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Multi-stakeholder Work Groups – Making Systemic Change in Regulated Occupations

by Jan Sheppard Kucher

Stories of physicians driving taxi cabs and engineers working in fast food outlets are all too well known and are now widely recognized as a discouraging waste of talent and a loss for both the individual and the country. The complex barriers related to international qualifications assessment and recognition (IQAR), particularly in the regulated professions and trades, have also been well documented. Provinces across the country continue to grapple with these challenges so that skilled newcomers to Canada may enter their occupations of choice as readily and efficiently as possible, while still protecting the public interest by maintaining solid standards of practice. However, while identifying the frustrations and barriers is relatively easy, finding solutions is much more challenging.

Clearly, the search for solutions is underway. National initiatives for change such as Engineers Canada's project, "From Consideration to Integration"¹ have set the stage for progress at the provincial level. And of course, given the division of federal/provincial responsibilities set down back in 1867, most of the change must take place at the provincial level. However, no one player "owns" the problem. In Nova Scotia, as elsewhere, the IQAR dilemma has lead to the development of a model for change which involves the formation of profession-specific multi-stakeholder work groups for the purpose of addressing IQAR issues and developing practical and realistic solutions.

As the name suggest – these are active working groups.
Their purposes are to:

- identify barriers, issues and gaps

- provide a forum for the exchange of information about existing processes and programs
- provide critical feedback on processes and programs
- plan new directions
- facilitate collaboration and partnership; avoid program duplication
- create and develop innovative, workable solutions

Currently, there are Multi-stakeholder work groups in the fields of Medicine, Pharmacy, Engineering, Teaching, Nursing and the Skilled Trades.

While the specific representatives on each group, as well as their roles, vary according to the structure and culture of the profession – the line-up is essentially the same. Each work group involves key stakeholders including:

- Professional Association or Occupational Regulatory Body
- Educational Institution – university, college, continuing education
- Government – the provincial Office of Immigration and other departments as relevant
- Employer representatives
- Representatives of associations of internationally educated professionals
- Immigrant serving agencies
- Language program providers
- Others as appropriate

The involvement of all stakeholders is critical to the success of this model for systemic change. Often, responsibility for making changes is placed only on the shoulders of the regulatory bodies but this will not result in the development of solid solutions.

Educational institutions must be involved for they are the providers of the "gap" training or longer term training opportunities which may be needed. Governments may be regulators themselves and also play a crucial leadership and funding role. Immigrant serving agencies and language providers must be at the table too. They have the front line expertise and knowledge of the challenges faced by internationally educated professionals, and most frequently, are the organizations which advise newcomers and develop bridging programs. If at all possible, employer and union partners can contribute to the richness of the discussion and participate actively in developing solutions. In occupations such as teaching, the involvement of the union is essential. In fields such as pharmacy, skills shortages mean that employers are often the strongest agents for change. And finally, the voice of internationally educated professionals must also be heard loud and strong at these Multi-stakeholder tables².

What we have discovered in Nova Scotia is that when the will exists and the commitment is shared, the potential for change is great. What we have also learned is that, while smaller provinces face the disadvantage of smaller numbers, our size can also be an

advantage. Nova Scotia's smaller size means that key stakeholders may be more readily identified, we can be more nimble in assembling these groups, meetings are manageable and logistics simple. Finally, and perhaps most important, efforts to develop the positive partnerships required, are frequently grounded in already well established working relationships.

The question of leadership is pivotal to the development of a multi-stakeholder work group and we have learned that leadership may come from a variety of directions. In NS, the NGO sector³ has the credibility and respect to play a leadership role – either directly or through encouraging other stakeholders to lead. The leadership of each multi-stakeholder group is a little different. The IMG Work Group is chaired by the Associate Dean of Continuing Medical Education at Dalhousie University⁴, the IPG Work Group is chaired by the non-regulatory Professional Association of Pharmacists⁵, and the IEE Work Group is co-chaired by Engineers Nova Scotia⁶ and MISA. It took a few months of meetings to build both the trust and a shared vision – and then real progress was made. We have seen the multi-stakeholder work groups result in concrete changes including substantive and improved changes to licensure pathways, and the introduction of innovative programming done in partnership.

Resources:

¹Engineers Canada
www.engineerscanada.ca/fc2i

²www.ietp-ns.ca

³Metropolitan Immigrant Settlement Association (MISA)
www.misa.ns.ca AND

Halifax Immigrant Learning Centre (HILC)
www.hilc.ns.ca

⁴Dalhousie University, Faculty of Medicine, Continuing Medical Education
<http://cme.medicine.dal.ca>

⁵Pharmacists Association of Nova Scotia (PANS)
www.pans.ns.ca

⁶Engineers Nova Scotia
www.engineersnovascotia.ca

Jan Sheppard Kutcher has worked for the Metropolitan Immigrant Settlement Association (MISA) in Halifax, Nova Scotia since 1997. Jan and her team deliver an intensive and strategic program of services to assist newcomers to integrate into the workforce in Nova Scotia. She has a keen interest in issues related to international

qualifications assessment and recognition, and in developing innovative approaches to the workforce integration of newcomers in smaller provinces. She has participated on numerous conferences and forums across the country and is a co-author of Work in Nova Scotia (WINS): a bridging program for newcomers. Her university education includes a BA, B.Ed., MA and MSW. Prior to working in the settlement sector, Jan worked in the fields of employment equity, career counselling, adult literacy and ESL education.