

# International Qualifications Assessment & Recognition (IQAR) In Nova Scotia

## Challenges and Solutions

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**isans** | Immigrant Services  
Association of Nova Scotia

## Executive Summary

For internationally-trained professionals who immigrate to Canada, qualifications assessment and recognition is a significant and complex barrier to employment. This paper aims to clarify some of that complexity by exploring the issue, defining terms, and identifying specific barriers. It examines legislation introduced in Nova Scotia to ensure fair registration practices and outlines the programs which ISIS offers to assist immigrants with these challenges. Finally, it highlights a unique collaborative approach to bringing about systemic change in regulated occupations. Developed by ISIS and in partnership with the province, profession-specific Multi-Stakeholder Work Groups bring together all relevant stakeholders who then work together to eliminate unnecessary barriers and, combine their efforts to streamline the process and provide effective supports. The paper concludes with a list of recommendations for moving forward

## The Issue

When immigrants make Nova Scotia their new home, they bring with them significant education, experience, knowledge, skills, positive personality traits and talents. This human capital has the potential to contribute tremendously to the economic development of the province. However, as both research and the experiential knowledge of the settlement sector can attest, too often this human capital is not fully utilized. One major reason for this frustrated potential is the challenge of international qualifications assessment and recognition (IQAR).

These are complex challenges requiring complex solutions. This brief paper will endeavour to shed some light on these challenges, as well as present some of the innovative programs and approaches which have been introduced in Nova Scotia. It will:

- begin by clarifying the sometimes confusing language and terminology related to IQAR
- outline what is needed to begin to address these challenges
- touch on legislation designed to provide a foundation for change
- examine the ISIS programs which support newcomers to overcome IQAR barriers
- explore the Multi-Stakeholder Work Group – a unique model of change which is leading to substantive progress in IQAR in the province
- make a number of recommendations for moving forward

## International Qualifications: More than a University Degree

### **Qualifications = Credentials + Competencies + Experience**

- **Credentials assessment** is the process of validating educational documents and providing a Canadian equivalency statement.
  - Every province outside the Atlantic region has a provincially mandated international credentials assessment service.
  - There is currently no international credentials service in the Atlantic region. However newcomers may send their documents for assessment to agencies in other provinces. The best source of information on international credentials assessment services is [www.cicic.ca](http://www.cicic.ca).

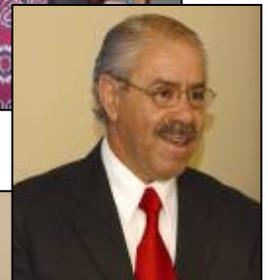
- If someone works in a regulated occupation, they should contact the regulatory body first to find out what they require for credentials assessment.
- Credentials assessment can be helpful for employers to understand international education better but it is not generally required for employment.
- A credentials assessment is required for immigration under certain federal programs. The assessment must be done by an agency designated by Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

### ***By law, occupations may be regulated or unregulated***

- Occupations are regulated if there is a need to protect the public interest.
- A regulated occupation requires a particular license or certification for practice.
- Self-regulated occupations are governed by professional regulatory authorities - e.g. Engineers Nova Scotia, College of Registered Nurses of Nova Scotia
- Some occupations are regulated by government - e.g. skilled trades, teachers
- In some occupations, (e.g. medical laboratory technology, law) there are national authorities which play a key role in assessment, although provincial licensure is still required for practice.

**Most regulated occupations start with a credentials assessment, but also require an assessment of competencies. This process is called “Recognizing Prior Learning” or RPL.**

- **Competency assessment** may take the form of written examinations, oral examinations, skills assessments, language tests, competency interviews, supervised work periods or other methods.
- Best practice competency assessment includes clearly identified competencies and an impartial process.
- The *method* used to assess competencies may be a barrier in itself:
  - The multiple choice exam format used for competency assessment in the skilled trades
  - The simulated examinations used for competency assessment in healthcare professions are an unfamiliar format for many internationally educated professionals.



### **The Needs of Internationally-Trained Professionals**

- Fair, transparent, accessible pathways to licensure
- Elimination of unnecessary barriers
- Clear, reliable information about pathways
- Customized assistance with navigating pathway and developing career plans
- Opportunities to engage with the profession & potential employers
- Access to gap training

- Supportive programs – e.g. cultural orientation, language, exam preparation, remediation, peer support, financial assistance, access to learning resources

## Legislation

### *Pan-Canadian Framework for the Assessment & Recognition of Foreign Qualifications*

Launched in 2009, the Framework establishes the principles of fairness, transparency, timeliness and consistency and provides a guide for governments across the country. An ad-hoc Foreign Qualifications Recognition Working Group supports the implementation of the Framework. While not legally-binding, the Framework is an expression of government commitment to addressing IQAR challenges. Refer to:

[http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/jobs/credential\\_recognition/foreign/framework.shtml](http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/jobs/credential_recognition/foreign/framework.shtml).

### *Fair Registration Practices Act (FRPA)*

In 2008, Nova Scotia joined Ontario, Quebec and Manitoba by passing legislation which requires that the registration practices of regulatory bodies are “transparent, objective, impartial and procedurally fair”. To review the Act, refer to: [http://nslegislature.ca/legc/bills/60th\\_2nd/3rd\\_read/b211.htm](http://nslegislature.ca/legc/bills/60th_2nd/3rd_read/b211.htm). The Nova Scotia Department of Labour & Advanced Education is responsible for ensuring that regulatory practices comply with the Act, with the FRPA Review Officer taking the lead. FRPA signals the strong commitment of the government of Nova Scotia towards ensuring effective workforce integration of internationally educated professionals and tradespersons. Additional information on FRPA is available at: <http://www.gov.ns.ca/lae/RplLabourMobility/FRP.asp>.

## Current Best Practices

In response to the barriers and gaps facing internationally-trained immigrants, ISIS has been a leader in developing and implementing programs and services to assist new professionals overcome IQAR challenges in Nova Scotia.

### *Employment Services to Immigrants*

The following is a list of sample tools & services which contribute to the successful integration of an internationally-trained professional in Nova Scotia:

- Pathways to licensure - visual flow charts which clearly illustrate the route(s) to certification in particular professions. The back page is a list of key resources.
- Career Pathway Loan Fund - a microcredit loan program to assist with the financial barriers related to assessment & gap training
- Profession-specific Orientation & Language programs (e.g. Orientation & Communications for Engineers; English for Healthcare Professionals; Online Orientation for Physicians)
- Professional Mentors - to welcome skilled newcomers to their professions, assist with networking, discuss trends & opportunities

- Profession-Specific Bridging Programs - ISIS' approach to bridging is customized, client centred and strategic, and includes study groups, clinical & communication skills workshops, observerships, resources and other initiatives

Other helpful programs include:

- Computer and technical skills training
- Pre-employment Workshops
- Practice Interviews
- Work Placement Program

### *Multi-Stakeholder Work Groups*

When ISIS began to work on IQAR issues, it didn't take long to realize that the challenges are not "owned" by the regulatory authorities alone. In order to make systemic change, and develop realistic and sustainable solutions, all the stakeholders involved needed to be at the table. On this basis, ISIS moved forward to provide leadership to the development of profession-specific Multi-Stakeholder Work Groups which meet regularly to address the challenges related to IQAR in the province. Unique to the province, these Work Groups include all stakeholders involved in the assessment, recognition and integration of internationally educated professionals and hence the stage is set for serious discussion and systemic change.

During the meetings and in the work done in the interim, barriers and gaps are identified, the pathways to licensure are reviewed and updated, information is shared, partnership opportunities are identified and implemented, barriers are eliminated and systemic changes are made. All participants are committed to ensuring that processes to licensure are fair, equitable and transparent, while upholding Canadian standards. Multi-Stakeholder Work Groups play a significant role in ensuring that internationally-trained professionals become contributing members to their profession in Nova Scotia, and this model for addressing IQAR has been recognized as a best practice both nationally and internationally. ISIS is now working closely with the NS Department of Labour & Advanced Education on this collaborative initiative.

### Active Multi-stakeholder Work Groups in NS

International Dental Professionals

International Medical Graduates

International Pharmacy Graduates

Internationally Trained Lawyers

Internationally Educated Nurses (RN & LPN)

Internationally Trained Construction Electricians

Internationally Educated Medical Laboratory Technologists

Internationally Educated Engineers & Engineering Technicians/Technologists

### Key Players at a Multi-Stakeholder Work Group

- Occupational regulatory authorities
- Professional associations
- Educational institutions
- Employers & Unions
- Government
- Associations of internationally educated professionals
- Immigrant settlement service providers
- Sector councils

### Concrete Results

Grounded in a spirit of collaboration, the Multi-Stakeholder Work Groups have inspired systemic change towards eliminating barriers to licensure in Nova Scotia. They facilitate the development of a collective vision, which then leads to concrete results. Here are just a few examples of progress made in three professions:



### Pharmacy

- The elimination of requirements for a hospital component of internship
- Development of Communications Skills Labs – a collaborative preparation program for clinical assessments and effective practice.
- International Pharmaceutical Graduates (IPGs) have the opportunity for Special Membership in the Pharmacy Association of Nova Scotia (PANS) – with access to professional liability insurance
- Creation of an annual award to honour a Canadian licensed pharmacist who has contributed significantly to the integration of internationally educated pharmacists

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## Medicine

- The establishment of the Immigrant IMG Clerkship Program
  - The creation of a Dalhousie Faculty position with designated responsibility for IMGs
  - Clinical Orientation for IMG Program – a collaboration between ISIS & the Dalhousie Faculty of Medicine
  - The development of a Family Medicine Clinical Observership Program with Doctors Nova Scotia
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## Engineering

- Orientation and Communication Skills for Engineers program is delivered by ISIS and recognized by Engineers NS Board of Examiners towards the requirement of Canadian experience
- The introduction of a competency interview as an assessment method for IEE with ten years of experience
- ENS welcomes engineers by encouraging them to join professional committees, highlighting their experiences in the professional journal etc.
- The development & piloting of an innovative worksite-based competency assessment program. Partners include ISIS, Engineers NS, Engineers Canada and local engineering firms.

## Moving Forward

While substantial progress has been made, there is still work to be done. Here are some of ISIS' recommendations for moving forward:

- Continue working to ensure that pathways to licensure are fair, equitable and transparent
- Work with stakeholders in other regulated occupations even if immigration numbers do not merit establishing work groups
- Identify and eliminate unnecessary barriers
- Produce professional orientation programs (classroom & distance/online) for immigrants both pre and post landing
- Develop and implement competency assessments which are fair, timely and rigorous, and whenever possible, are completed in a worksite setting
- Introduce increased opportunities for "gap", short term and professional training to address any deficiencies
- Encourage professions and trades to welcome internationally educated newcomers, and assist them with licensure processes
- Develop opportunities for observerships, mentoring and other mechanisms for enabling newcomers to gain access to learning about how their occupations are practiced in Canada
- Establish a provincially mandated international credentials assessment service
- Research alternative careers which will provide skilled newcomers the chance to apply their skills in positions commensurate with their qualifications

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