



Statement from WES Global Talent Bridge to Panel Session 3 of the First Informal Multi-Stakeholder Hearing, United Nations, New York, July 26, 2017

I am speaking on behalf of WES Global Talent Bridge, a program of World Education Services (WES), an international non-profit organization that operates in the United States and Canada to facilitate recognition of academic credentials from over 190 countries through its credential evaluation services. Our mission is to reduce barriers that lead to “brain waste” in destination countries and to facilitate integration. Brain waste reflects the failure to match the skills that migrants bring with the skills that society needs. According to Migration Policy Institute, 25 percent of all college-educated immigrants in the United States are affected by brain waste.ⁱ

A credential assessment analyzes the relative value of secondary or post-secondary credentials for the purposes of employment, further education or licensing. A U.S. or Canadian “degree equivalency” gives migrants, many of whom immigrate at mid-point in their careers, a starting point for suitable employment, career progression or the opportunity to begin a new career. It also gives them a tool for self-advocacy: the “right to decent work” surely includes the opportunity to utilize the qualifications they earned in their country of origin.

The number of college-educated migrants on the move has increased dramatically in the last decade. According to the Migration Policy Institute, almost half (48 percent) of immigrant adults who entered the United States between 2011 and 2015 were college graduates—a sharp rise from the 33 percent among those who arrived before the 2007-09 recession and 27 percent who arrived before 1990.ⁱⁱ

Yet, the high degree of unemployment and underemployment among this population indicates that their training and experience are not being recognized by employers, despite the need for precisely those skills in the labor market. Instead of utilizing the migrant talent available in their own backyards, employers go to great lengths to attract talent from overseas.



In the spirit of offering concrete solutions to this session focusing on international cooperation and governance of migration, I would like to cite a few examples where, because of political will among national and regional bodies, migrants gain an understanding early in the immigration and settlement process of the value of their foreign qualifications, with positive outcomes.

Since 2012 World Education Services has been designated by the Government of Canada as an agency to provide an Educational Credential Assessment (ECA) as part of the pre-immigration screening process for skilled workers. Should that individual be invited to settle in Canada, they have been advised about the relative value of their previous education and can make informed choices about employment or upgrading their education. Similar strategies for assessing qualifications early in the settlement process now exist in Germany through a regional system of government-supported qualification assessment that connects migrant skills to industry sectors needing skilled labor.

As we apply a “whole of society” approach to the Global Compact it is not impossible to imagine credential assessment at the point of entry as a normative practice to facilitate recognition of foreign qualifications, with customized guidance based on real-time data as to destinations and markets that require migrants’ skills. Policy coherence could be achieved by making sure that immigration, education, employment and licensing sectors coordinate their recognition efforts.

At the same time, a “whole-of-government” approach recognizes the stake that local and regional governments have in the settlement outcomes of immigrants, even if immigration policy is made primarily at the national level. For example, in the United States the Welcoming Economies Global Network comprises more than 20 regional economic development initiatives across the Rust Belt to tap into the economic contribution of immigrants. WE Global Network’s **Ideas that Innovate** is a collection of state and local public policies that further its efforts to pursue immigrant economic development strategies.ⁱⁱⁱ **Cities of Migration** seeks to improve local integration practice in major immigrant and refugee receiving cities worldwide through information sharing and learning exchange, since cities best understand the challenges facing their immigrants.^{iv} Skilled immigrants are drivers of economic prosperity if their education and experience are utilized.



A second initiative that I would like to mention is WES' pilot project for assessing the credentials of Syrian refugees. It directly addresses the problem that many refugees lack access to official academic credentials due to the collapse of the education system in areas of conflict. Canada has settled almost 47,000 refugees since November 2015, many of whom are highly-educated and highly-motivated, to resume their careers or to continue their education, which has been interrupted by the war. We find that most of them have fled with documents or some kind of credible evidence we can use to reconstruct and assess their qualifications. We work with local resettlement agencies as partners to refer to us those with secondary or post-secondary education and then, with their assessment in hand, we support refugees in taking next steps. One of our referral partners recently reflected on the value of this intervention beyond its obvious benefit, citing its impact in helping refugees reclaim their dignity and stem discouragement and cynicism that threatens to fuel radicalization. He said, "The sooner you can deliver hope, the better." We will be scaling up this project, pending completion of our evaluation this summer. We can anticipate that credential assessment may become even more vital as government cash subsidies to refugees expire, language skills improve and newcomers consider how to utilize their education. Governments can begin to consider how to cooperate with efforts to provide a path forward for these vulnerable individuals who, nevertheless, are immensely capable and resilient.

As we learned from a recent longitudinal study, highly-skilled refugees are the group most likely to experience downward mobility upon entering the United States, taking "survival jobs" that have no connection to their previous skills, despite being also the group most likely to arrive with some English. Yet, there is a small window of opportunity to make an enormous difference. The study found that those refugees (both high and low skilled) who took advantage of a government program in 1980 to receive intensive and intentional ESL, skills training or opportunities to use pre-existing skills achieved a "living wage" in an average of 13 months, compared with an average of 14 years it took other refugees to reach that milestone.^v With the amount of cash assistance for a refugee family reduced from 36 months in 1981 to 4-6 months in 2016, this is not enough time for a skilled refugee to transfer their credentials to enter the workforce at living wages, and not enough time for limited language learners to acquire English proficiency to enter vocational programs and access career pathways.



This is short-sighted and self-defeating government policy. An analysis of the cost of early skill training per enrollee at that time (\$2,400) compared to the federal and Social Security tax revenue from enrollees since that time, reveals there was an estimated tax return on investment of 627 percent.^{vi}

What is needed is for this research to inform public policy in the areas of immigration, labor, education and social inclusion. For example, we know that skills upgrading is key to integration: even getting a short certificate in the country of destination increases the value of the home country credential in the eyes of employers.^{vii} Yet, in the U.S., immigrants with higher degrees often find themselves in adult literacy programs because of language deficits and on a track to obtain a high school equivalency instead of a professional certificate! In contrast, federal and provincial governments in Canada, through such initiatives as the **Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council**, have invested in bridging and mentoring programs that effectively prepare the migrant for the Canadian workplace.^{viii}

In summary, good research and best practices abound for improving the outcomes for skilled migrants, but policy coherence is critical to success. Governments need the political will to connect the dots and prioritize investment in individuals who need a rather modest level of assistance in specific, targeted ways. As a contributor to the GFMD Business Mechanism and the GCM process, World Education Services is ready to assist in this endeavor.

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About WES

Founded in 1974, World Education Services (WES) is a non-profit organization dedicated to helping individuals achieve their higher education and professional goals by evaluating and advocating for the recognition of international education qualifications.

With a staff representing 37 nations and speaking over 40 languages, WES has delivered evaluations to more than one million people worldwide that are recognized by more than



2,500 educational, business, and governmental institutions throughout the U.S. and Canada.

Through our Research and Consulting Services, WES is a leading provider of research regarding international education and trends. WES' Global Talent Bridge program helps skilled immigrants reach their educational and professional goals.

ⁱ Batalova Jeanne, Michael Fix and James D. Bachmeier. **Untapped Talent: The Costs of Brain Waste Among Highly Skilled Immigrants in the United States**. Migration Policy Institute, 2016

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.weglobalnetwork.org/ideas-that-innovate/>

^{iv} The Maytree Foundation. **Practise to Policy: Lessons from Local Leadership on Immigrant Integration**. 2012. <http://citiesofmigration.ca/>

^v Nibbs, Faith. **Moving into the Fast Lane: Understanding Refugee Upward Mobility in the Context of Resettlement**. Forced Migration Upward Mobility Project, 2016.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Bergson-Shilcock, Amanda and James Witte, **Steps to Success: Integrating Immigrant Professionals in the U.S.** New York: World Education Services, 2015.

^{viii} <http://triec.ca/>