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Pan-Canadian Quality Standards in International Academic Credential Assessment – Phase II: Final Report

Canadian Information Centre | Centre d'information canadien
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cmec

Council of   Conseil des
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The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, was formed in 1967 by the provincial and territorial ministers responsible for education to provide a forum in which they could discuss matters of mutual interest, undertake educational initiatives cooperatively, and represent the interests of the provinces and territories with national educational organizations, the federal government, foreign governments, and international organizations. CMEC is the national voice for education in Canada, and, through CMEC, the provinces and territories work collectively on common objectives in a broad range of activities at the elementary, secondary, and postsecondary levels.

The Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials (CICIC) was established in 1990 after Canada ratified the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees concerning Higher Education in the States belonging to the Europe Region, to assist Canada in carrying out its obligations under the terms of this convention. In 1997, Canada signed the subsequent Lisbon Recognition Convention, promoted its Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications, and adopted a set of General Guiding Principles for Good Practice in the Assessment of Foreign Academic Credentials. Both of these conventions promote international mobility by advocating wider recognition of higher education and professional qualifications.

CICIC collects, organizes, and distributes information and acts as a national clearing house and referral service to support the recognition and portability of Canadian and international educational and occupational qualifications.

Note of Appreciation

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To enter the workforce or program of study, foreign-trained individuals need to show the value of their education by getting their academic credentials assessed and compared to Canadian standards.

The Canadian economy continues to attract immigrants from all over the world. One of the principal goals of Canadian immigration policy is to fill gaps in the labour force as baby boomers exit the labour market. In 2006, it was estimated that there were 3.6 million immigrants in Canada's labour force and that 42 per cent of these immigrants had university degrees.[1]

Individuals who come to Canada to enter the workforce or study at a Canadian university or college need to show the value of their foreign education by getting their academic credentials assessed and compared to Canadian standards. In principle, the academic credential assessment process facilitates immigration, entry into academic courses, foreign student exchange, further education or training, occupational licensing, registration and certification, and entry into the labour market.

Skilled immigrants may encounter some difficulties when they arrive in Canada; there are cases where they are unable to pursue their career or educational objectives because they are unable to get their foreign education recognized. The Canadian landscape is structured such that the assessment and recognition of academic credentials is under the direct jurisdiction of a variety of bodies, at both the provincial/territorial and the pan-Canadian levels, including regulated occupations, regulatory bodies, assessment agencies, and postsecondary educational institutions. Each of these bodies has a distinct mandate and prerequisites when conducting these academic assessments. In other words, there is a distinct relationship between academic credentials and the ability to meet the requirements of the many organizations at hand.

In 2007, the Canadian Information Centre for International Credential (CICIC), under the aegis of the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) with funding provided through Human Resources and Skills Development Canada's (HRSDC) Foreign Credential Recognition (FCR) Program, embarked on the Pan-Canadian Quality Standards in International Credential Evaluation project, which provided

1 Zietsma, D. (2010). *Immigrants working in regulated occupations; Statistics Canada − Perspectives*. Retrieved January 11, 2012, from http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-001-x/2010102/pdf/11121-eng.pdf

for a diagnostic study to investigate the consistency and portability of academic credential assessments conducted in the provinces and territories of Canada. To this end, consultations with stakeholders (some of whom are both assessors and end users), quantitative and qualitative surveys, and a series of focus groups with the immigrant clients and end users of academic credential assessments were performed between November 2007 and May 2008.

The main theme emerging from the diagnostic research was that there was both a need and an opportunity for improved dialogue among members of the academic credential assessment community, as well as for improved access to these assessment services by the immigrant seeking to better integrate into the country. Research found that there were differences in the assessment practices and that these stemmed mainly from the fact that there was no common standard, and assessments were often driven based on the nature of the organization. Additionally, members of the academic credential assessment community suggested that future initiatives aimed at the creation of pan-Canadian standards, greater networking and training opportunities, improved information sharing, and joint research projects could help effect positive change in this area. As a result, a number of recommendations were proposed.

In April 2010, in an attempt to reconcile the gaps and differences within the academic credential assessment community, CICIC carried out a subsequent phase of the project by undertaking the following activities with new funding from HRSDC:
- development of a pan-Canadian Quality Assurance Framework (QAF);
- development of pan-Canadian terminology guides for francophone and anglophone settings;
- development of a competency profile for academic credential assessors;
- feasibility study to examine the possibility of offering an on-line program for academic credential assessors;
- creation of two country profiles in both French and English to help assessors understand foreign academic credentials and compare them to provincial and territorial standards;

- creation of networking opportunities to discuss policies and procedures within the pan-Canadian academic credential assessment community;
- feasibility study to examine the possibility for organizations to share resources and best practices in academic credential assessment.

In cooperation with various academic credential assessment agencies, regulatory and certification bodies, professional and occupational associations, and educational institutions, Phase II of the project aimed at improving fundamental areas to facilitate the academic credential assessment process for all end users such as academic credential services, educational institutions, employers, regulatory bodies, and, most of all, the immigrants requiring support in their integration process. To this end, CICIC's work focused on assisting the community of academic credential assessors who conduct assessments of international academic credentials in Canada.

Through various networking activities, CICIC raised awareness on the importance of academic credential assessment and the need for consistency and portability of assessments. Overall, the project received positive feedback and support for the work that CICIC set out to accomplish. Exchanges among members of the academic credential assessment community at these networking events produced a number of suggestions for future work. Similarly, each activity produced a number of recommendations, which fall into three larger categories of action: professional development, information systems, and stakeholder engagement.

Recommendations

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

1. Offer an on-line university-level program in collaboration with key stakeholders, for academic credential assessors.
2. Provide workshop opportunities through webinars on issues pertinent to the academic credential assessment community.

INFORMATION SYSTEMS

3. Promote the current country profiles, developed in Phase II for academic credential assessors to use as a reference when assessing credentials and to increase collaboration within the community of academic credential assessors.
4. Produce additional country profiles to expand this on-line pan-Canadian reference tool.
5. Develop an on-line tool for organizations to share information, best practices, methodology, and results related to academic credential assessment decisions.
6. Amalgamate and redesign the CICIC on-line communication platform to target key audiences.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

7. Implement a communication strategy to promote the use of the Pan-Canadian Quality Assurance Framework for the Assessment of International Academic Credentials (QAF) within the academic credential assessment community.
8. Participate in key meetings and conferences to present and promote the project and the QAF to key stakeholders.
9. Provide regular workshop and networking opportunities for the academic credential assessment community.
10. Reach out to domestic and international partners regarding the importance of academic credential assessment.

INTRODUCTION

"(…) the responsibility to demonstrate that an application

does not fulfill the relevant requirements lies with

the body undertaking the assessment."[2]

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2 Council of Europe/UNESCO; *Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region*; otherwise known as the Lisbon Recognition Convention of 1997, as signed by Canada in November 1997, section 3 III(5); Retrieved January 11, 2012, from http://cicic.ca/docs/Lisboa/lisbon1997.en.pdf

Issue

Currently, foreign-born individuals represent 20 per cent of the Canadian labour market. If immigration trends continue, it is estimated that by 2031 one in three workers will be foreign born.[3] In fact, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) estimates that "by 2012, 100 per cent of all net, new labour market growth will be the result of immigration."[4]

In recent years, the federal and provincial/territorial governments have undertaken numerous initiatives to attract newcomers and capitalize on their education and capabilities. However, despite their high levels of educational attainment, many skilled workers are having difficulty becoming fully integrated into their chosen fields of experience and expertise.

According to Statistics Canada's "Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada," 6 in 10 newcomers worked in a field different from their educational background after their arrival, whereas only 4 in 10 Canada-educated individuals were in the same situation.[5] In 2006, immigrants who had been in Canada for less than 10 years had higher unemployment rates than those born in Canada, and, in recent years, immigrants have become more likely to be in the low-income bracket.[6]

Although immigrants are selected to enter into Canada based on a points system where they are rewarded for their academic achievements, the selection process used by the immigration system does not guarantee them a job in their chosen profession. Equally, it does not guarantee their admission into a Canadian program at a college or a university.

When surveyed, newcomers indicated that they faced a number of challenges when finding employment or gaining admission to a Canadian educational program: not enough Canadian job experience, lack of connections in the job market, and their academic credentials not being recognized.[7]

Individuals who come to Canada need to show the value of their foreign education as a first step before they can enter into the workforce or study at a Canadian university or college. The diploma they receive at the end of their program is the only physical piece of evidence that attests that the individual has attended and completed a given educational program. However, those who lack understanding on the comparability between international academic credentials and provincial/territorial systems – these include employers, regulatory bodies, and educational institutions – may not recognize this diploma. As a result, the individual will need to get his or her academic credentials assessed to gain the recognition necessary to pursue his or her career and/or educational goals in Canada.

Once a request is made for an academic assessment, the onus falls on the authority assessing the credentials to show that the applicant does not fulfill the requirements for recognition; it is not up to the applicant to prove that his or her academic credential meets the Canadian equivalent.[8] This principle is in accordance with the Lisbon Convention, which states that "the responsibility to demonstrate that an application does not fulfil the relevant requirements lies with the body undertaking the assessment."[9]

3 Statistics Canada. (2011). *Projected trends to 2031 for the Canadian labour force*. Retrieved January 11, 2012, from http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/110817/dq110817b-eng.htm

4 Citizenship and Immigration Canada. (2003). *Immigrant occupations: Recent trends and issues*. Retrieved March 31, 2008, from http://www.cic.gc.ca/english.research/papers/occupations/occupations-e.html

5 Plante, J. (2010). *Characteristics and labour market outcomes of internationally educated immigrants*. Retrieved January 11, 2012, from http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/81-595-m/81-595-m2010084-eng.htm

6 Statistics Canada. (2011). *Projected trends to 2031 for the Canadian labour force*. Retrieved January 11, 2012, from http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/110817/dq110817b-eng.htm

7 Ibid.

8 Council of Europe/UNESCO. (1997). *Explanatory report to the Council of Europe – UNESCO joint convention on the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education in the European region*, Section 3.2. Retrieved January 11, 2012, from http://cicic.ca/docs/Lisboa/Explanatory.en.pdf

9 Council of Europe/UNESCO. *Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region*, otherwise known as the Lisbon Recognition Convention of 1997, as signed by Canada in November 1997, section III, article III. 3 (5). Retrieved January 11, 2012, from http://cicic.ca/docs/Lisboa/lisbon1997.en.pdf

There are various credential assessment services whose primary task is to assess the validity of international academic credentials and compare them to educational credentials in Canada. Such services verify documents from international academic credential-granting institutions and conduct research to offer an educated opinion on the Canadian comparability of international academic credentials. Additionally, licensing bodies, educational institutions, employers and employment agencies, and government services may also perform academic credential assessments for their own purposes.

Given the number of bodies that perform academic credential assessments (it has been estimated that there are more than 50 regulated occupations, 400 regulatory bodies, 7 assessment agencies, and 390 recognized and authorized postsecondary educational institutions involved in the assessment and recognition of academic credentials), there are a number of methodologies employed when verifying the authenticity of documents and determining the provincial or territorial academic comparability of education received outside Canada. There is therefore no assurance that an individual will receive a consistent assessment of his or her academic credentials from one organization to another. This situation may be challenging for a newcomer who decides to switch vocations once settled in Canada, or, after having settled, chooses to pursue academic or professional goals in another province or territory. There are currently no pan-Canadian standards governing the practice of international academic credential assessment. Therefore, the assessment that the individual originally requested may not necessarily be recognized, and he or she may be required to have the credential reassessed, entailing further delays and costs.

Pan-Canadian Quality Standards in International Credential Evaluation: Phase I

In January 2007, the Alliance of Credential Evaluation Services of Canada (ACESC) in cooperation with CICIC and its parent organization, CMEC, received funds from HRSDC's FCR Program to research the development of pan-Canadian quality standards in international academic credential assessment that would ultimately help the practice of academic credential recognition in Canada. The overall goal of the project was to help internationally trained newcomers integrate into the workforce by improving the consistency and portability of their academic credential assessments in the provinces and territories of Canada, in both regulated and unregulated

professions and, similarly, to facilitate the assessment of academic credentials for the admission of foreign students to Canadian colleges and universities.

Phase I of the project was intended as the initial phase of what would become a multi-phase initiative, providing for an environmental scan to better describe the academic assessment landscape in Canada and highlighting opportunities for potential coordination and cooperation. To this end, consultation with stakeholders (both assessors and end users), quantitative and qualitative surveys, and a series of focus groups with the immigrant clients and end users of academic credential assessments were performed between November 2007 and May 2008. This phase of the project focused mainly on a diagnostic review of the practices of the academic credential assessment services in the provinces and territories of Canada.

This environmental scan determined that while the majority of assessments conducted by the academic credential assessment services are relatively consistent, there were some instances when decisions on an international academic credential were different. Differences could have a number of detrimental effects; different results could be confusing to both the immigrant client and the end users and consequently delay the successful integration of internationally educated Canadians into the workforce or into a Canadian educational program. This could further be problematic in a regulatory setting, where the opinion provided by an academic credential assessment agency could be a major factor in determining whether an individual meets entry-to-practice requirements. Ultimately, these situations could undermine the integrity of the academic credential assessment process.

Assessment results could be more consistent and portable if the academic credential assessment community used, and had access to, the same set of references. A number of policy recommendations and areas of improvements were proposed by the academic assessment community based on the findings and formed the basis for the next phase of the project. These include the creation of pan-Canadian standards, greater networking opportunities, improved information sharing, professional development opportunities, and joint research projects to create positive change in this area.

MITIGATING FACTORS TO EXPLAIN DIFFERENCES IN ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Complexity of the case: If a case is straightforward, it is more likely that an assessment will be more or less consistent from one organization to the other. If a case is more complex, more research and methodology is required, increasing the likelihood of different interpretations.

Standards: Members of ACESC collectively adopted a framework of practice specifically tailored for academic credential assessment services. Otherwise, there are currently no pan-Canadian standards for other organizations to apply when assessing academic credentials. Therefore, each organization employs its own methodology and policies.

Resources: The budget, resources, staff, and time allocated for academic credential assessment vary from one organization to another, which could explain some discrepancy in methodology.

Location: The provinces/territories that the services represent and operate within can have an impact on the academic credential assessment.

Terminology: Many academic credentials assessed can be interpreted in different ways based on the multiplicity of terms and languages available. Each organization adopts its own set of terms.

Mandate: Organizations often have different focuses for their assessments, which could impact the way in which the assessment is conducted. A specific aspect of an academic credential could be valued differently from one organization to another, ultimately affecting the overall assessment result.

Pan-Canadian Quality Standards in International Academic Credential Assessment: Phase II

Phase II started in April 2010 and lasted two years. Based on the recommendations proposed from Phase I, the second phase focused mainly on the following activities:

1. cross-referencing the terminology and definitions used by academic credential assessment agencies and other organizations assessing international academic credentials;
2. providing networking and workshop opportunities to academic credential assessors from across Canada;
3. developing, on a trial basis, a set of made-in-Canada references profiling specific countries with information on their education systems and Canadian equivalencies for assessors to use when determining the comparability of an internationally obtained academic credential;
4. researching the feasibility of developing an on-line program specifically designed for existing academic credential assessors and for those individuals interested in a future career in this field;
5. developing a pan-Canadian QAF to serve as a reference tool for all groups performing academic credential assessments in Canada;
6. researching the feasibility of developing a tool to share assessment methodology, best practices, research, and past decisions to facilitate academic assessment and promote shared practices.

These activities attempted to lay the groundwork for the establishment of a set of pan-Canadian policy and practice standards to guide the work of all academic credential assessing bodies. Initiatives that promote collaboration in this field should expedite the integration process, reduce cases of under- and unemployment among newcomers, and contribute to a simplification and greater transparency of the academic credential assessment processes.

To ensure support for this project, CICIC worked closely with interested members of the academic credential assessment community to develop practice standards and reference tools. It was essential that the needs and specifications of all organizations performing academic credentials be reflected in the final product. CICIC therefore adopted strategies to encourage the organizations' support and contribution.

- **Openness**
  CICIC spent a great deal of time networking and promoting the project and its goals to organizations that perform academic credential assessments. Participation from various stakeholders was vital to the development process, as the final tools would collectively reflect the specific needs of each organization. To this end, CICIC sought involvement from sector councils, employers, colleges and universities, regulatory bodies, fairness commissioners, directors of apprenticeship, and government officials. Different organizations were invited to join throughout the entire project.

- **Transparency – www.social-network.cicic.ca**
  For each activity, a working group composed of interested volunteers from the academic credential assessment community guided and directed the development. Moreover, a social network Web site was created to allow the rest of the community to provide input and track the progress of the project. CICIC posted all documents on the site and set up discussion platforms to allow public exchange within the community.

National Workshop for Academic Credential Assessors

On October 3–4, 2011, CICIC invited a total of 126 individuals from across Canada involved with academic credential assessment to the second National Workshop for Academic Credential Assessors in Moncton, New Brunswick, following the success of the first workshop in 2007. Participants representing assessment agencies, universities, colleges, regulatory bodies, sector councils, the apprenticeship sector, fairness commissioners, and various government bodies were in attendance. New Brunswick's Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour (Population Growth Division) also sent a number of its stakeholders to the event and provided some of the meeting logistics. This event allowed participants to share their opinions and expertise on the practice of academic credential assessment in Canada.

George Gollin, from the University of Illinois, spoke about diploma mills; Carolyn Campbell, from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the United Kingdom, explained the UK validation process. Additionally, participants took part in a series of training sessions focused on topics pertinent to the profession of academic credential assessment, and provided input on the various assessment reference tools developed throughout the project.

Consultants presented results from each activity and provided an opportunity for the participants to offer final comments. Overall, members of the academic credential assessment community responded positively to the project and demonstrated an interest in working on initiatives aimed at fostering change in this field, such as adherence to the pan-Canadian QAF, greater networking and professional development opportunities, improved information sharing, and joint research projects.

ACTIVITIES

Widespread adherence to a QAF will improve the

consistency and portability of assessments across

the country.

Quality Assurance Framework (QAF)

The environmental scan conducted during Phase I showed that there were significant differences in the methods and policies employed by groups that perform academic credential assessments. Some organizations employed strict, codified academic credential assessment procedures, while others used comparatively informal ones. These differences could be explained by examining the means available to a given organization when carrying out the necessary research and procedures associated with the assessment practice.

The scan concluded that there was a willingness to subscribe to a set of pan-Canadian quality assurance standards that would help guide and direct their activities.[10] CICIC therefore undertook the development of a QAF to guide and streamline the practice of academic credential assessment.

Through numerous rounds of consultation with various organizations, CICIC developed a framework to continually improve international academic credential assessment. This framework is based on a concerted pan-Canadian approach and vision of quality that reinforce principles such as collaboration and transparency. It is divided into three sections:

- fundamental principles, operational definition of the QAF, scope, and objectives;
- process by which any given organization can adhere to the pan-Canadian QAF including a Code of Good Practice in the Assessment of International Academic Credentials; and
- management of the QAF including a proposed governance model and the mechanisms that need to be in place to ensure its continuous improvement.

Governance

CICIC developed the QAF with the help of multiple organizations such that the QAF could serve all academic credential assessors regardless of the nature of their organization. Furthermore, the governance section emphasizes the importance of respecting the autonomy of each organization involved in assessing international academic credentials; it values the needs of each organization and therefore has no binding authority. "Within the QAF, these organizations are accountable to their own supervisory authority."[11] At the same time, the QAF recognizes that those who apply for an assessment of their international academic credentials need guarantees regarding the quality of the services rendered. Widespread adherence to a QAF will ultimately help to improve the consistency and portability of assessments since organizations will be abiding by a common set of principles and guidelines.

The framework suggests that the QAF be under the aegis of CMEC. Since CMEC is the pivotal platform for the convergence of the educational policies of the provinces and territories — and the ultimate responsibility for academic credentials lies precisely with the provinces and territories — it is clear that CMEC should be at the centre of any pan-Canadian process involving quality assurance of the assessment of international academic credentials. Through Canada's international obligations regarding the assessment and recognition of international academic credentials, CICIC, under the aegis of CMEC has already become an important custodian of information and support for quality assurance. Thus CMEC has the necessary capabilities to produce the tools associated with a QAF and to support their operational implementation.

The QAF also calls for the creation of a support committee made up of representatives of organizations that adhere to the QAF. The mandate of this committee would be to assist CICIC in managing the QAF, in particular with a view to its continuous improvement.

The QAF was presented at the National Workshop for Academic Credential Assessors in October 2011 for feedback. Representatives from the various academic credential assessment organizations reacted positively to the framework. Some participants raised concerns related to the governance structure and the implementation strategy. A QAF support committee, to be established in a proposed next phase, could address these issues.

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10 Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials under the Council of Ministers of Education Canada. (2009). *Pan-Canadian Quality Standards in International Credential Evaluation*. Retrieved January 11, 2012, from http://cicic.ca/docs/2009-report-standards-evaluations.en.pdf

11 Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials under the Council of Ministers of Education Canada. (2012). *Pan-Canadian Quality Assurance Framework for the Assessment of International Academic Credentials*. Retrieved January 11, 2012, from http://cicic.ca/docs/ 2012/ Quality_Assurance_Framework_EN.pdf

English and French Terminology Guides – terminology.cicic.ca

Phase I emphasized the issues associated with the multiplicity of terms and definitions used by the academic credential assessment community across Canada; the usage and understanding of a particular term with respect to the occupational and educational fields can be interpreted in a number of different meanings depending on the group that interprets it. These discrepancies could cause confusion and misunderstanding for both immigrants and institutional clients. Moreover, inconsistent use of terminology among the academic credential assessment community could impede future efforts to cooperate toward consistent and portable results. Phase I recommended the creation of English and French terminology guides to reflect the current terms used in the assessment of academic credentials.

CICIC developed an English guide and a French guide to the terminology used by groups that perform academic credential assessments. CICIC solicited the help of a number of different groups to ensure that the finished product accurately reflected a complete set of the terms used in every field across Canada.

Recognizing that the guides would be subject to updates, the working group decided to structure them under an electronic platform to guarantee that they would remain current. Individuals can access the guides electronically, propose edits to the definitions, and suggest additions and deletions to the terms.

Country Profiles – Countryprofiles.cicic.ca

One of the central factors associated with inconsistent academic credential assessment outcomes among organizations that perform these assessments relates to the lack of a standard set of references. Specifically, provinces and territories do not have a complete set of information profiling countries that is available for assessors to use when evaluating internationally obtained academic credentials. The majority of assessors rely on materials produced outside of Canada. Alternatively, some organizations produce their own country profiles tailored according to institutional needs. Moreover, groups assessing academic credentials rely on their own unique combination of available resources when conducting research. In response to this need, CICIC produced country profiles

on India and France, in an attempt to create a standard set of pan-Canadian references. This tool is Web-based and provides up-to-date information on educational trends and profiles of education systems.

Given the changing nature of the information provided in a country profile, members of the working group agreed on an electronic platform, similar to the terminology guides. They also established a section dedicated specifically for members to raise and discuss related issues to promote collaboration among members of the academic credential assessment community. The tool allows members to log in, amend information, post up-to-date information on a specific country, and discuss pertinent issues with other assessors.

The tool received positive feedback at the National Workshop for Academic Credential Assessors. Participants concurred that this tool would not only grant them access to key information on a specific country; it would also provide them with an interface to exchange information with the academic credential assessment community. The overarching goal of this activity is to demonstrate the value and usability of these profiles to academic credential assessors, leading to the development of additional country profiles to serve as pan-Canadian references.

Competency Profile

During Phase I of the project, research found that there was no enumerated set of specific skills or education that all academic credential assessors in Canada are expected to master. This activity related to the human resource requirements for organizations performing academic credential assessments.

Various types of organizations take it upon themselves to perform their own academic credential assessments including academic credential assessment services, universities, colleges, regulatory bodies, apprenticeship training providers, sector councils, and employers. Canada's high rate of immigration could suggest that the field of academic credential assessment has made considerable progress in its development over the years. Over time, the increasing number of newcomers integrating in Canada meant that organizations had to develop procedures to manage the increasing number

of academic assessments being carried out; individuals conducting academic assessments have no doubt developed expertise and knowledge to cope with the increasing number of assessment requests. Phase I therefore recommended that groups employing academic credential assessors convene to prepare a profile of education, skills, and competencies that are relevant to the academic credential assessment profession.

The working group assigned to this activity met in October 2010 to discuss the parameters around the competency profile activity. Subsequently, consultants conducted a series of on-line surveys and focus groups to finalize the profile. The goal was to help organizations employing academic credential assessors to improve their human resources requirements and to increase the visibility of the profession.

From the beginning, the development of this competency profile intended to "increase the visibility of the profession of academic credential assessors."[12] As a result, a few recommendations were proposed:

- Use the profile to help guide employers in their performance appraisal reviews.
- Integrate the profile into their continuing professional development and quality assurance systems.
- Use the profile as a basis to promote the development of a university program for academic credential assessors; the program would reflect the structure of the competency profile.
- Once the profile becomes prevalent in everyday hiring practices, consider professionalizing the work of academic credential assessors to ensure quality assurance in the practices.

FACTS

- We estimate that some 550 organizations undertake academic credential assessments in Canada.
- These organizations employ about 1,200 full-time and 500 part-time assessors.
- They perform around 285,000 assessments a year.

On-line University Program for Academic Credential Assessors

Upon completion of the competency profile, CICIC conducted market research to examine the feasibility of offering an on-line distance learning university program for academic credential assessors in the provinces and territories. CICIC conducted the project in three stages:

- First, it determined the numbers, characteristics, and attitudes of potential users of the program.
- Second, it sought input on course information from key stakeholders including assessment agencies.
- Third, it partnered with educational institutions (Athabasca University and *Télé-université, Université du Québec à Montréal* [TELUQ]) to discuss the development of a distance education program specifically designed for existing academic credential assessors and for those individuals interested in a future career in this field.

Research indicated that only a modest number of conventional, formal pan-Canadian and international training courses existed, since most assessors rely on in-house training instead. Research concluded that there was market interest in creating an on-line distance learning university program, provided that a flexible and modular approach was considered focusing on specific ranges of competencies. An approach that includes a PLAR option would be particularly attractive to the large number of academic credential assessors who are already experienced but who lack relevant qualifications. It was recommended that the program be offered at the bachelor and master's levels with formal examinations leading up to academic accreditation of competence.

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12 Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials under the Council of Ministers of Education Canada. (2012). *Competency profile for an academic credential assessor, Volume 2*. Retrieved January 11, 2012, from http://cicic.ca/docs/2012/Competency_Profile_Volume_2_EN.pdf

Given that the development and offering of programs fall under the responsibility of higher educational institutions, CICIC could not go beyond the market research at this stage. Further developments or discussions on costs associated with the development of the curriculum will be necessary with direct involvement from the universities. Such a program will no doubt represent a step toward reaching the goal of the project: "The establishment of such a training course would help improve the consistency of practice by academic credential assessors, who are often separated from other assessors and have mostly learned from experience."[13]

Web-based Application to Share Assessment Results, Resources, and Methodologies on Academic Credential Assessments

During our environmental scan, academic credential assessors concluded that results would be more consistent if all assessors could access each other's databases to facilitate and guarantee portability and consistency in assessment results. Currently, no standard pan-Canadian tool exists to which all groups can refer, owing to a number of reasons including proprietary and privacy issues. Assessors therefore suggested the creation of an on-line tool permitting access to existing databases in academic credential assessment services, universities, colleges, regulatory bodies, etc., where current information on academic credential decisions could be shared to facilitate the work of the academic credential assessment community.

This activity examined the feasibility of an on-line tool or portal to share academic credential assessment results, resources, and methodologies between the various organizations performing academic credential assessments in Canada. The purpose of the study was to examine the organizations' willingness to share existing data and to use such an on-line resource. It will be necessary to research the technical feasibility and privacy concerns should this activity advance into a next phase.

Overall, there was support for access to shared data, but the nature and purpose of the tool needed more clarity: Who would have access to the data? What kind of data would they be allowed to access, and for what purpose? What assurances are there for privacy? Research also found that the condition of available data collected across the country was less than ideal (see information box). Though no formal consensus was found, the report suggested that a pilot project, with a small cluster of willing partners, be developed and tested. This would provide a practical way to explore and overcome the identified issues and concerns. The trial could progressively be expanded in both functionality and coverage to benefit the entire community of academic credential assessors.

Finally, it was recommended to link any future steps with future expansion of the country profiles project to form a larger on-line sharing tool within the academic credential assessment community. Since both of these activities deal with data and information-sharing tools, they should be developed under a single platform.

DATA COLLECTION

Research suggested that any future work related to sharing data needed to consider and remedy the current issues related to data collection:[14]

- Some data are not reliable and have not been updated in organizations' databases.
- There is a wide variety of data structure across the country: some organizations use strictly an electronic database to store all information, whereas others will depend on physical data archives. Some organizations store their data combining both of these methods.
- Sometimes, personal data are embedded within the academic credential. Extra measures will have to be taken to ensure that privacy rights are respected.

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13 Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials under the Council of Ministers of Education Canada. (2012). *A feasibility study for a distance education program for Canadian academic credential assessors.* Retrieved January 11, 2012, from http://cicic.ca/docs/2012/Distance_Education_EN.pdf

14 Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials under the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada. (2012). *A feasibility study for a web-based application to share assessment results, resources, and methodologies on academic credential assessments*. Retrieved January 11, 2012, from http://cicic.ca/docs/2012/Shared_Data_EN.pdf

RECOMMENDATIONS

Future steps ought to include networking and training

opportunities, improved information sharing, and joint

research projects.

A number of recommendations aimed at making a positive change in the practice of academic credential assessment were developed throughout the project. These originated from members of the working groups, the consultants' reports, and the discussions at the National Workshop for Academic Credential Assessors. These recommendations echo the various themes that laid the foundation for Phase I and Phase II: the adoption of pan-Canadian standards, greater networking opportunities, improved information sharing, professional development opportunities, and joint research projects.

These recommendations fall into three larger categories of action: professional development, information systems, and stakeholder engagement.

Professional Development

1. **Offer an on-line university-level program in collaboration with key stakeholders, for academic credential assessors.** Research showed willingness on the part of individuals to take on-line courses related to the practice of academic credential assessment. Formalizing the skills and competencies outlined in the competency profile will permit homogeneous training for the profession, thus yielding a consistent approach to the practice of academic credential assessment. An approach that considers PLAR options will likely have substantial uptake. It is recommended that, with the collaboration and guidance of on-line universities, CICIC develop a program for academic credential assessors.

2. **Provide workshop opportunities through webinars on issues pertinent to the academic credential assessment community.** It is recommended that practitioners be provided with access to CICIC's network of Canadian and international experts through webinars. These sessions will provide members of the academic credential assessment community with the opportunity to gain new knowledge on current issues directly affecting their assessments. It will also put them into direct communication with a network of professionals in the same field.

Information Systems

3. **Promote the current country profiles to allow discussion within the academic credential assessment community.** Phase II produced country profiles on India and France, in an attempt to create a standard set of pan-Canadian references. Assessors can use these resources when evaluating internationally obtained academic credentials. These tools provide up-to-date and accurate information about education systems in foreign countries and permit comparisons to provincial and territorial systems. The profiles are structured into two platforms:
   - a public one, which contains information on the education system of a country, and
   - a private one, to which assessors can log in and interact with other members of the assessment community on a specific country.

   It is recommended that assessors begin using this feature to foster collaboration and information sharing within the community.

4. **Produce additional country profiles to expand this on-line pan-Canadian reference tool.** It is recommended that additional country profiles be developed to expand this pan-Canadian tool. Consideration should also be given to linking this tool to the on-line shared database activity.

5. **Develop a pilot on-line application to share information, best practices, methodology, and results related to academic credential assessment decisions.** The feasibility study showed that there was willingness to share precedents and best practices within the community of academic credential assessors. The concept of a shared database, however, required more clarity. It is recommended that CICIC develop, create, and implement a pilot on-line shared database tool to share precedents and best practices in academic credential assessment within the community of academic credential assessors. As a trial phase, the project should reach out to a small number of interested partners. It should be noted that this should not be a centralized database but rather an electronic tool giving assessors access to other organizations' databases of information.

6. **Amalgamate all on-line services and redesign CICIC's on-line platform to target key audiences.** It is recommended that next steps should include developing and updating CICIC's current on-line communication platform, with a special focus on social networking and unified branding. The platform should be easy to navigate and focus on attracting key audiences, such as assessors and immigrant clients.

Stakeholder Engagement

7. **Implement a communication strategy to promote the use of the pan-Canadian QAF.** As recommended in Phase I, CICIC developed a set of standards related to the practice of academic credential assessment in an effort to improve the consistency and portability of assessment results. The authors of the QAF represent an array of organizations across the country that perform academic credential assessments. With the framework finalized, CICIC should identify and reach out to stakeholders, promote the benefits of the QAF, and encourage its integration into their academic credential assessment practices.

8. **Participate in key meetings and conferences to present and promote CICIC's activities, including the QAF, to key stakeholders.** In the past, CICIC actively participated in various stakeholders meetings to discuss and present the goals of the project and the benefits of the QAF. Any future initiatives should focus on maintaining these activities to ensure the project's continued relevance for stakeholders.

9. **Provide regular workshop and networking opportunities for academic credential assessors from across Canada.** With the success of the national workshop in Moncton, it is strongly suggested that this type of event take place on a regular basis. As the biggest assembly of academic credential assessors in the country, this is an important step toward fostering a sense of community among practitioners in a wide range of settings and facilitating networking and information-sharing opportunities.

10. **Reach out to domestic and international partners regarding the importance of academic credential assessment.** Since Canada's ratification of the UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees concerning Higher Education in the States belonging to the Europe Region,[15] ratified by Canada in 1990 and its signing of the Lisbon Recognition Convention[16] in 1997, CICIC has played a crucial role in supporting the efforts undertaken in the provinces and territories to carry out the international obligations associated with those conventions. It is recommended that CICIC continue to foster these relationships as well as be involved in the activities of specific regional convention committees that reflect our immigration trends.

Since 2007, CICIC has striven to create awareness of the importance of academic credential assessment in the integration process of an individual wishing to study or work in Canada. Recent efforts focused on the development of reference tools to facilitate this process. These tools were created to aid and guide all organizations performing academic credential assessments. Abiding by the same set of references will gradually improve the consistency and portability of assessment results across the country. Furthermore, it will serve as a means for quality control, ensuring that the foreign-trained individual's academic credential will be assessed based on a proposed set of pan-Canadian standards.

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15 UNESCO. *Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees concerning Higher Education in the States belonging to the Europe Region 1979*, as ratified by Canada in March 1990. Retrieved January 11, 2012, from http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13516&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

16 Council of Europe/UNESCO. *Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region*, otherwise known as the Lisbon Recognition Convention of 1997, as signed by Canada in November 1997. Retrieved January 11, 2012, from http://cicic.ca/docs/Lisboa/lisbon1997.en.pdf

Since CICIC's message has only begun to gain momentum, future work should be undertaken to ensure continuous progress and support within the academic assessment community. Of course, the recommendations set out above cannot be considered until the resources, partners, funding, and infrastructure are determined. Furthermore, any future initiatives need to be sensitive to regional and jurisdictional differences that exist among stakeholders. Efforts to accommodate these needs and differences throughout the process will ensure the sustainability of a greater pan-Canadian vision.

"The assessment of an academic credential becomes important when someone from another country wishes to study or work here, without repeating the full course of study."[17]

17 Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials under the Council of Ministers of Education Canada. *(2012). Competency profile for an academic credential assessor, Volume 2.* Retrieved January 11, 2012, from http://cicic.ca/docs/2012/Competency_Profile_Volume_2_EN.pdf

APPENDICES

"There is both a need and an opportunity for improved dialogue among members of the academic credential assessment community, as well as for improved access to these assessment services by the immigrant seeking to better integrate into the country."[18]

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18 Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials under the Council of Ministers of Education Canada. (2012). *Pan-Canadian Quality Standards in International Academic Credential Assessment: Phase II*; p. 3, Retrieved January 11, 2012, from http://cicic.ca/docs/2012/Final_Report_Phase_II_EN.pdf

Appendix I: Consulting Firms

Cambridge Professional Development Ltd.
5 Mundella Road
Nottingham, United Kingdom NG2 2EQ
☎ +44 845 3455 199 (and 299)
📠 +44 78 3161 9669
www.camprof.com

Cambridge Professional Development

Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning (CIRL)
251 Queen's Quay West, Suite 701
Toronto, Ontario M5J 2N6
☎ +1 (416) 205-9494
www.cirl.org

Diversis
3-5 Hill (2nd floor)
Edmundston, New Brunswick E3V 1H7
☎ +1 (506) 737-9600
📠 +1 (506) 737-9609
www.diversis.ca

diversis

Gail Larose Consulting
20 Crichton Street
Ottawa, Ontario K1M 1V4
☎ +1 (613) 863-1187
📠 +1 (613) 745-8284

George Tillman Consulting/Expert-conseil
162 Belmont Avenue
Ottawa, Ontario K1S 0V5
☎ +1 (613) 421-3554

Onyris inc.
96A Laurier Avenue West
Montreal, Quebec H2T 2N4
☎ +1 (514) 847-8816
📠 +1 (514) 221-3734
www.onyris.com

< onyris >
// SOLUTIONS WEB CRÉATIVES

Thornley Fallis Communications Inc.
55 Metcalfe Street, Suite 730
Ottawa, Ontario K1P 6L5
☎ +1 (613) 231-3355
📠 +1 (613) 231-4515
www.thornleyfallis.ca

Thornley Fallis

Vandenburg & Associates (V&A)
PO Box 25139
RPO Mountain Road
Moncton, New Brunswick E1C 9M9
☎ +1 (506) 383-6983

Appendix II: Working Group Members

The following individuals volunteered to be part of the working groups of the various activities in Phase II.

TERMINOLOGY GUIDE WORKING GROUP

Alexandre Dufour-Mignault
Centre d'expertise sur les formations acquises hors du Québec

Alison Pickrell
Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology

Anika Marcotte
Citizenship and Immigration Canada

Charles Bernard
Citizenship and Immigration Canada

Eva Schausberger
Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council

Gail Larose
Gail Larose Consulting

George Tillman
George Tillman Consulting/*Expert-conseil*

Nancy Tran
Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials

Noelline Ip Yam
Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials

Shannon MacKay
Academic Credentials Assessment Service

Yves Beaudin
Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials

QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK WORKING GROUP

Audra Jefremovas
Comparative Education Service

Beka Tavartkiladze
World Education Services

Bonnie Kennedy
CAPLA

Carine Bacourt
Centre d'expertise sur les formations acquises hors du Québec

Cyrille Simard
Diversis

Heidi Wong
College of Dietitians of Manitoba

Jeff Stull
International Qualifications Assessment Service

Joseph Vibert
Canadian Alliance of Physiotherapy Regulators

Nancy Tran
Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials

Noelline Ip Yam
Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials

Philip Bélanger
New Brunswick Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour

Philip Mondor
Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council

Rosalie Vlaar
University of British Columbia

Sharon Eadie
College of Occupational Therapists of Manitoba

Tim Owen
World Education Services

Yves Beaudin
Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials

COMPETENCY PROFILE WORKING GROUP

Beka Tavartkiladze
World Education Services

Bonnie Kennedy
CAPLA

Christine Wihak
Thompson Rivers University

Daniel Mills
Apprenticeship and Occupational Certification,
New Brunswick

Darlene Fisher
International Qualifications Assessment Service

Deirdre Brown
University of British Columbia

Dianne Conrad
Athabasca University

Felicity Borgal
Cambridge Professional Development Ltd.

John O'Sullivan
Cambridge Professional Development Ltd.

Kristine Smalcel Pederson
University of Northern British Columbia

Monica Chong
Comparative Education Service

Murray Young
Thompson Rivers University

Nancy Tran
Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials

Nigel Lloyd
Cambridge Professional Development Ltd.

Noelline Ip Yam
Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials

Philip Mondor
Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council

Roger Hur
International Credential Evaluation Service

Stefan Sokolowski
International Qualifications Assessment Service

Wendy Nielsen
Professional Standards, Alberta Education

Yves Beaudin
Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials

ON-LINE POSTSECONDARY PROGRAM WORKING GROUP

Alexandre Dufour-Mignault
*Centre d'expertise sur les formations acquises
hors du Québec*

Dianne Conrad
Athabasca University

Louis Mathier
Téluq, Télé-université, Université du Québec à Montréal

Michael Rohaly
International Credential Evaluation Service

Nancy Tran
Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials

Noelline Ip Yam
Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials

Pierre Gagné
Téluq, Télé-université, Université du Québec à Montréal

Tabasom Eftekari
Canadian Alliance of Physiotherapy Regulators

Yves Beaudin
Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials

COUNTRY PROFILES WORKING GROUP

Beka Tavartkiladze
World Education Services

Deborah Taylor
Grant MacEwan University

Erika Danziger
Ryerson University

Frank Vandenburg
Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour
New Brunswick

Gary Belton
University of Calgary

Haichen Sun
International Qualifications Assessment Service

Heidi Wong
College of Dietitians of Manitoba

Julia Goquingco
International Credential Evaluation Service

Michael Rohaly
International Credential Evaluation Service

Nancy Tran
Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials

Noelline Ip Yam
Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials

Sarah Ledwidge
International Credential Assessment Service of Canada

Tabasom Eftekari
Canadian Alliance of Physiotherapy Regulators

Tina Cheng
British Columbia College of Teachers

Yves Beaudin
Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials

SHARED RESOURCES ON-LINE TOOL WORKING GROUP

Alexandre Dufour-Mignault
*Centre d'expertise sur les formations acquises
hors du Québec*

Christiane Des Lauriers
Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists

Felicity Borgal
Cambridge Professional Development Ltd.

Frank Vandenburg
Vandenburg & Associates

John O'Sullivan
Cambridge Professional Development Ltd.

Kevin Kamal
World Education Services

Michael Rohaly
International Credential Evaluation Service

Mike Sekulic
Grant MacEwan University

Nancy Tran
Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials

Nigel Lloyd
Cambridge Professional Development Ltd.

Noelline Ip Yam
Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials

Sean Sweeney
International Credential Assessment Service of Canada

Sharon Eadie
College of Occupational Therapists of Manitoba

Sharon Langley
CMA Alberta

Yves Beaudin
Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials

Appendix III: National Workshop Participants

Abdeslem Ahmia
North West Resource Center for Newcomers (NWRCN)

Alexandre Dufour-Mignault
Centre d'expertise sur les formations acquises hors du Québec (CEFAHQ)

André Gariepy
Commissaire aux plaintes en matière de reconnaissance des compétences professionnelles
Office des professions du Québec

Ashraf Ghanem
Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour
Settlement and Multiculturalism Branch
New Brunswick

Becky Chamula
Canadian Alliance of Physiotherapy Regulators

Beka Tavartkiladze
World Education Services

Benoit André
Centre d'accueil et d'intégration des immigrant.e.s du Moncton métropolitain (CAIIMM)

Bonnie Doughty
Multicultural Association of Fredericton Inc. (MCAF)

Bonnie Kennedy
Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA)

Caroline Ausukuya
World Education Services

Carolyn Carter-Legacy
Certified Management Accountants of New Brunswick (CMA-NB)

Charlotte Sheridan
Brock University

Chris Ferguson
Canadian Council of Directors of Apprenticeship (CCDA)

Christiane Des Lauriers
Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT)

Cinnamon Stacey
International Qualifications Assessment Service (IQAS)

Daniel Buteau
Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC)

Darcy McCardle
University of Prince Edward Island

Darlene Fisher
International Qualifications Assessment Service (IQAS)

Deborah Taylor
Grant MacEwan University

Deborah Wolfe
Canadian Network of National Associations of Regulators (CNNAR)

Deborah Wybou
New Brunswick Multicultural Council Inc. (NBMC)

Denise Jillions
Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Foreign Credentials Referral Office (FCRO)

Diane Gordon
Nova Scotia Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Review Office

Dianne Conrad
Athabasca University

Donna Hicks
Multicultural Association Chaleur Region (MACR)

Doug McBean
University of Toronto

Ed Leslie
New Brunswick Society of Certified Engineering
Technicians and Technologists

Emma Flynn
Miramichi Regional Multicultural Association (MRMA)

Evan Houlahan
Multicultural Association of the Greater Moncton Area
(MAGMA)

Évelyne M'Banze Isamène
*Commissaire aux plaintes en matière de reconnaissance
des compétences professionnelles*
Office des professions du Québec

Fred Veysey
Multicultural Association of the Greater Moncton Area
(MAGMA)

Galina Korobova
Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour
Settlement and Multiculturalism Branch
New Brunswick

Gary Belton
University of Calgary

Geoff Gillard
The Alliance of Sector Councils

Gordon Griffith
Canadian Network of National Associations of Regulators
(CNNAR)

Gwen Harwood
Cape Breton University

Jake Arbuckle
Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour
Settlement and Multiculturalism Branch
New Brunswick

Jane Brown
Think Inc. Enrolment & Student Services Consulting

Janelle Bourgeois
New Brunswick Society of Medical Laboratory
Technologists

Jessi Bradley
Multicultural Association of Fredericton Inc. (MCAF)

Jean-Yves Francoeur
*Centre de ressources pour nouveaux arrivants au Nord-
Ouest Inc. (CRNA-NO)*

Jeff Stull
International Qualifications Assessment Service (IQAS)

Jennifer Carey
New Brunswick Association of Medical Radiation
Technologists (NBAMRT)

Jennifer Pottinger
Ontario College of Teachers

Jhulio Solis Fondeur
Restigouche Multicultural Association

Jill Rogers
Saint John Y Settlement

JoAnne Graham
Association of New Brunswick Licensed Practical Nurses
(ANBLPN)

Jocelyn Stevens
Pride of Race, Unity, Dignity through Education PRUDE

John Bryant
Certified General Accountants Association of Canada
(CGA-Canada)

Jordan Walker
Department of Education and Early Childhood Education
Prince Edward Island

Joseph Arseneault
New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Teacher Certification

Juan Manuel Toro Lara
Consortium national de formation en santé

Julia Goquingco
International Credential Evaluation Service (ICES)

Julie Parna
Association of Registrars of the Universities and Colleges of Canada (ARUCC) – York University

Julie Pocock
University of Waterloo

Junghsiang Huang
International Credential Assessment Service of Canada (ICAS)

Karen Clark-Verbisky
Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Foreign Credentials Referral Office (FCRO)

Karen Gauthier
University of Saskatchewan

Karen Luker
The Canadian Alliance of Audiology and Speech-Language Pathology Regulators (CAASPR)

Keith Chiasson
Comité d'accueil d'intégration et d'établissement des nouveaux arrivants de la Péninsule acadienne (CAIENA-PA)

Ken Wong
Simon Fraser University

Kevin Kamal
World Education Services

Laura Sheehan
College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE)

Lihong Yang
University of Alberta

Luisa Montoya
New Brunswick Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, Settlement and Multiculturalism (Branch)

Lynda Finley
Nurses Association of New Brunswick (NANB)
Association des infirmières et infirmiers du Nouveau-Brunswick (AIINB)

Marianne Tompkins
Ontario College of Teachers

Marie-France Lavoie-Sergerie
Centre d'expertise sur les formations acquises hors du Québec (CEFAHQ)

Marie Richard
Centre d'expertise sur les formations acquises hors du Québec (CEFAHQ)

Marion Rey
Centre d'accueil et d'intégration des immigrantes du Moncton métropolitain (CAIIMM)

Mary Stack
Saint John Multicultural and Newcomers Resource Centre Inc.

Maxine Reimer
Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science Technology (SIAST)

Mélissa Lelièvre
Université de Moncton

Merike Remmel
University of Toronto

Michael Rohaly
International Credential Evaluation Service (ICES)

Michel Bédard
Centre d'expertise sur les formations acquises hors du Québec (CEFAHQ)

Mike V. Sekulic
Association of Registrars of the Universities and Colleges of Canada (ARUCC) – Grant MacEwan University

Mohamed Bagha
Multicultural Association of Charlotte County (CCMA)

Nancy Desrosiers
Department of Education and Early Childhood Education Prince Edward Island

Natalie T. Melanson
International Credential and Competency Assessment and Recognition (ICCAR)

Nicole Whyte
New Brunswick Multicultural Council Inc. (NBMC)

Nuzhat Jafri
Ontario Office of the Fairness Commissioner

Olesa Krikorova
International Credential Assessment Service of Canada (ICAS)

Philip Bélanger
International Credential and Competency Assessment and Recognition (ICCAR)

Philibert Rutayisire
Carrefour d'immigration rurale du Nord-Ouest

Philippe Legendre
Centre d'expertise sur les formations acquises hors du Québec (CEFAHQ)

Ranin Be
Centre d'expertise sur les formations acquises hors du Québec (CEFAHQ)

Rebecca Bourdage
College of Physiotherapists of New Brunswick (CPTNB)

Roger Hur
International Credential Evaluation Service (ICES)

Rosalie Vlaar
University of British Columbia

Roseline Pelletier
Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour New Brunswick

Sandra Zarate
International Qualifications Assessment Service (IQAS)

Sarah Ledwidge
International Credential Assessment Service of Canada (ICAS)

Scott Walker
Thompson Rivers University – PLAR

Shannon Mackay
Academic Credentials Assessment Service (ACAS)

Shari Nemirovsky
The University of Western Ontario

Sharon Eadie
College of Occupational Therapists of Manitoba

Sharon Langley
Certified Management Accountants of Alberta (CMA-Alberta)

Shelly Hladun
Grant MacEwan University

Shereen Mir
Canadian Alliance of Physiotherapy Regulators

Stephanie Hamilton
Multicultural Association of Carleton County (MACC)

Stephanie Lynn
Think Inc. Enrolment & Student Services Consulting

Tabasom Eftekari
Canadian Alliance of Physiotherapy Regulators

Tim Owen
World Education Services

Tina Cheng
British Columbia College of Teachers (BCCT)

Tom Sisk
Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of New Brunswick (APEGNB)

Victor Richard
Certified General Accountants Association of New Brunswick (CGA-NB)

Ximena Munoz
Office of the Manitoba Fairness Commissioner

Yasmin Ojah
Saint John Y Settlement Services

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS/CONFÉRENCIERS PRINCIPAUX
Carolyn Campbell
UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)

George Gollin
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

CONSULTANTS
Cyrille Simard
Diversis Inc.

Felicity Borgal
Cambridge Professional Development Ltd. (CamProf)

Frank Vandenburg
Vandenburg & Associates
Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour
New Brunswick

Gail Larose
Gail Larose Consulting

George Tillman
George Tillman Consulting / Expert-conseil

John O'Sullivan
Cambridge Professional Development Ltd. (CamProf)

Marta Jacyniuk-Lloyd
Cambridge Professional Development Ltd. (CamProf)

Nigel Lloyd
Cambridge Professional Development Ltd. (CamProf)

Pierre Killeen
Thornley Fallis

HUMAN RESOURCES AND
SKILLS DEVELOPMENT CANADA (HRSDC)
Jean-Robert Misangumukini
Labour Market Integration

CANADIAN INFORMATION CENTRE
FOR INTERNATIONAL CREDENTIALS (CICIC)
Eric Schvartz
Project Manager

Nancy Tran
Project Manager (Phase II)

Noelline Ip Yam
Administrative Officer

Yves E. Beaudin
National Coordinator

1. **Pan-Canadian Quality Standards in International Academic Credential Assessment: Phase II**

2. *Pan-Canadian Quality Assurance Framework for the Assessment of International Academic Credentials*

3. *Competency Profile for an Academic Credential Assessor – Volume 1*

4. *Competency Profile for an Academic Credential Assessor – Volume 2*

5. *Competency Profile for an Academic Credential Assessor – Volume 3*

6. A Feasibility Study for a Distance Education Program for Canadian Academic Credential Assessors

7. A Feasibility Study for a Web-Based Application to Share Assessment Results, Resources, and Methodologies on Academic Credential Assessments

8. *English Terminology Guide for Academic Credential Assessment in Canada*
http://terminology.cicic.ca
(ON-LINE ONLY)

   French Terminology Guide for Academic Credential Assessment in Canada
http://terminologies.cicdi.ca
(ON-LINE ONLY)

9. Country Profiles
http://countryprofiles.cicic.ca
(ON-LINE ONLY)

www.evaluation.cicic.ca