

# TACKLING BRAIN WASTE:

## Strategies to Improve the Recognition of Immigrants' Foreign Qualifications

Madeleine Sumption  
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MIGRATION POLICY INSTITUTE



### Executive Summary

Foreign-trained professionals often encounter difficulties putting their skills and experience to good use in the host-country labor market. Barriers to practicing the profession in which they are trained can arise for several reasons. For example, local employers may wish to avoid the risks of hiring a candidate with unfamiliar qualifications and no local work experience. Immigrants may possess relevant occupational skills but lack the language proficiency a job requires. International differences in education, training, and skills learned on the job mean that immigrants may require additional training or work experience, but may have few options for filling skills deficits without starting their training again from scratch. And some occupations require licensing or registration, creating barriers to entry in the form of examinations, application fees, or supervised training requirements. The sheer complexity of licensing systems and the vast number of different agencies and government departments involved, meanwhile, leave room for confusion and make it difficult for governments to ensure that policies are implemented consistently.

Immigrant-receiving countries have introduced a wide range of policies to improve the recognition of foreign qualifications. Several of them focus on providing information — both to help employers understand the nature and content of foreign qualifications, and to help immigrants navigate the system and understand their options. In many countries there is still scope for improving these services. That said, employers' and regulators' tendency to discount the value of foreign qualifications does not only result from a lack of information. Foreign professionals, especially the newly arrived, are often *not* completely interchangeable with their locally trained counterparts. As a result, effectively demonstrating that their training meets local standards may not be enough; they may also require opportunities to fill knowledge deficits without prohibitive time and expense.

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Whether or not occupations are regulated, some immigrants require significant support to fill gaps in their skills, gain local work experience, and address other barriers to employment. A range of public and nonprofit programs has emerged to provide this support. Such programs — some providing valuable, individualized assistance — are often expensive and serve relatively small numbers. Experimentation with more innovative approaches to reducing costs of provision and participation is warranted; potential examples include the development of online training options, and low-cost student loans for immigrants funding their own retraining. More broadly, governments can also seek to make universal services such as public employment offices and adult education more flexible and more accessible, in order to accommodate people with nontraditional professional and education backgrounds.

Regulated occupations make up a minority of jobs in the labor market but they pose some particularly stubborn obstacles to foreign professionals, particularly in the health sector and for the self-employed. To address these barriers, some governments have reduced regulatory authorities' discretion to reject certain qualifications or candidates for registration. Policymakers in several countries have also pushed regulatory agencies to avoid an "all-or-nothing" approach to certifying foreign professionals, allowing partial or conditional registration that permits individuals to perform at least some activities within their occupation or to work under supervision while they wait to achieve full registration.

Voluntary cooperation among regulatory authorities in different countries has also been undertaken to speed up the registration process in several occupations, including engineering, architecture, and medicine. Cooperative agreements are based on the idea that countries may have equally high standards even if their certification processes are not exactly the same; in practice, most have taken place among small groupings of similar countries and thus only benefit a small share of foreign-trained professionals (the EU Professional Qualifications Directive is a significant and unusual exception.) Nonetheless, incremental progress has been made toward extending their scope, and several models now exist on which future agreements can build.