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International talent: An answer to the shortage of planners in Ontario?

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It's no secret that there is a shortage of planners in Ontario and across Canada. The population of Canada is projected to continue growing, and planners play a crucial role in all aspects of growth management from forecasting future growth and planning for accommodating the growth sustainably and efficiently to development review process and project and infrastructure implementation stages.

A variety of factors are contributing to the current planner shortage, which suggests it is unlikely to end anytime soon. The shortage has made it difficult to attract and/or retain professional planners, and those working in planning are stretched thinner than ever before.

One of the most immediate methods employers can use to address this shortage, for the benefit of communities across Ontario, for the profession, and for your fellow planners, is to consider hiring applicants for planning positions who have international planning education and/or experience.

HIRING PLANNERS WITH INTERNATIONAL PLANNING EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCE

Employers in Ontario often require candidates to possess planning experience in Canada, even if the Professional Standards Board for the Planning Profession in Canada (PSB)'s Prior Learning Assessment Recognition (PLAR) process accepts Canadian or international planning experience as part of its experience requirement.¹

Similarly, employers also often indicate their preference for, or even mandate, that applicants be RPPs or eligible to become RPPs. This is something that OPPI both encourages and appreciates, for a variety of reasons, but particularly because Candidate and RPP members of OPPI are bound to the Professional Code of Practice and are required to define and serve the public interest.

Admittedly, it therefore seems counterintuitive for the regulator of the RPP designation in Ontario to encourage hiring of non-RPPs for planning positions, but there is logic to this approach.

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THE MISALIGNMENT BETWEEN THE IMMIGRATION PROCESS AND THE PATH TO RPP

Many applicants with international planning education and/or experience have gone through an extensive process prior to immigrating to Canada to validate their education and professional experience against the current National Occupation Classification of “urban and land use planners.”² This National Occupation Classification includes academic requirements, which specifies a bachelor's degree at minimum (which is consistent with the requirements of the PSB's PLAR route to certification). Additionally, applicants should have a minimum of three consecutive years of experience in planning, and it is mandatory to submit experience certificates along with their immigration applications.

This is important, because it indicates that those with international education/experience may well qualify for Candidate membership, critical to RPP certification, through the PLAR route. Further, because being employed in planning is currently a requirement for the certification process, hiring applicants with international planning education/experience could be the necessary catalyst for eventual RPP certification. In fact, there are many individuals with international training/experience who may immediately qualify for Pre-Candidate membership.³

Applicants without a degree from a Canadian university should not be precluded from consideration on that basis. Often, the university degree exists to demonstrate a capability of the applicant to think critically and apply reasoned, professional judgment – a critical skill in many professions including planning. Furthermore, those with planning degrees from non-Canadian universities are often familiar with the concepts of planning and indeed conversant in the core competencies of the planning profession in Canada.⁴

The “learning curve” for an internationally trained/educated planner is more about becoming acclimatized to the realities of planning in Ontario (e.g., the legislative and policy framework that dictates how planning is conducted) and not learning how to “do” planning; this is not particularly different from the learning curve of a recent graduate of a domestic planning program. The learning curve of a recent graduate often includes job specific skills and contextual nuances that are coached and developed through on boarding and regular check-ins with new employees, regardless of their origin or educational background.

Moreover, planners in Canada often use best practices and precedents from international projects. The principles of creating a complete community that is resilient and vibrant is, generally speaking, universal. Internationally trained planners bring to the table a different perspective based on their familiarity with a context that either is dealing with the same issues (e.g., affordable housing, climate crisis) we are dealing with in Canada or have found a path forward to resolve them.

THE ROLE OF POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

Post-secondary institutions in Canada can play a crucial role in helping to expedite internationally trained planners or professionals within environmental disciplines in getting accustomed to the rules and regulations of planning in Ontario.

Post-graduate certificates in Ontario (such as the Sustainable Urban and Transportation Planning Program at Seneca Polytechnic) as well as accelerated master's degree programs (such as MPLAN at University of Guelph) and other similar programs are designed to provide professionals with competencies based on the Canadian context. These programs often include courses on history and theories of planning in Ontario, planning framework and legislation in Ontario, and a more focused view of issues in planning, including sustainability, mobility, and planning in rural, Indigenous, and remote communities. The short duration and flexible delivery of these programs also allow professionals to study while employed, making it easier for employers to use these programs as a form of training if needed.

Where possible, post-secondary institutions should offer bridging programs for professionals from related disciplines. A planner with an extensive background in

these disciplines is a valuable asset for employers due to the multidisciplinary nature of planning. Post-secondary institutions could provide the necessary education to make it possible for these professionals to join the planning industry.

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CASE STUDIES: THE EXPERIENCES OF SOME INTERNATIONALLY TRAINED PLANNERS IN ONTARIO

The following case studies are the real, anonymized experiences of individuals with education and experience in planning from abroad. These case studies illustrate a variety of challenges and barriers faced by those with education and experience who wish to practice planning in Ontario.

Person 1 is an internationally trained planner who completed their bachelor’s degree in planning in Iran, a master’s degree in urban design from the Bartlett School of Architecture (University College London, UK), and a master’s in advanced architectural studies from the same institution. Bartlett/UCL is ranked #1 among architectural schools worldwide according to the QS World Ranking, and Person 1 graduated with merit. They also worked for several years in their home country, including collaborating with municipalities on an award-winning project that was published multiple times and nominated for the Aga Khan Architecture Award during its implementation stage. Before moving to Canada with their family, they managed a team and several projects.

Upon moving to Canada, Person 1 faced the challenge of starting from scratch like many immigrants. Fortunately, they secured a position at a reputable planning and architectural firm, albeit in an entry-level role with a salary of \$38,000 per year, which barely covered their monthly expenses.

The position was demanding, requiring weekend work and unpaid overtime, often totalling 60-70 hours per week. Although grateful for the opportunity to enter the industry, the role did not match their skills, knowledge, or experience. These supporting roles and entry-level positions are typically more suitable for students and recent graduates proficient in computational graphics and modelling. Person 1’s core competencies, such as project management, policy development, negotiation, and consultation skills, were not taken advantage of.

This opportunity served as a stepping stone for Person 1 to excel over time. Ten years later, as a senior urban designer with a major Ontario municipality, Person 1 is well-versed in the planning framework, policies, and legislation in Ontario. They have been a full member of OPPI since 2019 and is currently a sponsor for Candidate members, helping them become planners who uphold professional standards and serve the public interest.

Person 2 has a very diverse experience expanding to 15+ years in different facets of planning in four different countries. Their last position prior to immigrating to Canada was as project manager for seven master planning development projects in Dubai. Person 2 holds a bachelor’s degree in city and regional planning and a master’s degree equivalent in project management.

Since arriving in Canada a decade ago via the skilled immigrant (express entry) route, Person 2 has completed two certificate programs in sustainability management from York University and Toronto Metropolitan University and has also completed the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) Mentorship Program.⁵

They also did their due diligence to break into the planning profession in Canada, but unfortunately, without any success. Despite the numerous job applications, it is still very hard for Person 2 to get a response from employers, let alone a call for an interview for a mid-to-senior level planning position to match their years of experience.

Person 2 has tried their best to expand their professional network, as they have learned it’s a key component to entering the profession here. Since arriving in Canada, Person 2 has been under-employed

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POST-GRADUATE PLANNING PROGRAMS*

Master of Planning: University of Guelph, expedited master’s degree, one year

Sustainable Urban and Transportation Planning: Seneca Polytechnic, graduate certificate program, two semesters

Graduate Diploma in Planning: University of Waterloo, graduate diploma, 1.3 years

Certificate in Urban Planning Studies: Queen’s University, four courses

**List is not exhaustive.*

and to help their family pay their monthly expenses, has taken on jobs as a school bus driver, taxi driver, and pizza delivery driver. Person 2 is currently unemployed.

THE BENEFIT TO THE PLANNING PROFESSION: INSIGHT, EXPERIENCE, AND PERSPECTIVE

If you consider the planning competencies, it is abundantly clear that planning as a profession is not bound by the location of practice. Leadership, plan and policy making, critical thinking, interpersonal skills, human settlement, and others are soft or transferable skills that transcend both time and place.

The transferability of planning competencies is what allows Ontario trained planners to work on international planning projects or for global consulting firms. In fact, it is quite likely that Ontario trained planners are valued on international teams for their unique experiences, perspectives, and knowledge. This same logic is what makes planners who have completed their education and started their career internationally an asset to Ontario-based teams. Planning teams are strengthened when individual team members have developed their planning competencies through diverse experiences and practice.

Additionally, planners who have studied and worked internationally and have immigrated to Canada through the Federal Skilled Worker Program have years of professional experience, skills, and insight to contribute. They have also been vetted by the federal government through the immigration process, which has a number of requirements, including an accredited university education, three consecutive years of industry experience, and proficiency in the English language.

Furthermore, since they have arrived, many internationally trained planners have completed programs such as Canadian university education, mentorship, and volunteering and have done other jobs that make them familiar with the Canadian workplace culture. Just as any senior planner in Ontario would attest, years of practice and experience, in addition to their educational foundation, have contributed to internationally trained planners' understanding of the public good, political acumen, analytical and big picture thinking, and overall proficiency as a planner.

In a world that is increasingly globalized, communities and, as a result, planners, are facing similar challenges. Sustainability, conservation, climate change, urbanization, changing family and social dynamics, cultural heritage – these topics are centre stage to planning across all continents. Internationally trained planners often have diverse experiences with projects of different scales in multiple different countries and are comfortable navigating complex policy frameworks and regulatory standards.

It's also important to consider that not all work is hyper-local and even when a project is embedded in local context and identities, planning competencies

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THE ROLE OF AI IN INTEGRATING INTERNATIONALLY TRAINED PLANNERS

Language skills have often been a barrier to integrating internationally trained planners into the profession in Canada. This is understandable in a profession where communication skills are crucial for daily tasks such as consultation, report writing, negotiations, and presentations. As a result, planning firms may prefer to hire native or fluent English speakers over experienced internationally trained planners.

Advancements in AI help bridge this gap. By automating routine and mundane tasks, AI allows planners to focus more on higher order, creative, and strategic aspects of their work, where seasoned planners can leverage their years of experience and critical thinking.

AI tools can also analyze large texts and documents, assist with report writing, prepare graphics and presentations, and create interactive consultation platforms. This reduces reliance on language proficiency and instead emphasizes the need for a deep understanding of concepts and their application in specific settings.

provide professional planners with the tools they need. There is a good chance that someone who has trained and worked in different countries and contexts has new ideas, approaches, and solutions that your team is not aware of or has not yet considered.

“...planning as a profession is not bound by the location of practice.”

Planners who have immigrated to Canada may have a better sense of population needs, community preferences, and cultural nuances that are essential to effective planning. In a profession largely focused on inclusivity and democratic processes, it is important that different parts of the community, including different demographics, ethnicities and equity-deserving groups, have representation. This will contribute to the communities with diverse backgrounds a sense of self-determination, political contribution, and control over their environment.

As we continue to experience a shortage of planners across Canada, internationally trained planners are part of the solution and have important skills, experiences,

and perspectives to contribute. However, without the support of Ontario planning employers, they are unable to join the profession. This article is a call to action for all hiring managers, senior staff, and managing partners to hire internationally trained planners at all jobs levels. It is also a call to action that contributes to planning being more welcoming to communities and members of the public, as well as to aspiring planners, who do not currently see themselves in the profession.

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INTERNATIONAL TALENT AVAILABLE

As a profession, we need to reflect inwards and be honest about the barriers we are creating – who is let in and who is left out. For far too long, we have largely failed to consider and value international planning education and experience. Many other industries actively seek out international skilled talent.

Internationally trained planners have a love for the profession and have chosen to make Canada their home. However, they are caught in a catch-22 – to be eligible for the PLAR route to certification, they must be employed in planning, and to be employed in planning, most jobs require them to be an RPP or Candidate member. Planners in this position do not have a clear path to join the profession. As a result, our profession is missing out on world-class talent.

We all have an important role to play in breaking down barriers to entry and valuing planners with international education. The profession can only benefit from being more inviting of diverse perspectives and experiences. 🌍



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Maryam Sabzevari, RPP, is a Member of OPPI and an urban planner and designer with extensive experience in place-making, sustainable design, transit-oriented communities, development review, urban revitalization, and policymaking. She is currently Senior Planner in Urban Design at the City of Toronto and is also a dedicated educator who designed and co-founded the Graduate Certification Program in Sustainable Urban and Transportation Planning at Seneca College. **Chris Tyrrell, MCIP, RPP**, is a Member of OPPI and an accomplished urban planner and professional services executive with over 28 years of experience. Chris is currently the National Vice President of Planning, Transportation and Infrastructure at WSP Canada. **Ryan Des Roches, cd, octr**, is OPPI’s Registrar & Director, Special Projects.

¹Prior Learning Assessment Recognition (PLAR). <https://psb-planningcanada.ca/certification-process/application-process/prior-learning-assessment-plar/>

²Government of Canada. National Occupation Classification: urban and land use planners.

³OPPI Membership. <https://ontarioplanners.ca/become-an-rpp/oppi-membership#MEMBERSHIP%20CATEGORIES>

⁴OPPI. Competency Tree. <https://ontarioplanners.ca/become-an-rpp/competency-tree>

⁵Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) Mentorship Program. <https://www.mentoringpartnership.ca>