credentials are required for employment in their given fields. As a result of these discrepancies and subsequent employment struggles, immigrants feel intense disappointment over the unmet employment expectations they experience upon arrival in Canada.

The structure of the article is as follows: we first review the statistical literature concerning the non-recognition of foreign credentials, considered one mechanism by which the employment situation of newly arrived immigrants is declining; we then review an important article by Schellenberg and Maheux (2007) that finds new

immigrants report unfavorable assessments of Canadian labor market experiences. Our sample and qualitative research methodology are then presented, followed by a discussion of our findings. Our research represents the voice of a group of immigrants, providing a perspective that enables us to link labor market experiences to immigrant admission policy.

Literature Review

Research suggests that highly skilled immigrants in Canada are not faring as well as past generations. There is evidence of initial wage gaps that are much larger than they were in the past (Reitz 2007a; Picot 2004; Li 2000, 2003). Whereas the mean earnings of previous cohorts fairly quickly converged to, or exceeded, that of similar Canadian-born workers, there is considerable evidence that this is not the case for recent immigrants (Alboim et al. 2005; Grant and Sweetman 2004; Li 2003). One of the factors blamed for this downward trend is the non-recognition of immigrant credentials, which refers to foreign education, professional training, and work experience (Finnie and Meng 2002; Reitz 2001a).¹

As source countries change from European to Asian and African, immigrants may have increasing difficulty in the Canadian labor market as employers devalue their foreign credentials.² Some of this discounting may be justified based on variations in educational quality and country specific components of skills (see Sweetman 2004). In response to the uncertainty surrounding foreign credentials, Canadian employers may adopt a risk-averse strategy by valuing the credentials obtained in Canada over those obtained in a foreign country.³ Li (2001) argues that earnings differentials may not be a result of immigrants having less human capital, but having lower market value attached to their equivalent qualifications.⁴

Ferrer and Riddell (2008) similarly find that immigrants receive lower returns to foreign years of schooling and work experience than Canadians; however, they also argue that immigrants' credentials are valued in the Canadian labor market; for immigrants, the increase in earnings associated with completing educational programs is generally higher than that of comparable natives.⁵ Thus, there is some discrepancy over the extent to which the human capital of immigrants is rewarded in Canada's labor market. Nevertheless, studies merge on the conclusion that foreign

¹ It is important to note that issues with foreign credential recognition are just one of a number of factors that may lead to skilled immigrants being unemployed or underemployed in Canada. Other possible reasons include lower quality of foreign credentials (Sweetman 2004), language barriers and discrimination (Reitz and Banerjee 2007; Galabuzi 2006; Reitz 2005)

² The returns on foreign education have not necessarily declined; what has changed is the entrance of more immigrants from nontraditional source countries, which are more likely to be associated with lower quality education systems than traditional source countries.

³ This is not to say that some foreign-earned credentials are not on par, or even of superior quality, with Canadian-earned credentials; however, Sweetman (2004), after a thorough review of studies, concludes that some foreign-earned credentials are well below Canadian standards.

⁴ Li (2001) further argues that other features such as racial origin and gender may also be disadvantaged. Researchers suggest that discrimination due to language, accent or culture is another possible form of discrimination that contributes to differential employment outcomes (Metropolis 2005).

⁵ They argue that for immigrants, it appears that the greatest returns result from the receipt of the degree, certificate or diploma, not the acquisition of a particular number of years of schooling.

credentials are unequally valued in Canada, and that there is a downward trend in immigrant earnings. The overall scenario is therefore discouraging: Canada has been successful at attracting highly skilled immigrants, however the labor market outcomes of these immigrants is worsening, and a significant reason lies with the non-recognition of immigrants' foreign credentials.

Research by Schellenberg and Maheux (2007) used the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada (LSIC) to examine immigrants' subjective assessments and perceptions of settlement four years after landing. They conclude that new immigrants perceive significant employment hurdles in Canada and report unmet expectations. The greatest difficulty new immigrants faced since arriving in Canada was finding an adequate job. Among immigrants aged 25 to 44 who encountered difficulties seeking employment, almost half cited not enough Canadian job experience, followed by no connection in the job market, foreign experience not accepted and foreign qualification not accepted; these are overlapping problems facing immigrant job seekers in Canada (p. 9). This parallels the remark by Lamontagne (2003: 14) that "some have described Canada's efforts to attract qualified workers trained abroad as seduction and abandonment", in which skilled workers are recruited based on advanced skills, and then left to their own devices in a system that does not recognize their skills, which can lead to unmet expectations.

This article takes the analysis one step further. As indicated in the literature summarized above, there are a considerable number of statistical findings documenting employment difficulties of new immigrants, and the Schellenberg and Maheux (2007) study observes perceptions of difficulties centering on employment issues, confirming the barriers to employment. Our research provides new data on how a specific group of highly skilled immigrants perceive their employment opportunities in Canada. What makes our research new is that it links findings on admission criteria through Canada's point system to labor market experiences. Quantitative studies have shown declining employment outcomes due to the non-recognition of foreign credentials (Reitz 2007a; Grant and Sweetman 2004; Li 2001), and a large survey of immigrants indicates unfavorable assessments of the Canadian labor market (Schellenberg and Maheux 2007); but there is an inadequate understanding of how immigrants conceptualize these assessments and discounting in relation to Canada's point system. In the following sections, skilled immigrants provide their own accounts of how their frustrations stem not from credential devaluation in and of itself, but from the gap between Canada's immigrant entry criteria and Canadian employers' hiring criteria, commenting on resulting feelings of deception.

Methodology

This article is based on research involving 35 in-depth interviews with immigrants from Bangalore, India. Data collection took place between January and April 2005. This research is part of a larger project with over 50 immigrants, which looked not only at the economic and employment circumstances of new immigrants, but also at the transnational ties that they maintain between their countries of origin and settlement. The broader research was designed to explore settlement experiences of

skilled immigrants and the extent to which they are involved in regular flows of people, information and goods between India and Canada. The interviews however, contained numerous questions relevant to studies of labor market experiences. Specific question included: what is the highest level of education you completed? In what range does your total yearly income fall? What was your occupational position in India when you applied for migration? What was your first job in Canada? What is your current job in Canada? And tell us about your experiences as skilled migrants to Canada.

What became clear to us through these interviews is that the most intriguing findings from our research were not simply our ability to provide qualitative support for statistical findings, but the added understanding of how immigrant frustrations were predominantly fueled by what migrants perceive to be a misleading system of entry. This group of immigrants expressed frustration resulting from the discrepancy between Canada's admission requirements which credit their foreign credentials, and the employment requirements which do not.

Eligibility for this sample was restricted to individuals who had been born in Bangalore, India, were residing in the Greater Toronto Area⁶ at the time of the interview, and had immigrated to Canada under the Economic Class. Recruitment of participants was achieved through various methods including: notices in Indian newspapers with Toronto distributions, announcements made at cultural and religious events, and emails to members of various cultural and religious organizations. Some individuals who responded to the ads or announcements were not interviewed because they did not meet the eligibility requirements. Only one member of each household was interviewed. The sample includes 21 men and 14 women.

We exclusively sampled economic class migrants, but because this paper is part of a larger study, we did not determine how many of the participants were primary applicants and how many were spouses of the primary applicant. In retrospect, we wish we had asked participants more about their application process and their total score on the point system. We can assume, however, that many of the women are accompanying spouses, and not primary applicants. That being said, all of the women in this sample are professionals who hold University degrees. Therefore, we feel this does not negatively affect the results. The women interviewed were very clear in their frustrations with the point system and the underemployment being experienced by both themselves and their husbands.

Nineteen of the participants are permanent residents in Canada and the remaining 16 are Canadian citizens. All of the participants are Hindu, and speak English in addition to various Indian languages. Over 50% of the sample immigrated to Canada between the ages of twenty-five to thirty-four, which reflects that they arrived during their prime working ages. At the time of the interviews, the average age of participants was 47. The average number of years since immigration was 13.

The average family income among participants was approximately \$60,000. Sixty-six percent had a family income of \$40,000 or more, and almost half

⁶ The Greater Toronto Area (GTA) is the largest metropolitan area in Canada. In 2005, the GTA had a population of over 5.6 million people. In addition to the City of Toronto, it includes four surrounding Regional Municipalities—York, Halton, Peel and Durham.

(46.9%) had a family income of \$60,000 and over. However, a quarter of the participants had a household income of only \$20,000 to \$39,999 suggesting that there was a significant variation in income levels. The number one reason for the disparity was the length of time in Canada. The longer participants had been living in Canada, the higher their income. This reflects findings that suggest low-income rates are greatest among recently arrived immigrants, and that as newly arrived immigrants acquire experience in Canada, their low-income rates fall (Statistics Canada 2003).

This sample is no more or less middle class than the Indian population in general in Canada. In 2001, Indians in Canada earned on average \$27,023 (Statistics Canada 2001) suggesting that among dual-income households, their annual household earnings would be approximately \$54,046, which is very close to the mean sample household income of \$60,000.

This sample is very homogeneous in terms of education. All participants have at least completed post-secondary education, with fourteen also completing post-graduate degrees. According to census data, this sample is more highly educated than the general Indian population in Canada. Twenty-six percent of Indians in Canada over the age of 15 have a University degree, and 35% of East Indians in Canada, between the ages of 25–44 years have a University degree (Statistics Canada 2001); whereas all participants in the current study have a University degree.

This raises questions about why the sample average household earnings would not be higher than the Indian population in Canada more generally, since the education and credentials of this sample are significantly higher. As the above literature review indicates, highly educated visible minority immigrants in Canada experience a net earnings disadvantage (Li 2001; Reitz 2001b), in part because their credentials are not recognized in Canada (Reitz 2001b). This helps explain why participants' higher than average education levels are not reflected in higher than average earnings.

This sample represents a specific type of immigrant—highly educated and highly skilled migrants from Bangalore, India. Generalizations about a broader immigrant experience should be made with caution. The results are intended to supplement existing quantitative studies on the non-recognition of foreign credentials in Canada, and contribute to our understanding of how employment frustrations of a specific group of immigrants are directly linked to Canada's point system for entry.

Findings

Skilled immigrants cite problems with having their experience, education, and credentials assessed and accepted as a key barrier to their successful labor market participation. Based on Canada's point system, these skilled immigrants believed their foreign skills would be valued and recognized in Canada, however their post-migration experiences involve high levels of unemployment and underemployment. Participants remark on the discrepancy between the selection/admission process and the employment process in Canada.

For example, Rajeshri⁷ immigrated to Canada in 2003 at the age of 41. She came with her husband and two children. She has a Bachelor of Science degree from India, and was an Executive Administrator in India; her first job in Canada was a part-time telemarketer. Combined with her husband, who holds a professional degree from India, their current family income is between \$20,000–40,000. Rajeshri explains how Canada's point system led her to believe her credentials would be recognized in Toronto, and questions the legitimacy of such a process.

When you are giving a migration, when you are selecting the processes going on, you ask if we are qualified and educated and can speak much English. Why do you stress that you need only professionals to your country, and then when you bring in the professionals they are brought in and treated no different than ordinary clerks here?

She goes on to explain:

All of our hard work and reading and all of it is thrown in the dustbin, just because we landed here. So my question is why do you ask people when you select for immigration—are you a professional? Are you qualified? So they say that you don't have Canadian experience, but how do you gain Canadian experience if you are not even granted an attempt?...All those highly qualified from India, they have PhDs and you see them as labourers.

In trying to make sense of her situation Rajeshri expresses her frustration for Canada's treatment of skilled professionals: "If you let us come, let us merge into your system. If you don't want us then don't let us come". Rajeshri's experience of entering Canada as a skilled worker did not provide her with any indications that her credentials would not be recognized. It is this discrepancy that her fellow skilled immigrants also find most frustrating.

Naisha immigrated to Canada in 2003 with her husband who was the principal applicant. She holds Masters Degrees in languages and a post-graduate degree in Personal Management. She was a Lecturer in a University in India, and is currently unemployed in Canada. Her husband was an Aerospace Engineer in India and has a PhD from France, but cannot find employment in his field; he has only managed to secure work as a laborer in Canada. Their combined family income is less than \$20,000 a year.

"We went to interview [for immigration]...The lady who was in charge said okay you guys are highly qualified...She said you will definitely end up in good terms because you are highly qualified. So we landed here, and then we realized that getting a job here is very tough. We had no Canadian experience and wherever you go they ask for Canadian experience. Irregardless of my husband's PhD being from France, they don't recognize it...To this day we still cannot find good jobs. Why do they want highly qualified people to immigrate to Canada when they only want labourers? They are deceiving us".

⁷ All names used in this article are pseudonyms. Anonymity of participants was assured and maintained. Other publications generated from this sample have used different pseudonyms to ensure participants can not be identified by 'matching' findings from various articles.

Mandira shared a similar experience of frustration with the discrepancy between Canada's immigration policy for skilled workers (point system) and the utilization of immigrant skills. Mandira immigrated to Canada in 2001 with her husband. She earned a Bachelor of Commerce degree and a Bachelor of Education degree. She was a school teacher in India, and found a job in a daycare upon arrival in Canada. Her husband, in contrast, holds a professional accounting degree from India, and is currently underemployed as a security guard. Their combined family income in Canada is less than \$20,000.

When we are in the process of immigration they ask for your qualification, like you have to meet certain standards; but when we come here we realize that we don't have any jobs here. My brother-in-law is so well educated. He ranked high in his mathematics and stats and is an IT professional, but do you know what job he is doing? His first job was working in a basement painting; his second job was packing candles in a factory. Right now he is working in a juice factory.

The men in the sample expressed similar levels of frustration. Srinivas immigrated in 2001 at the age of 31. He earned two undergraduate degrees in India (Commerce and Law) and then earned professional credentials as a Chartered Accountant. He worked as a Chartered Accountant in India and Australia, but could only find labor jobs upon his arrival in Canada. He now drives a taxi part-time, and helps prepare taxes for an accountant at tax season.

Okay [finding a job] was a bit furious for me...I was not able to get a job at all in accounting or any office environment...So I started working in a warehouse as physical labourer...I finally took a tax preparer's course, and started working for an accountant during the tax season. Right now I also drive a taxi on a permanent basis...In my real capacity [as an accountant], this is only a day and a half for me. I kept thinking there should be some place that recognizes my skills; but that has still not happened.

Feeling pressure to support their families and meet their daily provisional needs, forces many of these highly skilled immigrants to take jobs that require very little skill or education.

In 2000, at the age of 44, Havish arrived in Toronto with his wife and two children. He holds a B.A. in Technology and worked as a telemarketer upon arrival in Canada. Five years after immigration, he is working as a real estate agent, having completed his real estate course and exam.

There is no respect of outside work experience and qualification...We were never told that our credentials wouldn't be recognized. We were never told that our work experiences wouldn't be recognized. On the contrary, immigration officials asked us about our experiences and qualifications. I thought the Government would not have asked us about our education and experience if they were not to be recognized over here.

Immigrants' frustrations stem not simply from the fact that their credentials are not recognized, but also because Canada's point system implies that Canada needs their skills and values their credentials. It is this discrepancy between immigrant

admission based on foreign credentials, and employer non-recognition of these credentials that is discouraging to immigrants.

Vaishnav, provided a more specific breakdown of the point system in his interview. He immigrated in 1997 at the age of 42. Vaishnav has a post-graduate degree in Commerce from a University in India and worked for a bank in India doing auditing of accounts. He has struggled over the credential recognition process in Canada and at the time of the interview, 8 years after arriving in Canada, he had finally found a 3-month contract job at a bank, but claimed his skills were being underutilized:

Okay [in Canada's point system], if you are a graduate, this many points; if you are a post-grad, this many points; and so on. Based on this, that means your qualifications are recognized; but as soon as you come here nobody, and no financial institution, is going to honour it. So there is a glitch in the system.

Canada's point system serves to recruit and admit immigrants who are highly skilled, by awarding points for foreign educational credentials and work experience. This has served as a successful way to recruit large numbers of skilled workers; Canada's point system has been heralded as a success and as a model to replicate. Immigrants admitted through this process however, discover that their foreign skills are not recognized once they arrive in Canada, leading to high levels of underemployment. This discrepancy between admission criteria and employment criteria is a cause of great concern for migrants who choose Canada, in part, because of the employment opportunities purportedly available. Previous studies have documented the downward trend in immigrant earnings, which is partly the result of the non-recognition of foreign credentials. Our research builds off these findings by documenting how immigrants subjectively perceive the apparent incongruity between the recognition of their credentials pre- and post-migration. This section of the article has documented immigrants' frustrations, confusion and anger over the process, specifically their concern over the inability of the Canadian Government and employers to amalgamate their evaluative systems.

Conclusion

Recent statistical findings identify deteriorating employment outcomes among recent skilled immigrants due in part to credential discounting (Kustec et al. 2007; Reitz 2005; Aydemir and Skuterud 2004; Grant and Sweetman 2004; Picot 2004; Li 2003), and a large survey of skilled immigrants in a nationally representative sample (Schellenberg and Maheux 2007) report on new immigrants' settlement experiences and their perceptions of employment difficulties. The present article expands current understandings by confirming these findings, and also demonstrating how, for a group of skilled immigrants from Bangalore, the negative employment experiences are particularly frustrating because Canada's point system recognizes their credentials, but Canadian employers and professional organizations do not. While the qualitative methods described in this article have restricted generalizability, they offer a greater degree of depth to investigate not only the direct link between employment outcomes and dissatisfaction, but also the discrepancy between admission and employment criteria.

Frustration with the immigration experience and disappointment with employment failures appear to be compounded by a sense of betrayal. Participants reported that their employment expectations had been falsely inflated by messages implicit in the federal government point system, which recruits and admits applicants based on their skills. Upon arrival the skills and experience which facilitated their admission to Canada are not sufficient to secure satisfactory employment; it is the realization of the discrepancy between admission and employment criteria that is at the crux of the frustration expressed by the skilled immigrants interviewed in this research.

The extent to which the credentials of immigrants are recognized and utilized in the Canadian labor market is an important policy issue. This paper echoes the academic (Metropolis 2005) and government reports (HRSDC 2002) that identify the recognition of immigrants' credentials as a policy priority. Any additional policy implications are limited given the small size of our sample, however we suggest the Canadian Government continue efforts to facilitate the transferability of foreign credentials. There is a need to better align admission criteria with employer demands to ensure Canada's immigration policy and labor markets are maximizing the use of our immigrants' skills. One possibility would be to have credential assessments occur prior to admittance into Canada.

We also argue for improved labor market information being provided to potential migrants. Migrants need to fully understand that the admission criteria currently being used by the federal points system does not necessarily coincide with the employable skills being recognized by Canadian employers. This very relevant information needs to reach immigrants pre-migration, in order to facilitate their integration and prepare them for the Canadian labor market.

This research demonstrates how a small group of skilled immigrants in Canada are struggling to integrate into the Canadian labor market as a direct result of the non-recognition of their credentials. This suggests that Canada may lose many of these highly trained immigrants to other countries because opportunities for labor integration are too restrictive. Furthermore, Canada's slow integration of immigrants could lead to difficulty attracting skilled workers in the future.

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