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Chair

The Honourable Andrew Telegdi

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● (1110)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Andrew Telegdi (Kitchener—Waterloo, Lib.)): I call this meeting of the citizenship and immigration committee to order.

Starting off, we have an item of business. We have enough people here for a quorum.

The subcommittee on agenda and procedure of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration has the honour to present its second report, which states that Gurmant Grewal, member of Parliament; officials from the Department of Citizenship and Immigration; and representatives from the Canadian Bar Association be invited to appear on Thursday, March 24, 2005, to speak on Bill C-283; that the names of the members travelling in April 2005 be submitted to the clerk no later than March 21, 2005; that the clerk be authorized to schedule Ottawa-based witnesses during the month of May 2005; that the analyst prepare a summary evidence on recognition of international experience and credentials of immigrants and family reunification before the summer adjournment; and that the committee discuss the motion of Meili Faille and Diane Ablonczy from 1 p.m. to 1:30 p.m. on Tuesday, March 22, 2005.

Is this so moved?

Mr. Bill Siksay (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): I so move.

(Motion agreed to)

● (1115)

The Chair: I'd like to welcome the students from Concordia University. They're here with David MacDonald, a former distinguished member of Parliament.

Welcome.

Mr. David MacDonald (As an Individual): These are students from Concordia University, from the school of community and public affairs. They're studying both national and international politics, so I hope you learn something.

The Chair: Well, the committee is actually going to be embarking on a cross-Canada tour, so we're going to be going out to the east coast as well. That's for the members of the audience.

We'll be dealing with issues such as a new Citizenship Act. We're going to be dealing with what the regulations are for people becoming citizens, loss of citizenship, adoptions. We'll also be dealing with the citizenship oath, whether it's appropriate. The students might want to make some input into that. As well, we'll be dealing with international credential recognition. That's for people who come to Canada with degrees from other countries and in many cases have trouble getting recognition for their credentials. We'll also be dealing with the issue of family reunification.

Now, this tour is going to take place in April, and we're going right across Canada. So you're free to talk to the clerk. He will let you know when we're up in your area, and maybe you can attend.

Today we're going to be dealing with international credentials. I welcome Lisa Little from the Canadian Nurses Association; Jeff Poston from the Canadian Pharmacists Association; Pauline McNaughton from the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks; and from the Conference Board of Canada, Michael Bloom.

Welcome.

We're going to have presentations of up to seven minutes from you, after which the committee members will ask questions. We will rotate from party to party. The first round of questions and answers will be seven minutes. Once every party has had their opportunity, we will be rotating between the opposition and the government side, and then it will be five minutes.

Ms. Little, do you want to proceed?

Mrs. Lisa Little (Health Human Resources Consultant, Canadian Nurses Association): Thank you very much, and good morning.

The Canadian Nurses Association appreciates this opportunity to speak on the importance of foreign credential recognition. My name is Lisa Little, and I am the health human resources consultant with the Canadian Nurses Association.

The Canadian Nurses Association, along with the Registered Psychiatric Nurses of Canada, the Canadian Association of Licensed Practical Nurse Regulators, the Canadian Federation of Nurses Union, the Canadian Healthcare Association, and provincial, territorial, and federal governments and others are currently engaged in a diagnostic study funded by the foreign credential recognition program of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada to examine the policies and practices with regard to licensure or registration of the three regulated nursing groups and their integration into the workforce.

The preliminary findings from this work suggest several areas for improvement. One, the various stakeholders, including the federal government, and provincial and territorial governments, regulatory bodies, employers, and unions, etc., are not working together in a coordinated manner. Information and communication on this issue is not clear or consistent and is scattered across many sources. The result is a complex maze through which internationally educated nurses must navigate.

Second, all stakeholders report that language and culture remain one of the primary challenges for internationally educated nurses interested in working in Canada. They report that one of the best ways to address this is through bridging programs here in Canada, which offer courses on language specific for nursing and on cultural adaptation, as well as on the role of nursing in Canada. However, there are not enough of these programs across Canada and they are not standardized, ranging from one week in length to nine months in duration. And they are prohibitively costly for internationally educated nurses.

Third, the volume of internationally educated nurses applying to one or more of the provincial or territorial nursing regulatory bodies has increased threefold since 1999, adding to the workload and processing. In addition, the licensure process is complex and offers areas for improvement through enhanced coordination, collaboration, and centralization.

The Canadian Nurses Association continues to believe in a principle-based approach to the regulation and integration of international nurse applicants into the Canadian health system. CNA presented this principle-based approach in its presentation to this committee last year.

CNA has defined six principles, which I would now like to review briefly and to provide more information on how they pertain to internationally educated nurses.

The first principle speaks to the primary objective of Canadian nursing regulatory bodies when they're assessing the eligibility of internationally educated nurses for licensure, that is, to ensure that nurses being granted a licence to practise possess the competencies to provide safe, competent, and ethical nursing practice.

The second is consistency. Requirements for initial licensure of internationally educated nurses should be consistent and equivalent across Canada. They should also be consistent and equivalent with requirements for nurses educated in Canada.

The third principle is competencies and credentials. The assessment for licensure should employ various strategies, such as prior learning assessment and recognition, and consider internationally educated nurses' competencies and experience, as well as educational credentials.

The fourth is fairness and access. The process of assessment for eligibility for nursing licensure should be fair, timely, and transparent. Applicants are entitled to information as to the status of their applications and the basis for decisions related to licensure.

Principle five is disclosure. Internationally educated nurses seeking to work in Canada are entitled to information on the separate and distinct processes for applying for provincial or territorial nursing licensure, Canadian immigration, and nursing employment. We believe this information should be made available to them before they come to Canada.

The final principle is multiple responsibilities and collaboration. The successful integration of internationally educated nurses into Canada requires collaboration among the various stakeholders, including those that I mentioned previously.

● (1120)

CNA recognizes that this principles-based approach will require leadership and investment by government and others. The CNA proposes that the federal government, first, fund the development and dissemination of centralized electronic information targeted at internationally educated nurses and other health professionals; second, provide support for nursing and other health professional regulatory bodies to offset the increased demand to process international applicants; third, fund the development of an infrastructure to achieve a national approach to the recognition of foreign workers' qualifications and their integration into the workforce; fourth, support the development of standardized bridging programs in Canada for internationally educated nurses; and finally, provide funding support for internationally educated nurses to enroll in these bridging programs.

Clearly, the assessment of internationally educated nurses for licensure in Canada is complex. There are improvements to be made to ensure that each immigrant achieves their full potential. These improvements must be made within a framework of ensuring patient safety, and all of this must be done within a national health human resource strategy that coordinates employment, education, social, health, and immigration policies to enhance the productivity of all nurses.

CNA is committed to moving forward on this issue.

We thank you for your time.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we will go on to Mr. Poston.

Dr. Jeff Poston (Executive Director, Canadian Pharmacists Association): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to present to you today.

My name is Jeff Poston. I am the executive director of the Canadian Pharmacists Association.

For those of you unfamiliar with the association, the Canadian Pharmacists Association is the national voluntary organization for pharmacists, committed to providing leadership for pharmacists in all areas of practice and to improving the health of Canadians.

Before I focus directly on the needs of the internationally trained pharmacy graduates—I'm going to refer to them as IPGs during the presentation—let me give you some brief background. Currently in Canada we have a shortage of about 7% to 9% of the workforce in pharmacy. We're about 2,000 to 2,500 pharmacists short. The average vacancy rate in hospital pharmacy is about 13%. This is at a time when concerns about the safe, appropriate, and cost-effective use of medication is at an all-time high and when numerous reports, including Romanow and Kirby, have pointed to the potential role for pharmacists in solving some of the problems.

International pharmacy graduates have always been a part of the pharmacist workforce in Canada, and I believe they always will be. In 2004, 38% of the candidates who successfully registered with the Pharmacy Examining Board of Canada, PEBC, and who then became eligible for licensure in Canada were foreign trained. It's important that we continue to balance Canada's short- and long-term labour needs with the need to ensure the professional competence of pharmacists and their ability to deliver safe and high-quality care.

Looking at it another way—and we exclude Quebec because it is not part of the Pharmacy Examining Board of Canada's assessment process—Canadian pharmacy graduates only made up about two-thirds of the candidates qualifying for licensure. We believe that such a high dependency on IPGs to meet our labour force needs is both risky and not sustainable in the long term. This strategy relies on Canada maintaining salaries that are competitive internationally and attractive to IPGs.

I'd now like to move on to briefly describe the process facing internationally trained pharmacists wishing to practise in Canada, some of their specific challenges, and what we believe needs to be done. To become licensed as a pharmacist in Canada, foreign-trained pharmacists and Canadian graduates have to satisfy the requirements of the Pharmacy Examining Board of Canada, plus meet any provincial requirements, including tests for proficiency in either English or, in Quebec, French, as well as some other provincial requirements.

There are four steps for international pharmacy graduates becoming registered with PEBC and therefore eligible for licensure in Canada. The four assessment steps are, first, document evaluation to show that they've graduated from an appropriate degree program; second, an evaluating examination to demonstrate basic knowledge of pharmacy, pharmaceutical, and medical sciences; and third, a qualifying exam that is split into two parts. Part one is based on multiple-choice questions to test practical and clinical knowledge, and part two is an objective/subjective clinical examination; that is, candidates are examined in 15 simulated practice situations involving standardized patients or health care professionals to test their ability to deal with common or critical practice problems.

If you look at figure 1 in the material we submitted, we can see that there has been substantial growth since 1995, and particularly since the year 2000, in the number of foreign-trained pharmacy graduates entering the assessment system. We clearly have a situation where not all of the candidates who pass the document evaluation are successful in the evaluating exam, and not everyone who passes the evaluating exam is successful in the qualifying exam. The qualifying examination is particularly challenging for foreign-trained pharmacists compared to Canadian graduates.

In addition, once candidates have successfully passed the PEBC assessment process, they must then meet the requirements of the individual province in which they practise. As I said, this usually includes language proficiency, often a jurisprudence exam, and some clerkship requirements.

Clearly, successful candidates have to overcome a series of hurdles aimed at ensuring appropriate competencies. While some may see the process as somewhat onerous, evidence from licensing bodies supports the need for the process, but also points to the need to provide foreign-trained pharmacists with appropriate help and support.

● (1125)

A limited number of programs exist to support IPGs in preparing for the PEBC assessment, and for practice in Canada. There's a well-known and relatively successful program in the pharmacy bridging course offered by the University of Toronto. Like nursing, these courses are relatively few in number and vary considerably in content.

We would recommend that support for IPGs be strengthened in at least three areas. First, we need more funds for university programs, bridging programs tailored to meet the needs of internationally trained pharmacy graduates to help them address the various components of the licensing process. We also need funds for additional practice sites, particularly in hospitals since such sites help foreign trained pharmacy graduates adjust to pharmacy practice standards in Canada.

We also need funds for grants and scholarships to support individual foreign-trained pharmacists so that they can gain access to the education and training programs. In addition to better supporting IPGs, we would also recommend that greater investment be made then in creating places for Canadian high school graduates wishing to enter university programs in pharmacy. We turn many away. Funding is also needed to support and to improve health human resource planning for pharmacy.

Thank you very much. I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.

● (1130)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we're going to go to Ms. McNaughton.

Ms. Pauline McNaughton (Executive Director, Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks): Good morning. I'm here from the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks. I'm the executive director of the centre. I'd like to address the barrier, the challenges related to language proficiency.

Language proficiency in English or French is key to the success of newcomers seeking to live and work in Canada. According to the longitudinal survey of immigrants to Canada that was done in 2003, 70% of immigrants reported problems in finding employment, and of these, 22% cited language as the most serious problem. Forty per cent of immigrants who tried to access education and training also reported problems, and language was most frequently cited by 27% as the most serious problem in accessing education and training.

According to the Knowledge Mattersreport issued by HRSDC in 2003, language fluency is one of the seven key determinants for the successful integration of immigrants.

How language proficiency is determined by employers, by regulatory bodies, and by the skilled worker immigration process itself is a high-stakes situation for both immigrants and prospective immigrants to Canada, and fairness is of paramount importance. To ensure fairness in this process, the Government of Canada must provide leadership and direction, tools, and resources to make this process as ethical, fair, and consistent as possible.

Canada has a great advantage over many other countries because it already has a national language standard in English and French developed by Citizenship and Immigration Canada in 1996. It's called Canadian Language Benchmarks,and it is available in English and French. The benchmarks are used to describe, to measure, and to recognize, in a standard way, the second language proficiency of adult immigrants and prospective immigrants for living and working in Canada.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada also established the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks in 1998, in partnership with most provincial governments, as a national not-for-profit organization to support this national standard through policy guidelines, research, and development.

Some fear that the use of the Canadian language benchmarks might result in gatekeeping, that opportunities will be denied to some individuals who don't measure up. This is not necessarily the case, and the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks works hard to ensure that the benchmarks are used to help determine exactly what levels are required for success. Certainly, artificial barriers that are now in place are more detrimental and unfair than a system based on a clear description of language levels needed and attained.

The impact of the Canadian language benchmarks and adult language training for newcomers has been profound in both federal and provincially funded language training programs. All stakeholders can now speak a common language in the English as a second language and French as a second language community and in the wider immigrant and immigrant-serving community.

The potential of the entire Canadian language benchmark initiative in assisting newcomers to Canada in reaching their personal and professional goals has only just begun to be realized. The Canadian language benchmarks provide a clear measurable standard for use in the workplace. Their implementation into the labour market is under way but needs considerable support to achieve the goals necessary to make a substantial difference.

The benchmarks help employers understand the language requirements of a specific job; they help employers recruit, hire, and train to meet job requirements; they are easy to understand; and they have companion tests and training recommendations. Employers and post-secondary institutions can use the benchmarks to determine exactly what levels are required for success. The benchmarks help newcomers make informed decisions regarding training and employment opportunities. Newcomers can navigate through the complexities and prerequisites and screening processes armed with a clear understanding of the requirements and documentation of their own language proficiency.

Significant achievements have been made in recent years to make the Canadian language benchmarks the recognized national standard for the labour market.

● (1135)

The new Canadian English Language Benchmark Assessment for Nurses, CELBAN, was funded by federal and provincial governments over the last couple of years. It's designed to assess the English language proficiency of internationally educated nurses who are applying for licensure in the nursing profession in Canada. Lisa spoke about some of the challenges in the different provincial systems; this is one huge step forward, because it provides a consistent, national, language assessment tool. It's endorsed by most regulatory authorities across the country. Five new testing centres are opening in April and May in Vancouver, Edmonton, and the Greater Toronto Area.

An online readiness self-assessment tool, funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada under the new enhanced language training initiative, is also going to be launched this spring for internationally educated nurses—both those in Canada, as well as those overseas—so they can prepare for the CELBAN test. They can find out how ready they are and prepare even before they arrive in Canada.

The centre has also published a guide for trades and professional organizations on how to develop an occupation-specific language assessment tool using the benchmarks, and a growing number of post-secondary and training institutions are benchmarking occupation-specific programs and courses to help support immigrants in the successful participation in training. A number of the bridging programs in Alberta, in Ontario, and in British Columbia are also using the benchmarks. A growing number of employers and sector councils are using the benchmarks to help inform training and development, as well as hiring and recruitment processes.

A new initiative now under way at the centre, funded by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, is to bridge the Canadian language benchmarks to HRSDC's national essential skills for the workplace, so it's bridging two national government standards to create a synergy and to help them support newcomers.

The centre is working with the Canadian Tourism Human Resources Council to develop occupational language analyses of tourism occupations based on essential skills profiles and national occupational classifications, so it unifies those three national standards. Bridging the benchmarks and the essential skills creates a better understanding of the skills newcomers and immigrants need to reach their employment goals.

The key recommendations we have for you today are essentially that the federal government departments, such as Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, and others, work together with the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks to establish the benchmarks as the national standard for describing, measuring, and recognizing second language proficiency of adult immigrants and prospective immigrants in educational, training, community, and workplace settings; to promote the recognition and use of the Canadian language benchmarks as the national standard for industry; to improve the functioning of the labour market through the talent, skills, and abilities that immigrants bring with them to Canada; to develop an expanded Canadian language benchmarks national assessment system to support the use of the benchmarks in education, training, and the labour market; and finally, to fast-track the development of occupational language analyses based on the essential skills profiles, in partnership with sector councils.

The idea is to take those occupational language analyses and develop an online database linked to the essential skills profiles so there's ready access to standardized information regarding language proficiency levels for all stakeholders, including immigrants, prospective immigrants, employers, sector councils, regulatory bodies, career counsellors, immigrant-serving agencies, and language training providers.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next we will go on to Mr. Bloom.

Mr. Michael Bloom (Executive Director, Strategic Projects and Initiatives, and Director, Education and Learning, Conference Board of Canada): Thank you.

I'm Michael Bloom, executive director of strategic projects and initiatives and director of education and learning at the Conference Board.

I'd like to start by situating the issue from the perspective of the Conference Board as a national organization that has an abiding interest in the competitiveness and prosperity of the country.

To us, immigration is a central facet of a human capital strategy for the country, and the issues associated with immigration are centrally important and becoming increasingly important to the country as the environmental factors play upon us, many of which you're familiar with. I'll quickly touch on some: the aging population issues around competition for talent in what is an increasingly competitive global marketplace; the issues around foreign direct investment, putting pressure on our people to be more productive; and the increase in quality of human capital in other countries as skills and education systems improve elsewhere. It's noteworthy that China is now looking to North America and Europe to repatriate people to work in their economy. That kind of situation is going to add additional pressures on us moving forward.

In light of the pressures, we have at the same time to recognize internally that we have an issue around the stock and flow of people. The stock of people are all those people who work in our labour market, 16 million or so. That stock has to be continually maintained, as it were, through skills development and lifelong learning. We do as much of that as we can, and more needs to be done, no doubt. By the way, 20% of the people in our labour market are immigrants, compared with only 10% in the United States. At the same time, we know that the single most important source of a new flow into this labour market is the immigrant population. They are providing a very significant number of the highly skilled folk.

Of course, that leads to the issue of the credential recognition failures, or the limitations of success, perhaps we should say, because we do have some successes in this country. By our calculation, the cost to immigrants of being either unemployed or underemployed because their credentials are not recognized adequately in Canada is between $3.4 billion and $5 billion a year. That combination of unemployment and underemployment is partly a product of the failure of the country to produce systemic solutions to credentialing issues. We've heard already today—and you're going to hear many more—examples of successes or partial successes we've had in the last decade and lots of ideas to move this forward. I'm going to offer a couple myself.

Overall we need to recognize strategically that there is an issue between the functioning of the federal system and the work of the provinces and territories. You know that the bulk of immigrants go to Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal. Toronto today has about half of all the immigrants coming to Canada. So the issues around how best to accommodate the credentials of immigrants are necessarily tied to a strategy that will connect the federal government with the provinces and the great cities of Canada.

Last year the Conference Board had an opportunity to facilitate a meeting between the Government of Ontario and the Government of Canada to talk about how to improve that relationship, and I know there are negotiations and discussions currently under way. That issue of finding a way to connect those levels of government is central to finding really large-scale solutions.

Before I make a few recommendations, I would point out that in fact several sector councils have already achieved a level of success here in moving forward on foreign-credential recognition. One of them you've heard about, the Tourism Sector Council, and they are making great progress. Two others I'll mention to you.

● (1140)

The Software Human Resource Council, Paul Swinwood's group, is currently engaged in starting an initiative in this area. Of course, we know immigrants have quadrupled their participation within the ICT sector of our economy, so they are an important feed into the software sector of our economy. I think it's a very important initiative from the software council.

I also would point out the Canadian Aviation Maintenance Council, CAMC. Very interestingly, they have connected the PLAR issue with foreign credential recognition, and they now have a program with a long but worthy title: prior learning and foreign credential assessment and recognition system.

The idea of linking those two pieces is, I think, an excellent one. It recognizes there are credentialing issues for those who gain domestic credentials and those who have domestic experience as well. I think putting those two pieces together is the way forward, sector by sector, to have a really effective strategy.

So what would we do about it? There are a number of things to do—and I am sure you are going to be hearing a longer list of recommendations, over the days, than anyone can hope to implement—but we think some of the places to look are around the language training issue.

While immigrants are often in a position to obtain some language training, we think it does not often bring them up to job standard—the level of language proficiency that allows them to perform a job at full competence. In the language of the international adult literacy survey, it would be level three on that scale, if you've looked at that work.

So there's a challenge there. Currently more than 40% of Canadians are not at that language standard, so there's a real challenge there. I mentioned the settlement issue, connecting the cities with the provinces, and the big cities especially—Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal. I am not excluding others, but those are where the bulk of the people go.

Looking at standardization of the systems for recognition, linking the sector councils is an important move forward. We also feel we may be able to do more outside the country, in the way of letting potential immigrants we want to attract know what the labour market looks like and what the requirements are for skill and language, and then giving them more help than they are getting today to prepare them. We do not want to discourage them. We want to encourage them to come. Giving them more service abroad and helping them find where they would best fit in the labour market, even before they arrive, would be very helpful.

It may be that we could focus on a few professions or occupations to pilot a system. If we say we have a limited capacity internationally to operate in this way, perhaps we could take some of the professions or occupations most under pressure and pilot a system to improve that.

Finally, I mentioned the point about linking this to prior learning assessment and recognition. I think it will be a tremendous help if we have an integrated credentialing strategy in the country. We know a lot is being done. Very often the systems do not exclude immigrants, but they don't encourage them adequately; the challenge will be to change the culture in a lot of our credentialing and educational institutions so they embrace immigrants as a central part of their mandate. That, of course, may have some implications for the way those organizations are funded moving forward.

Thank you.

● (1145)

The Chair: Thank you very much. Now we are going to go on our seven-minute question and answer session.

Madame Grewal.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for appearing before us. Thank you for your presentations.

As an immigrant to Canada, I know firsthand the red tape, the bureaucratic nonsense, involved in getting foreign academic credentials recognized in this country. As a new immigrant, you have unbelievable difficulties and stresses in settling into your new home, in finding housing, schooling, and family care, and simply in becoming accustomed to a new environment here.

After your education and work experience got you into this country, not being able to work in your chosen field is what immigrants often face. In your opinion, what can the federal government do to speed up the recognition of foreign credentials?

Too often immigrants are coming to Canada with false expectations. They have been misled to believe our immigration officials—that their degrees and experience will be transferable to Canada and that they will have no problem finding employment here. These people often are already doing quite well financially in their own hometown, but they come to Canada and end up driving a cab or doing janitorial work. Some even end up returning home.

Based upon the immigrants you have spoken to, would you say immigrants have been misled about what they will encounter once they are here in Canada?

● (1150)

Ms. Pauline McNaughton: I can address that from the language aspect. I think many newcomers are misled, or they misunderstand, because the information is not there. Or perhaps underestimating or overestimating language proficiency skills is also a problem for many immigrants in terms of thinking that they're more ready than they are. That's a problem related to, again, lack of information.

I would support some of the ideas that Lisa and others expressed about getting information online or in other venues available before people come and making sure it is coordinated in terms of what is required at the provincial level and national level, if necessary. So having that information available overseas so that they can better prepare before they come to better anticipate the time it's going to take them, I think, is crucial.

Mr. Michael Bloom: I would second that. I don't think people are being intentionally misinformed, but I think there's a lack of understanding on the part of our officials about how the labour market works here. They may not have expertise about the language qualifications to actually work successfully in a profession or occupation, which is different from being able to function inside a community.

More and more I think we can do two things. One, we can create a more comprehensive online information base. For example, I think an immigrant would be interested in knowing how many immigrants from the country they are coming from have obtained employment of a kind they want in Canada, and where. We could aggregate data while respecting the privacy of individuals very easily. This would give people an understanding of how that labour market is functioning and give them a more realistic assessment of their odds of finding the work they want.

Secondly, I think we should be more proactive with immigrants, or prospective immigrants, by saying that if we find somebody whose skills we like, who has a qualification we like, and they do not have the language proficiency, we need to invest in them before they come. We need to spend more money on them where they are, before they leave, to get them to a level. We could combine that with a better system for evaluating their credentials before they leave the country they're leaving. This would give us an idea of understanding the kinds of needs. We could do a diagnostic, do some development there, and link up provincially in Canada with the appropriate groups to say, okay, this person needs more training when they arrive, and not leave people in a kind of limbo as they come in. I think being proactive can really help.

Dr. Jeff Poston: I would agree with most of that. I think we certainly see within pharmacies that we have good online information available. The National Association of Pharmacy Regulatory Authorities website has good comprehensive information on what's required to get licensed. The PEBC website has good information.

But I think often it's not so much being misled, but the extent of change that folk may need to go through in order to become integrated culturally and into professional practice settings in Canada is often underestimated. A major issue is language fluency. Of the few bridging programs that we have with respect to pharmacy in Canada, a lot of their work is focused around developing fluency to the level that's required to be able to practise in professional situations. I think one of the major things to do is have better information out of country, but we also need further investment in bridging programs to work with graduates when they're here to develop their practice skills.

Mrs. Lisa Little: I support the comments already made, but I would also add that we should clearly articulate to people that there are three separate processes. The immigration process is separate from the registration or licensure for a regulated health profession, which is separate from employment. A lot of people in the work that we've just done in our diagnostic study—we did focus groups of internationally educated nurses across the country and we had an enormously huge response rate—thought the minute they got through the immigration process they could not only work as a nurse, but could have a job immediately. They didn't understand that the processes were very different.

The other thing I would support in terms of speeding this up is to move to a national approach for assessment. Many of the individuals we went through with the focus group said they had applied perhaps to be a registered nurse, then realized they didn't actually meet the qualifications for that—their education had not prepared them for that. After that whole time they went through the process and realized they were not successful, they then applied to perhaps be a licensed practical nurse. If we had someway to coordinate that, and if it were centralized, we could look at an individual and say, “You are best suited for competencies for this particular nursing group, but not this one”. We would save a lot of time and inefficiencies for them.

● (1155)

The Chair: Next we go to Madame Faille.

Ms. Meili Faille (Vaudreuil-Soulanges, BQ): Monsieur Clavet will be speaking on that subject.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Roger Clavet (Louis-Hébert, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would also like to thank the witnesses for taking part in this meeting with the members of the committee.

Of course, the situation in Quebec is different, for example with respect to the Pharmacy Examining Board of Canada, but in any event, the question is addressed to all those who work as pharmacists. I was reading in your study that another study had been prepared by the Ontario College of Pharmacists. In connection with disciplinary matters, it was found that 63 percent of pharmacist errors were made by international graduates. This is a huge figure, and it is a matter of concern. It also pointed out that 29 percent of international graduates were unable to comply with the standards of practice, whereas this figure was 14 percent for all pharmacists.

I wonder what criteria would generate such a large gap between so-called “international pharmacists” and others. Has the Canadian Pharmacists Association found an explanation for these significant differences between internationally trained pharmacists and the others? What is the basis for stating such a major difference?

[*English*]

Dr. Jeff Poston: I think the main issues you see are around the ability of foreign-trained pharmacists to actually become integrated into the practice situation. The particular study you mentioned by the Ontario College of Pharmacists was instrumental in the College of Pharmacists going to the University of Toronto to develop what was the first large-scale bridging program we have.

A lot of the issues that make up the statistics and that come forward at that board are issues around patient-caring counters, where there's often a misunderstanding that may be tied back to fluency or to differences in cultural practice between the culture we have in Canada and that of the person's place of origin. It was the discovery of these differences that has led to bridging programs being developed in pharmacy, but we don't have anywhere near enough of them at the moment to begin to focus on and address these issues.

One of the common problems is that often—it goes back to the earlier question—we find people perhaps become registered and hope to practise simply in their own cultural community within Canada but then find, for employment reasons, they have to try to work elsewhere. That creates challenges.

Honestly, I think the solution is going to be further development of bridging programs and also the improvement of the accessibility of those sorts of programs to foreign-trained pharmacists.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Roger Clavet: I would add that the information supplied to us would appear to indicate, at least from the point of view of the Canadian Pharmacists Association, that there are very rigorous and perhaps overly strict demands and criteria, given the emphasis that is placed on finding qualified internationally trained pharmacy graduates, which, according to you, is designed to prevent this type of error.

For example, how come we are so lenient towards cyberpharmacies in Manitoba, with anyone able to use the telephone or a computer to readily sell prescription drugs to Americans, and relatively permissive about it when compared to our attitude towards pharmacists of foreign origin?

[*English*]

Dr. Jeff Poston: Actually, from a Canadian Pharmacists Association's perspective, we oppose the cross-border drug trade between Canada and the United States. We really see it as simply another way of exporting the Canadian health care system to the United States. Certainly, we have sympathy with U.S. citizens who don't have adequate drug coverage, but we don't believe the solution to that is for Canada to try to be the drugstore for North Americans. We certainly have concerns about some of the patient care issues and the impact that sort of trade would have on access to drugs in Canada. That is a concern and we wouldn't see that.

I think the standards that are set up by the Pharmacy Examining Board of Canada and by provincial regulatory authorities are fair. They are focused on ensuring that pharmacists are competent, that patients are protected, and that drug use is safe and appropriate. We need to maintain that standard. Many of the foreign-trained graduates are able to meet that standard, but there is certainly a group who need further help in doing so.

● (1200)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: I have a question for the Canadian Nurses Association. Do you represent Quebec as well?

[*English*]

Mrs. Lisa Little: No.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: I am now addressing the Canadian Pharmacists Association. Do you represent Quebec as well?

[*English*]

Dr. Jeff Poston: No, we have pharmacy members in Quebec, but the system around the licensing of pharmacies in Quebec is managed by l'Ordre des pharmaciens du Québec. Whereas they actually sit on the Pharmacy Examining Board of Canada and have an interest in national standards, they have a separate system around recognition of foreign-trained pharmacists in Quebec.

About 6% to 7% of the pharmacy graduates from the two schools in Quebec actually sit the Pharmacy Examining Board of Canada; that's a usual average. It's that sort of percentage who sit and thereby become eligible for licensure in other parts of Canada.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: My question is now for the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks. In language training, do you work together with the Quebec issue table?

[*English*]

Ms. Pauline McNaughton: Yes. Since the organization was created in 1998 we've always had an observer member from Quebec, which is their choice of how they want to represent themselves. That's been consistent and unbroken over the years.

Quebec has its own French benchmarks, but they are almost identical or they're very similar in levels. They have the same 12 benchmark levels, the same four skill areas, and there's a strong correlation between the two sets of benchmarks. We have worked with them collaboratively, sharing resources, and we are hoping to work with them more closely in the development of national online assessment tools that certainly would result in the same benchmark levels, even though the benchmarks are somewhat distinct. We have a working relationship with them.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Your time has expired; you've gone over by 45 seconds.

Mr. Siksay.

Mr. Bill Siksay: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have a question for Mr. Bloom. I was interested in your comment that China is taking initiative to recruit and repatriate emigrants from China. I wondered if you might expand on that a little bit.

I'm particularly concerned in light of testimony we had a few weeks ago from Professor DeVoretz of the Metropolis project, who has been looking at the settlement and integration of Chinese immigrants in Vancouver and shows that it's not going very well, especially since the refugee movement post-Tiananmen. A lot of people are very frustrated with their situation in Canada and are actively considering returning to China once they get their citizenship, for instance, or establishing here so that their kids have something here. But there are lots of questions about it.

I wonder if you could tell us a little more about what you see China doing in this area.

Mr. Michael Bloom: My response is going to be first that we haven't done a systematic study of this, so the basis for my remark and my response is what I've read and heard anecdotally from others.

There is something going on here that I think I can say something about. It's not just China; we've seen in Europe a similar phenomenon. As countries are finding skill shortages in their economies, where they were once net exporters of people, now they're looking to turn it around.

There's always been, in the case of China, a certain number of people who've come to Canada, studied, and gone home. Some of the people who came to study didn't go home, but stayed. So there was always a certain flux there.

I think what's happening now is China's economy is growing very rapidly. The growth rate of the economy, even what they are reporting, is much higher than our growth rate. There are those would argue that the actual rate of increase is even greater than that.

It's not an even distribution in their labour market, either. There are parts, such as Guangdong province, with tremendous growth. The coastal regions are growing very rapidly. I think it's an economic imperative that is getting people in the government in China to look for people in Canada.

Of course, you probably were reading, as I was, that the size of the bureaucracy in China is now more than 40 million. There are plenty of folk to be looking for people to bring home. The systems are so large now that they can actually have a resource to do it.

I can't tie it in to what's going on around the Chinese situation in British Columbia, but I will say that the way people make decisions, if they are being offered an attractive opportunity at home to use the credentials they have—and I think we're going to see some of it in India as well, where the middle class has grown large and is rapidly growing—we're going to see more competition for the talent that's come here.

In the past, the number of people who left was low. After they arrived, they stuck it out. But as the choices grow, I think this is a real issue for us. It's all the more reason to be proactive and think about ways to make it work for people before they arrive, and when they do arrive, to understand their issues and intervene much more proactively than we have been.

It's worthy of a systematic study, and I'm going to look into it further.

● (1205)

Mr. Bill Siksay: I have a question for Ms. McNaughton.

Mr. Bloom, when he was speaking, mentioned a level three standard, which I think is different from the Canadian benchmarks. I think it was an international literacy standard. Your level three, I think, is different.

What rang bells for me was that there was just recently a study released by Simon Fraser University on immigration settlement and integration across Canada—a report card on how we were doing. In British Columbia, the standard new immigrants are reaching is level three by the Canadian benchmark. I gather that's not a standard that would get you into the workforce, or even particularly well integrated into the community.

I wonder if you can tell me a little bit about level three in particular, if it's something you can talk about, and what the Canadian standard for entering the workforce and integration into the community would be.

Ms. Pauline McNaughton: There are 12 benchmark levels. In the skilled worker process for application into Canada, they award language points from benchmark four to benchmark eight.

It's generally accepted or understood that the minimum labour market readiness language level would be a five. To be successful in a first-year college or university program, you probably need a benchmark eight or nine. To work in the nursing profession, you need sevens, eights, and nines. The benchmarks sometimes vary in the reading, writing, listening, and speaking areas. A benchmark five would probably get you a job, but probably not a very highly skilled job or a job that required a great deal of communicative ability. So five is the minimum.

Canada is actually generous in awarding points from four to eight. There are three levels there to preclude using the benchmarks as a barrier, in that sense of giving people some.... Does that give you a...?

Mr. Bill Siksay: It's helpful. So a provincial standard of three is significantly below what's required even for low-level successful entry into the workforce?

Ms. Pauline McNaughton: Yes. Now, it's certainly true there are many immigrants working well below a benchmark five, and somehow they're coping and are managing. They may be at risk for losing their jobs, they may not be able to move ahead in their jobs, but there are lots of people working below a five.

● (1210)

Mr. Bill Siksay: Then when you talk about national standards, it's the kind of standard where there's such a variation among provinces that the centre would think it needs to be addressed by some kind of national standard and policy?

Ms. Pauline McNaughton: I think having national information available, as for the nurses, certainly helps provinces be more consistent. We know now that colleges and universities sometimes assign different benchmark entry levels, and we have no desire to interfere or dictate what they say a person needs. But certainly our goal would be to standardize it across the country.

Mr. Bill Siksay: I have a general question, maybe for all of you.

We keep hearing about the need for greater services for people before they come to Canada, and the solution we always hear about is online resources. I think Mr. Poston mentioned some of the problems with this—that people can underestimate the information they read online. I'm wondering if anybody's looked at the efficacy of online information, and its accessibility for the people who are coming to Canada, and just the effectiveness of that kind of program.

Does it really help? I know we all immediately go to the Internet now in the way we practise our lives, but is that true of people who are intending to immigrate to Canada?

Dr. Jeff Poston: I don't think that's been studied very systemically. I know at one of the future meetings the Pharmacy Examining Board of Canada is hoping to present to the committee, and I think I'll pass that information on. They have more experience around the statistics of use of their website. Also, I think the National Association of Pharmacy Regulatory Authorities will be presenting, and I'll notify them, as they have that experience.

But the informal network telling folk what practice is going to be like in Canada I still think is fairly important, and the quality of information in that informal network is probably one of the things we need to improve.

The Chair: We're going to leave it at that, because we've run over quite a bit. We'll come back to you again.

Mr. Bill Siksay: Mr. Chair, I'd like to extend my apologies, but I have to leave.

I will look forward to the rest of your testimony in the record of the meeting. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Mr. Anderson.

Hon. David Anderson (Victoria, Lib.): Ms. Little and Mr. Poston, you both mentioned the issue of consistency across Canada. I wonder if you could quickly indicate in both your professions the difficulties of a person qualified in Manitoba practising in Ontario or New Brunswick or any other province. In other words, how big is the internal problem in Canada that we have to deal with, as compared with some of the external issues you've described?

Mrs. Lisa Little: Currently we have a mutual recognition agreement between the provinces. So if someone is licensed in Manitoba, they are able to then also work in Ontario through an agreement that recognizes through the framework of the national exam that there's consistency in meeting those competencies.

Dr. Jeff Poston: It's pretty much a similar thing for us. There's a mutual recognition agreement between the provinces. If people have passed the national examining board exam, then there's some....

There may be some slight variation among the provinces, in the sense that there may be some requirements about further clerkship work under supervision for a relatively short period of time; there may be a requirement for a law exam around pharmacy jurisprudence just to check that folks are familiar with the legal requirements of practice in a province, because there are individual provincial pharmacy acts that people have to be knowledgeable of.

Hon. David Anderson: Thank you.

It is therefore feasible to think of information Canada-wide provided overseas; I gather that's the conclusion I can draw from that.

Turning then to the issues you both dealt with in respect to gaps in intake of Canadian trainees into your professions, I gather there's a major fall-down in the nursing profession soon to come. In the next six to ten years we will lose a great number of current nurses, and this is true of a good number of other professions as well.

Has this been anticipated within Canada, or have we just assumed that this gap you talked about in pharmacy—being one-third of the total requirement—had to be met by immigration, or were there some efforts made to deal with it internally?

I mention this question specifically because I think, Mr. Poston, you said not much is being done to encourage high school graduates to regard pharmacy as a desirable profession to enter.

● (1215)

Dr. Jeff Poston: I think there are three parts to it. One of the things we're hoping to get funded shortly by HRSDC is a major sector study of pharmacy. One of the things we haven't had historically is good forecasting models, a good predictor of what our requirements are going to be. That's something we've clearly identified, that we need to do a better job of predicting what our future requirements are.

One of the other things that has affected this is a worldwide shortage of pharmacists. We've seen a cycle of shortages of pharmacists in Canada. Perhaps about every eight to ten years there's been a shortage. We'd lobby Citizenship and Immigration to up the quota. We'd usually hire people from Britain and South Africa, and it would be a short-term fix. What's happening is that there's a worldwide shortage of pharmacists, so importing pharmacists into Canada is no longer a solution.

The other challenge we have is the funding processes in the universities to create new places. It's a five-year program in most universities in Canada now. That just, I think, points to the need for better forecasting, because in any action you take there's a five-year lag before you see new graduates. We have seen, notably at the University of Toronto and at Dalhousie, Canadian faculties begin to increase their spots, but I think we need a much better idea of what our future requirements are going to be.

Mrs. Lisa Little: As you mentioned, the registered nursing community will experience a great shortfall of nurses over the next five to ten years, anticipated to be half of our current workforce, over 100,000 nurses, because of the age of the current nursing workforce. Just to set the reference point, back in 1990 we used to graduate about 10,000 registered nurses a year in this country. In 2000, due to budget cuts, we graduated fewer than 5,000. Many provinces have made some significant improvements and we're coming back up, but we certainly are not quite back to where we were, and we've lost that time where we weren't putting out those numbers. We have seen some improvements with accelerated programs or advanced standing programs. So it's possible to complete a degree in three years if you're willing to work through the summer and go to school, those kinds of things. But we still know we're turning away qualified nursing students from Canadian educational programs. We estimate that to be about three to one. So there are three qualified applicants for every one seat in Canada.

So we do see that this piece of immigration, as I mentioned, needs to fit within a global HHR strategy in this country, one that promotes a self-sufficiency model, I think, given the global nursing shortage that is reported by almost every country, except for maybe one or two, and the issue of unethical recruitment, which is a very pressing matter these days. We have to look to improving as much as we can, developing the workforce through Canadian graduates, but recognizing that there are those who want to come and work in Canada. We want to support those individuals, but we do not want to go and recruit from countries where it will affect the ability to provide health care in that country.

Hon. David Anderson: Thank you for that response. It appears that we are, in fact, as with the medical profession and dental profession representatives who came here, faced with what is a more global problem of human resource management, recruitment, and training than simply the immigration element of it, important though immigration may be.

The next question I would like to pose is to Mr. Bloom—I have a number of questions, I might add, down here; I apologize for not having had a chance to question you before. You did comment on the fact that there might be some misinformation overseas. How much of that is from immigration consultants, who are selling a service and frequently create an idealistic, utopian view in the mind of the prospective immigrant as to how they're going to arrive in Canada, how they're going to be received, how they're going to be paid, and how they're going to enter a profession? Do you have any information on that distinction? In my view, from speaking to a good number of them, immigration officers abroad are pretty realistic, if not sober-sided, and—I use the word very positively—conservative in their approach to telling people what they might meet here. They are not paid by the number of people they manage to put through the system and get into Canada, they're paid to give accurate information. But unlike them, an immigration consultant is paid by the number of people they put into Canada, and that seems to me to be a problem.

● (1220)

Mr. Michael Bloom: I believe I made the point that I don't feel that the officials are misinforming intentionally. I think they do have some lack of expertise in some of the pieces. Probably more significant is that if we have a relatively small cadre of officials operating compared to the complexity of our need, if we brought in—I think the number just came out—something like 233,000 immigrants this year, how many hours do we need to spend with a skilled immigrant to fully understand their need, to be able to diagnose that, and then to offer them a set of interventions that will enable them to come here, get credentials, and get into the right work? I haven't seen a study on that, and until we do that kind of calculation, we're not going to have empirical evidence as to whether our system is large enough. But the anecdotal evidence is that we have good people out there, but not enough of them. That may be why the market is being filled by consultants who, as you say, have a different motive for operating. In many cases, they need to make a living out of this, and they have different priorities.

Finally, somebody asked a little earlier—and I think this ties in—whether we can use online information, leaving aside which language the information would be in to be most effective. When you find out how people learn, it's usually a mediated solution. You can use technology, but you need some human intervention to allow people to gauge what the information means. This is another argument for having more officials operating in countries we've targeted as sources of skilled immigrants.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to move on to Madam Grewal.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

As all of us know, there is a critical shortage of health professionals in Canada, doctors and nurses especially. Is it just greener pastures alone that lure doctors and nurses to the U.S., or is our system failing them?

Mrs. Lisa Little: Are you speaking about losing Canadian professionals to the U.S.?

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Canadians and immigrants, all doctors who are practising in Canada.

Mrs. Lisa Little: One of the phenomena in nursing over the last 10 or 12 years is what we call the casualization of the workforce: nurses lose their full-time jobs and are forced to work casual or part-time. They're actually working full-time hours in those jobs, but because of employers' inability to sustain their budgets, they've had to go down to more casual jobs and part-time so they didn't have to pay sick time and vacation and all those types of things. That phenomenon has created much interest in health professionals or nurses in looking at the United States, where they can achieve full-time employment. They also are offered a chance to go back to school full-time to do a master's that's fully paid for by some of these employers. There are perks and advantages, financial incentives, that we cannot compete with in Canada with our current budgets related to health care and employers. Many of them go, but come back because of the environment in which they live and work in the U.S., in a system they're not accustomed to, compared to the publicly funded, not-for-profit health care system in Canada.

So I think we've seen fewer nurses go to the U.S. over the last few years than we did, say, 10 years ago, but it's still an attractive place to go, and we have difficulty in competing with that at times.

Dr. Jeff Poston: Our data are pretty anecdotal on the number of pharmacists who go to the United States. There are actually quite a few barriers to overcome for Canadian pharmacists to go and work in the United States. They more or less have to go through yet another examination process and another licensing process, which I think is a significant deterrent for many. But there is a severe shortage of pharmacists in the United States as well, which has made some of the salary packages very attractive. We are seeing a proportion of recent graduates, fresh out of university, still having all the knowledge and skills available, actually going through the examination process and looking to get licensed there.

It is probably a larger issue in western Canada than in the rest, in B.C., I know, because of their proximity to Seattle and places like that. There certainly have been anecdotal reports of a number of pharmacists going south in that situation.

● (1225)

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Do you have any programs in place to fast-track newcomers to Canada who have outstanding credentials? And in your opinion, were the measures for additional funding for immigrants' language training in the last budget adequate?

Ms. Pauline McNaughton: The funding for the enhanced language training initiative, which was two budgets ago, has certainly been a great boost, but a great deal more funding is required. There is funding, for example, for bridging to employment programs, as was mentioned earlier, but to sustain those programs and to provide meaningful supports, not to just the lucky few dozen who got in this year, but to the host of people who could benefit, there needs to be additional funding.

Dr. Jeff Poston: A lot of the programs bringing new pharmacist immigrants are becoming employer driven. Large multiple-pharmacy organizations are actually recruiting overseas and sponsoring students to come. We are seeing a growth in private initiatives to actually support immigrants with the right sorts of qualifications. The companies themselves do a certain amount of screening in particular countries before they will sponsor or support an immigrant. We are seeing that grow as a channel for foreign-trained pharmacists to come into Canada.

The Chair: Next we will move to Mr. Temelkovski.

Mr. Lui Temelkovski (Oak Ridges—Markham, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I have a question for Madam McNaughton. With language training, do you have different benchmarks for different professions? You also get funding from the Department of Citizenship and Immigration. Do those funds come with any requirement that applicant Temelkovski would have to learn to level eight or ten to enter the workforce, or does applicant Temelkovski just come in and say, I want to learn English?

Ms. Pauline McNaughton: The Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks does not deliver language training. We're a standard-setting organization. We provide a lot of supports and resources to language training providers. Citizenship and Immigration funds the LINC program, the language instruction for the newcomers to Canada program and the French CLIC program, and provincial governments fund language training as well. They all use the benchmarks as an accountability measure. I feel hesitant to speak on their behalf, but in any federally or provincially funded language training program I am familiar with the instructors are required to report progress in benchmarks. They are accountable for reporting back to their funder that students have made progress, and some programs have exit assessment tools. About 95%, I would say, of all publicly funded language training programs in the country establish placement of learners using a Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks test. So if they use exit assessment tools, they are able to do that before and after measure. The benchmarks, then, are a key tool for all funders in respect of accountability.

Mr. Lui Temelkovski: How would this relate to language tests given to potential immigrants to Canada? How accurate would they be for someone, once they've been here, to enter into the workforce?

Ms. Pauline McNaughton: The national assessment tools that are used across the country now were intended for low-stakes purposes, for placement into a language training program. Those tests that are nationally available are not suitable for a high-stakes purpose of determining whether someone's ready to work or ready to enter into a profession or trade, because they just don't have that level of validity and reliability. We developed the English language benchmark test for nurses, and that is a high-stakes test designed specifically for regulated purposes, but other more general benchmark tools do not exist at that level of validity. There are some under development, not by us, but by the Centre for Language Training and Assessment, but it was one of our recommendations that there needed to be more assessment tools for those kinds of higher-stakes purposes.

We are developing an English language assessment for the workplace that will have a higher validity. It's at a higher benchmark level, seven to ten, but it's more to support bridging to employment programs, mentoring programs, internship programs. Again, it's meant for placement for individuals who are seeking to prepare for the workplace.

● (1230)

Mr. Lui Temelkovski: Mr. Bloom, have you looked at other countries and how they integrate their newcomers into their economy?

Mr. Michael Bloom: We've had a look at some other countries, for example, Australia, the U.K., and the United States. A lot of countries are currently trying to do a better job on this.

I want to say, by the way, that one of the things we have actually done rather well in Canada is selecting immigrants on the basis of skill. We do have a superior track record in this area. In fact, if you look strategically at what is the basis for immigrant selection in other countries, for example, the United States, there's a different basis for their selection. They have not had as their number one priority selecting for skill. They've had family reunification, and of course, with their Hispanic population they have a different kind of immigration flow as well. You have to be careful in looking at other countries as to what their motives are.

I think what we're seeing now in other countries is a greater emphasis on finding skilled immigrants. We had a junior minister from the U.K. over to visit recently. I think the U.K. was very interested in what we were doing here, but they have implemented some new programs to try to connect their immigrant populations to work better, for example, reaching into their community and religious organizations within the towns where there are large new immigrant populations

We can look at some of the systems outside of government, but within government we're again in a world where more governments are competing with us to try to find skilled immigrants.

Mr. Lui Temelkovski: Would you say that the labour market in Canada has enough people right now that we're producing or bringing into Canada?

Mr. Michael Bloom: I think the labour market in Canada today does not have enough skilled labour. In some areas already we have shortages, in the health sector for example. The shortages vary by region, of course, but you can find shortages in the Toronto area. It's not just in rural or remote areas.

Going forward, every projection we've made and every projection everybody else we've looked at has made are saying that by 2010 all the net growth will be coming from immigration. This is not a surprising phenomenon. If you disaggregate our economy and look at where our engineers have come from, in some sectors over 40% of the engineers are foreign-born. If you look at tool and die makers, if you look at all sorts of skilled trades, you find many, many of those people have always come from other countries. The contribution to our labour market because of demographics is becoming more important, but it was always important on the high end.

One of the interesting factors I want to point out is that until recently, skilled immigrants did better in the labour market—caught up and then did very well indeed. But in the last 15 years, there's been a major problem. They haven't caught up, according to the statistics we have. That suggests a couple of possibilities. Our view is that it's because the labour market is not functioning fully effectively, and the major issue here is credentials.

Is it across every area? No, but certainly many skilled areas require immigrants now and will require more in the future.

● (1235)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Madame Faille.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Meili Faille: I have two questions from two completely different standpoints.

First of all, do you have the point of view of employers from unionized and non-unionized organizations? Perhaps Mr. Bloom could answer this question. As it is employers who hire immigrants, I would like to hear their point of view.

My second question has to do with the certification process. At the moment, they come here on the basis of a selection chart, and when they get here, they begin the certification process. Could something be done before they even arrive in Canada? Most of the people we meet are not doing well financially. They often have a family and children, and when they get here, cannot achieve the standard of living they had before.

There are also impediments in terms of the fee structure. The fees appear to be higher for immigrants. Furthermore, there does not necessarily appear to be a distinction made between duly selected refugees and immigrants.

I would like to hear your points of view on the subject. Thank you.

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Bloom: On the first part about the perspective of management and labour, I can say on the management side that we feel most businesses do not have a good understanding of the credentialing issue. Most employers are not comfortable with issues related to learning, and with evaluating learning at the scale of small and medium enterprises. Larger businesses have a better capacity, as they tend to have people with expertise in their human resource departments who have a better understanding of that.

I have met with management officials of large enterprises in both the service and manufacturing and high tech areas. They are aware of the issues, and sometimes they actually have very high-level interventions internationally to reach out and find people to bring to Canada. So you will find some interesting successes at the level of the individual corporation in finding skilled people.

There's a good news story there in some of the larger organizations, but generally if you go to the average employer they use Canadian educational qualifications as a rough proxy for skill. They very rarely ask what grade you got. They don't want to read what the professor or the teacher said about the person; they're not interested in that. They use it as a screening tool. If you have a qualification they can trust in that they know it is recognized in the country, they will use that as a basis to screen and hire—plus interviews.

When it comes to international credentials, most people, except for the specialized, larger enterprises, have no knowledge of how they can fairly evaluate the credential or, to put it another way, the risk associated with the hire. There is an economic cost to hiring; if you pick the wrong people you lose money, because they don't stay with you. So it's a really important issue, and for the small and medium folk, it's very hard for them to understand how to do that. I think that's particularly where government intervention.... That's where the sector councils are so important, because they have a big role in the small and medium enterprise.

I will not speak to the labour piece. I do not have information about that. I have colleagues who know more about that. I don't have that.

Finally, on the matter of fee hurdles, I think one of the general issues with our educational institutions in Canada at the post-secondary level is that they do not see credentialing as a central function in their life as institutions. It's not that they don't know something about it and don't recognize it; it's a piece of their life, but they don't put it as a top priority. We did a survey of 50 large institutions in the educational or credentialing professional sector, and they did not see this as a top-level strategic issue for them—several years ago anyway. So that's big issue.

The other piece that goes with that is government. Government funds places in universities. Universities and colleges aren't free just to offer any number of seats. Governments have not tended to connect the credentialing issue with the funding of places domestically. So there's no holistic strategy here, and I think that may be why the pricing is so inconsistent.

Those are a few observations.

● (1240)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'm going to ask a round, and then we're going to move to Madame Grewal, and that will be the wrap-up.

The Conference Board of Canada came out with a report, and you mentioned that we're losing about $4 billion or $5 billion in the economy. We had some witnesses who mentioned $15 billion. It seems to me, particularly with the fact that we have more of a problem now with highly skilled people who are coming into Canada and not doing as well as their predecessors, and given that we've got a $1-trillion or $1.4-trillion economy, I think those figures are way, way too low.

I don't know if you have any comment on that.

Mr. Michael Bloom: I have a couple of things. One, we were talking about the loss of income to individuals, not the amount of productivity those individuals generate. Obviously they're going to generate more in the economy than they actually get in the way of wages. Secondly, we based our numbers on actual inductive, empirical evidence through a careful process of surveying.

I think they are conservative numbers, and I wouldn't be surprised that if we did more work, they would turn out to be even larger numbers. I have seen other numbers. Some of them are based on examining the census and ascribing certain outcomes by category from the census data. But whether it's our number of $3.4 billion to $3.5 billion or it's a larger number, it is a substantial issue in the country, and a growing one by every measure we can make.

So I wouldn't be surprised to see it larger. It means it's all the more pressing to address.

The Chair: My wife was a nurse and went through the downsizing in the Bob Rae era. What I noticed was that she and many of her colleagues got out of nursing and went into other professions and are doing very well at them. The last thing they would think about is going back into nursing.

It seems to indicate to me that, especially now, we're going to be facing more and more shortages. We're going to have to do much better in terms of human relations with personnel in the public sector and try to retain them, because it really hurts in the long run.

Mrs. Lisa Little: For certain, one of the aspects that we've been talking about is not only the need to recruit in relation to the shortage, but you have to effectively retain people as well.

We have created a situation in which we have what we call very unhealthy workplace environments for many nurses, ones in which they are “forced” to work overtime because of a lack of staff. Nurses have the highest absenteeism in the country of all professional groups and workers, not just within health.

We have environments in which we have violence in the workforce, both physical and mental. It's not a healthy place for nurses these days, so trying to convince them to stay until they can no longer work in the environment is a challenge. That also affects our ability to recruit people into the profession, because they see what it's like. They see how hard the nurses work. They see what they're put through. So it's a challenge on both sides.

You're exactly right. If we don't fix the work environment situation and our ability to retain, we can recruit as many as we want, but they're going to leave as fast as we bring them in.

● (1245)

The Chair: In the budget now, we're going to be spending $100 million over five years, which is $20 million a year, and much of it is going to be spent in the area of websites for prospective immigrants. It seems to me that this should help a lot, particularly since we're requiring more and more skills to get into the country and we're getting more and more computer literate.

Would you agree with that, Mr.Bloom?

Mr. Michael Bloom: I would say that where we are investing in online resources to support immigration, we're going to have a benefit out of it. I look forward to seeing some measured, tracked results of that investment going forward. That's a great initiative.

The Chair: The challenge we have as a country is that we cannot afford to have this situation even in the province of Ontario. If you want to go from a college to university or from university to a college, you have problems with acceptance of one degree at the different institutions. It seems like a luxury we can no longer afford, and we somehow had better get our act together on it.

Ms. Grewal.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Some of the main stumbling blocks toward extending recognition of foreign credentials are language barriers and professional testing and examinations by professional bodies. Are there other barriers besides these?

Dr. Jeff Poston: I think one of the barriers that is sort of linked to it is access to practice experience. I think one of the things we see, particularly with the graduates who might try the exam once and fail, is the need for remediation programs. A lot of the remediation essentially has to be workplace experience. Often these folk have the knowledge and skills; it's a question of application and an ability to apply the knowledge and skills in a health care setting.

I think a key part of addressing the issue is to find ways of funding. For pharmacists, it's practice places in hospitals and in community settings so that people can get that workplace experience that seems to be a key factor to integrating everything into their practice situation.

Mrs. Lisa Little: I would add that I think there are in fact two barriers.

One is misinformation, and Mr. Anderson asked about this in terms of the work we just completed. Some of the misinformation is actually being given by Citizenship and Immigration Canada officials, where nurses expressed to us that they were told in their country, when they went into the embassy to inquire, that there were no jobs in nursing in Canada, that there was no shortage and they shouldn't bother applying. So there's that whole misinformation.

The second one is the false expectations that are being created. He alluded to the independent consultants who are offering to facilitate recruitment to Canada. Many of the internationally educated nurses we interviewed or did focus groups with expressed that they would pay an individual $10,000 to $20,000, who guaranteed them a job in Canada. That's just not possible, so they come expecting to get a licence, and I think that false expectation is part of the issue as well.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

On behalf of the committee, I want to thank you for appearing. We all know that this is a critical issue we're facing, so if you have any suggestions or afterthoughts, we'd really like to hear from you.

We're going to be travelling across Canada in April, so if we see some of you or some of your affiliates, you are most welcome.

Just to let the committee members know, we've had an invitation to go to the Yukon also with our travels across Canada.

Thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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