

Op-Ed – Relieving the Headache

The complexity of intergovernmental relationships in Canada is enough to give even the most senior bureaucrat a headache. These headaches are all too frequent for the complexities involved with credential recognition of foreign trained professionals.

The barriers faced by foreign trained professionals are well documented. Policy challenges for this file range from complex immigration processes to difficulty having credentials verified in order to access the labour market to leveraging trade relationships through international agreements like the CETA. Labour mobility is the common thread shared by each of these policy challenges. Unfortunately, these policy challenges also share an annoying headache.

Before tackling these serious policy challenges, let's try to ease the severity of the headache we face. Easier said than done? Perhaps. But let's give this a try.

How do we make it easier to recognize legitimate credentials and experience across Canada without compromising professional standards? A worthy question, certainly, but allow me to reframe the question with which policy-makers should wrestle. How do we make credential mobility easier for all Canadians? I offer a path forward to alleviate some of the symptoms of our headache.

The first symptom faced is the lack of political will and scarcity of resources dedicated to easing the challenges of labour mobility across Canada. I am not seeking to cast blame on certain governments, but rather to diagnose a problem. Too little progress has been made in achieving the goals set out in the Agreement on Internal Trade from 1990. Aspirations such as reducing interprovincial trade and mobility barriers have not been fully fulfilled. To treat this first symptom, the federal government needs to take leadership and identify mobility as a policy priority. Addressing mobility barriers is difficult work and will yield few headlines. However,

federal leadership and investment of significant resources is a necessary part of influencing change. If we admit we have a problem and seriously resolve to address it, we are off to a good start.

The second symptom faced lies in opposition across provincial governments and professional bodies. There are many valid reasons why stakeholders on this file may not be predisposed to supporting federal government involvement. However, leadership and stakeholder negotiation are vital. Harmonization of credential regulations and standards is not a simple task, specifically when there are so many actors involved. This second symptom may be the most difficult to overcome. Interprovincial tables are already well established and equipped to handle multi-stakeholder negotiations. For any future success, stakeholders on this file must align with the federal policy priority and commit to discussing the intricacies of changes.

The third symptom lies in a current lack of transparency. Current requirements can differ from province to province, often without clear information provided. The Pan-Canadian Framework for the Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Qualifications acknowledges this informational deficiency. To intelligently seek improved mobility across Canada, collection of information, requirements, and data are all necessary. Obtaining this information relies on good relationships between the many stakeholders involved. If nothing else, data collection and publication at least makes current standards and requirements more transparent for the current state of affairs. A little bit of fresh air can do wonders for improving one's symptoms.

Finally, the final symptom of our headache is rooted in the knowledge that we cannot expect to standardize credential regulations across all of Canada for all professions. Assumptions of universality or attempts to appeal to a lowest common denominator are sure to generate opposition. After all, many regulations and standards exist to protect public safety and there can

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be good reasons for differences from one jurisdiction to another. Any attempts to harmonize standards should therefore include a strong accommodation mechanism. Acceptance that there are cases of legitimate difference is critical. Again, the work required to achieve these goals is not glamorous. It will require case-by-case, jurisdiction-by-jurisdiction efforts to seek standardization where possible in the interest of improved Canadian mobility. If we can relax our assumptions of perfection, we are more likely to achieve our goals.

The Canadian federation is sick. It is not a debilitating disease but our headache reemerges every time we face a new policy challenge and reminds us that not all is well. Before we try to fix our immigration system or our labour market challenges or our complex trade relationships, perhaps we should first treat the symptoms of our headache?