

***Examining Systemic and Individual  
Barriers Experienced  
by Visible Minority Social Workers  
in Mainstream Social Service Agencies***

**A Community Project**



**Literature Review**  
**(Appendix A of Project Research Report)**

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## **Introduction to the Social Work Profession**

Social work is a profession that strives to protect the rights of visible minorities and other disadvantaged groups. Yet this extensive literature review reveals that it is also a profession where social workers who come from disadvantaged groups still experience individual and systemic level forms of discrimination. Internationally as well as Canadian educated visible minority social workers in Canada face systemic barriers to employment in the field of social work, particularly in mainstream social service agencies. The issue of systemic discrimination is of particular importance to social work, which prides itself on being a profession committed to the pursuit of social justice (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 1994). The social work profession has widely adopted anti-racism and anti-oppression oriented initiatives in its educational institutions and particularly at some of its workplaces where the anti-oppression approach has been adopted as the primary practice model (Wilson & Beresford, 2000).

While social work values demand social change, the profession's denial of adequate and equitable access to the employment of visible minority social workers perpetuates society's systemic and institutional structures that are discriminatory and oppressive. Ironically, the skills and knowledge of visible minority social work professionals, particularly of those who have been internationally educated, are much needed in the field of social work in Canada. With Canada's increasingly diversified population, not only are language abilities and cultural knowledge imperative for service provision in working with visible minority communities and individuals, but the demand for social workers is also increasing because of Canada's ageing baby boom population and the corresponding reliance on immigrants to fill the gaps in the domestic labour market (O'Reilly, 2001). Like many other areas of the labour market, the social services sector is also concerned with current and projected skill shortages. Notwithstanding, there is the reality that a more diverse group of social work professionals is very much needed at a time of a growing and diverse service user group.

## **Terminology Used in the Literature Review**

In keeping with the Employment Equity Act of 1995 and the Canadian Census definition, "visible minorities" are persons who are other than Aboriginal peoples and non-Caucasian or non-White (Department of Justice Canada, 1995). While visible minority professionals may have similar experiences in terms of their visible minority status in the Canadian public sphere, internationally educated professionals' experiences can be viewed as unique and different from that of domestically educated professionals. For instance, internationally educated individuals who obtained their academic and work credentials in a country other than Canada, may face additional barriers in resettlement.

By contrast, the term "Canadian educated" refers to people who obtained their academic and work credentials locally, in Canada. This categorization of visible minority professionals is not static because, as becomes evident in this literature review, many complexities and permutations exist. For example, a person may be internationally educated, but also have training and work experience in Canada, or he or she may be educated in Canada, but not have Canadian work experience, or alternatively he or she may have an international education, but Canadian volunteer experience rather than paid Canadian work experience. Each of these permutations may have a different impact on the individual's employment experience and situation.

Furthermore, all internationally educated professionals are not necessarily visible minorities, and thus may not face the same level, or kinds of difficulties, in the Canadian labour market and field of social work, as those who are considered visible minorities.

### **The History of Immigrant, Skilled, Visible Minority Workers in Canada**

With the introduction of the points system in 1967 as Canada's primary tool for the selection of skilled workers and the subsequent implementation of a national Multiculturalism policy in 1971, Canada's demographic profile as well as immigration policies changed drastically (Drieger, 2001; Hum & Simpson, 2002; Statistics Canada, 2003; Teelucksingh & Galabuzi, 2005). Specifically, the changes in immigration laws from 1967 have marked a shift in the countries of origin of recent immigrants, who are more likely to be from Asian countries, rather than European countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy and the United States (Ministry of Industry, 2005; Statistics Canada, 2003). Canada receives over 200,000 immigrants each year, and they account for almost 60% of the national population growth. It is therefore no surprise that over three quarters of Canada's current immigrants are visible minorities and over 200 ethnic groups appeared in the 2001 census, where China, India, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Taiwan were the countries of origin for over 40% of all immigrants who came to Canada between 1991 and 2001. The population of visible minorities has been steadily increasing over the past 20 years and between the years 1996 and 2001, this population increased at a rate of six times faster than the total population. In 2001, almost 4 million individuals in Canada identified themselves as a visible minority. Projections show that by 2017, visible minorities will account for 1/5 of Canada's population, which will represent an increase of up to 111% from 2001 (Minister of Industry, 2005).

The skilled worker program of Immigration Canada evaluates individual applicants through a points-based system, whereby points are awarded based on a variety of criteria, including educational qualifications, professional credentials, work experience and official language ability. Given the context of such immigration policies and migration trends, here is an overview:

- ❖ Approximately 73% of internationally educated professionals are visible minorities (MacBride-King & Benimadhu, 2004).
- ❖ About 94% of immigrants who arrived during the 1990s were living in the Census Metropolitan areas with the majority of immigrants who arrived of working age.
- ❖ About half a million immigrants are expected to join the Canadian workforce by 2006 (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2000).

### **Visible Minorities and the Canadian Labour Market**

These trends and numbers are significant in that the proportion of visible minorities, particularly those who are internationally educated, is steadily increasing. Yet various reports and research studies seem to indicate that such populations are under-represented, underemployed, unemployed, and generally experience lower than average income and higher

than average poverty rates than the dominant majority in Canada (Alboim, Finnie & Meng, 2005; Chui, 2003; Drieger, 2001; Frenette & Morissette, 2003; Harvey, Siu, & Reil, 1999; Hum & Simpson, 2002; Li, 2000; Mata, 1999; Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2002; Picot & Hou, 2003; PROMPT, 2004b; Reitz, 2005; Schellenberg, 2004; Teelucksingh & Galabuzi, 2005; Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2000). An analysis of the trends and conditions of Canadian census data of Canadian Metropolitan Areas reveals that recent immigrants: had lower employment and higher unemployment rates than Canadian-born; were less likely to work full-year and full-time; were more likely than Canadian-born to be self-employed in some areas, but not others; and were less likely to be employed in occupations typically requiring a university degree, resulting in an over-representation in low-skilled jobs even though they are more likely than the Canadian-born population to hold a university degree (Schellenberg, 2004). An overview of pertinent reports and research studies reveals that:

- ❖ Around 51,000 highly skilled internationally trained professionals settle in Ontario each year, and yet only 23% of them identify being in a regulated profession (Government of Ontario, 2005).
- ❖ Despite having a university education, one in four immigrants holds a job requiring no more than a high-school education (Reitz, 2005; Schellenberg, 2004).
- ❖ 88% of internationally educated visible minorities worked as professionals in their country of origin before immigrating to Canada but that once in Canada, only 18% worked as professionals (Basran & Zong, 1998).
- ❖ Over 90% of the internationally educated professionals had work experience in their country of origin and over 55% reported feeling that foreign work experience is not fairly recognized by provincial government agencies, professional organizations and educational institutions (Basran & Zong, 1998).
- ❖ Over 70% of newcomers faced at least one barrier in accessing the job market and that 6 out of 10 immigrants no longer worked in the same occupational field as before coming to Canada (Chui, 2003).
- ❖ Over the past twenty years, the low income rate of immigrants relative to Canadian born has been steadily increasing even after controlling for time spent in Canada (Picot & Hou, 2003; Schellenberg, 2004).
- ❖ 50% of 1,500 food bank users in Toronto were immigrants, 60% of whom held a university degree or trade certification (Keung, 2005).
- ❖ The poverty rate of recent immigrants to Canada has risen to over 52% (Jackson, 2001).

These trends and statistical data demonstrate that both internationally educated visible minority professionals and also Canadian-born and educated visible minorities are experiencing some kind of barriers in the domestic labour market. The literature concerned with trends in the Canadian labour market, labour market integration, access to employment, and immigrant settlement indeed confirms that there is a disconnect between the purpose of the points system, in terms of filling domestic labour market shortages and gaps by attracting the most highly skilled and educated immigrants to Canada, and the actual experiences of selected immigrants whose education and training is either underutilized or not utilized at all (Alboim et al., 2005; Anisef et al., 2004; Aydemir & Skuterud, 2004; Bauder, 2003; James, 2005a; Ministry of Training,

Colleges and Universities, 2002; PROMPT, 2004b; Shields, 2004). In other words, qualifying as the most desirable immigrants has not directly translated into gainful employment. This has been particularly the case among regulated trades and professions in which a license from the province and/or a professional regulatory body must be obtained prior to working in that area. In fact, research has found that the number of points granted to an immigrant by a visa officer and the Department of Citizenship and Immigration has no bearing on an individual's ability to practise their profession in Canada (Brouwer, 1999). According to Shields (2004), immigrants are increasingly used as part of the flexible and disposable labour force that has been created to meet the demands of the globalized economy, and immigrants are unable to obtain positions that are equivalent to their level of experience and training.

The literature also confirms that the experiences of internationally educated professionals are quite similar and comparable to those of visible minorities who are not immigrants and that there are differential levels of labour market success based on geographical origin of immigration and race (Frenette & Morissette, 2003; Kunz, Milan, & Schetagne, 2000; Statistics Canada, 2003; Teelucksingh & Galabuzi, 2005). Statistics Canada's Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants (2003) indicates that 68% of immigrants from Australia were employed in their own professions within 6 months of arriving in Canada, but only 33% of those born in Asia and in the Middle East were similarly employed. Like the situation of immigrants in general, visible minorities are receiving lower economic returns for their human capital. Regardless of place of birth, visible minorities have equal or higher educational credentials than non-racialized groups, but are still facing limitations in their access to employment (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2000; Teelucksingh & Galabuzi, 2005). Canadian-born visible minorities earn systematically less than average and have higher rates of unemployment and underemployment than their colleagues (PROMPT, 2004b; Shields, 2004). According to 2001 Census data, visible minorities' average employment income was about 86% of the average income earned by the general population. Visible minority men earned almost 18% less than the male national average while visible minority women made 26% less employment income than the national average for women (Statistics Canada, 2005a, 2005b). Poverty rates among visible minorities in Canada are also relatively high, over 50% for some groups (Jackson, 2001). In Toronto, over 50% of visible minority families live below the official low-income cut off, whereas the rates among White ethnic groups is less than 10% (Statistics Canada, 2003).

Canadian visible minorities report that getting a job is difficult, but finding a job that matches their qualifications and offers promotional opportunities is even more difficult (Reitz, 2001). They also report that the higher up the organizational hierarchy, the lighter the skin tone becomes, with management positions primarily filled by individuals from non-racialized groups. For example, less than 1% of the membership of Canadian corporate boards consists of visible minorities (James, 2005a). Even in the federal public service sector, where employment equity has been legislated, visible minorities are under-represented, with visible minority women being the most under-represented (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2000). Inversely, immigrants who have been educated in Britain and the United States tend to obtain jobs that are similar to those of their non-minority Canadian-born counterparts (Shields, 2004).

Considering the overwhelming majority of contemporary internationally trained professionals who constitute visible minorities, visible minority status rather than newcomer status appears to have a major role in the shared experiences of unemployment, underemployment, and the deskilling (Prompt, 2004b) among internationally and Canadian educated professionals who are visible minorities.

## **Barriers Faced by Visible Minority Workers in the Canadian Labour Market**

Although there is little research documenting the barriers faced by visible minority social workers per se, especially those who are internationally educated, there is some literature on the discrimination and barriers faced by Canadian and internationally educated visible minorities in other human service professions, the labour market in general, as well as in the workplace (Beck, Reitz & Weiner, 2002; Hagey, Choudhry, Guruge, Turritin, Collins & Lee, 2001; NARCC, 2002). There is also a large body of literature documenting the barriers faced by internationally educated professionals of various disciplines attempting to gain access to their regulated professions, in both the public and private sectors (Azuh, 1998; Graham, 2001; JobStart and Skills for Change, 2001; Mata, 1999; Rahi, 2003).

### **Inaccessible and Inadequate Information for Internationally Educated Social Workers (IESWs) and Social Service Employers**

Many immigrants arrive in Canada without an adequate understanding or appreciation of the barriers and challenges they are likely to face. Canadian Citizenship and Immigration (CIC) offices overseas are primarily concerned with attracting desirable immigrants but rarely provide prospective immigrants with an accurate picture of what settlement upon arrival in Canada might entail. Apart from the points system itself, and without additional information, skilled workers are often led to believe that they will be able to utilize and ultimately benefit from the skills and education which gained them entry to Canada in the first place. Internationally educated professionals have expressed disillusionment with their immigration process and feelings of being misled regarding the ease of finding employment in the profession of their choice (Centre for Research and Education in Human Services, 2005). There is also a paucity of information about the process of credential recognition and the timelines involved in undergoing this process. This lack of information from federal government sources before and during the immigration process is a major barrier for internationally educated professionals seeking employment in their field in Canada (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2002). In an Ontario study, only 20% of immigrants had been informed by federal immigration officials about specific licensing requirements for their profession (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2002). The same study found that those who were informed about licensing requirements before immigration were more likely to be working in the exact profession for which they were educated or in a related profession. Other information that has been suggested to be made available prior to arrival is information regarding the labour market, assessment and licensing procedures, and the investments required in order to find employment (Centre for Research and Education in Human Services, 2005).

Once in Canada, the information about specific requirements to enter various professions within the Canadian job market and how to meet them is not easily accessible to internationally educated professionals. In fact, according to a recent study of skilled immigrants in Ontario, 42% of respondents had not heard of academic credential assessment (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2002). While 80% of the respondents knew that they required a license to practise their profession in Ontario, 54% did not know the required steps for obtaining such a license. The information provided on Canadian government web sites is presented in either French or English, which is not accessible to those with other language abilities.

Information is not consolidated in an easily accessible, user-friendly way, which means that people who are searching for information prior to immigration may miss key pieces of information. Accessing services once in Canada is also a challenge as information on relevant programs is rarely presented in a format that is easily found. For example, Ontario lacks a consolidated provincial list of immigrant employment support programs (Center for Research and Education in Human Services, 2005). As the majority of jobs in Canada are available primarily through the “unadvertised job market”, those who do not have already access to that job market are at a considerable disadvantage.

As current programs and initiatives are primarily targeting internationally educated professionals, those who are providing employment are often uninformed of services that they can tap into. A PROMPT (2004c) study found that almost half of employers surveyed did not know the range of employment initiatives available to assist them in hiring immigrants. Specifically, employers and human resources managers are often unaware of the organizations that provide credential recognition services (ENVIRONICS, 2004). This lack of information could mean that employers will be less likely to take the time to verify an applicant’s credentials. Another study conducted by PROMPT found that of all stakeholders, employers were the least clear about the current publicly funded system of immigrant employment initiatives (Centre for Research and Education in Human Services, 2005). The study also found that employers infrequently used specific initiatives to recruit internationally educated professionals. The lack of pre-immigration licensing information, as well as misinformation about the licensing process was presented by regulatory bodies in Ontario as a major challenge to licensing foreign-educated professionals (Ontario Regulators for Access, 2003).

### **Settlement and Social Service Sector Issues (IESWs)**

Settlement policies at the federal level have not been appropriately adjusted to match the needs of the highly educated and skilled immigrants in Canada (D’Alessandro, 2004). Instead they focus on the basic reception needs of arriving immigrants, such as housing and language instruction, without a focus on employment integration, which is a key aspect of successful settlement. In terms of settlement services, newcomers experience a lack of access to culturally appropriate and anti-racist services that are able to fully meet their needs (Beyenne, et al., 1996). Programs are chronically under-funded and where funding exists it is often limited (Centre for Research and Education and Human Services, 2005). According to Sadiq (2004), a two-tiered system of settlement service has been created out of funding practices that link smaller immigrant service agencies to larger multi-service agencies, at the expense of the formers’ autonomy and ability to deliver culturally appropriate services. At this level, immigrants are consequently denied access to the services they require in order to integrate successfully into the new host culture and the labour market.

Existing programs that focus on labour market integration are primarily concerned with individual-level interventions by working directly with the individual immigrant, rather than employers and/or regulatory bodies. The majority of employment services tend to concentrate on increasing the individual’s chances of success in the labour market by providing job-search techniques, preparation, resume writing, and generic labour market information workshops. While these services play an important role in addressing some barriers at the individual level, they fail to pay adequate attention to the systemic barriers that the individuals continue to face (Centre for Research and Education and Human Services, 2005). That is, such programs fail in

working with employers and regulatory bodies who do not recognize or utilize the talents, skills, knowledge and experiences of internationally educated professionals.

### **‘Canadian Experience’ and Language (IESWs)**

Many internationally educated professionals face difficulties with employers and regulatory bodies who fail to recognize previous work experience from an applicant’s home country by insisting on Canadian work experience as a prerequisite to accessing a profession in Canada (AIPSO et al., 2001; Aydemir & Skuterud, 2004; Antunes, & MacBride-King, & Swettenham, 2004; ENVIRONICS, 2004; R J Sparks Consulting Inc., 2001). The emphasis on Canadian work experience creates a dilemma for internationally educated professionals who cannot obtain Canadian work experience in their profession when no one will hire them precisely because of a lack of Canadian work experience. In some professions, such as engineering and medicine, prospective employees must have one year of Canadian work experience before they can apply for a license. This situation is intensified as there is no coordinated approach between regulatory bodies and industry to provide direct experience for individuals to apply for a license (AIPSO et al., 2001). Inversely, the reasoning behind “lack of Canadian work experience” represents the devaluation of international experience. Presently there is such an emphasis on equating international experience with Canadian experience that the inherent value and worth of work experience gained in other countries is discounted. Such a discriminatory practice ultimately privileges Canadian work experience over international experience.

According to some employers and human resource managers, Canadian work experience is seen as proof of language and communication skills, an ability to function in the business culture and knowledge of Canadian laws, such as codes of ethics, legislative requirements, employment standards, organizational structures and protocols for communication (ENVIRONICS, 2004; Ontario Regulators for Access, 2003). The limited number of on-the-job placements, potential employer distrust of work experience outside Canada and reduced networking opportunities have been identified by licensing bodies as barriers faced by international educated professionals to obtaining the work experience that they need in order to get licensed (Ontario Regulators for Access, 2003).

According to some employers, language issues, in terms of comprehension, writing and comprehensibility, are a deterrent in hiring internationally educated professionals (ENVIRONICS, 2004; Rahi, 2003). The majority of respondents in a recent survey of Canadian employers and human resource managers who have employed immigrants and internationally educated professionals, said that the immigrant employees did not require any special training beyond what might be required by Canadian-born employees, but when special training was required, it was in the area of job specific language skills (ENVIRONICS, 2004). Employers and human resource managers listed language difficulties as arising in the interviewing process as well as the integration process into the organization. A PROMPT (2004c) study indicated that 79% of employer survey respondents stated that language barriers prevented them from hiring more foreign-educated professionals. New immigrants and prospective employees, however, identified having an accent or ‘unusual’ names as costing them work opportunities, specifically when phone recruiters are used by employers to weed out those applicants with accents from the job competition (Conference Board of Canada, 2004).

Considering social workers are increasingly working with people of diverse backgrounds who speak other languages, it seems fitting that linguistic diversity would be encouraged in the social work profession. A study of Canadian social workers and immigrant clients confirms that multilingual competency should be actively encouraged in social work education, yet those with linguistic abilities report being generally excluded from social work jobs (Russell & White, 2002).

### **Credential Recognition and Licensing (IESWs)**

Obtaining recognition for foreign credentials is a particular barrier experienced by new immigrants, partially due to the unfamiliarity of regulatory bodies, employers and academic institutions with foreign educational, training, technological and professional standards (Brouwer, 1999). Even when internationally educated professionals are able to access the process of credential recognition, there are significant weaknesses in the method of assessing their background on the part of accreditation bodies. Such weaknesses include limited to no credit given for training outside accredited programs, a lack of systematic structures on gathering information for assessment, subjective and ad hoc standards of assessment, a heavy reliance on personal information provided by informal sources as well as a wide-spread reluctance to grant credit for learning obtained outside of formal education programs (Task Force on Access to Professions and Trades in Ontario, 1989). According to PROMPT (2004b), part of this inconsistency stems from the limited reach of initiatives that are designed to support employers towards hiring foreign-educated professionals. Internationally educated social workers need to have their education credentials assessed by the Canadian Association of Social Work (CASW) and then apply to their provincial regulatory body to obtain a registered professional designation. If their educational institution is not included in the list of accredited institutions with the International Association of Schools of Social Work, their degree may be devalued or even unrecognized.

In many cases, internationally educated professionals are required to apply for a license in order to practise a regulated profession after their credentials have been officially recognized. In Ontario, there are now more internationally educated applicants to regulatory bodies than Canadian educated (PROMPT, 2004a). According to a study of internationally educated professionals, the process of applying for a license can be quite difficult and constitutes yet another barrier to accessing a profession (PROMPT, 2004a). According to Ontario regulatory bodies, the challenges regarding the assessment of foreign credentials include a lack of resources to provide individualized feedback to applicants, applicants' lack of knowledge about Canadian practices, and difficulty in obtaining and maintaining information about an education from an applicant's country of origin, training, and practices (Ontario Regulators For Access, 2003).

A study conducted by the National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women in Canada (1999) solicited the views of professional associations of nurses, teachers and social workers of the accreditation process. This study identified the need for further action on improving the accessibility and availability of information on licensing and certification services for immigrants. The social work licensure process itself has been challenged for being discriminatory because those without the necessary Canadian professional training and credentials and who are visible minorities, recent immigrants and from poorer backgrounds, are

routinely denied the right to employ the title “social worker” which in turn privileges workers who are able to meet the licensure criteria (Baines, 2004).

As with the accreditation process, there is a considerable lack of consistency and transparency amongst regulatory bodies for assessing credentials for the purposes of licensing (Ontario Regulators for Access, 2003; PROMPT, 2004a). Occupational regulatory bodies, such as the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers, have the decision-making authority with regards to who may be licensed without any specific provisions that must be followed when assessing internationally educated professionals. Furthermore, government legislation is largely interpreted by regulatory bodies themselves, adding another layer of inconsistency to the access of regulated professions (Alboim, 2002). A survey of Ontario professional regulatory bodies found that even though 87% have instituted specific access policies, practices or guidelines regarding internationally educated professionals, not all regulatory bodies perceived themselves as having a role in the improvement of access to professions for internationally educated professionals (Ontario Regulators for Access, 2003). On the contrary, many professional associations engage in “protectionism” by placing limitations on the licensing of internationally educated professionals to protect the self-interest of the membership (PROMPT, 2004a).

The costs associated with assessment represent another barrier for internationally educated professionals (AIPSO, CAPE, CASSA, CCNC, HDC, 2003; NARCC, 2002; PROMPT, 2004a; Rahi, 2003). That is, internationally educated professionals may first be assessed by a national body, just to have their credentials recognized, and then have to apply within the province for specific licensing (AIPSO, CAPE, CASSA, CCNC, HDC, 2003; PROMPT, 2004a). Obtaining credential recognition can take a long time, leaving the applicant in a state of limbo where they are unable to utilize their skills (NARCC, 2002; PROMPT, 2004a). The process of obtaining accreditation is further complicated when internationally educated professionals accept a job outside of their field for survival purposes and the resulting time away from their profession is used against them when attempting to obtain accreditation (R J Sparks Consulting Inc., 2001). Another unsupportive feature is the lack of accountability within the application process whereby appeal mechanisms for certain decisions and denial of a license are either insufficient or nonexistent (Azuh, 1998; PROMPT, 2004a). Furthermore, there is limited financial assistance available to those applicants who require upgrading or specified training (Rahi, 2003).

### **Skill Underutilization and Devaluation (IESWs)**

The combined effects of the barriers discussed above result in an overall underutilization, devaluation and deskilling of internationally educated visible minority professionals in Canada. Specifically, immigrants who qualify as skilled workers receive lower returns for education regardless of where their education was obtained (Alboim et al., 2005; Anisef, Sweet & Frempong, 2004; Aydemir & Skuterud, 2004; Reitz, 2001). Specifically, the extent of skill underutilization is significantly greater for visible minority immigrants than for immigrants of European origins (Reitz, 2001). Alboim and colleagues (2005), for example, found in their analysis of the Statistics Canada’s Survey of Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities database that a foreign degree held by an immigrant of a visibility minority group is heavily discounted in Canada, for reasons related to differences in the type and quality of schooling, an inability on the

part of Canadians to accurately judge the worth of a foreign degree and/or prejudice against foreign education in certain countries. When skilled worker immigrants who had already obtained a degree in a foreign country obtained another degree in Canada, they received a much higher return for their education, indicating a greater value associated with a Canadian degree and education. According to Aydemir and Skuterud (2004), internationally educated professionals from Eastern countries have experienced such a strong deterioration in return for their foreign education and credentials as to render them essentially worthless in Canada.

## **Discrimination in the Workplace**

Discrimination in the workplace is a common experience among Canadian and internationally educated visible minorities (Kunz et al., 2000). Visible minorities have reported that it is difficult to advance in the workplace and that racial discrimination is most likely to take place in the higher levels of an organization, where they are under-represented in management positions (Kunz et al., 2000; Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2000). A recent study on the diversity climate of human service organizations in the United States found that the majority of agencies have a client population of over two-thirds visible minorities, but predominantly White management and staff (Hyde & Hopkins, 2004). Ethno-racial minority social workers tend to be frontline staff who are expected to work with clients of the same background, but have little power or status within the organization. Only a minority of agencies exhibited a racial or gender balance in management, staff and client populations and less than half of the agencies had implemented an affirmative action plan. As a result visible minorities often experience lower salaries, fewer opportunities for advancement, ghettoization into less desirable jobs such as part-time contract positions and less access to more prestigious social work jobs such as hospital social work, family counselling, and supervisory or management positions. Racial discrimination is, in other words, one of the main causes of skill underutilization of foreign-educated professionals according to Reitz (2004).

Mechanisms that systemically perpetuate such discrimination within organizations include processes of seniority, entitlement, inflexible systems, bona fide job requirements, limited advertising, unfair communication systems and a so-called corporate culture fit (Kanee & Silvera, 2004). Systemic racial discrimination, which manifests itself in the organizational structures and processes of an organization, can be difficult to identify as it involves informal social processes and practices (Beck et al., 2002). Another difficulty in addressing racial discrimination is that it is commonly believed that racism no longer exists in Canada, making discrimination more likely to appear non-existent (Beck et al., 2002). In addition, Kuntz and colleagues (2000) found that most companies usually abide by their employment equity policies, but that through informal cliques, racial minorities are excluded from opportunities of promotion. Anti-discriminatory policies were less likely to be in place in health and mental health agencies than community agencies. Agencies that had a mission, vision and goals that explicitly stated a commitment to promoting a diversity climate were much more likely to realize that goal. Hyde & Hopkins (2004) concluded that there is a gap between the need for robust diversity climates in organizations and the actual work being done to develop and maintain agencies that actively pursue and embrace diversity.

## **Impact of Discrimination in the Workplace**

The experience of workplace discrimination and unequal access to gainful employment places visible minorities at a higher risk for physical and mental health issues as they are faced with a variety of stressors including the threat of poverty due to being deskilled (Antunes et al., 2004; Canadian Task Force on Mental-Health Issues, 1988; Ng, Wilkins, Gendron & Berthelot, 2005). In fact, recent immigrants from non-European countries are twice as likely as the Canadian-born population to report a deterioration in health over an eight-year period, even though they arrive being in better than average health than the average Canadian (Ng et al., 2005).

Apart from impacting individual's lives, immigrant settlement, social cohesion, and the economy are also affected by such trends and discriminatory practices (AIPSO et al., 2003; Bloom & Grant, 2001; Cernetig & Keung, 2005; James, 2005a; Reitz, 2005). When ethnic or racial status remains correlated with economic success over extended periods of time, inter-group relations are bound to become a divisive issue in any given society (Reitz, 2004). The estimated cost to the Canadian economy each year because of unrecognized qualifications and skill underutilization ranges from around \$2 billion to up to between \$4.1 and \$5.9 billion annually (Bloom & Grant, 2001; Reitz, 2004). There is also a fear that highly skilled internationally educated professionals will cease coming to Canada if Canada continues to deny immigrants the opportunity to reach their full potential. Canada is also experiencing a so-called brain drain of internationally and Canadian educated professionals who are relocating to other countries or returning to their home countries where they have better opportunities for advancement (Cernetig & Keung, 2005; James, 2005a). Indeed, Canadian economists have warned that if Canada does not become more hospitable to foreign-educated professionals, it will be "squeezed out" in a global fight for skilled immigrants (James, 2005b).

## **Systemic Discrimination and the Need for an Integrated Anti-Racism Approach**

An analysis of the preceding barriers and struggles encountered by internationally and domestically educated visible minority professionals supports the view that systemic discrimination and racism plays a major role in such experiences. Many researchers (Agocs & Michael, 2001; Baines, 2002; Kunz et al., 2000; Reitz & Sklar, 1997; Teelucksingh & Galabuzi, 2005). Teelucksingh and Galabuzi (2005) stress that the disproportionate rates of visible minorities in the labour market and upper management positions regardless of level of education have their roots in racial discrimination that manifest in terms of economic discrimination and exclusionary discrimination.

The connection between workplace and settlement issues is often overlooked, and discussions about labour market integration fail to lead to a discussion of settlement needs and vice versa. An exploratory study of the settlement needs of employed newcomers illustrates that indeed labor market integration cannot occur if settlement needs are not being met (R. J. Sparks Consulting Inc., 2001). When these needs are not addressed, labour market integration becomes more difficult. At the level of policy and services to immigrants these two issues continue to be dealt with separately (D'Alessandro, 2004; James, 2005a).

The barriers posed to racial minorities outlined above are furthermore unlawful under the governing provincial, territorial, and federal human rights legislation as well as under section

15(1) of the Charter (Cornish, et al., 2000). The National Anti-Racism Council of Canada (NARCC) (2002) argues that the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, designed to protect people from discrimination, has actually become a barrier to obtaining justice for people experiencing racial discrimination. According to the federal Employment Equity Act, for example, employers under federal jurisdiction must ensure that women, visible minorities, Aboriginal people and the disabled are included in their recruiting and promotion practices, and that any barriers to such access are removed (Department of Justice Canada, 1995; Statistics Canada, 2005). NARCC (2002), however, argues that there are serious limitations to the Act which introduce particular problems for visible minorities. Specifically, the Act applies solely to larger corporations, federally regulated industries, and governmental employers. It does not cover private or provincial organizations and does not monitor the application of employment equity principles at a provincial level. This has an enormous impact, as for example, Ontario witnessed its employment equity legislation repealed by the Conservative Government in the 1990s despite representing one of Canada's largest and most racially diverse provinces. Another challenge is those provinces that have employment equity policies and legislation do not necessarily have a clear method of its enforcement or accountability structures (NARCC, 2002). In effect, individual organizations decide whether or not to implement and enforce an employment equity policy.

Others have argued that a lack of understanding of equity programs has resulted in the devaluation of the people who benefit from them, particularly in the eyes of colleagues and supervisors who erroneously assume visible minorities are only hired based on their skin colour and not on their merit (Kunz; Milan & Schetagne, 2000; Conference Board of Canada, 2004). In an attempt to challenge some of the myths surrounding employment equity, the federal government produced a publication called "Employment Equity - Myths and Realities" (Social Development Canada, n.d.). Despite a decade of experience with employment equity, systemic racism and discrimination remain deeply embedded within the culture of many organizations (Agocs & Michael, 2001).

Thus, a shift towards targeting the educational institutions, employers and accreditation bodies in terms of equitably facilitating the integration of internationally educated professionals' skills is needed in current labour market strategies, programs and policies (Centre for Research and Education and Human Services, 2005). In terms of internationally trained professionals systemic discrimination is occurring in two main areas: on the level of service provision where settlement services aim primarily at meeting basic needs, and with labour market integration strategies and initiatives. Internationally educated professionals are required to negotiate two separate systems and face systemic discrimination in both. What is needed is an integration of the two systems in terms of service provision with the explicit goal of eliminating the systemic discrimination that exists in both.

## **Existing Initiatives**

Federal, provincial, and territorial ministers agree on the necessity and benefit of attracting skilled immigrants and fully integrating them into the labour market as a key strategy for addressing Canada's demographic changes and labour market needs (Canadian Intergovernmental Conference Secretariat, 2004). For example, Bill C-11, the Immigrant and Refugee Protection Act, includes a section specific to internationally educated professionals. An

objective included in Section 3 states that the federal government should, “work in cooperation with the provinces to secure better recognition of the foreign credentials of permanent residents and their more rapid integration into society.” In fact, there are numerous initiatives on the parts of internationally educated professionals’ associations and lobby groups, as well as numerous government initiatives that aim to improve the situation of internationally and Canadian-educated professionals.

## **Government Initiatives**

Federal, provincial and territorial ministers have openly agreed upon developing a national immigration framework to improve the integration of internationally educated professionals into the workforce (Canadian Intergovernmental Conference Secretariat, 2004). Recent government initiatives include, for example, an initiative by the federal government in partnership with the Ontario government where over \$3 million were dedicated to enhanced language training for up to 20,000 new internationally educated workers on an annual basis (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2005). Another initiative is the federal government’s action plan to combat racism in Canada, which includes a commitment of \$56 million over five years (Department of Canadian Heritage, 2005). Specifics of the action plan include a commitment to collaborate with employers, unions and other stakeholders to identify systemic barriers in the workplace and to support members of visible minority communities to facilitate the process of foreign credential recognition. Human Resources and Skills Development Canada will receive \$13 million from the allocated funds towards reducing discrimination in the workplace and eliminating barriers to jobs and promotions. CIC and HRSDC have identified key tasks to improve outcomes for immigrants - improve the processes for recognition of foreign credentials, implement Enhanced Language Training and Bridge-to-Work initiatives, provide more up-to-date and targeted labour market information and invest in targeted research. The Labour Program will implement a “Racism-Free Workplace Strategy” and work closely with CIC on issues such as inclusion in the workplace and community, the business case for diversity and measures to better integrate visible minorities, new immigrants and Aboriginal people into the labour market. However, the limited funding and central focus on federal agencies as targets of this initiative may severely limit the potential impact the program may have. The report also does not address other factors that perpetuate systemic discrimination and racism in Canada, such as providing status to undocumented workers, lack of protection for certain groups of workers, the vast majority of whom are visible workers, the class bias in the immigration selection process, and Security Certificates which have resulted in racial profiling and deportations to known situations of torture and/or persecution.

Some initiatives on the municipal level include Toronto Access and Equity grants which are made available to certain organizations for building their capacity to become more inclusive (City of Toronto, 2005).

## **Community-based Initiatives**

An initiative supported by the Access Alliance Multicultural Community Health Centre is the Internationally Educated Social Workers Network which is a self-sustaining network made up of internationally educated social workers. Over 325 network members meet on a bi-monthly

basis at the Centre for learning and networking opportunities, discussing issues relevant to the sector, and advocating for culturally responsive services. The network also sponsors forums with guest speakers such as representatives from the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers, managers from mainstream social work agencies, and internationally educated social workers who have found Canadian social work employment, who share their experiences or tips on finding employment.

### **Internship Programs**

“Career Bridge” is funded by the Ontario provincial government and offers 150 internships in an attempt to address the barriers posed by Canadian employers’ common requirement for Canadian work experience. While internships have proven to be a successful way for newcomers to gain on-the-job experience and subsequently employment in their professions, there is generally a shortage of internship opportunities (James, 2005b) and a high demand of internationally educated professionals wanting access to the program.

### **Bridging Programs**

Bridging programs are one way for internationally educated professionals to gain Canadian work experience, develop networks and fill some of the “gaps” in between their qualifications and requirements for Canadian practice (Alboim, 2002). Bridging programs can provide the opportunity for internationally educated professionals to obtain occupation-specific language skills, upgrade professional skills through on-the-job training and courses, and gain knowledge about Canadian workplace practices. However, in order to make such programs effective and accessible, “targeted” versus “ad hoc” bridging programs are needed that would be developed in partnership with occupations in a systematic way (Alboim, 2002).

The Ontario Government, for example, recently released a progress report of its initiatives that assist internationally educated professionals, including an investment of \$1 million over a three-year period to develop and implement a bridge training program for internationally educated social workers through Ryerson University and the Access Alliance Multicultural Community Health Centre (Government of Ontario, 2005). The School of Continuing Education, in collaboration with the School of Social Work at Ryerson University in Toronto, offers a “Bridging to Employment and Registration” program to assist internationally educated social work professionals who want to work as social workers in Canada. This program offers courses on social work language, culture and practice in Canada, mentorship opportunities, as well as a work placement.

### **Mentoring Programs**

Mentoring projects link internationally educated professionals with Canadian professionals in the same profession, to help them navigate the system, obtain contacts and obtain exposure to the Canadian workplace through job shadowing (Alboim, 2002). Mentoring has been identified as an essential component in the professional growth of internationally educated visible minority professionals (Conference Board of Canada, 2004). Mentoring programs can assist in labour market integration by providing newcomers with direct access to the unadvertised job market, the development of contacts, networks and exposure to ‘Canadian’

workplace practices. Like bridging programs, mentoring programs are however only effective if they are implemented in a systematic way with government funding for recruitment, training, orientation, matching and supervision of mentors (Alboim, 2002).

The Social Work Mentoring Program in Toronto is a pilot program that matches internationally educated social workers with social workers currently working in the field in Toronto. Partners of this project include Access Alliance Multicultural Community Health Centre, the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) and St. Michael's Hospital's "Hospital Mentors for Foreign-educated Professionals Project Inner City Health Program". By matching internationally educated social worker protégés with social work mentors working in a Canadian social work capacity, the program aims to increase the protégés' networking capabilities and expose internationally educated social workers to working in a Canadian social work environment. The objectives of the program are therefore two-fold: 1) to assist internationally educated social workers in learning about the Canadian social work field, and 2) to provide a mutual learning endeavour for both social work professionals.

## **Internet**

There has been an attempt to improve the "Going to Canada" internet portal by including more up-to-date information on the labour market, the educational system and Canadian society in general, as well as providing tools to allow immigrants to assess their language abilities and credentials before coming to Canada. The "Work Destinations" web site also provides information about the regulated trades and professions in Canada, with links to the various regulatory bodies. The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities in Ontario has developed e-fact sheets and career maps for a number of specific professions, which provide information for newcomers on the requirements for becoming licensed in their professions. Such fact-sheets, however, are not available for social workers.

## **Recommendations**

### **Expand programs to target stakeholders other than internationally educated professionals**

As previously mentioned, most of the existing initiatives, strategies, and programs adopt an individualistic approach by targeting solely individuals who seek employment rather than educational institutions, employers and accreditation bodies that fail to integrate the skills of internationally educated visible minority social workers. For example, employment initiatives could target employers to raise awareness about the benefits of hiring internationally educated professionals and encourage them to fully value the skills and experience that they bring to the workplace (Centre for Research and Education in Human Services, 2005; Triple S. Community-building, 2005).

## **Adopt an integrative anti-racism approach**

The difficulties and barriers to access experienced by Canadian and internationally educated visible minority professionals tend to be conceptualized as individual or micro-level issues. The review of the literature suggests that these experiences must be re-conceptualized more accurately as part of systemic discrimination and racism that dominates the domestic labour market. In other words, systemic discrimination must be named as the overarching barrier that visible minorities are faced with regardless of where they have been educated or trained.

## **Increase accessible information provision**

With respect to the lack of accessible sources of information, participants in a study of internationally educated professionals in Ontario suggested that more information about the Canadian labour market be made available at the Government of Canada Visa offices around the world as well as on the Internet (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2002). Having clear and direct information on requirements for licensure and the appropriate regulatory bodies for prospective immigrants before they immigrate to Canada can help with integration as well (AIPSO et al., 2001; Alboim, 2002). ENVIRONICS (2004) also suggested providing employers with better information and communication programs about diversity, and communicating success stories.

## **Subsidized programs**

A survey of Canadian employers and human resource managers suggested a number of recommendations including subsidized language courses, integration programs, orientation sessions about hiring procedures and legalistic and cultural characteristics of Canada, job hunting skills training, apprenticeship and co-op programs (ENVIRONICS, 2004).

## **Develop a National Policy on Access to Professions and Trades**

The development of a National Policy on Access to Professions and Trades could address, among other things, inter-provincial harmonization of standards among regulatory bodies and the application of these standards to assessments of foreign credentials, as well as outline the roles and responsibilities of regulatory bodies in regards to facilitating the process of obtaining recognition (AIPSO, et al., 2003). The adequate standardization of educational credentials by developing better databanks could minimize the risk of under-evaluation of foreign academic credentials (Mata, 1999). Within such a policy, accountability measures could be introduced so that people can have some process of challenging a denial of accreditation.

PROMPT (2004a) furthermore suggests that regulatory bodies assess an applicant's credentials without regard to their country of training, socioeconomic status or employment status, and without regard to labour market demands. They also recommend accountability measures be put in place to ensure that the registration process is carried out in an equitable way. To meet these ends, they suggest that all regulatory bodies be required by legislation to

undertake regulatory audits that result in equity action plans, with annual equity reports provided to the public. Cornish et al., (2000) argue for a systemic solution, such as the implementation of a licensing equity plan by regulatory and licensing bodies and the implementation of employment equity plans by employers to effectively challenge discriminatory barriers.

### **Develop a concrete plan of action for Section 3 of Bill C-11**

Although Bill C-11, or the Immigrant and Refugee Protection Act, includes a section specific to internationally educated professionals, there is not a concrete plan of action outlined to address these barriers or accountability measures presented to ensure that the proposed changes occur.

### **Enhance coordination among all government levels**

There is an overall lack of coordination of government initiatives regarding settlement and labour market integration at all levels of government - federal, provincial and municipal (Reitz, 2004). This has resulted in a disconnect between immigration policy and settlement as the federal government controls the immigration process, the provinces control the licensing and there is little communication between the two levels of government. (James, 2005a; Lateline News, 2004). Coordination of efforts between the federal and provincial governments in terms of specific academic credential assessment services could play a formal role in helping federal government officers determine the educational equivalencies of applicants (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2002). A policy outlining a national strategy to facilitate and coordinate the integration of internationally educated professionals into the labour market, which includes the coordination of initiatives of different levels of government, with employers, regulatory bodies and general settlement services is needed (Mata, 1999; PROMPT, 2004c).

The Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration (2003) recommends providing funding for LINC training programs that are specifically geared toward finding employment, creating a federal – provincial – territorial working group to move as quickly as possible on the issue of credential recognition, establishing a CIC office that facilitates professional and trade assessments and accreditation for immigrants, and providing greater support and assistance to foreign-educated workers through loan and internship programs.

### **Creating Diverse Organizations: Organizational Change**

Different sectors of the labour market are increasingly recognizing the critical need to address issues of diversity within their organizations, for both ethical and practical reasons (Buchanan & O'Neill, 2001). Organizations are realizing that to be connected with the wider public, they need to be reflective of Canada's increasingly diverse population. In an attempt to create more diversity and inclusivity, many human services and private organizations have accepted to undergo organizational change (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2002; Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition, 2004).

The Conference Board of Canada (2005) recently published a guide for employers, outlining how to maximize the potential of visible minority employees, from recruitment to promotion, and how to create a culture of inclusion within the organization. A comprehensive survey of the Canadian business community outlined three pillars for a successful workplace diversity action plan; direction from the CEO or company head to lead the equity/diversity plan and process, the incorporation of equity initiatives into a well-planned strategy and perseverance to continually refine and assess diversity and equity measures (Merchant, 2004). Not only do the barriers found in the structures and systems of organizations need to be addressed, but also the overall culture of the organization must be included in organizational change – in a way that values people’s diversity and integrates their skills and experiences into the organization (Buchanan & O’Neill, 2001).

The literature on culturally competent organizational change highlights several key factors that need to be considered in order for efforts to have the most potential for success. A necessary component of successful change is that race and ethnicity are not simply added into existing organizational routines, policies and procedures, but integrated fully into all aspects of the organization in such a way to redistribute power and fully embrace and integrate diversity in all aspects of functioning (Baines, 2002; Canadian Mental Health Association, 2002; Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition, 2004). Adopting a multicultural or diversity policy with the goal of bringing about real organizational transformation requires a strong implementation strategy and commitment from all levels of the organization (Creegan et al., 2003). A culturally inclusive organization at minimum needs the staffing, management and leadership that is reflective of the diversity of the community it serves (Nybell & Grey, 2004). The diversity strategy needs to be well articulated with accountability structures in place to support change (The Conference Board of Canada, 2005) and with policies that clearly identify the organization’s commitment to anti-discrimination and inclusivity (Kanee & Silvera, 2004). Workplace mandates, policies, rules and procedures that can create an uneven playing field by blocking minority groups from full participation in organizations need to be directly addressed to create inclusive organizations (Buchanan & O’Neill, 2001).

While these diversity initiatives are useful they may not address the systemic barriers faced by internationally educated professionals. Even though numerous reports have been produced outlining very specific recommendations for organizations to address these barriers, these recommendations are not appearing in organizational change reports.

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