Building a Self-Directed Process for the Development of Internationally Trained Professional Profiles in Canada

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Abstract More and more internationally trained professionals (ITP) coming to Canada face challenges in getting credentials recognized by regulatory bodies and employers (Forum of Labour Market Ministers 2009; Ontario Office of the Fairness Commissioner 2011b). This leads to a high level of brain waste that recently has been estimated to cost Canada up to $3.4 billion per year (Evans, CGA Magazine 45(4): 26, 2011). This paper looks at some of the challenges regarding prior learning assessments and portfolio-building processes toward credential evaluation, and explains some of the reasons why the current system and tools are not meeting the needs of ITPs. In particular, postsecondary institutions and regulatory bodies' processes toward preparing individuals for evaluation are compared, leading to a number of conclusions on commonality and future directions. The authors conclude with the proposal of a new generic online and modular professional profile model to better prepare ITPs for credential assessment. Such a model would be particularly useful for credentialing bodies with fewer resources available. It would also provide a common set of information to front-line agencies that support ITPs.

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Introduction

We consider the situation of underemployed internationally trained professionals (ITP), defined as individuals who hold a degree equivalent to a Canadian college[1] or university credential, who may have acquired work experience toward professions that are regulated in Canada, and who are not working at their full level of expertise. Federal and provincial governments in Canada have been attracting immigrant professionals for a number of socio-economic reasons (Conference Board of Canada 2011b), and the outcome of this process has yielded some unsatisfactory results in terms of achieving the expected productivity enhancements (Akbari 2011; Akbari and Aydede 2011;Grant 2007a, 2007b; Grant and Nadin 2007; Grenier and Xue 2011; Guo 2007; Hawthorne 2007; Li 2008; Ogilvie et al. 2007; Owen 2007; Reitz 2007a, b; Shinnaoui and Narchal 2010; Somerville and Walsworth 2009, 2010). Special attention has recently been given to the work of regulatory and educational bodies toward ensuring that the attracted internationally trained professionals are able to work in their field and at the right level in the most expedient manner possible (Forum of Labour Market Ministers 2009; Ogilvie et al. 2007). Few would argue that it is economically efficient to have professionals work in positions below their acquired education and experience. Evans (2011) reported that the loss of productivity due to the misalignments of internationally trained individuals' (ITIs, which includes ITPs) skills with their occupations in Canada, denoted as a "brain waste," is a significant problem that costs Canada more than $3.4 billion annually. This issue is increasingly gathering political attention, becoming one of the ballot questions in the 2011 Ontario provincial election (Bardeesy 2011), and it was one of the agenda items in the Canadian federal election of May 2011.

The roots of this brain waste lie largely in the lack of recognition of ITPs' credentials, as stated and analysed in Grant and Nadin (2007), Guo (2007), and Ogilvie et al. (2007). More emphasis is being placed on the design of policies and processes for the recognition of the credentials of immigrant professionals by post-secondary education and professional organizations (Alberta Advanced Education Technology 2008; Anonymous 1992, 2008; Bardeesy 2011; Dali and Dilevko 2009; Evans 2011; Ogilvie et al. 2007; Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology 2000). The federal government, through the Forum of Labour Ministers (Forum of Labour Market Ministers 2009) has proposed a pan-Canadian framework for the recognition of foreign credentials, and it encourages all organizations to find solutions to speed up the current evaluation processes.

Recognizing prior learning and competencies is seen as economically efficient by adults with experience (Scott 2007) because it assumes that competencies will be

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[1] In Canada, a college is a higher education institution equivalent to a community college (in the American sense) or a technical or applied school of arts or science. In Quebec, colleges are referred to as CEGEPs (Collège d'Enseignement General et Professionnel).

evaluated in-depth and recognized so as to minimize the investment of time and resources into rebuilding already-acquired knowledge and skills. It is even more important to the ITP who has to rebuild a career in Canada and comes into the country with the expectation of credential (and competency) recognition. Credential recognition is based on a combination of academic and experiential evidence, and a decision must be made on the adequacy of prior learning for accreditation or work placement in a professional field. In the case of an ITP, a portfolio is needed to ensure that a full and comprehensive review can be made for a decision by regulating bodies and employers, as well as for the ITP's professional development and planning. Arguably, the current tools are lacking in that they fail to provide a number of important processes that a Canadian would *not* need to follow, but that are critical for ITPs. Instances of such processes include understanding the similarities and differences in comparable occupations in Canada, language testing needs, descriptions of the scope of international employers when they are not global companies and easily recognizable to evaluators, comparative values of educational achievements, and so forth.

The evaluation of prior learning and credentials should be viewed as a combination of two things (Joosten-Ten Brinke et al. 2008; Moldoveanu 2009): preparing the individual for an assessment and performing the assessment on the individual. Many researchers have provided definitions, processes, benchmarks, and policy-oriented data on the second part of an assessment process, which is the assessment of individuals. These authors discuss the procedures for assessment and crediting of prior learning (Joosten-Ten Brinke et al. 2008; Suopis 2009), benchmarking processes (Day 2001; Moldoveanu 2009) or success rates and strategies to support an ITP through an assessment (Dali and Dilevko 2009; Hoelscher et al. 2008; Scott 2010). Other concerned parties, such as the Ontario Office of the Fairness Commissioner (Ontario Office of the Fairness Commission 2011a, b), have pointed out the need for and have encouraged an assessment process that is open and clear. All of these interventions help to clarify the evaluation process but do little to explain to an ITP how to build a portfolio for evaluation. Since fewer authors have provided insights into how to prepare individuals for assessment, this article will strive to provide a theoretical background that will lead to a practical application for this purpose.

Credential recognition and assessment differ for each occupation and across disciplines. Every accreditation body has its own requirements, but we believe there are a number of commonalities that vary only in the degree of importance attached to them. For example, when it comes to evaluating educational degree equivalencies, presenting employment experience and other curriculum vitae information, and measuring soft skills, several regulatory or accreditation bodies share common needs and practices. The communication of these requirements is sometimes at fault, leading to difficulties for the ITP in understanding how to prepare a dossier for evaluation. A well-defined set of processes and tools would make the job easier for the ITP, as asking for the preparation of a portfolio is not enough and leads to errors. The question we ask is, can we provide a modular approach to ITP preparation that could serve the lion's share of the requirements of all regulatory and credentialing bodies? To accomplish this goal, attention must be given to prior learning assessment and the tools and processes that are needed by ITPs to prepare for an evaluation. The need for a well-developed portfolio, for example, becomes critical for a proper evaluation and

serves a number of other benefits for individuals (Romaniuk and Snart 2000). We will also argue that other support mechanisms are needed by the ITP, including mentorship, networking, and career planning.

Given the importance and the need for an efficient assessment process, this article discusses the development of a new generic self-assessment model that prepares the individual for evaluation through, in part, the portfolio process. It will be based on the identification of some practical challenges that are faced by the ITP when he or she attempts to have his or her credential recognized. This research is presented in the next section. Identifying these challenges leads to the proposition of a new generic model that encompass a clearly structured portfolio and a building process that are equally understood by ITPs and assessors. The model aggregates various existing tools and processes. In addition, the model will be modular, available online, and useful for any regulatory bodies. This is presented in "A Generic Portfolio Model for ITP Credentialing" section with conclusions in "Conclusion" section.

Credentialing Requirements and Challenges for the ITP

For an internationally trained professional, having his or her credentials recognized begins with a process of prior learning assessment.

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition

Prior learning assessment and recognition (commonly referred to as PLAR in Canada) is a two-step process of: (1) assessing formal and sometimes informal and non-formal learning (Romaniuk and Snart 2000; Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology 2000; Van Kleef 2007) and (2) making decisions on aspects of the learning that will be recognized. PLAR is one of the tools used to determine credentials attained through educational and experiential background. The evaluation of informal knowledge includes that gained through general life experience, including volunteerism (BCCAT 2011; Butterworth 1992; Day 2001; Scott 2010), as opposed to non-formal and formal learning that occurs through training and development (Koenig and Wolfson 1994; Suopis 2009). [2] Each credentialing body will decide on the weight given to prior learning acquired via educational bodies or through experience.

Within academic and professional credentialing communities, evaluating credentials and prior learning may require further testing or proofing in order for the academic institution, regulator, accreditation body, or employer to accept competencies obtained in other jurisdictions. Given the complexity of an adult profile, particularly when it comes to international applicants, additional information is normally expected for a more complete assessment because little may be known of the equivalencies that can be drawn. The evaluation of credentials and prior learning for professionals is thus usually performed using a portfolio or a dossier (Kaslow et al. 2009). Other input mechanisms

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[2] A compendium of terminologies is available from Joosten-Ten Brinke et al. (2008). Ideally, a holistic view of PLAR, although more complicated, will provide the most complete assessment of individuals. This description best serves the economic efficiency needs of our growing population of internationally trained professionals if and when the tools and processes can become recognized, are achievable, and are used in a fair and consistent manner.

and processes such as mentorships (Allies/Maytree Foundation 2011), networking, and more detailed competency self-evaluations (Ryerson University 2011) can help an ITP prepare a portfolio and plan for interviews or evidence-collecting processes that will be required for the evaluator to assess and recognize credentials.

Portfolios have been widely used in universities and colleges, typically in distance education departments, to evaluate the competencies of adults and their readiness to enter or re-enter a formal academic program (Aarts et al. 1999; Mount and Belanger 1998; Wihak 2007). In such situations, the portfolio is sometimes used to award credits to adults based on their prior education or experience (Sweygers et al. 2009). Portfolios have also been used as a course assessment tool (Mayeh Abu 2006) and many postsecondary institutions in Canada offer portfolio building as a course. The output is often a profile prepared for use by the institution and employers. It is geared toward younger and less-experienced clients, or adults aiming at returning to school to gain new degrees.

Most portfolio processes will require that the user perform a self-assessment of his or her prior learning. This might raise a red flag regarding the actual accuracy of the information contained in a portfolio and the level of confidence the assessor can have in the data he or she is evaluating. The question of self-assessment in PLAR has been extensively studied and most authors agree that notwithstanding the risk of incorrect information, self-assessment is still a valid process that leads to better-informed individual evaluations. In addition, in resource-constrained environments, self-assessment is a feasible way to maximize information gathering without infringing on the evaluator's right to test and validate competencies.

In a work context, portfolios are used in educational institutions to assess the competencies of teachers and university professors (Heath and Cockerham 2001), by artists who need visual histories, or architects and engineers as demonstrations. Portfolios are not new. Rather, it is their expanded use in more disciplines that is new, as well as the fact that ITPs have their own needs regarding the tools and processes used to prepare a portfolio. For an ITP, the preparation for assessment, which includes the development of a portfolio, must include a process in which the ITP can (1) understand the Canadian requirements, and (2) to make his or her comparable experience, competencies, and learning understandable and valued by Canadian assessors.

The portfolio is here defined as "a file in which competencies and/or competency developments are illustrated" (Sweygers et al. 2009), but to prepare a proper illustration, there are processes and tools required by both the ITP and the assessor. Each product in a portfolio provides evidence of the achievement of specific competencies (Kaslow et al. 2009), including academic and experiential evidence that will contribute to an evaluation of competencies and allow for a decision regarding credentials (Kaslow et al. 2009; Sweygers et al. 2009). Additionally, a portfolio is a living document that is constantly updated and that serves a number of purposes, including growth or developmental planning, job prospecting, credential evaluation, and professional demonstrations of expertise.

Building a Portfolio Via Postsecondary Education Institutions

Portfolios are a commonly accepted tool to illustrate evidence of prior learning. Hence, internationally trained professionals seeking credential recognition should

build a portfolio to submit to the appropriate regulatory body. Our first question was whether Canadian educational institutions offered portfolio-building courses that meet the needs of ITPs. Educational institutions currently offer portfolio-building courses, mainly to Canadian adults returning to school. But, we estimated that Canadian students would have different requirement in their use of a portfolio and existing courses may or may not include some of the important elements needed of an ITP portfolio. We also assumed that professional associations providing accreditation in Canada would have an easier task of recognizing achievements from Canadian applicants and new challenges to assessing ITPs. Our second question related to the requirements of accreditation bodies, or those professional associations that grant designations and credentials in a specific professional field. Did these associations all look for similar information in a dossier to make a decision? Was there a match between the content of portfolio courses taught by educational institutions and the requirements of accreditation bodies?

To answer these questions, we retrieved information from Canadian educational institution websites and the websites of Ontario professional accreditation bodies (regulated industries), we performed a number of focus groups with community agencies (such as front-line service providers in Northern Ontario, including immigrant service organizations and Professions North/Nord (PNN)[3]), and we conducted interviews with employer groups (such as a Northern Ontario HRPAO association) and a small number of Northern Ontario-based ITPs regarding current preparatory services.

The results of two horizontal analyses are presented: first, on the contents of a portfolio which includes the tools and processes offered in postsecondary institutions to prepare a portfolio, and the second, on the requirements of the regulatory bodies for credential recognition and employment. We also compared the two sets. Data collection for comparative analyses was performed from the websites of postsecondary institutions and regulatory bodies, in addition to the other stakeholders identified above. The sample of postsecondary institutions was obtained using the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC 2011) website and search engines to determine if they had PLAR initiatives. Our sample included 48 postsecondary institutions. We obtained the sample of regulatory bodies from the website of the Ontario Office of Fairness Commissioner of Ontario. The sample (a census of Ontario) had 34 bodies.

The results have been regrouped into the categories illustrated in Table 1. The ratio of postsecondary institutions requiring each subcategory as a component of the portfolio is demonstrated in column E and the ratio of accreditation bodies requiring each subcategory appears in column F. Note that to populate Table 1, we explored the information provided by the institutions through their websites and various informative documents available within.

Based on our survey, most regulatory bodies in Ontario require at least seven common components in a portfolio: personal details, formal and information education, work experience, technical demonstration of competencies, and language skills.

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[3] Professions North/Nord (PNN) is a bridging program for internationally trained professionals in accounting and finance, serving the needs of Northern Ontario through a number of front-line partner agencies in the five main cities of the north. A focus group session was held in Sudbury with these stakeholders in spring 2011.

Table 1 Professional profile—utilization of components

(A) Category	(B) Subcategory	(C) N.O. frontline[a]	(D) Sweygers et al. (2009)	(E) Postsecondary institutions[b], %	(F) Accreditation bodies[b], %
Overview	(1) Personal details	x	High	41.67	65.65
	Declarations	x		25	17.65
	Autobiographical	x		18.75	0
Education evaluation	(2) Formal	x	High	77.08	100
	(3) Informal	x	High	72.92	64.71
	Non-formal			58.33	2.94
Goals papers/ self-assessment	Personal development plans	x		16.67	0
	Reflection			10.42	0
Experience	Resume	x		31.25	20.59
	Chronological record of achievement	x		10.42	5.58
	(4) Work experience	x	High	70.83	64.71
	Volunteer experience	x	High	47.92	0
	Hobbies	x	Low	16.67	0
	Home working experience	x	Mid	2.08	0
	International employer profile	x		2.08	0
Demonstration of competencies	(5) Technical	x	High	12.5	88.24
	Non-technical	x		8.33	8.82
	(6) Language	x		6.25	73.53
Verification of learning/ competencies/ evidence	(7) Evidence	x	High	85.42	97.06
Pre-structured format		x	High	27.08	5.88
Other					

[a] As aggregated from the Professions North/Nord (PNN)–Northern Ontario bridging project

[b] High use (75 %+), medium use (50–74 %), low use (49 %−)

In Table 1, we have identified the common components (numbered in the second column) that will be transposed into our generic model. The table is based on the current requirements of Ontario regulatory agencies (column F), as compared to the typical information taught in portfolio courses at postsecondary institutions in Canada (column E). We have also included those requirements provided to us in interviews by other Ontario stakeholders (columns C and D).

A similar analysis performed in Flanders, Belgium, by Sweygers et al. (2009) found that more than 80 % of organizations that use portfolios for evaluation required some form of a standard format in submissions. The analysis also reported that personal development plans and reflection as well as competency estimation were

only required in the portfolio-building process by approximately 50 % of the organizations surveyed, whereas the other elements were required by more than 80 % of the survey sample. The relative importance of each of the steps in the portfolio model will need to be evaluated in a future study and could be examples of processes that become modular additions of a generic system. It is important to note that competency self-evaluation did not feature as a highly used tool in Flanders, yet it is a critical component of a portfolio for Canadian accreditation bodies. The fact that an ITP may be asked to self-assess his or her acquired competencies does not mean that this disclosure or any evidence provided in support of achievements will be accepted by evaluating bodies, but is an indicator demonstrating that Canadian evaluators recognize the value of self-assessment, at least as an indicator of learning and knowledge, and each case may or may not require further testing depending on the circumstance and the comprehensive nature of the portfolio.

It is important when one is reading the table above to recall that portfolio initiatives in postsecondary institutions are mainly geared towards adult or mature people returning to school. That explains some of the disparities appearing in the table. One example is the request for skills acquired through non-formal education, the low proportion of these institutions requiring the evaluation of formal education or the request for goal papers.

The most significant difference between the requirements of regulatory bodies for credential recognition and the portfolio process of postsecondary institutions is the "demonstration of competencies" categories, and more precisely, technical competencies. While almost all regulatory bodies require the evaluation of technical competencies and language, very few postsecondary institutions do so (four out of 91 include an assessment of those technical competencies and only three include an assessment of language). Moreover, if we go beyond credentialing and think about employment, only one institution assesses non-technical competencies (soft skills), a factor that employers often identify as the main barrier they have in hiring ITPs (see Table 1).

The reason for evaluating current portfolio trends in Canadian educational institutions was to ascertain the level of fit with ITP needs. We find that portfolio initiatives in postsecondary institutions in Canada tend to place greater emphasis on non-formal and volunteer experience as compared to the usual requirements of regulatory bodies. They were also less likely to require details on technical knowledge and language competencies, which is comprehensible since students would have graduated in a Canadian landscape and would therefore have more broadly recognizable competencies.

If information for ITPS regarding building a portfolio is not provided by educational institutions, who is to provide it? The discussion that follows outlines some of the process impediments as well as issues faced by users and evaluators in working through a credential evaluation system, and provides arguments for devising comprehensive preparatory tools and processes for ITPs.

Information Providers

Another available option for preparing ITPs is front-line settlement agencies and regulatory bodies themselves. A certain number of these organizations provide portfolio-building advice for different markets and with different purposes in mind,

but focus group sessions with front-line settlement agencies report difficulties in appropriately counselling ITPs on the needs of many credentialing bodies. Some generic sites are available, for example the "Working in Canada" website, which targets internationally trained individuals before they arrive and provides leading questions to ITIs in order to help initiate portfolio development. However, these sites tend to lack depth and do not allow for much-needed personal interaction. The tools these informational sites lack are often the processes for translating competencies acquired abroad into comparative Canadian competency requirements. There are many tools and many different versions of tools, some of which are more capable than others of providing the right quantity and quality of information to make a sound decision. Some vary in complexity that would allow or prevent users from developing a useful portfolio for evaluation.

In our survey, we found that regulators offer broad to highly detailed advice on the preparation of the portfolio for accreditation. Accreditation bodies are best able to counsel the ITP as they make decisions on what counts. However, not all accreditation bodies have the resources to properly prepare the ITP as their focus is on assessment. When it comes to portfolio development, an ITP can be at a disadvantage in preparing a self-assessment or even preparing an adequate file for evaluation because standard Canadian-based instructions may assume that an individual has an understanding of the meaning of competence and the way it is interpreted in Canadian organizations.

Needs of Users

From an ITP's perspective, time constraints, varying individual needs, limited mentorship opportunities, limited time and resources from academic institutions, and geographically dispersed populations with fewer front-line services are all impediments to an expedient credential preparation and evaluation. These are among the reasons for encouraging a self-determined model for individuals to prepare their own portfolio. We can envision that much of the preparatory work performed by an ITP needs to be of a higher quality so as to minimize the burden on evaluating bodies (postsecondary institutions, accreditation bodies, and employers). In any event, it is in the best interest of an ITP to learn how to develop a comprehensive portfolio for formative and developmental purposes, including a better transition to the workplace (Romaniuk and Snart 2000). A portfolio can also allow an individual to better understand his or her competencies and represent them in a clearer light to evaluators.

Needs of Assessors

When a compilation of educational achievements is needed by an ITP, it is often not sufficient to provide transcripts because equivalencies may not be assessable by the evaluator, and some outside research or expertise might thus be needed to ascertain the degree to which the educational profile resembles Canadian requirements. This is where organizations such as World Educations Services (WES) can help decipher differences and similarities.

A focus group session held with a group of 20+ human resource professionals (HRPAO) in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada identified that a number of additional

challenges are present when assessing the dossier of an ITP (such as further research into equivalencies and international employers) that may make the file less attractive when too many applicants are already vying for the job. A vice-president position can have different responsibilities and meaning between Canadian organizations depending on size and industry. These differences may be magnified when international complexities and cultures are added. This means that an ITP must gain an understanding of the comparative differences and similarities in order to more easily explain his or her own competencies. An ITP may also need to provide an understanding of the scope and background of international employers because Canadian employers and evaluators may be comfortable in understanding global firms but may lack an understanding of the nature of regional segments of international organizations.

An ITP will most likely need more information to develop a professional profile, and the assistance of mentors is useful in speeding up knowledge acquisition as well as ensuring an adequate presentation of findings, according to Allies/Maytree Foundation (2011). In our ITP interviews to identify the usefulness of portfolios, an engineer explained that several of his network members had immigrated to Canada with an engineering background and they had advised him that his credentials (based on their own experience in finding employment in their field) would not be recognized in Canada. He was therefore advised to find other types of employment (e.g., taxi driver), which meant working in positions below his educational level. He refused to believe that he could not work as an engineer and sought the assistance of a mentor, in this case, an engineering professor at an Ontario university. He proceeded to prepare a portfolio based on the requirements identified on the accreditation body website and followed the advice of his mentor while also updating his knowledge of Canadian standards. Within a short amount of time, he was granted full recognition for his background thanks to a well-prepared portfolio. The accreditation body allowed him to write the entrance exam into the profession without any additional course requirements. A few years later, he was the Director of Engineering for a medium-sized enterprise in Northern Ontario and working successfully on challenging and rewarding projects.

Language competencies, which are not usually a concern in a typical Canadian portfolio (except where bilingualism is needed and testing is provided), is another example of the different requirements of an ITP portfolio. Culture and communication skills can become a concern or a barrier for an ITP if an employer or evaluator considers that the ITP is not ready to work within a Canadian environment (sometimes based on "fit," or on regulatory and legal standards). Demonstrating a sound network may be necessary in positions where knowing people is important to the job. As a result, an ITP must develop a professional profile that includes a number of additional tools and processes beyond those normally expected of a Canadian portfolio.

The evaluating regulatory body faces a number of challenges in proceeding through what may be understood as a fair and open system of assessment, not least of which is an understanding of international factors (education, work experience, language, and culture), assessment processes, communication, and consistency. We know that the process of evaluating an individual is fraught with challenges, especially when it comes to informal or non-formal learning. Even when there are a large number of guiding principles, there are difficulties in developing assessment processes that are replicable within and between organizations.

Within postsecondary institutions, the PLAR process is frequently distributed rather than centralized, with individual departments or faculties undertaking much of the assessment. This makes the idea of a clear and open system of evaluation more difficult. Since department-based assessors may be more or less prepared for an assessment, it is incumbent on the applicant to provide a more complete file that can limit evaluation errors based on a lack of information. Increasingly, the prior learning assessment is being moved to specialized independent bodies such as WES and Comparative Education Service that have more resources to keep up with the work of international institutions. Sadly, in such situations, the evaluation is based more prevalently on formal learning.

Regulatory bodies are ultimately entrusted with the responsibility of performing PLAR for professionals but often are given few resources to evaluate an expanding and increasingly diverse group of new Canadians. Even with a more open and fair process of assessment, these evaluators need a clear and well-documented portfolio to make a good and timely decision.

A Generic Portfolio Model for ITP Credentialing

It appears that in order to have his or her credentials assessed and recognized, an ITP has to build a document that consists of more than the classical portfolio, and that includes elements related to technical skills, non-technical (soft) skills, language competencies, and proper translation into Canadian equivalents of degrees and experiential skills obtained via mentors. We call this document a professional profile, and we believe it should include a process to help build it (such as mentorship, opportunities for networking, volunteering, or shadowing, etc.). This model would have to be generic (not specific to any particular profession or sector) to allow any ITP to use it. It would use competency models or lists that have already been developed by regulatory or government organisations. The professional profile itself, together with each if its elements, would have a specific format that are agreed on and understood in the same way by all involved parties. The resulting model would be ready for use online and be made widely available. Finally, it would have a modular structure to allow for differences in requirements among professions and disciplines, and for situational factors of accreditation or evaluating bodies.

From the above analysis, we can extract a number of requirements that may form several data modules required by a group of assessors for evaluation purposes. The intent is to build these modules so that all accreditation bodies can have similar preparatory processes and tools for ITPs, while at the same time outlining their individual requirements through a cafeteria-style modular format.

Academic achievement, which is the first common portfolio requirement by regulators, credentialing bodies, and employers, is relatively well structured in Canada, as organizations such as WES have significant international experience in this field and are able to draw comparisons to the benefit of evaluators.

The experiential evidence drawn from work and informal sources, on the other hand, is a difficult undertaking and may be either broadly defined in generalities (often incorporated into a resume), or more concise and described in a structured self-assessment process. SignPost, a tool developed by Ryerson University and The Conference Board of Canada (Conference Board of Canada 2011a; Ryerson University 2011) for

accounting and finance occupations, is an example of a more succinct and well-articulated process that allows an ITP to self-assess using levels of competencies that are agreed upon by regulators and employers. Some regulators or accreditation bodies provide a compendium of terms for an ITP to use in a self-assessment, and federal databases in Canada and the USA are available for various disciplines to help ITPs understand key requirements (such as through the Ministry of Labour in the USA, or the Canadian Dictionary of Occupations in Canada).

Competence is an elusive concept with a wide array of definitions. We chose two that are relevant to this article. The first and most simply stated is by Hoffmann, who says that competency is a "set of performances and standards." In this definition, competencies are a method for the measurement of learning and experiences, and these are expected to be demonstrable in relation to specific standards or performance indicators of competence (Hoffmann 1999). The second definition, this one by Mulder et al. (2009), identifies competence as "a series of integrated capabilities consisting of clusters of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessarily conditional for task performance and problem-solving and for being able to function effectively in a certain profession, organization, job, role, and situation". In the latter definition, competencies are built with an occupation in mind, or are agreed upon by a grouping of professionals within a profession, organization, or sector. Competency assessment is one of the tools that can be used to better assess experience, as it allows for an opportunity to test and validate specific competencies. In fact, competency assessments appear to have taken a hold (Kaslow et al. 2009) recently, with accreditation bodies and sector associations investing great effort into designing competency models for their respective occupations (e.g., SignPost for accounting occupations). A competency model is a structured model that identifies the important elements of competence that need to be demonstrated or subject to evaluation, in order to be accredited or to meet the core requirements of the industry. Competencies can be demonstrated through evidence or testing, and doing so means less of a reliance on purely academic standings (which, in adults, can be quite dated, as compared to their informal and non-formal learning throughout the previous years). As the use of competency models to describe occupations has increased, portfolios have emerged as the tool to use for professional credential recognition with competence as its central piece.

The multidimensional aspect of competencies can make them strenuous to build and are often handled by professionals in the field. Mansfield (1996) reported that standardization in competency modelling is difficult, and therefore, competency groupings could be hard to achieve, especially when consensus is required from several players within an industry. It is not impossible, however, as this has been achieved through the sectorial and pan-Canadian consultative process utilized in the creation of SignPost, during which individual professional bodies, employers, and educators contributed their own knowledge base and assisted in harmonizing the information collected in order to create the sector-specific instrument.

Building such a model requires some challenges to be solved, one of which is regarding the specific format, with the other related to the description of competencies. Although no solution is offered here for this particular task, another research project may look at current generic competency descriptions, such as those developed by the Canadian federal government, as a starting point for self-evaluations.

The Challenge of Standardization

The necessity of a portfolio/professional profile model that would fit the requirements of regulatory bodies leads to another important question: Is there a generic portfolio format for ITI professionals? By generic, we mean a process or an approach to building a portfolio that any ITP can follow to build his or portfolio to the satisfaction of the specific body. We do not mean standardization in the contents.

Sweygers et al. (2009) have suggested that standardization does not work, stating, "a universal PLA portfolio is neither possible nor desirable without sacrificing functionality". Ideally, each evaluating body should have a clear and efficient system to prepare the ITP for evaluation. We know that this is difficult with the given resources, and that there are common elements between organizations that can be explored to realize economies of scale. In our preliminary review of accreditation bodies in Ontario, we found that more than 80 % of organizations sought the same things. Therefore, we can assume that in a large proportion of portfolios, a standard process could be built that is useful to most evaluators, even if some elements need to be added or amended to meet the specific needs of individual bodies (hence, our proposal of a modular approach).

Some regulators have built components of the portfolio process and made them available on their website. This is the case with the Ontario Association of Certified Engineering Technicians and Technologists (OACETT 2005). OACETT has built an occupation-specific portfolio template for a certified engineering technologist and provides a self-assessment process based on competencies. It also provides an employment resources fact sheet designed specifically for ITPs. Accounting and finance-related professions have an advanced online system to evaluate competencies but have not provided a full template for developing a portfolio, a task that was recently undertaken by Certified General Accountants (Evans 2011). These types of innovations can serve to build a generic set of processes and tools for the benefit of others who do not yet have these resources.

SignPost Talent Management Project by Ryerson University (2011) and the Conference Board of Canada (2011a) for occupations in finance and accounting are automated systems that allow an ITI to build a comprehensive portfolio and resume, and to advertise their competencies to employers. In the case of SignPost, it is equipped to review different skill levels for each competency and allows the user to input sources of evidence for each skill level claimed. Building the model required several meetings throughout the nation to gain consensus on a list of competencies from regulators, employers, and educators, to describe the various levels of achievement that individuals could display for each competency, and to automate the evaluation system. Ryerson developed similar online competency self-assessments for nursing and dietetics. These concentrated databases require substantial investments and can take years to develop, but they are excellent examples that should be studied to create a generic portfolio model.

It would be extremely time and resource consuming to develop a competency model similar to SignPost for each of the 520 occupations listed in the National Dictionary of Occupational Codes in Canada, and such a task is likely not feasible. Concentrated databases are both a demonstration of diversity and a standardization of the portfolio process within a discipline. The resulting portfolios are generic and allow an evaluating body to work through standard sections rather than piece together information from various portions of the dossier. It also can lead to more open and

standard evaluation procedures. There are always flaws in any standardized and automated systems when it comes to clearly relating individual skills, but such a system would often represent a substantial improvement in the process of building and evaluating a portfolio. At this time, there are many disciplines for which no such service is available, and the need for a generic model was pointed out in two federal government reports: "The On-line Portfolio Development Model for the Going to Canada Portal" in 2004, and "A Pan-Canadian Framework for the Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Qualifications" in 2011.

Diversity is acceptable when the client is provided with a strong discipline-oriented process that provides the tools to meet the rigours of an assessment in the discipline. Diversity at the source, or when the process is individually directed with few instructions, can be mayhem. In many cases, this is how portfolio development has been managed, with some instruction on what should be done, but little to no instruction on how to get the job done. The resulting portfolio is often missing important information, which creates delays, or the competencies of the client or applicant are not properly assessed, resulting in economic inefficiencies. Where a formal and thorough discipline-oriented process is not available, we can achieve a better outcome for the individual and the evaluator by providing more insights on the steps to build a portfolio as well as a number of inputs that will diversify the process, such as the assistance of a mentor, linkages to networks, or the opportunity for the individual to gain sector-specific experience to suit individual needs. A well-defined generic portfolio tool could be an important value-added instrument even if it must be supplemented by some discipline specificity.

The Professional Profile Model

There are other challenges in building a generic professional profile model. For example, in the demonstration of competencies element of a portfolio as seen in Table 1, ITPs identify their significant prior professional learning (job experience, volunteer, and personal development programs) and list the learning outcomes they believe they have achieved through these experiences. This is supplemented by a collection of evidence, a process that is painstaking and not always achievable depending on individual circumstances, to support the statements made in the competency assessment. ITPs must assess and understand the competence requirements in Canada and make linkages, where possible, to their own acquired competencies to identify whether there is a match or a need for development (training, experiential, or otherwise). There are likely to be problems in understanding different terminologies and expectations in each discipline, especially regarding soft skills, and cultural and language issues will need to be considered in the development of a model.

To summarize, our analysis has identified seven key components required by a majority of accreditation bodies in Ontario:

1. Personal details
2. Formal education
3. Informal education
4. Work experience
5. Technical knowledge (competencies)

6. Language proficiency
7. Evidence of competencies

From our discussions with employers and some regulators, it has emerged that they require the following additional components from ITPs:

8. International work equivalencies: detailed understanding of the equivalency in work experience and the description of regional international employers
9. Soft skills evaluations
10. Equivalencies of education
11. Networking abilities
12. Canadian experience

Finally, ITPs and service organizations in Northern Ontario communities have identified the following additional needs, especially to help ITPs properly document components 8 to 12 above:

13. Mentorship
14. Information sourcing
15. Personal development planning

We have aggregated these needs into one unique document that we call the professional profile of an ITP. The professional profile is illustrated in Fig. 1 below. The 15 components identified above are clustered into four main headings, which are each represented by one quadrant. Quadrants are counted clockwise, starting with the top left. The two top quadrants represent the types of information normally required in a portfolio for most professionals, regardless of their profile. The bottom two quadrants represent additional tools and support mechanisms required for ITPs. More specifically, the components of the bottom-left quadrant 3 are to be added to any documents that an ITP sends for credentialing to a regulatory body. These components
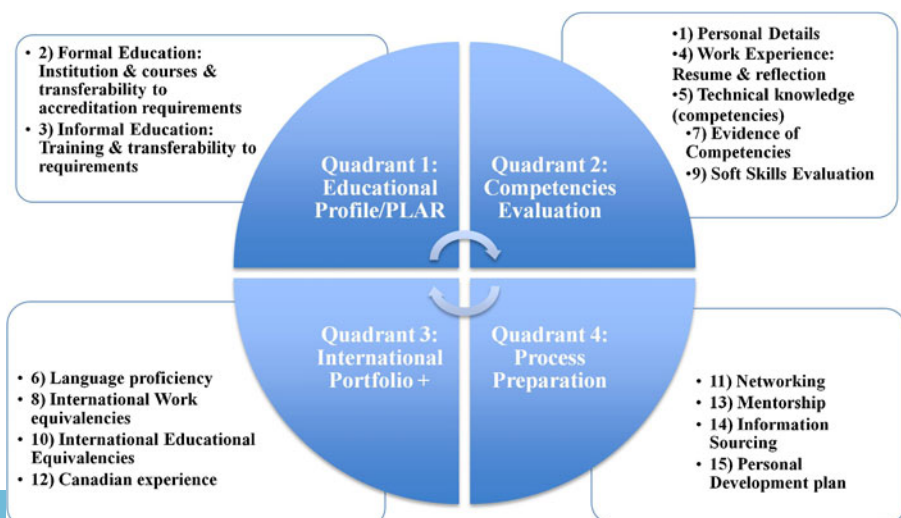

Fig. 1 ITP professional profile preparation model (proposed)

would allow the body to easily and in a straightforward manner assess how degrees and experience acquired abroad translate into a Canadian context. The bottom-right quadrant 4 serves several purposes. First, it is intimately linked to quadrant 3, as its components allow an ITP to translate prior learning to the Canadian context. In addition, it serves as a preparation tool for job-tailored cover letters and interviews.

In future research, the model will need to be tested with credentialing bodies across Canada, and we expect some real challenges in building a generic system that is able to properly evaluate competencies. The challenge will be particularly strong in finding sufficient and comprehensive competency descriptions and tools for different professional designations (including National Occupational Codes) and devising a process that can be completed independently by ITPs.

Conclusion

We have studied the problem of recognizing the credentials of internationally trained professionals (ITPs) who immigrate to Canada. It is a well-known and documented fact that these immigrants face many difficulties when it comes to having their prior knowledge and competency recognized by regulatory bodies and employers. Prior learning assessment and recognition or credential evaluation for ITPs in Canada appear to be decentralized and divided processes, and based on our discussions with front-line service providers in Northern Ontario, there is little in terms of agreed-upon, established procedures to evaluate the dossier of internationally trained professionals. From a credentialing point of view, much of the work is done by postsecondary institutions, accreditation bodies and regulators, and employers. There can be differences between educational institutions in the way portfolios are developed, submitted, and evaluated, as well as differences between provincial evaluators in the same discipline.

Our analysis has shown several additional needs for ITPs preparing for an evaluation, and we have suggested additional tools and processes required to bridge the gap. Having identified the main shortcomings of the current system regarding the requirements of the regulatory bodies, we have proposed a new model to develop tools and processes that are modular and complementary to the existing information provided by evaluators for their specific profession. In the future, we are planning to evaluate the fit of the model by surveying regulatory bodies across Canada and ITPs who will be the future users of the professional profile-building model.

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