

Governments To Fast-Track Assessment Process

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When Iranian-born Fariborz Birjandian came to Canada 21 years ago with a degree in management and maritime science, he quickly realized he had transferable skills that could be applied to several occupations.



Photo - Dean Bicknell, Calgary Herald

Iranian immigrant Fariborz Birjandian, executive director of the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society, welcomes the announcement of quicker assessments for foreign credentials, but has some reservations.

At the time, the process of foreign credential recognition was nearly non-existent compared with today and that process is now undergoing what the federal government says is another step to speed up the assessment of internationally trained immigrants.

Ottawa recently announced a plan to ensure newcomers to Canada in certain fields will know within one year whether their qualifications will be recognized by provincial and professional regulatory and accreditation bodies across Canada, working in conjunction with provincial officials to co-ordinate implementation of the new framework.

“We have to give these people hope to see light at the end of the tunnel,” says Birjandian, who is now the executive director of the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society (CCIS). “At least the federal government is trying to engage all other partners in a meaningful way. Hopefully, there will be some accountability around it.”

The Pan-Canadian Framework for the Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Qualifications sets an initial deadline of Dec. 31, 2010 to assess the first

round of eight occupations: architects, engineers, financial auditors and accountants, medical laboratory technologists, occupational therapists, pharmacists, physiotherapists and registered nurses. It's part of Ottawa's previously announced \$50-million plan to work with provincial and territorial ministers to address barriers to credential recognition.

“This framework complements initiatives such as the Action Plan for Faster Immigration, as they make our immigration system better meet the needs of our labour market,” says Jason Kenney, federal minister of citizenship, immigration and multiculturalism, in a news release.

During the next phase of implementation ending December 2012, the framework will expand to include dentists, engineering technicians, licensed practical nurses, medical radiation technologists, physicians and primary school teachers.

“Ensuring that foreign credentials and qualifications are assessed ... in a timely manner will enable newcomers to maximize their talents,” adds Diane Finley, minister of human resources and skills development.

Finley co-chaired the Forum of Labour Market Ministers and will work with her provincial counterparts and about 500 accreditation bodies, post-secondary institutions and other stakeholders to ensure smooth implementation.

Birjandian hopes the plan will address the length of time it can take to immigrate to Canada, which he says is often four or five years — delays that can cause highly sought-after workers to find their skills no longer needed upon arrival. At the start of the boom in Alberta, for example, welders were in high demand. By the time they were recruited and accredited in Canada, the recession took hold and many now find themselves working in menial jobs. Similar stories are heard from engineers.

“We think that if we deal with those (credential recognition) issues they have ... we're going to solve the problem, but at the end of the day, it's employers that accept the assessment or not,” says Birjandian. “If we don't address the numbers (of new immigrants), we're still going to be in the same situation where everybody will be qualified and certified in Canada, but supply and demand will tell us how many of them get jobs.”

Continued page 2...

Continued from page 1...

The Foreign Credentials Referral Office, established in May 2007, helps foreign-trained workers get the information and support services they need to speed up the process of credential recognition in Canada and before they arrive.

While Birjandian is encouraged by the recent announcement, he worries Canada's immigrant selection system, based on a points scale targeting specific occupations, will result in unneeded professionals as supply and demand shifts. "It's a rapidly-changing environment we're dealing with in the business community worldwide," he says.

CCIS helps new immigrants identify transferable skills that can be applied to occupations that utilize their skills to avoid highly trained newcomers working as taxi cab drivers or day labourers. The new framework is meant to improve pre-arrival services, timely assessments that are fair and eventually improved workforce participation.