



A Foreign Qualification Recognition Plan for Alberta

Interim Report

Government of Alberta ■

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Interim Report on Progress

May 2009

Issue

A Foreign Qualification Recognition Plan for Alberta (FQR Plan) was announced on November 7, 2008 to help achieve the desired outcome that immigrants will have the opportunity to fully use their education, skills and work experience for the benefit of themselves and the Alberta economy. This report highlights key achievements and implementation progress to the end of May 2009, as well as next steps.

Background

It is predicted that due to a declining birthrate and an aging population, immigration will account for all of the net labour market growth in Canada by 2011.¹ As a result, immigration remains an essential strategy to address Alberta's current and future labour market needs.

Each year, thousands of immigrants from all over the world choose to come to Alberta to work and live. They bring with them a wealth of knowledge, skills and experience that contribute to our workforce and add to the cultural diversity of our province.

However, despite the skills and expertise that newcomers bring, many skilled immigrants have reported challenges in integrating into the Alberta labour market, including:

- Underemployment and over-qualification;
- Employment unrelated to their previous education; and/or
- Difficulties in having their qualifications recognized.

Foreign Qualification Recognition (FQR) is the process of verifying that the education, skills and job experience obtained in another country meet the standards established for Canadian workers.

In May 2007, the Government of Alberta led a series of roundtable discussions across the province with key stakeholder groups to discuss challenges related to FQR. Groups represented at these consultations included: immigrants, immigrant-serving agencies, employers, professional regulatory organizations (PROs) and educational institutions.

¹ *The Daily*, 2008: "Canada's immigrant labour market," Statistics Canada.

Stakeholders identified five key challenges:

1. The diversity and number of decision makers – in Alberta, there are over 50 PROs, more than 25 educational institutions and numerous employers and industry councils, each with their own FQR processes;
2. A lack of information or capacity for decision makers to conduct fair and timely assessments;
3. A broader range of immigrant source countries than in the past, many with non-English educational systems that may not be well understood by Alberta decision makers;
4. Stakeholder inconsistency in the assessment and recognition of foreign credentials; and,
5. A general lack of an open, transparent and accountable FQR process.

The FQR Plan

To address these challenges, *A Foreign Qualification Recognition Plan for Alberta* was developed as a strategic initiative intended to encourage systemic improvements to FQR processes.

The FQR Plan is a government-wide initiative that supports and enhances other key government strategies including *Building and Educating Tomorrow's Workforce*, the *Health Workforce Action Plan* and *Supporting Immigrants and Immigration to Alberta*. In addition, the Plan complements ongoing developments at the national level such as the establishment of a Pan-Canadian Framework for the Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Qualifications² and implementation of full labour mobility as part of the *Agreement on Internal Trade*.

Alberta's Plan emphasizes a collaborative approach to improving and enhancing FQR processes in the province, and this has positioned the province to play a leadership role in this area both in the Canadian context and internationally. While other jurisdictions such as Ontario and Manitoba have taken legislative approaches mandating PROs to be fairer and more accountable, Alberta's approach gives stakeholders ownership over the process, thereby encouraging a cycle of continuous improvement. The Plan focuses on three strategic areas, each intended to contribute to this cycle. These include:

² Alberta is co-chair of the ad-hoc federal, provincial, territorial (FPT) working group developing the Pan-Canadian FQR Framework.

1. *Specialized Information*: To ensure that immigrants have access to current, accurate and understandable information about the steps they need to go through to obtain recognition of their foreign credentials.
2. *Assessment Standards and Resources*: To increase the transparency, fairness and accountability of FQR processes.
3. *Bridging the Gaps*: To make available appropriate, timely and accessible programs and services to bridge gaps between the qualifications presented by immigrants and the standards required to enter the workplace, PROs and educational institutions.

Alberta Government's Role and Commitments:

While it is acknowledged that the Government of Alberta is not a key FQR “decision maker”³, stakeholders agree that government has leadership and coordinating roles to play. By way of the FQR Plan, government has committed to:

- Establish a FQR Innovation Fund to support stakeholders in developing the tools and resources they need to improve FQR processes;
- Facilitate and improve the exchange of information on issues and best practices related to FQR; and
- Develop a FQR Unit within Alberta Employment and Immigration to support the implementation and monitoring of the FQR Plan by:
 - Coordinating activities across several government departments;
 - Engaging stakeholders; and
 - Evaluating performance through the development and annual monitoring of performance measures and targets.⁴

Key Accomplishments

In just six months since the announcement of the FQR Plan, significant progress has been made. Notable achievements include:

- ✓ Creation of a dedicated FQR Unit within Alberta Employment and Immigration
- ✓ Establishment of the FQR Innovation Fund, guidelines and evaluation criteria
- ✓ Initiation of consultation process and establishment of relationships with PROs
- ✓ Development of International Education Guides and workshops
- ✓ Continued support of the Immigrant Access Fund to help immigrants access employment or obtain Canadian accreditation

³ FQR decisions in the province are largely the domain of professional regulatory organizations, employers and post-secondary institutions.

⁴ Reports on performance will be available annually, beginning in April 2010. Performance measures and targets will be re-evaluated annually and adjustments will be made, as necessary.

The feedback received from key stakeholders including immigrant-serving agencies, PROs and other jurisdictions has been very positive, and much has been achieved since the announcement of the FQR Plan. However, much more needs to be done to improve FQR processes in Alberta and many of the actions outlined in the Plan will require ongoing attention for years to come.

The remainder of this report highlights implementation progress for each of the three actions in greater detail. In addition, a summary of short-, medium- and long-term implementation priorities is provided.

For an overview of the implementation status for all ten actions included in the Plan, please see Appendix 1.

PROGRESS ON SPECIALIZED INFORMATION

Desired Outcomes

- Immigrants have easy access to current, accurate and understandable information on the steps to recognize their foreign qualifications in Alberta.
- Prospective immigrants have access to this information to support informed decision-making and pre-arrival preparation.
- Employers, PROs, educational institutions and immigrant-serving agencies have access to high quality information tools and resources to assist them in the FQR process.

Achieved

- ✓ A review of current models for the provision of immigrant information and career counselling services, including a scan of other provinces' web resources, has been completed.
- ✓ The FQR Unit has undertaken an environmental scan to identify available resources and tools for consolidation on the Alberta-Canada immigration portal.
- ✓ A template has been developed for information fact sheets on professional licensing.
- ✓ An immigrant Focus Group was held on May 14, 2009 at the Bredin Institute to provide feedback on the clarity and navigability of online FQR content. Overall, the web content was well received, and participants' feedback will be taken into consideration to strengthen the quality of information.

In Progress

- FQR content on the “Immigrate to Alberta” web portal will be launched by July 31, 2009 after being vetted by, and incorporating feedback from, immigrant focus groups, the FQR Steering Committee and relevant government Communications branches.
- Information fact sheets and flowcharts for accreditation in regulated occupations are being developed, and will be posted online after approval by PROs. The goal is to have the first eight occupations completed by September 30, 2009.

PROGRESS ON ASSESSMENT STANDARDS AND RESOURCES

Desired Outcomes

- The assessment of foreign qualifications follows principles of transparency, fairness and accountability.
- Assessments are based on accurate and current information.
- Alberta standards are upheld.

Achieved

- ✓ An introductory letter, signed by the Ministers of Advanced Education and Technology, Health and Wellness and Employment and Immigration, was sent out to FQR stakeholders shortly after the FQR Plan was announced.
- ✓ An information session for PROs was held on December 8, 2008. More than 35 PROs were represented and discussions focused on the FQR Plan, reporting requirements, current processes and next steps.
- ✓ The Innovation Fund and corresponding criteria were announced at the end of March 2009, and the first round of proposals has been received.
- ✓ Individual consultations are underway with PROs to finalize reporting mechanisms and timelines and to build relationships. To date, meetings have been held with 8 PROs.

PROs have received the FQR Plan very positively and individual meetings are progressing well. One issue that has emerged during individual meetings with PROs relates to the diversity of FQR approaches and processes taken. Ongoing efforts will be required on the part of the FQR Unit and PRO representatives to address reporting issues and timelines. The remainder of this year will be dedicated to the consultation process and, as a result of the time needed to ensure that PROs are well positioned to provide the required information, full reporting for the majority of PROs may be deferred until 2011.

- ✓ 7 International Education Guides (IEGs) have been developed to help improve decision makers' understanding of other countries' educational systems. IEGs have been developed for China, the Philippines, the United Kingdom, South Korea, Colombia, Russia and India. Related information has been provided via workshops and the website (see www.immigration.alberta.ca/igas-ieq).
- ✓ Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training has updated its web resources to include information for foreign trained skilled trades people.

In Progress

- A review of Innovation Fund proposals is underway and funds will be awarded by June 30, 2009.
- Individual consultations with PROs continue, with a focus this year on regulated occupations that are of strategic importance to Alberta. It is anticipated that all PROs for regulated occupations will provide full reports by 2011, and at least 15 PROs will be in a position to provide reports by 2010. This information will provide a stronger evidence base to support the development of information resources and bridging programs.

PROGRESS ON BRIDGING THE GAPS

Desired Outcomes

- Immigrants can effectively acquire the knowledge and skills they need to meet Alberta's accreditation standards.
- Employers include immigrants in the labour force.

Achieved

- ✓ An initial review of current Government of Alberta bridging programs and policies has been completed. The review included definitions of terms, a description of program objectives, an overview of program delivery and some proposed next steps for departmental consideration.
- ✓ The Government of Alberta has funded community organizations and educational institutions to provide occupation-specific bridging programs in 9 regulated occupations. Programs are currently available for internationally-educated pharmacists, engineers, engineering technologists, nurses, teachers, accountants, physicians, electricians, and paramedics. A full list of programs is provided in Appendix 2.

- ✓ The Government of Alberta has approved funding until March 2010 to support administrative costs for the Immigrant Access Fund (IAF), which assists immigrants to access employment or obtain Canadian accreditation standards (see www.iafcanada.org). As of April 30, 2009, 316 microloans have been approved through the IAF.
- ✓ Several employer forums have been held across the province to develop a better understanding of how government can support employers to enhance workplace diversity and integration.
- ✓ A contract was awarded to the Northern Alberta Alliance on Race Relations (NAARR) to provide diversity training workshops to employers and industry sectors. To date, 21 workshops have been held across the province.

In Progress

- Government is working to build stronger relationships with immigrant employment councils and to engage employers and industry sectors to gain a better understanding of what FQR supports they need. For example, FQR officials recently collaborated with officials from other divisions to meet with representatives from the manufacturing sector.
- The FQR Unit will send out a request for proposals for a contractor to provide additional workplace diversity training and workshops to employers and industry sectors this year.

Moving Forward

Through the first six months of implementing *A FQR Plan for Alberta*, significant progress has been made. Alberta's collaborative approach to improving FQR processes has been very well-received by stakeholders and other Canadian jurisdictions. However, the challenges that have emerged with FQR have developed over time and will require the collective efforts and continued engagement of key stakeholders to develop positive effective solutions over the next few years. Below is a brief summary of government's implementation priorities for the next two years and beyond.

Short-term Priorities (over the next six months)

- Complete individual consultations with PROs and establish reporting mechanisms and timelines
- Award first round of FQR Innovation funding to successful applicants

- Launch FQR content on the Immigrate to Alberta website, including information fact sheets for as many regulated occupations as possible
- Act as co-chair of the working group and contribute to the development of a Pan-Canadian FQR Framework by September 30, 2009
- Increase engagement of employers

Medium-term Priorities (1 year)

- Begin receiving full reports from PROs
- Complete first annual report on FQR in April 2010, including preliminary reporting on performance measures and targets
- Post information fact sheets for all regulated occupations
- Identify employer and industry champions of FQR and facilitate the sharing of best practices

Long-term Priorities (2 years and beyond)

- Assess effectiveness of FQR initiatives and make recommendations to improve/enhance information resources and develop bridging programs based on areas of need

If you have questions related to FQR in Alberta, please contact the Government of Alberta FQR Unit at FQRPlan@gov.ab.ca.

Appendix 1 – Status of Implementation

Actions	Activities	Implementation Status			
		Achieved	In Progress/ Short-term (6 months)	Medium-Term (1 year)	Long-term (2 years)
GOVERNMENT ROLE:					
Establish a FQR Innovation Fund	Develop process and criteria for funding in consultation with other government departments and stakeholders	X			
	Award FQR Innovation Funding		X	(on-going)	(on-going)
Improve Coordination and Information Exchange	Expand and maintain FQR Steering Committee	X	(on-going)	(on-going)	(on-going)
Ensure Accountability and Continuous Improvement	FQR Unit established within government to support the implementation and monitoring of the FQR Plan	X			
SPECIALIZED INFORMATION:					
1. Provide an information channel through the Immigrate to Alberta web portal to maintain and disseminate a comprehensive inventory of information related to foreign qualification recognition in Alberta	Link existing information on FQR to the Alberta web portal		X	(on-going)	(on-going)
	Enhance links to additional FQR resources as they are developed		X	(on-going)	(on-going)
2. Enhance and develop the resources and services available to meet the information needs of immigrants and stakeholders on FQR. Information tools or resources will be linked to the web portal to be shared on a system-wide basis and through face-to-face information service delivery centres					
	Review current models of providing immigrant information and career and employment services and make recommendations for enhancing and developing tools, resources and services as part of implementing Connecting Learning and Work			X	
a) For stakeholders: Consolidate and maintain a repository of information on FQR processes and best practice tools and resources	Information maintained on web portal. Initial scan of available resources and tools for consolidation on the Alberta-Canada Immigration web portal	X (Initial scan complete)			
	On-going maintenance and development of new tools/resources as needed		(on-going)	(on-going)	(on-going)

Actions	Activities	Implementation Status			
		Achieved	In Progress/ Short-term (6 months)	Medium-Term (1 year)	Long-term (2 years)
b) Support development of clear, accurate and understandable information on the accreditation process	Develop template for information fact sheets on professional licensing	X			
	Complete fact sheets for majority of professional regulatory organizations		X		
ASSESSMENT STANDARDS AND RESOURCES:					
3. Strengthen the reporting by professional regulatory organizations on the foreign qualifications they evaluate and how these compare to standards in Alberta	Consultation with professional regulatory organizations to identify reporting mechanisms and processes	X (meetings held with 8 PROs to date)	X		
	Implement new reporting requirements			X	
4. Government will review the licensing information provided in Action 3 to support the development of best practices and assessment tools and resources	Working group established to review licensing reports and identify strategic areas for further action			(on-going)	(on-going)
5. Support professional regulatory organizations in developing streamlined, innovative and flexible approaches to the recognition of foreign-earned qualifications	Consultation within government and PROs to develop Innovation Funding criteria	X			
	Implement FQR Innovation Funding for PROs	X	X (Funding to be awarded to PROs)	(on-going)	(on-going)
6. Expand the information resources on foreign education systems and credentials available to employers, professional regulatory organizations and educational institutions	Develop information resources on foreign educational systems and credentials	X (International Education Guide [IEG] website launched and 7 IEGs completed)	(on-going)	(on-going)	(on-going)
	Develop and deliver workshops on FQR to stakeholders	X (4 in Alberta to date)	(on-going)	(on-going)	(on-going)
7. Enhance information resources and tools to support FQR in the skilled trades					
a) Improve the visibility and expand the scope of online resources for skilled trades already available to employers and immigrants	Raise profile of information for immigrant workers on Apprenticeship and Industry Training website	X	(on-going)	(on-going)	(on-going)
	Update information on website regarding foreign and domestic workers focusing on the needs of specific user groups e.g. foreign worker, employer, labour broker, etc.	X			
	Provide online information describing best practice for foreign worker recruitment in the skilled trades	X	(on-going)	(on-going)	(on-going)

Actions	Activities	Implementation Status			
		Achieved	In Progress/ Short-term (6 months)	Medium-Term (1 year)	Long-term (2 years)
b) Develop practice certification exams in several high demand skilled trades. Practice exams will be made available online and will be an important tool for domestic and foreign skilled trades workers and employers	Development of online practice exams for highest demand trades	X (completed for 2 trades: electrician and welder)	X		
	Development of online study guides linking practice exams, glossary of terms, resources, trade scope documents, etc.		X	(on-going)	
c) Support credential benchmarking research regarding certification and training systems for skilled trades in other international jurisdictions	Support the work of the Construction Sector Council and B.C. Industry Training Authority regarding the benchmarking of foreign trained workers against the red seal standard	X (Analysis of South Africa and the Philippines for electricians & plumbers)	(on-going)	(on-going)	(on-going)
BRIDGING THE GAPS:					
8. Support increasing development of bridging programs that either bridge to licensure or to professional qualifications, preparing foreign-trained immigrants to meet professional qualification standards in Alberta	Develop criteria for approval of bridging programs		X		
	Develop bridging programs within the Advanced Education system			X (subject to funding availability)	(on-going)
9. Enhance bridge to employment programming to facilitate immigrants' access to, and participation in, the labour market					
a) Strategically target funding for existing or new bridge to work programs to meet labour market needs	Review and evaluate current bridging programs to ensure alignment with labour market need. Develop program policy as required	X	(on-going)	(on-going)	(on-going)
b) Support the development of modularized programming, using various media, to increase the participation of newcomers in the labour market	FQR Unit to lead a review of current programs and identify potential areas for the development and implementation of modularized programming.			X	
c) Support the Immigrant Access Fund to help immigrants access employment to obtain Canadian accreditation	Provide support to cover administrative costs.	X	(on-going)	(on-going, approved until March 2010)	
10. Engage and support employers to enhance their ability to integrate and retain immigrants					
a) Support the development of workplace internship, Canadian work experience and mentorship programs, and other innovative approaches to facilitate the entry of skilled immigrants into the workforce	Review and identify employer information and resource needs to support immigrant integration. Develop tools and resources as required	X (2 employer forums have been held in Calgary)	(on-going)	(on-going)	(on-going)
b) Develop and promote workshops, resource tools and best practices highlighting the importance of diversity in the workplace	Develop and deliver workshops to employers on immigrant integration into the workplace	X (NAARR has delivered 21 workshops)	(on-going)	(on-going)	(on-going)
c) Identify and engage industry champions to promote and increase awareness of the benefits of immigrant integration into the economy	Outreach to geographic and industry sector groups through established networks and partnerships	X (Manufacturing sector)	(on-going)	(on-going)	(on-going)
	Support the establishment of urban immigrant employment councils	X (Councils in Edm & Cgy)	(on-going)	(on-going)	(on-going)

Appendix 2 – Government-Sponsored Bridging Programs Targeting Regulated Occupations

The Government of Alberta is currently providing funding for 16 “bridge to employment” programs that have been designed specifically for 9 regulated occupations. “Bridge to employment” programs may include elements of:

- Job-specific skills training;
- Job-specific language training; and/or
- Career development and job placement services.

According to *Alberta’s Occupational Demand and Supply Outlook (2008-2018)*, all of these occupations, with the exception of accountants, are projected to face labour supply shortages over the next decade. Programs are listed below by occupational category.

Accounting

- *Bridging the Gap for Foreign Trained Accountants*, Calgary Immigrant Women’s Association
- *Accounting to Payroll Certification*, Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers
- *Program for Internationally Educated Accounting Professionals*, Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers

Electricians

- *Electrician Upgrading and Certification Program*, Calgary Catholic Immigration Society

Engineering

- *Engineering Bridge*, Bredin Institute (Calgary)
- *Engineering and Technology Upgrading Program*, Calgary Catholic Immigration Society
- *Transitions to Technical and Engineering Careers*, NorQuest College

Engineering Technologist

- *Engineers’ and Technologists’ Integration Program*, Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers

Nursing

- *Nursing Program*, Mount Royal College
- *Practical Nursing Diploma for Internationally Educated Nurses*, NorQuest College

Paramedics

- *International Paramedic Bridge Program for International Medical Graduates*, Bredin Institute (Edmonton)

Pharmacists

- *International Pharmacy Bridging Program*, Bredin Institute (Calgary)
- *Pharmacy Bridge Program*, Bredin Institute (Edmonton)
- *Enhanced Language Training for International Pharmacists*, NorQuest College

Physicians

- *Medical Communication Assessment Project*, University of Calgary

Teaching

- *Transitions to Alberta Classrooms*, Chinook Learning Services, Calgary Board of Education and University of Calgary