Establishing a Pan-Canadian Credential Assessment Centre for Internationally Educated Teachers

Feasibility Study

cmec

Council of Ministers of Education, Canada

Conseil des ministres de l'Éducation (Canada)

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The Registrars for Teacher Certification Canada, a committee established in 1999 at the request of CMEC, exchange information concerning the regulation of the teaching profession throughout Canada. Registrars also coordinate the implementation of the Agreement on Internal Trade for the teaching profession. The committee is composed of the registrars for teacher certification in all provinces and territories.

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FEASIBILITY STUDY

ESTABLISHING A PAN-CANADIAN CREDENTIAL ASSESSMENT CENTRE FOR INTERNATIONALLY EDUCATED TEACHERS

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Also available in French under the title:

Étude de faisabilité: Établissement d'un centre pancanadien d'évaluation des qualifications des enseignantes et enseignants formés à l'étranger

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Section 1 – Introduction

This document summarizes the key findings from a feasibility study on establishing pan-Canadian centres for the assessment of the credentials of internationally educated teachers, conducted in 2013. The study was designed to provide recommendations for a pan-Canadian method of assessing the credentials of internationally educated teachers (IETs). It was guided by four principles identified in the Forum of Labour Market Ministers' Pan-Canadian Framework for the Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Qualifications:

- Fairness

- Transparency

- Timeliness

- Consistency

The study identified commonalities in the current processes and practices for IET credential assessment across Canada and evaluated best practices in other contexts of credential assessment. It then drew upon previous reports, as well as focus groups, to synthesize its findings into a proposed model for the country.

1.1 Summary of findings

The study developed summary profiles for each Canadian province and territory, outlining their respective credential-assessment processes for IETs. It found numerous commonalities among them, specifically in such areas as calculating credit equivalency, document-submission and -verification procedures, control of fraudulent documentation, acceptance of English-language proficiency tests,[1] distance education, and file and data storage.

Inevitably, of course, the study also found differences. These presented themselves in such areas as French-language testing; fees; academic and professional program credit requirements; secondary-school transcript requirements; character references; and document translation.

The study then reviewed four models of international credential recognition that were relevant to IET assessment in Canada: educators in Wales and England; engineers in Canada; nurses in Canada; and engineers in the United States. This review found that there were two key attributes of any successful implementation of a credential-recognition model:

- Consensus from stakeholders

- Long-term planning and monitoring

These attributes demanded strong, consistent communication during model development and following implementation, as well as ongoing monitoring to ensure that the model continued to meet the needs of stakeholders.

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[1] While the tests accepted are fairly consistent, only half of jurisdictions require them.

1.2   Methodology

The draft models were presented to the Pan-Canadian Credential Assessment (PCCA) Subcommittee of the Registrars for Teacher Certification Canada for discussion. A presentation that included feedback from the subcommittee and a recommended model was then made to the Registrars for Teacher Certification Canada.

The registrars's committee discussed the models at length, including modifications to the recommended version, now called the Comprehensive Centre Model. It is based on the various discussions undertaken during the whole process.

From the outset of the project, Quebec indicated that it would not participate in one centre for the whole country, since its process is substantially different from that of the other provinces and territories. It did, however, support efforts to standardize document-verification and credential-assessment procedures, and may be willing to work with other jurisdictions to find convergences between credentialing processes.

Section 2 – Overview of Presented Models

The PCCA Subcommittee and the registrars' committee evaluated four models:

1. Status quo
2. Document Processing Centre
3. Regional Credential Assessment Centres
4. Academic Credential Assessment Centre

2.1 Model 1: Status quo (supplemented by support tools)

Model 1 maintains the status quo, in which each IET candidate applies to the jurisdiction in which he or she wishes to be certified, and each jurisdiction follows its own process for credential assessment. Relevant assessment steps, from document collection to granting of teaching certificates, would remain the responsibility of each jurisdiction.

This model could be enhanced by the development of support tools that might include:

- a database of international teacher-education programs;[2]

- professional development opportunities for credential evaluators;

- webinars and/or workshops that would assist IET applicants; and

- a Web site that would act as a central information clearinghouse for the credential-recognition process across Canada.

The subcommittee noted that one of the chief advantages of this model was that it would likely require no changes to existing legislation. The notion of developing shared assessment tools — in particular the suggested database and professional development opportunities for assessors — was welcomed, although concern was expressed over the logistics of their development and maintenance.

2.2 Model 2: Document Processing Centre

Model 2 allocates the collection and verification of documents as well as communication with applicants to a centralized Document Processing Centre. In this model, all jurisdictions would use a single application form. Applicants would submit required documents to the centre or ask relevant institutions to do so. Once the documents were verified by the centre, they would be forwarded to the jurisdiction to which the IET was applying, along with the application form and a brief report explaining how the documents had been verified.

In this model, all credentialing activities except for document collection and verification would remain the responsibility of the jurisdictions.

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[2] The comparability tables of academic credentials from specific countries currently being developed by CMEC's Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials could be used as a template for such a database.

Subcommittee members were generally in favour of this model. They identified certain functions necessary to meet their needs, such as processing of alternative documents, communication with IETs regarding the documents submitted, and document storage and sharing with jurisdictions. They pointed out that the proposed process would have to demonstrate flexibility in accommodating certification differences between jurisdictions.

2.3 Model 3: Regional Credential Assessment Centres

In this model, jurisdictions would collect application forms and send them to regional assessment centres in Ontario, British Columbia, or Alberta for processing. Quebec would continue to process its own applications and would not accept those of other jurisdictions for assessment. Applicants would pay a fee to the certifying organization in the jurisdiction where they wish to be certified, a portion of which would be paid to the respective assessment centre.

The services provided by the centres could include:

- document collection and verification;
- assessments of academic credentials, language proficiency, and professional standing;
- criminal record checks.

Each jurisdiction could choose which services a regional centre would provide based on need and centre capacity. Some jurisdictions might choose to have the centre complete all of the listed services, while others might choose only one or two. All jurisdictions would remain responsible for granting certification.

In general, subcommittee members felt that this model fell short on three counts. It would not sufficiently increase the efficiency of application processing; it would not advance the intention of the 1994 Agreement on Internal Trade (AIT) for enhanced mobility of people across Canada; and it would not lend itself easily to developing a business model and determining staffing requirements, since it would permit jurisdictions to opt in to services.

Although this model was rejected by the subcommittee, it prompted members to note that, whatever model was used, it would not be advisable to inform applicants through the centre about whether they would meet the certification requirements in a particular jurisdiction. The responsibility of determining whether a candidate meets certification requirements should remain with each jurisdiction.

2.4 Model 4: Academic Credential Assessment Centre

This model is similar to the one in place for engineers in the United States and in development for nurses in Canada. In this model, the centre would be separate from, and responsible to, all participating jurisdictions. IET applicants would pay a fee for the centre's academic credential assessment that would be separate from the fee paid to the certifying organization. Ideally, the centre would sustain itself financially through these fees once it was fully operational.

The centre would be responsible for collecting and verifying all documents, assessing credentials, and determining credit equivalencies. It would then prepare a report for the jurisdiction(s) to which the candidate was applying, which could include elements such as:

- documents received;

- descriptions of courses completed, together with their classification (e.g., teaching methodology course, general academic course) and a calculation of attributable credits;

- description of the institutions in which the applicant completed his or her education and practicum, together with the length of the practicum;

- notes on variations in an IET's application that might be of interest to the jurisdiction (e.g., whether certain records were destroyed); and

- a non-binding recommendation concerning whether the applicant meets certain requirements for certification.

The centre could also support a single on-line "portal" that could collect application forms and any electronic documents and provide links to each jurisdiction's assessment agency. For maximum efficiency, it would be beneficial for jurisdictions to agree on as many elements as possible, such as a single, flexible application form (with different fields based on the jurisdiction(s) to which IETs are applying) and an agreed-upon method of calculating credit equivalency.

The subcommittee was generally in favour of Model 4 and discussed various adaptations that would enhance it, such as communicating with IETs about their documents and developing and maintaining a database of international teacher-education programs. This database would include the recognition status of an institution and whether the credential leads to certification in the country in which it was issued. The subcommittee also suggested that the Document Processing Centre described in Model 2 be combined with the Academic Credential Assessment Centre (Model 4),

although only the academic and some professional credentials (such as the length of the practicum) would be assessed by the centre. Professional suitability requirements could be assessed by the centre for some jurisdictions, while others would opt out of this service due to legislative constraints.

2.5 Summary

Generally, subcommittee members were in favour of the following elements, regardless of which model was ultimately developed:

- a single entry point for the credential-recognition process;

- a single, flexible on-line application form;

- a single centre to collect and validate all or most of the necessary documents (including alternative documents) and to communicate with applicants about missing or improper documents.

Section 3 – Proposed Model

The outcome of the foregoing discussions was a model for a pan-Canadian centre as described below.

3.1 Model description: The Comprehensive Centre Model

Model overview

The model recommended by the subcommittee is a hybrid of models 2 and 4, with some tools from Model 1. For the purposes of this report, this model will be called the Comprehensive Centre Model. It has three important goals:

- finding efficiencies by reducing duplication;
- streamlining the credential-recognition process for IETs;
- supporting smaller jurisdictions in credential assessments.

The centre would provide several general services: accepting application forms, accepting and authenticating documents, and assessing academic and some professional credentials. It would then deliver the documents and a report on the credential assessment to the jurisdiction(s) to which the candidate is applying. It would not perform salary-classification determinations, although some of the information provided by the centre might be useful to salary-classification decisions.

The centre would act as a single entry point for IET applicants in Canada and would therefore be well positioned to offer tools for IETs and assessors. However, the certification decision would remain the responsibility of each jurisdiction.

The centre could be housed in an existing organization, such as the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT), which has the necessary infrastructure in place to support the operations of an international credential-assessment centre. The OCT was suggested as the host organization because, among other things, it:

1. regularly processes a large volume of IET applicants and thus is likely to have the capacity to accept applicants to other Canadian provinces and territories;

2. has a high degree of organizational expertise in credential assessment, including experience with a wide range of countries; and

3. is able to draw upon a pool of employees and potential employees with strong French-language skills, making it well prepared to process French-language applications.

It was suggested that the centre be governed by a board of directors consisting of the registrars from those jurisdictions using it. The centre would have a separate brand and governance structure in order to distinguish it from the jurisdiction/host organization in which it was housed.

The centre would use standardized document-collection, verification, and credential-assessment procedures. It would accept applications from teachers educated outside of Canada, including those applying for certification in Ontario.

Support tools

IETs would have access to the centre's Web site, which would provide information on the credential-recognition process for IETs in Canada, an on-line application form, and webinars or other tools to support the application process for IETs. The centre would also provide some support to jurisdictions (through a separate portal) that could include professional development sessions for jurisdictions and access to a database managed by the centre to assist with understanding the assessment report.

Centre staff would be available to take questions directly from the jurisdictions about the credential-assessment reports, as well as to re-examine complex assessments.

Roles and responsibilities

As summarized briefly above, the centre would have several roles. It would administer a standardized, on-line application form that would be adapted to each jurisdiction, and it would follow standardized primary and alternate document-collection and -verification procedures. These would include:

- statement of professional standing;

- postsecondary degree(s);

- official transcript(s);

- professional degree(s);

- diploma(s);

- language-proficiency test results;

- criminal record check reports/consent forms;

- alternative documents, including the statement of professional standing in lieu; and

- possibly proof of citizenship and/or right to work in Canada, pending a review of the relevant legislation and current jurisdictional procedures.

The centre would be responsible for collecting certified translations for any document not in French or English (either from the applicants or from translation services that it would coordinate), with the cost borne by the applicants. It would also be responsible for all communications with applicants regarding their document-processing status and any missing or improper documents. Questions outside the scope of centre services would be referred to the relevant jurisdiction(s).

The centre would also be responsible for storing physical and electronic documents and providing jurisdictions with access to them on its Web site. This would include sharing of documents in cases where the applicant is applying to multiple jurisdictions. Applicants would also be notified that if they chose to apply to another jurisdiction in the future, they might be required to submit additional documentation.

Finally, the centre would assess applicants' academic and professional courses based on a standard formula for calculating the equivalency between international credits and credits accepted by Canadian jurisdictions. While determining a standard formula for credit equivalencies may prove challenging, doing so would greatly increase pan-Canadian consistency and the centre's efficiency.

The centre would also produce and distribute a report that would be used by jurisdictions to inform their certification decisions. This report would include:

- a list of documents received (with an indication of which ones had been verified);

- a list of courses completed by the applicant (including an indication of which courses were completed by distance education);

- an indication of which courses would be considered academic and which would be considered professional in Canada;

- the number of credits granted per course and the total number of credits obtained;

- information on whether or not the institution and teacher program from which the applicant graduated are recognized and lead to certification in the jurisdiction in which they are located;

- the equivalent degree in Canada for the applicant's international degree;

- the length of the practicum;

- an indication of whether the information reported came from a standard document or an alternative document; and

- instructions on how to access the documents submitted by the applicant (e.g., a link to the files stored on-line).

In the majority of cases, the centre would provide jurisdictions access to their documents when the report was submitted. [Earlier access to professional suitability documents (e.g., criminal record check reports/consent, statements of professional standing) could also be provided if desired.]

The role of the centre could be expanded in future to provide such services as self-assessment tools for IETs, assessment of additional documents and/or applicants for salary purposes, and provision of notes on the application process (e.g., records of communications with institutions and applicants). Furthermore, the centre could collect data on applicants' academic credentials and certification outcomes by jurisdiction. This might reveal opportunities to harmonize academic requirements across jurisdictions.

3.2 Implications of the model

Instituting the Comprehensive Centre Model may have numerous implications for jurisdictions. Expertise and staffing levels would, over time, gravitate toward the centre as it assumed day-to-day responsibility for the credential-assessment process. While the jurisdictions would retain control over determining whether candidates met requirements for certification, everyone would benefit from improved quality and reliability of the credential assessment. The overall process would be more efficient, with reduced processing times for applicants who transition from one jurisdiction to another, and would facilitate the mobility of IETs across Canada. IETs would also benefit from a single entry point for credential assessment, fair and more consistent credential assessments, and the elimination of duplicate efforts when applying to more than one jurisdiction.

3.3 Additional considerations

Several additional items should be considered before implementation, all of which can be addressed in the development of a business case.

Fees

Committee members determined the importance of clarifying the centre's operational costs so as to determine how much funding beyond the application fees would be needed. Most agreed that it would be fair to charge a fee for the centre's services in addition to that charged by jurisdictions, reasoning that the assessment provided by the centre could be used again if the applicant decided to move to another jurisdiction, thereby saving the applicant time and work. Given that fees vary widely by jurisdiction, however, coming to an agreement on an appropriate fee for the centre's services may prove challenging.

The centre's fees would need to be sufficient to support its activities but should not represent an excessive increase for the IETs applying to jurisdictions that currently have low fees. A sufficient volume of low-cost assessments (e.g., for applicants from countries with teacher-education programs and certification requirements similar to those in Canada) would be necessary to keep fees reasonable.

Appeals

Appeals processes differ across jurisdictions, and there are variations in the legislation regarding who must respond to IETs' appeals. Some jurisdictions would therefore prefer that the organization completing the credential assessment (i.e., the centre) respond to appeals — especially since the centralization of assessment expertise over time might erode their own capacity to defend ambiguous or difficult assessments. Others, however, indicated that the organization ultimately responsible for the certification decision should be responsible for defending those decisions in an appeal. Furthermore, if the centre responded to

appeals, this would likely add to operational costs, particularly as centre staff would have to understand the variations in the appeals processes for all jurisdictions.

The relationship between Saskatchewan and World Education Services (WES) may be an appropriate model to use in this regard. If an appeal of a certification decision is launched, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education responds to it, but it may request additional information from WES. Similarly, in the proposed model, jurisdictions would be able to request additional information from the centre in the event of an appeal (including, for example, the number of precedents used in the credit-calculation/document-verification procedures). In ambiguous or difficult cases, independent reviews could be requested from another academic credential assessment service, such as the one at the *ministère de l'Immigration, de la Diversité et de l'Inclusion* that Quebec uses.

Implementation approaches

Before full implementation, it would be advisable to test centre functions on a small scale. Several approaches could be taken, each with advantages and disadvantages.

a. Pre-test approach: The centre would test the new standardized processes on a small number of past applications and compare its decisions with those made originally. Any apparent deficiencies in the processes could then be corrected before accepting new applications. This is a low-cost, low-risk approach to testing, but it would not test the centre's ability to collect documents from applicants or communicate with them.

b. Pilot-test approach: The centre would begin accepting applications from a few jurisdictions before full

implementation. This approach would test all the processes on a comparatively small number of applicants and identify ways to improve them before full implementation. It could be supplemented by a short survey of some applicants and additional feedback collected from the centre and the selected jurisdictions. The advantage of this approach lies in testing all processes, including how they work together. However, as the test would cover only some jurisdictions' applicants, complications might arise when other jurisdictions' applicants are included.

c. Phased approach: The centre could assume some of the proposed processes for all jurisdictions, and once they are operating smoothly, begin assuming more of them (e.g., begin by offering document collection and verification and then proceed to offer credential assessments). The advantage of this approach is that it may be faster to begin with a small number of processes, particularly if legislative or human resource changes must be implemented to move forward with additional processes. The centre could begin by offering the processes that can be implemented relatively quickly, such as application acceptance and document review. A disadvantage of this approach, however, is that it may be difficult to obtain approval for a centre that provides limited services within some jurisdictions, particularly if its fees are high.

These approaches can also be combined. For example, it might be advisable to begin with the pre-test approach and then move on to either the pilot-test or phased approach. Similarly, the committee could decide to implement a phased pilot approach, in which the centre begins by offering some processes to some jurisdictions before offering all processes to those jurisdictions and then all processes to all jurisdictions.

Governance

The centre's governance structure will be an important consideration. To ensure that it remains independent of the host organization and accountable to the jurisdictions it serves, it is suggested that it be guided by a board of directors composed of one registrar from each jurisdiction using the centre's services. Positions (e.g., chair, vice-chair, etc.) would rotate regularly between jurisdictions, and registrars from other jurisdictions could join the board as non-voting observers.

The following preliminary roles and responsibilities are suggested for the board:

- develop the centre's standards and procedures for credential assessment, as well as for communication with jurisdictions and IET applicants;

- assume responsibility for the quality of the credential assessments conducted by the centre;

- represent the needs and concerns of the jurisdictions using the centre's services

- communicate with stakeholders (such as teacher-representative organizations) when necessary/advisable;

- manage the contract with the host organization to provide assessment services.

Regarding the centre's relationship with the host organization, the best use of existing resources would likely result from contracting the host organization to provide IET credential assessments. That way, staff

management, hiring, and resource use and development would largely be the responsibility of the host organization, with guidance from the board when appropriate. It is suggested, however, that the centre be branded separately from the host organization to reduce confusion among applicants. Thus the centre would need a separate Web site and contact information.

Comprehensive Centre Model challenges

As with any document-processing and/or credential-assessment model, the Comprehensive Centre Model presents some challenges. Specifically, the jurisdictions' control over costs and setting priorities for application processing would inevitably diminish with the establishment of a centralized process, and developing standard credit-equivalency calculations between jurisdictions could prove difficult. The former issue would, to some extent, be addressed by having a governing board that represented jurisdictional interests. The latter is more challenging, but is well worth pursuing, since it would deliver significant efficiency to the process.

Section 4 – Next Steps

Realizing the Comprehensive Centre Model requires two preliminary steps: 1) developing communications plans for government decision makers, and 2) developing a business case for the model.

Communications plans could be based on the information provided in this report. The business case would require developing terms of reference (based on this report) and securing funding.

The business case would address the following topics:

1. The centre's governance structure, such as the number of representatives on the board of directors and their roles and responsibilities;

2. Staffing levels;

3. Fees;

4. The appropriate implementation model;

5. The centre's role in the appeals processes;

6. Document storage and sharing processes;

7. The tools developed to support the centre and their associated costs.

Completion of the business case would be followed by the development of the processes and materials needed for the centre to function. This would comprise everything from creation of a standardized application form to formalization of the relationship between the jurisdictions and the centre. A significant part of this work would involve the development of the centre's assessment policies and procedures, including standard document verification procedures, policies regarding acceptable alternative documents and acceptable teacher-education programs, and procedures for credit-equivalency calculations. As well, jurisdictions would have reached a consensus on the content of the assessment report, as well as on the Web site, branding, and other communications.

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