

Engineering Group Wants Barriers For Foreign-Trained Workers Lifted

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When Divyesh Patel joined his wife in Canada in 2015, he never expected his degree in chemical engineering would lead him to the helm of one of Edmonton's most beloved bakery operations.

But Patel, originally from India, had a winding road to his current position as operations manager at the Italian Centre's bakery division, where he oversees the process engineering side of the sweet operation.

He assumed that because he had worked for more than 10 years at an international engineering firm, he would have no problem finding employment in his field in Canada.

"I started from scratch," Patel said of his arrival in Canada, "even though chemistry is the same around the world."

After looking into his options as it became more difficult to find work in his field, he connected with the Association of Science and Engineering Technology (ASET) and learned he could get an Alberta engineering technician certificate in roughly six months.

"It's like one professional tool that I can use everywhere," said Patel, who now helps mentor others in the field.

Patel's path to success - he was promoted in his former job shortly after and then hired by the Italian Centre this fall - was made easier by ASET's years-in-the-making push to level the playing field for foreign-trained professionals.

Now, six months after the province passed legislation to simplify and accelerate foreign credential recognition, ASET CEO Barry Cavanaugh is calling on other professional licensing bodies to do the same to stop further "brain drain" from the province.

"There's a fairly significant shortage of skilled technologists who have experience. ... This country needs people with skills and knowledge," said Cavanaugh, noting that ASET deals with professionals in 21 disciplines and 124 occupations.

The body removed the requirement for licensees to have Canadian work experience, which often resulted in a catch-22 for those trained abroad who needed a licence to get experience in the first place.

Instead, all applicants now take standardized tests to qualify for their certifications.

Cavanaugh said the process to remove this barrier took several years, beginning in 2013. Curricula had to be developed for multiple designations based on knowledge needed for the job and courses offered in Canadian universities, and then tests and materials written in a way that was fair to those who used English as a learning language.

The effort, while expensive and time-consuming, has already affected hundreds of foreign-trained professionals, Cavanaugh said, and ASET has also offered to share its materials with regulatory bodies in other provinces to help them make similar changes.

"We're growing," said Cavanaugh, who hopes the new legislation will push other organizations to do the same. "And if we want to continue to grow, we need people to bring their brains."
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