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# The Recognition of Foreign Qualifications

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**Devinder Shory, MP**

*This article looks at an important issue facing new Canadians – the recognition of their foreign credentials.*



I have always said that whether you were born here, flew here or sailed here, Canada opens her arms to those who work hard and play by the rules. It is vitally important for our newcomers to integrate - but integration is a two way street. The ones who are here before must open their hearts to welcome newcomers as full partners in our society by addressing the issues like foreign qualifications recognition and tearing down barriers to success. And at the same time it also the newcomers' obligation to strive to be a part of society - whether it comes to wholeheartedly accepting Canadian values or getting involved in community work.

Before offering some views on the particular problem of recognizing foreign credentials I would like to explain a little bit about my background. I was born, raised and educated in India, and was a practicing lawyer there until coming to Canada in 1989. While working towards my goal of practicing law again, I did what many in my situation do. I took on other jobs to support my family.

I ran a video rental store and drove a taxi, and did whatever it took to get by. It took me until 1998 to finally become fully qualified and licensed to practice law in the province of Alberta. But I am one of lucky ones who reached their goal and much more. For every success story like mine there are multiple stories of

people still struggling to navigate through a confusing process of foreign qualifications recognition.

In my constituency, Calgary Northeast, I have a total of 48.5% of constituents who identify themselves as visible minorities, and 37% are immigrants to Canada. To break this down a little further and provide a deeper understanding of these numbers, the last published census indicated that in Calgary Northeast: 22.6% identified as South Asian; 11.1% as Punjabi; 6% as Chinese; 4.9% as Filipino; 3.3% as Southeast Asian; and 2.6% as Latin American. To feel the diversity of Canada you only have to drive through the neighbourhoods in my constituency and many others across Canada..

This pluralism provides some unique challenges but I think we need to remember that this is not something new to Canada, or even unique to our generation. In fact, free institutions and tolerance are the hallmarks of parliamentary democracies, and part of our British Commonwealth heritage. For centuries, Canadians have grappled with how to embrace diversity in a pragmatic and practical way, be it between British and French settlers, or Europeans and First Nations peoples. Even though the pluralism of yesterday does not look exactly like the pluralism of today, the goal is the same – to knit newcomers into the fabric of Canadian society and build bridges between immigrants and settled Canadians.

To achieve that goal, I feel language is a key first step to connecting newcomers to the communities. Without English or French, newcomers risk being locked out of Canadian society. They need to take initiative to learn, just as we need to make accommodations so they are able to do so. The same can be said for programs and agencies that assist job seekers newly arrived in Canada.

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*Devinder Shory represents Calgary Northeast in the House of Commons. This is a revised version of his presentation to the Ninth Canadian Seminar of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association held in Ottawa from October 16-22, 2011.*

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In October 2011 I organized a Newcomers Resource Expo. It featured a variety of booths and displays from agencies dedicated to helping newcomers. Some were Calgary-based, some Alberta-based, and some Federal. It was wonderful to be able to put so many newcomers in the same room along with those who provide resources. Sometimes it is as simple as making those connections happen in a tangible way. As the MP, I feel it is part of my obligation to my constituents.

In addition to these types of events, my office is open and accessible to the diverse nature of Calgary Northeast. At least one staff person in each of my offices in Calgary and Ottawa speaks multiple dialects including Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi, Pashto, Farsi, and of course English. We reach out not only to mainstream media, but to ethnic media as well. Maintaining these relationships is essential since the mode of delivery of information can differ greatly from one community to another. You really need to reach people where they are. And of course that also means providing that personal touch and showing up in person to support community-based groups and individuals who otherwise may not come into contact with “the system”.

Of all the barriers facing newcomers the one I feel most passionately about is under-employment or specifically, the challenge of having one’s foreign qualifications recognized in Canada.

***You know, some people say that the safest place to have a heart attack in Alberta might be the back seat of a taxi – chances are it’s a doctor driving.***

It is estimated Alberta has about 2,500 International Medical Graduates trying to become licensed doctors and a doctor shortage of around 1,100, and this is just one category of professional. We all know that we have a doctor shortage across Canada. While no one here is advocating lowering our standards, we have to admit that we have thousands of bright professionals eager to jump in and plug these gaps. Our government has made improvements. Through the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada we are funding initiatives to remove some of the red tape and make the process a clear one.

For example HRSDC Canada led a Framework called the Pan-Canadian project in conjunction with the provinces and territories. In 2010, the Pan-Canadian Framework achieved its goal, which was to let foreign skilled workers in 8 of the targeted occupations

(Architects, Engineers, Medical Laboratory Technologists, Occupational Therapists, Pharmacists, Physiotherapists, Registered Nurses and Financial Auditors and Accountants) know within 1 year of applying, whether their credentials are recognized or what additional courses they required in order to have their credentials recognized. Also, Canada’s Economic Action plan invested \$50 million to work with partners to improve foreign credentials.

These are concrete achievements but we want to do more. That is why our government is continuing to work on the issue of Foreign Qualifications Recognition, and the House Standing Committee on HRSDC is studying this issue right now. Through the committee, we plan to deliver recommendations on practical pathways to shorten the process of foreign qualifications recognition even further. We want to build on our successes because there is still more to do – we still have too many bright professionals ready to work and contribute who are waiting to have their credentials recognized.

It is imperative that we keep Canada competitive and attractive to foreign qualified professionals, not only for the purposes of immigration and integration, but for our future economic prosperity as well. It takes more than one MP, or the whole of the Federal Government to accomplish things on Foreign Qualifications Recognition. It takes a joint effort on the part of the Federal Government, the Provinces, Territories and the professional licensing authorities to work together on formulating clear pathways for professionals to navigate their way to the jobs we expect them to do. The alternative is bleak, for Canada and for the professionals, whose efforts are defeated.

Representing a pluralistic constituency means reaching out to all individuals and groups in the community for their ideas and perspectives. I do not believe in playing one group against another. And I am proud to say that my message does not change depending on who walks through my doors, or which local forum I am addressing.

Last but not the least, part of representing a pluralistic constituency is recognizing that Canadian citizenship is shared. It does not belong more to one set of people than another. Social cohesion works best when everyone has an equal share. Both governments and newcomers have a responsibility to level out the playing field here. And we need to continue to work with other governments, public institutions, and the private sector to address newcomers’ challenges and help them integrate successfully into the best country in the world.