

Immigrants say their skills aren't being put to good use

Foreign- trained professionals may benefit from \$100,000 job study

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Note

Irina Barladean, Abdul Waheed and David Chu all have the same reply when you ask what they would like for Christmas.

The foreign-trained immigrants would like jobs in their chosen professional fields.

The three are among thousands of highly skilled and educated immigrants here and elsewhere in Canada who could benefit from a one- year research study launched this week by the Kitchener-based Centre for Research and Education in Human Services.

Those working to find jobs for professional immigrants hope the research will help change situations for highly skilled people like Barladean -- a civil engineer -- who survived when she first came to Canada by selling ice cream in a mall.

Financed by a \$100,000 federal grant from the Department of Canadian Heritage, centre researchers will conduct the study in Waterloo Region, Brantford and London during the next year to illustrate ways communities are strengthened when they make better use of skilled immigrants.

The study will make extensive use of foreign-trained immigrants to do research and serve on various focus groups.

It will report on job barriers experienced by foreign-trained immigrants and examine difficulties experienced with professional regulatory bodies.

The study will contrast labour- market skills required in southwestern Ontario with those offered by unemployed or under- employed foreign-trained people.

It will also show the impact under-utilization of skills has on immigrants, their families and communities, said Rich Janzen, senior researcher with the human services centre.

Immigrants featured in the study will include foreign-trained engineers like Barladean, Waheed and Chu as well as doctors, architects, midwives and people in other occupations who are often forced to take low-paying, unskilled work because they can't get jobs in their own fields.

Barladean, 33, came to Canada from Moldova in the former Soviet Union two years ago with her husband, 12-year-old son and five-year-old daughter.

Her husband now works in Cambridge; the family lives in Kitchener.

"The very best Christmas gift I could get would be a good job where I could continue my career," she said.

Waheed, 37, an industrial engineer with 10 years experience, was born in Pakistan but came to Canada via Singapore 10 months ago. Waheed, who lives in Kitchener, left his wife -- a medical doctor -- and two small sons in Singapore while he searches for a job because he doesn't want them to be a burden on taxpayers. He also knows his wife, once in Canada, will have to take upgrading courses because her foreign medical qualifications are unlikely to be recognized.

Chu, 35, is an electrical engineer with 14 years experience who came to Canada from China six months ago with his wife and five-year-old son.

"I was told it would be easy in Canada for me to get a job in my field," he said. "But after I arrived, I found other foreign-trained people doing unskilled work outside their professional area because they can't find jobs."

All three are currently getting job-search help and learning business-communication skills at Waterloo's New Canadian Program, one of several local organizations that help new immigrants.

Barladean, who once designed gas-supply systems in Moldova, said she's upgrading her English skills and is prepared to work at any engineering job in order to continue her career.

Waheed, who is willing to accept entry-level positions, has had a number of interviews where he was told was over-qualified or lacked Canadian experience.

Waheed and Barladean like the sound of the centre's research project because they know what they can contribute to any community.

"We can contribute so much to this country if we are able to use our skills, (but) foreign-trained professionals who take survival jobs end up as unhappy people engulfed in economic and social problems," said Waheed.

"Then they become a burden and everyone ends up losing."

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WASTED RESOURCES

A study done in 2000 by Kitchener researchers for Ontario's Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities showed the following:

- * The unemployment rate of immigrant professionals who have been in Canada less than five years was 18.6 per cent, compared to 5.4 per cent among other Canadians.
- * After four to five years in Canada, the unemployment rate for immigrant professionals was still 11.8 per cent.
- * 60 per cent of recent, foreign-trained professionals who took jobs unrelated to their training in Canada were still in those jobs three years later.
- * Less than a quarter of employed, foreign-trained professionals worked in jobs that recognized and used their occupational skills.