

Statement to the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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Thank you Honourable Chair and Members. My name is Joan Atlin. I am the director of programs at the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council, TRIEC. TRIEC is a multi-stakeholder council which brings together employers, community organizations, colleges, universities, occupational regulatory bodies and all three orders of government to seek practical solutions to connect skilled immigrants with appropriate employment.

At TRIEC our understanding of foreign credential recognition is cast broadly. In an effort to maximize our reach and impact, we have focused on those highly skilled immigrants who are seeking employment in non-regulated occupations, which represents the majority of immigrants who come to Canada; they are sales managers, financial analysts, software developers, project managers, marketing managers, HR professionals, and so on. Whether and how their credentials, experience and qualifications are recognized, is up to the employer. And so our work with regard to foreign credential recognition has been focused largely on reaching out to employers to build their capacity to recognize immigrant skills, experience and qualifications.

For many employers, concerns around hiring skilled immigrants include not understanding their experience, not being familiar with their credentials or previous employers and concerns about communication skills. Often times the requirement for “Canadian work experience” is in fact a kind of euphemism for not knowing how to interpret the immigrant’s qualifications. This lack of familiarity, and the perceived risk which goes along with it, leads to widespread non-recognition of immigrant qualifications by employers. This has been our focus since TRIEC was established in 2003. We think it is important to recognize that some programs, initiatives and practices have met with success, and that future directions should build on this success. The remainder of my comments will therefore focus on opportunities that I think the federal government should consider in order to facilitate immigrant attachment to the labour market.

First, internships, or work experience programs more generally, have been very successful employment interventions because they directly connect employers and skilled immigrants. Internships can provide immigrants with their first job in Canada, as well as professional references, both of which reassure risk-averse employers. On average, 80% of participants find full time work in their field upon completion of a work experience program – a highly success outcome, both for the

individual and the economy. However, the demand for internships from immigrants far exceeds the number of participating employers and positions. There are also employers and communities across the country that would welcome an internship program, but they lack the capacity to establish one. There is a need for a national internship program. It could leverage the participation of employers across the country through a variety of instruments.

The federal government has the opportunity to set the example as an employer by taking the lead in offering targeted internships for skilled immigrants. In 2010, the Federal Internship for Newcomers was established. This program was initially piloted by CIC and HRSDC and has now expanded to a number of other departments. According to the Government's 2010 Annual Report on Foreign Credential Recognition, there were 65 internships offered through the program in 2010. There is considerable scope to expand this program across the federal government. The Ontario Public Service has a similar internship program which has placed nearly 600 newcomers in internships between 2006 and 2011 in Ontario alone through the Career Bridge program.

Second, mentoring programs have been successful because they connect skilled immigrants with a mentor who is an established colleague in their occupation. The mentor shares professional networks and helps navigate the job search. The mentee, a skilled immigrant job-seeker, also gains a greater understanding of their occupational context and expectations in Canada. In 2004, TRIEC launched *The Mentoring Partnership*. To date more than 6,000 immigrants in the Greater Toronto Area have been matched through this program and 70% of them are employed in their field or a related one within 6 months. While many smaller scale mentoring programs are currently offered across the country, they have difficulty finding high quality mentors and they lack marketing resources. As well, while mentoring programs are extremely cost efficient, these initiatives are not well-funded.

CIC is currently supporting ALLIES, (Assisting Local Leaders with Immigrant Employment Solutions) a national project of the Maytree and McConnell Foundations, to share the mentoring model nationally. ALLIES is building on the experience of TRIEC to support other immigrant employment councils across the country and together we have provided advice and supported the start-up of similar mentoring initiatives in Halifax, Montreal, Calgary and Edmonton. As part of this national mentoring initiative, ALLIES hosted a national learning exchange among these and other mentoring programs for skilled immigrants across the country earlier this year.

Here again, there is also a strong role for the federal government to play as an employer partner in these local mentoring initiatives. TRIEC is currently working with the Foreign Credentials Referral

Office (FCRO) to launch a mentoring pilot with the Ontario Region of CIC. Pilots will also be launched with our sister immigrant employment councils in Calgary and Ottawa. This pilot should pave the way to national involvement of the federal public service in mentoring programs for skilled immigrants. However, beyond the role of supporting the dissemination of the model and participating as an employer, there is a need for a funded national mentoring program to ensure the ongoing delivery of this successful intervention. Creating a national mentoring program would allow for enhanced program quality and coordination, increase employer participation, and provide reliable and sustained funding.

Third, bridging programs are successful. They bring together key stakeholders – employers, occupational regulatory bodies and educational institutions – to work together to assess immigrants' skills and competencies, to deliver training and to provide mentoring and/or workplace experience. The objective of these programs is to fill any gaps that may exist in knowledge or skills while avoiding duplication of the immigrants' education and training so they can be bridged quickly to licensure and/or employment in their fields. To date there have been very successful examples of bridge training in various sectors; health care, engineering, information technology, financial services, education, and others. Most bridging programs have been funded by provincial ministries, and while the outcomes of bridging programs have been promising, they are only accessible to a limited number of participants and are not self-sustaining. The FCRO is currently developing a website called the International Qualification Network as a vehicle to disseminate best practices on bridging and other initiatives. Beyond this promising initiative, there may be an opportunity for the federal government to invest in a nationally coordinated bridge training strategy across provinces, as well as a loan program to enable participants to cover their living costs while participating. Alberta has a well-established loan fund run by a private foundation and two private sector banks, Scotiabank and RBC have also recently launched loan funds which could serve as models.

Fourth, employer engagement is key to immigrant employment success. While there has been a significant investment in the development of labour market programs for immigrants, there has not yet been a parallel investment in programs targeted directly at employers. It is ultimately employers who either recognize or reject the credentials and skills of immigrants. We and our immigrant employment council partners across the country have seen a strong and growing demand from employers for support in recruiting, assessing, integrating and promoting skilled immigrants. We need a national strategy to respond to this demand.

TRIEC is working with other players in the Greater Toronto Area to better define a continuum of employer engagement. A coherent employer engagement strategy involves (a) developing

awareness among employers, (b) creating and disseminating tools that support employers in working with immigrants, (c) connecting employers to the programs and supports that will build their capacity. I will speak briefly to each of these elements.

(a) There is still a need to increase employer awareness of the value of immigrant skills and how including this talent pool can make Canada more productive and competitive in the global marketplace. Despite an uncertain economic outlook, the evidence on the key role of immigrant skills in the Canadian labour force in the coming years is unequivocal. The time is now to work with employers to understand the opportunity that skilled immigrants represent and to support their ability to take advantage of it. With support from CIC and the HRSDC's FCR Program, TRIEC has been successful in running awareness campaigns to engage employers, and an employer awards program to recognize innovative and leading employers and practices. A recent EKOS poll of employers commissioned by TRIEC demonstrated that these strategies have been effective.

(b) Employers need tools and resources to support organizational change. There is a wide array of assessment tools (for language, academic credentials or occupational competencies) and HR practices that employers need to learn about and be able to implement. Hireimmigrants.ca, a website originally developed by TRIEC and now managed by ALLIES, is a key national resource for employers. It houses a wealth of resources for employers including best practices and case studies from around the country, a roadmap for HR professionals, links to TRIEC's training videos for employers, and a link to the upcoming online e-learning campus for employers being developed by TRIEC. There is an opportunity for the federal government to fully endorse hireimmigrants.ca as the go-to place for employers and to support extensive marketing.

(c) Employers are often overwhelmed by both the numerous service providers approaching them and by the vast array of program information available about programs and services. Often, the effect is employer disengagement, rather than engagement. Employers need to be able to connect efficiently to the range of services and programs that prepare skilled immigrant candidates for the Canadian labour market. The "back end" of employment services systems needs to be better coordinated so that the "front end" experience for employers is as seamless as possible. TRIEC is currently working with the employment services arm of the government of the City of Toronto to pilot new strategies to coordinate outreach to employers by TRIEC, the City and the various networks of employment service providers across the GTA in order to streamline the experience for employers. While these employer "gateways" must be built locally, there is an opportunity for the federal government to encourage and support their development across the country, so that services available to employers to access candidates are better coordinated in their employer outreach.

And finally, we need to begin to find effective ways to **measure the long term impact** of all of these initiatives on employer behavior and immigrant employment. Government programs at both the federal and provincial level that support settlement and employment initiatives for skilled immigrants all function under different reporting and evaluation frameworks. There is an opportunity for the federal government to take leadership in ensuring that evaluation strategies among federal departments and their provincial counterparts who fund programs related to immigrant employment are not only counting program outputs but have a common and coherent framework for understanding to what extent they are contributing to the broader goal of moving the marker on employer behavior and immigrant employment. Better aligning the evaluation frameworks of the various government departments and levels of government would create: a more streamlined and cost effective system of accountability for organizations that are funded by various government levels and departments/ministries; more effective planning and allocation of the very significant investment of public resources to support immigrant integration into the labor market; and, better data for telling our success stories to justify that investment.

Together, the elements described above – supporting internships, mentoring, bridge programs, a comprehensive strategy on employer engagement, and improved impact evaluation strategies – could form a national strategy which would enhance labour market development, contribute to the productivity and competitiveness of Canadian business, and build success for immigrants and for Canada.

Thank you.