

Academic Requirements and Acceptable Alternatives: *Challenges and Opportunities for the Regulated Professions in Ontario*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Internationally educated people often struggle to meet the academic requirements for licensing in a regulated profession in Ontario. This study, *Academic Requirements and Acceptable Alternatives: Challenges and Opportunities for the Regulated Professions in Ontario*, examines fair-access issues related to those requirements. It focuses principally on 38 professions under the mandate of Ontario's Office of the Fairness Commissioner. The study presents these professions' standard academic requirements, discusses their flexibility in recognizing "acceptable alternatives" to these requirements, and examines fair-access issues for those alternatives.

THE CHALLENGE FOR INTERNATIONALLY EDUCATED PROFESSIONALS

Canada's immigrants often arrive with high levels of education and may have been licensed to practise a profession. But they often find it challenging to become licensed here.

In some cases, the challenge lies with differences in requirements: applicants who practised their profession with an undergraduate degree in their home country may need a graduate degree to practise here. In other cases, applicants have difficulty showing the equivalence of their education.

National and provincial governments, and many regulatory bodies, have worked to bring increased flexibility to the licensing process for the regulated professions. Their efforts have included improvements to the recognition of international credentials, and innovations in competency-based assessment and training.

Increasingly, regulatory bodies are identifying acceptable alternatives for meeting the academic requirements to become licensed. These include alternative ways for applicants to develop competencies and alternative ways in which these competencies can be demonstrated or assessed.

ACCEPTABLE ALTERNATIVES IN ONTARIO PROFESSIONS

The professions' academic requirements vary, from college diplomas, to general BAs, to post-graduate academic or professional degrees.

Almost all professions have a mechanism for accepting alternatives to their standard academic requirements.

Five types of acceptable alternatives that are available in various professions include:

- paper-based assessment of education and experience (available for 10 professions)
- direct assessment of knowledge and skills (e.g., exams) (16 professions)
- self-paced learning (20 professions)
- bridging programs (13 professions)
- advanced standing in academic or professional degree programs (at least 5 professions)

Each type of alternative can help improve applicants' access to licensing, and each also presents challenges. For example, time commitments and costs vary widely, and are often extremely significant.

Some alternatives also face sustainability challenges, due to uncertain or project-based funding.

Nationally, there is a significant correlation between the accessibility of acceptable alternatives and reduced disadvantage for internationally educated professionals.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Acceptable alternatives bring new flexibility to the licensing process, but they do not remove all barriers for internationally educated professionals.

Regulators must still ensure that academic requirements are relevant and necessary to the practice of the profession. Acceptable alternatives must be developed with careful attention to accessibility, affordability and sustainability.

Educational institutions and governments are key partners in sustaining acceptable alternatives and maximizing their fair-access contributions. For lasting impact, programming that helps internationally educated professionals to bridge competency gaps must be better integrated into the core work of post-secondary education. And governments must commit ongoing funding and support participants with adequate financial aid.

The Office of the Fairness Commissioner makes 11 recommendations to regulatory bodies, educational institutions, and government.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO REGULATORY BODIES

- Focus on competencies, not credentials.
- Make assessment more flexible, to recognize the variety of ways that individuals develop professional knowledge and skills. As appropriate, work with national bodies to design and implement alternative approaches to the assessment of professional competencies.
- Collaborate with educational institutions to offer high-quality learning opportunities that enable internationally educated applicants to develop missing competencies and fulfil requirements for licensing. Advocate for improved access to individual courses, bridging programs and advanced-standing opportunities.
- Work with partners to minimize the time and cost associated with acceptable alternatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO POST-SECONDARY EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

- Focus on teaching competencies, not on maintaining traditional program structures.
- Strengthen prior learning assessment and introduce flexibility into educational offerings to better meet diverse learning needs. Improve access to individual courses and advanced standing.
- Integrate bridging and bridging-like programs into the regular business of academic departments, so that this work is no longer isolated and dependent on time-limited project funding.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO GOVERNMENT

- Maintain and enhance funding for foreign-credential-recognition initiatives and bridge training.
- Improve access to financial aid for internationally educated professionals, to cover the whole range of costs associated with the licensing process, from assessments and exams to bridge training.
- Ensure that all relevant departments actively support the successful licensing and employment of immigrant professionals, rather than relying only on departments of citizenship and immigration.
- Through the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, ensure that the post-secondary education system meets the needs of internationally educated learners.

The complete study is available at www.fairnesscommissioner.ca.