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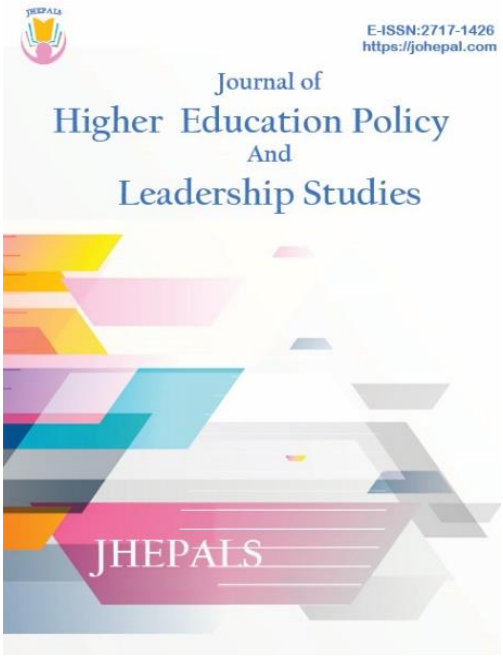
Higher Education Policy

And

Leadership Studies

JHEPALS (E-ISSN: 2717-1426)

https://johepal.com



Another Brick in the Wall: Credential Recognition, Occupational Closure, and the Persistence of Brain Waste

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Article Received **2026/06/17**

Article Accepted **2026/09/14**

Published Online **2026/09/30**

Cite article as:

Tucker, A. (2026). Another brick in the wall: Credential recognition, occupational closure, and the persistence of brain waste. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies*, *7*(3), 119-133.
https://dx.doi.org/10.66224/johepal.7.3.119

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[DOI: 10.66224/johepal.7.3.119]

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Journal of Higher Education Policy And Leadership Studies (JHEPALS)

E-ISSN: 2717-1426
Volume: 7 Issue: 3
pp. 119-133
DOI:
10.66224/johepal.7.3.119

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Abstract

Each year, thousands of internationally trained professionals arrive in Canada and other wealthy countries carrying years of education, only to find that their education is quietly set aside at the threshold of the labour market. This article synthesizes the scholarship on that loss, often called brain waste, and asks why it persists despite decades of reform. Drawing together human capital theory, the sociology of professions, segmented labour market theory, the literatures of recognition and epistemic justice, the decolonial critique of knowledge, and the organizational study of decoupling, I argue that the underuse of immigrant skills is less an administrative delay than a structural feature of how professions guard their boundaries and how organizations earn legitimacy. I show that the familiar hope that fair treatment and economic advantage move together rests on a fragile foundation, and that recognizing a credential is never a purely technical act but a decision about whose knowledge a society will allow to count. I close by tracing what the literature settles, what it still contests, and where research attentive to gender, race, and the Global South might go next.

Keywords: Credential Recognition; Brain Waste; Occupational Closure; Malperformative Inclusion; Immigrant Professionals; Precarious Work

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[DOI: 10.66224/johepal.7.3.119]

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The Person at the Threshold

Somewhere in a Canadian city this morning, a physician who trained for years in another country is driving a car for hire. A nurse who once ran a hospital ward is stocking shelves. A teacher who shaped young minds is standing at a cash register. They crossed an ocean carrying their knowledge with them, and they arrived to find that the knowledge had been quietly set aside. This article is about them, and about the wall they meet, the one redrawn inside the labour market long after they were welcomed across the border drawn on a map.

The research literature has a name for this loss. Scholars call it brain waste: the systematic underuse of the education and skills that internationally trained professionals bring (Batalova et al., 2016). In Canada, just over one in four immigrants who earned their degrees abroad work in jobs that ask far less of them than they hold, against roughly one in ten of those born in the country, and the gap is sharper still in the regulated health professions, where about a third of foreign-trained nurses and four in ten foreign-trained physicians practise in their fields, against nearly nine in ten of their Canadian-trained peers (Statistics Canada, 2022). The pattern repeats across the wealthy world. In the United States, researchers estimate that college-educated immigrants working below their training forgo close to forty billion dollars in earnings each year (Batalova et al., 2016), and an investigative analysis of European labour-force data placed the comparable continental loss in the tens of billions of euros (Lighthouse Reports, 2024).

The puzzle that animates this review is the loss's stubbornness. Both the logic of the market and the logic of justice argue against waste, and yet the waste endures, through good intentions and across decades of reform. To understand why, I gather the scholarship that has tried to explain it and read it through ideas that keep the person's dignity at the centre. The article moves from the promise of education through the sociology of professional closure and the two-tier labour market, into the critical traditions that name the harm, the bordering of hiring, the misrecognition of cultural capital, the injustice of being unheard, and the organizational habit of promising more than is practised, before turning to the Canadian policy landscape and the questions that remain open.

The Promise of Education and Where It Breaks

The scholarship begins, as so much of it does, with a hopeful idea. The economist Gary Becker (1964/1993) framed education as an investment in human capital, the stock of knowledge and skills a person builds and carries into the labour market, and argued that this investment should return to its holder in the form of higher earnings. The brain waste literature reads, in large part, as a long and careful demonstration that the promise travels poorly across borders. Jeffrey Reitz (2001) identified the reason. Human capital theory quietly assumes that employers possess some reliable way to read the worth of a newcomer’s skill, and the persistence of waste reveals that, too often, no such reliable means exists. Examining the earnings gap that immigrants carry, Reitz found that most of it stemmed less from unused skills than from unequal pay for equal work, a finding that complicates any account that treats recognition as the single lever.

The most sobering evidence arrived a decade later. Reitz, Curtis, and Elrick (2014) found that the value of work lost to the Canadian economy grew over the years they studied,

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and that this growing loss coincided with an expansion of the very programmes built to reduce it: credential assessments and bridge-training schemes. More effort, more offices, more assessment, and yet the aggregate picture worsened. That stubborn finding sits at the centre of everything that follows, the fact that any hopeful account must eventually answer to.

Who Gets to Belong to a Profession

A quieter, more skeptical tradition runs alongside the hopeful one, reframing the whole question. The economist Michael Spence (1973) proposed that a credential may function less as proof of skill than as a signal, a costly marker that conveys something about a person without making them more able to do the work. The sociologist Randall Collins (1979) went further, describing credentials as instruments that status groups use to guard their position and limit who may enter. In this reading, the difficulty is less about matching paperwork to jobs than about occupational closure: the long, largely invisible process by which a profession draws a boundary around itself and decides who may step inside (Abbott, 1988; Larson, 1977).

The idea has a long pedigree. Max Weber (1978) first coined the term “social closure” to describe how a group reserves an occupation's rewards for its own members by limiting entry. Frank Parkin (1979) sharpened it into two movements: excluding those below and pushing back against those above. Raymond Murphy (1988) traced how the modern professions accomplish closure through credentials, turning a certificate into a gate. Seen this way, judging a foreign credential is never solely a technical reading of competence. It is also a decision, made by those already inside, about who else may share in the work and its rewards. Girard and Bauder (2007) gave this its sharpest historical proof in the Canadian case. Reading through decades of professional periodicals, they found that the rules governing who could call themselves an engineer in Ontario were assembled in the years between the wars as a deliberate effort by the profession’s own members to protect their standing by excluding newcomers and foreign-trained engineers. That history sits beneath the nursing and physician numbers like the foundation of a building, unseen and holding everything in place.

How the Professions Learned to Guard the Gate

To see how firmly the gate is held, it helps to look at how the professions came to hold it. The sociologist Eliot Freidson (2001) described professionalism as a third logic for organizing work, standing apart from the logic of the market, where the customer decides, and the logic of bureaucracy, where the manager decides. In a profession, by contrast, the practitioners themselves decide, controlling who may train, who may enter, and who may judge the work. Freidson showed that this control rests on a few load-bearing pillars: a body of specialized knowledge, a jurisdiction protected by law, an orderly career inside a sheltered market, and training that the profession itself governs. Each pillar is also, from the outside, a wall. The same arrangement that protects a standard of competence also protects the people already within it from competition from those who would enter.

This arrangement has a history, and it is more recent than it appears. Magali Sarfatti Larson (1977) traced how the modern professions assembled themselves across the

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nineteenth and twentieth centuries, turning loose occupations into organized bodies that could license entry and limit numbers, an effort she called a professional project. Andrew Abbott (1988) showed that professions secure themselves less by serving the public than by winning jurisdiction, the exclusive right to a domain of work, often in open competition with rival occupations. The credential is the instrument that ensures the project's durability. Once a society agrees that only the holder of a particular certificate may do a particular kind of work, the certificate becomes a kind of property, and like all property, it can be defended, inherited, and withheld. Girard and Bauder's (2007) account of Ontario engineering, discussed above, is one local episode in this much larger story, the slow conversion of skill into a guarded possession.

For the internationally trained professional, this history has a hard consequence. The person arrives holding skill, and sometimes a credential of real distinction, only to discover that the credential's worth was never carried in the skill alone. It was carried in the recognition of a particular professional body, and that body owes the newcomer nothing. A profession built to control its own membership will, left to its own devices, tend to read a foreign credential as an outsider's claim rather than a colleague's qualification, and the long history of closure gives it every reason and every tool to do so. The wall, in other words, was built on purpose, by people protecting something they valued, and it stands today because the protection still serves them.

The Two-Tier Labour Market

An older idea from the study of work explains the loss almost too well. The economists Peter Doeringer and Michael Piore (1971) described the labour market as split into two tiers rather than one. The upper tier, the primary labour market, holds the secure, well-paid jobs with ladders to climb; the lower tier, the secondary labour market, holds the insecure, poorly paid jobs that lead nowhere. The trouble for a newcomer is rarely a shortage of skill. The gate between the tiers is guarded, so a great deal of training can be carried out for years in the lower tier while the gate to the upper one stays shut. Piore (1979) returned to this in a study of migrant workers he called birds of passage, showing how economies come to depend on a steady supply of newcomers to staff the lower tier, whatever those newcomers once were at home.

Harald Bauder (2006) pressed the argument further, contending that migration itself helps to regulate the labour market by supplying a flexible workforce whose qualifications can be discounted on arrival. The Canadian scholar Leah Vosko (2006) gave the resulting condition its name in her work on precarious employment, the insecure and uncertain work into which so many newcomers are channelled, and Guy Standing (2011) named a whole class formed by such insecurity. The field's vocabulary carries its own argument. Where brain drain centres the sending country's loss and brain waste centres the receiving country's failure to deploy skill, Bauder's (2003) sharper term, brain abuse, refuses to read the devaluation of a person's training as a natural settling-in period and insists instead that institutions actively exclude immigrants from the upper reaches of the labour market. The loss, on this account, runs deeper than a failure of recognition at the door of a profession. It is also the quiet sorting of people into the lower tier of a divided market, where their training is allowed to gather dust.

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The Border That Follows People to Work

If closure decides who may enter a profession, a second and quieter border decides who is called for an interview at all. Philip Oreopoulos (2011) demonstrated it through a simple and devastating experiment. He sent thousands of nearly identical job applications to Canadian employers, varying little more than the name at the top and the location of the schooling. Applications bearing English-sounding names with Canadian education drew employer callbacks at roughly two and a half times the rate of otherwise identical ones bearing names of Chinese, Indian, or Pakistani origin with education from abroad, and adding stronger language skills, experience at well-known international firms, or degrees from selective universities did little to close the gap. The familiar request for Canadian experience, on this evidence, can operate as a polite gate, keeping people out on grounds of name and origin while sounding like a reasonable concern for quality. Shibao Guo (2015) termed the larger pattern a racialized regime of skill, a system that reads a newcomer's difference as a deficiency.

The wall presses on some people far harder than others. Among immigrants who studied abroad, women are overqualified more often than men, a difference the census records but rarely interrogates (Statistics Canada, 2022). The legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) gave us the word for why this matters. Intersectionality names the truth that a person who is both a woman and a racialized newcomer meets a barrier greater than the sum of its parts, shaped at once by gender, by race, and by origin. A foreign-trained woman is often channelled into care work that sits below her training; her credentials are read through assumptions about who she is before they are weighed on their merits. An account that kept only the average in view would miss the people on whom the wall leans hardest.

The Credential as Cultural Capital and the Wounds of Misrecognition

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986) offered a way of seeing that deepens all of this. A credential, in his terms, is a form of cultural capital, the knowledge, skill, and bearing a person carries, which a society can store in a certificate, the way money is stored in a bank. The difficulty is that this capital holds its value only inside the field that agrees to honour it. When a person crosses a border, the certificate may keep its paper while losing its worth, because the new field declines to recognize it. Bourdieu had a hard and accurate name for the harm this does: symbolic violence, the quiet wound a system inflicts when it treats a person's hard-won knowledge as though it were worth less, and persuades even the person to half believe it.

Charles Tilly (1998) widened the lens, arguing in his study of durable inequality that the deepest and most lasting inequalities follow the categorical lines a society draws between groups, citizen and foreigner among them, more than they follow any individual's effort or gift. His central mechanism carries a memorable name, opportunity hoarding, the way a bounded group keeps a valuable resource, a profession, a network, a tier of good jobs, for its own members and passes it to their kind. The guarded gate of the profession and the discounting of the foreign credential, on this reading, form two faces of one categorical sorting rather than two separate puzzles.

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Credential Recognition & Occupational Closure

These structural accounts have an interior counterpart, the experience of the person who is sorted. The philosophers of recognition, Axel Honneth (1995) and Charles Taylor (1994), among others, remind us that being recognized by others is a basic human need, as real as food or shelter, and that its withholding is a genuine injury (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Miranda Fricker (2007) named the injury with precision. The foreign-trained professional suffers testimonial injustice, the harm of being believed less readily because of who she is, her accent, her name, her origin, and hermeneutical injustice, the deeper and lonelier harm of lacking any shared language, recognized by the institution, through which her knowledge can be made to make sense. The redistribution of work and the recognition of worth, as Nancy Fraser (1995) argued, are bound together, and a person denied the second is rarely granted the first.

What It Is Like to Meet the Wall

It is worth pausing here to listen because the structures described so far are lived by real people on ordinary days, and qualitative scholarship lets us hear them. Gillian Creese and Brandy Wiebe (2012), working with well-educated immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa who had settled in Vancouver, found that even those who arrived with strong English, advanced degrees, and years of experience were funnelled into what their participants called survival employment, the low-wage and insecure work a person takes to stay afloat while the door to their profession stays closed. The demand for Canadian experience, Canadian credentials, and even a Canadian accent fell unevenly, and women carried much of its weight, with their qualifications channelled toward care work and cleaning while they waited. Creese's wider work names a quiet and wounding detail: that an African accent, in a person fluent in English since childhood, could itself become a mark read as a deficiency.

The cost of meeting that wall is measured in both the body and the bank account. Research interviewing highly skilled recent immigrants who found themselves under-employed or unemployed in Canada heard people describe the experience in the language of grief and depression, a sense of self-diminishment (Dean & Wilson, 2009). One participant gave the study its title, observing that the education that had defined a life now felt irrelevant to the work at hand, and that the irrelevance was a source of deep sadness. These are the human readings of the aggregate numbers, the interior of the statistic. A figure that says one in four is also, read closely, a great many mornings that begin with a capable person setting their training aside and bracing to be underestimated again.

These testimonies do more than illustrate. They confirm, from the inside, what the theory claims from the outside. The injury Fricker named as being disbelieved on account of one's accent or origin is exactly what Creese's participants described at the interview table. The symbolic violence Bourdieu named, the slow persuasion that one's knowledge is worth less, is exactly the diminishment that Dean and Wilson's participants put into words. When the structural account and the lived account meet so precisely, we can be confident we are seeing something real, and that the wall is no abstraction but something people walk into again while trying to build a life.

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The Coloniality of Credentialing

A deeper layer lies beneath the discounting of foreign skill, and naming it changes how the whole pattern looks. The sociologist Aníbal Quijano (2000) argued that the end of formal empire left the empire's hierarchy largely in place. What persisted, in his account, is what he called the coloniality of power, an enduring arrangement in which the knowledge, the institutions, and the very humanity of the colonized world are ranked below those of the colonizing one, long after the flags have changed. A credential earned in the Global South meets, on this reading, more than ordinary employer caution. It meets a centuries-old habit of treating the knowledge of formerly colonized places as lesser, a habit so settled that it could feel like simple prudence.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) gave this its sharpest name. He wrote of epistemicide, the slow killing-off of whole bodies of knowledge from the global South, accomplished less by force than by a quiet refusal to count them as knowledge at all. Raewyn Connell (2007), surveying how the social sciences themselves are written, showed how thoroughly the world's theory is assumed to flow from a handful of northern centres outward to a receiving periphery, as though the South produced only data and the North produced only thought. Read together, these scholars suggest that when a Canadian licensing body weighs a degree from Lagos, Manila, or Dhaka against one from Toronto, it is rarely starting from a clean, neutral page. It is reading through an inherited map of the world on which some places were long ago marked as sources of knowledge and others as merely places that receive it.

This colonial inheritance helps explain a pattern that plainer theories leave puzzling: the discounting of credentials falls hardest on newcomers from the very regions that were once colonized, and lightest on those from Western Europe and the settler nations. Guo's (2015) racialized regime of skill and Bauder's (2003) brain abuse both point toward this, and the coloniality lens completes the thought, locating the present devaluation in a long history rather than in any single employer's bias. To recognize a credential from the global South fully and fairly would mean, in one small bureaucratic act, undoing an assumption that took centuries to build. That this is difficult is part of the point, and it warns against any reform that imagines the problem to be merely technical.

The colonial inheritance of credentialing is not merely theoretical. It is written into statute. Tracey Adams (2016) documented that Canadian provincial legislation historically embedded citizenship requirements directly into the criteria for entering regulated professions, restrictions implemented by deliberate state and professional action rather than by accident or oversight. The engineering case Girard and Bauder (2007) trace is one episode in a much longer, more organized project: licensing legislation passed in the 1920s and 1930s institutionalized exclusion and established the regulatory framework that still governs entry today. Ufodike (2025), surveying accounting professionalization across colonial and postcolonial settings, found that professional bodies in the Old Commonwealth countries, including Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, actively constructed tiered systems of recognition to keep racialized practitioners at a lower level of standing, a practice whose justifications shifted across generations while its structure did not. In colonial Kenya, the British Expatriates Association of Accountants discussed creating a separate institute for racialized members specifically to contain their standing, explicitly naming the risk that

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"other races" might "clamour for something at a lower level" (Ufodike, 2025, p. 469). Calling the present credential system a legacy of colonialism is therefore accurate in a precise, institutional sense: the legislation and professional bodies through which it operates were assembled during or immediately after the colonial period to do exactly what they still do, and they have not been dismantled. Pillay (2023) extends this point into the present, arguing that the settler colonial state apparatus continues to operate through credential validation, coopting racialized newcomers into a logic that promises belonging while structurally withholding it. The wall, in other words, was not built once and left standing. It is maintained, brick by brick, through the ordinary operations of bodies that were designed for that purpose.

When the Promise and the Practice Come Apart

The study of organizations offers a final piece. John Meyer and Brian Rowan (1977) observed that organizations routinely adopt the structures the world expects of them, a diversity office, a recognition policy, and a statement of values, as a kind of ceremony that earns legitimacy, while the daily work continues much as before. They called the gap decoupling, the coming apart of what an organization shows the world from what it does. Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell (1983) explained why organizations come to resemble one another, copying their peers and bowing to the state and the professions in a process they named institutional isomorphism, and Mark Suchman (1995) showed how much of organizational life is arranged simply to be seen as legitimate. Bromley and Powell (2012) sharpened the idea into a deeper coming apart, a gap between means and ends, in which an organization busies itself with the activity of inclusion, the audits and the trainings and the dashboards, while the end that activity was meant to serve quietly recedes from view.

Sara Ahmed (2006, 2012) named the same phenomenon from inside the institution that performs it. Her non-performative is the commitment that comforts the body, making it, while leaving the named harm in place, the diversity statement that does nothing, the wall the practitioner meets. Read alongside the organizational literature on decoupling, Ahmed's insight points toward a particular and consequential form of harm, which I call malperformative inclusion. Where the non-performative names a commitment that simply fails to act, malperformative inclusion names something worse, an inclusion that performs concern while actively producing the very exclusion it claims to remedy. The recognition programme that assesses, certifies, and celebrates, yet returns the foreign-trained physician to her taxi, is malperformative inclusion in its purest form. Naming it this way matters because it locates the hollow promise less in any individual's failure of goodwill than in the structural way organizations earn their legitimacy, and it suggests that the promise will yield only to changes that reconnect the means of recognition to its end, a person working in the calling they trained for.

This is the tender question that human resource development, the study of how organizations grow the people who work within them, has long wrestled with from within. Tara Fenwick (2004) called for a more critical practice, one willing to ask whose interests development truly serves, and Laura Bierema (2009; Bierema & Callahan, 2014) pressed the field to notice how easily it comes to serve the organization's performance while forgetting the person it claims to develop. Paul Thompson (2011) put the worry plainly, observing that

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human resource management can promise partnership while delivering pressure. A framework that means to honour the flourishing of immigrant professionals, in Amartya Sen's (1999) sense of the real freedom to do and to be what one has reason to value, must guard against quietly reducing that flourishing to a line on a productivity ledger.

The Limits of the Business Case

A hopeful proposition runs through much of the policy and management writing on this subject: the claim that doing right by internationally trained professionals and doing well as an organization or a country are, in the end, the same movement. The hope is appealing, and I share it. The evidence asks that it be held with care. If the recognition of immigrant skills were straightforwardly profitable, the market's pull would have long since worn down the walls of exclusion. That the walls have stood for a century, and that a decade of earnest reform moved the aggregate picture so little (Reitz et al., 2014), suggests that someone benefits from keeping them standing, that exclusion pays a few even as it costs the many.

The field of human resource management has already tested a closely related hope and found it wanting. When researchers asked whether a more diverse workforce reliably improves a firm's performance, the most careful studies, including a large research network reported by Kochan and colleagues (2003), found the link weak and conditional rather than automatic. Mike Noon (2007) drew the moral, warning that resting the case for fair treatment on a business payoff is a fragile foundation, because the day the payoff fails to appear, the case for fairness can fall with it. The same caution belongs here. To defend recognizing a person's training only because it pays is to leave that person exposed on any day the ledger fails to agree.

There is a further reason the hope of automatic benefit deserves caution. Human resource management has long tried to open what it calls the black box, the unseen space between what an organization does to its people and what those people then produce, often through the idea that performance follows when ability, motivation, and opportunity come together (Appelbaum et al., 2000; Paauwe, 2009; Purcell et al., 2003). Applied to brain waste, the idea is illuminating because it shows how a fully able and deeply willing professional can still be stopped cold when opportunity is withheld. Whether these three combine by adding or by multiplying remains unsettled in the research (Bos-Nehles et al., 2023; Marin-Garcia & Tomás, 2016), and the caution worth carrying is that an idea built to explain performance can slide, without anyone intending it, into treating a person as an input to performance rather than as an end in themselves.

The Machinery of Recognition

Set against this long history, the machinery a country builds to recognize foreign qualifications can seem modest, and understanding what it does and fails to do matters. Scholars distinguish two often-confused tasks. The narrower one, foreign credential recognition, asks whether a person's overseas degree is equivalent to a domestic one. The broader one, foreign qualification recognition, asks the fuller question of whether a person is ready to practise, taking in experience, language, and licensure as well as the diploma (Sweetman et al., 2015). Most of the apparatus a newcomer meets- the assessment agencies that evaluate degrees, the bridging programmes that fill gaps, the examinations

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that gate entry- lives somewhere along this path. Peter Li (2001) measured what the path costs in plain economic terms, finding that the market placed a markedly lower value on the very same credential when its holder was a racialized immigrant, a discount that the apparatus of assessment did little to remove.

In Canada, the structures that produce brain waste sit largely beyond the reach of any single government. The recognition of foreign credentials and the licensing of regulated professions rest mainly with the provinces and territories and with the professional bodies they empower, while the federal government plays a supporting and coordinating role. Recent years have seen genuine effort. The federal immigration system began selecting newcomers based on the kinds of work the country most needs, including health care and the skilled trades, and, in late 2025, announced a dedicated pathway for internationally trained physicians (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2025). The 2025 federal budget allocated new funding for foreign credential recognition, focusing on health and construction (Department of Finance Canada, 2025). The provinces have built their own safeguards, beginning with the fairness commissioner Ontario established in 2006 to oversee how professional bodies register newcomers, followed by Manitoba and Nova Scotia.

The international comparison is instructive. The United States leaves licensing to individual states and credential evaluation to private agencies, producing wide variation and, in many fields, long delays. Australia integrates the assessment of skills into the selection of migrants themselves, judging qualifications before a person arrives, an approach often credited with smoother integration (Hawthorne, 2015). The European Union works through common directives and a shared qualifications framework that member states adopt unevenly. Across all of these, a consistent lesson emerges. Procedural fairness, however necessary and good, has yet to dissolve the older habit of exclusion, and the overqualification gap endures wherever the gate of the profession remains in the hands of those already inside it.

What the Literature Settles, Contests, and Leaves Open

Several things the literature now settles on are worth stating without pause. The waste of internationally trained talent is large, lasting, and shaped by race and by gender. Foreign credentials and foreign experience are systematically devalued across Canada, the United States, the European Union, and Australia. The loss is genuine in money and in the harder-to-measure currency of a life spent below its calling. And professional licensing has long worked, in part, to draw a boundary around who may belong.

Other questions remain open, and honesty asks that we name them. Whether the recognition reforms of recent decades improve outcomes in the aggregate is genuinely uncertain, and the strongest evidence counsels humility. Whether fair treatment and economic advantage reliably move together is the live question on which much policy ambition turns. And whether the mechanisms that translate skill into deployment combine by adding or by multiplying awaits a careful test.

The gaps point clearly toward the work ahead. The fields that have studied closure and segmentation longest, the sociology of professions and the study of labour relations, deserve a fuller place in any account of brain waste, since their ideas of social closure,

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opportunity hoarding, and the two-tier market steady the whole structure. The average that pools women and men, and newcomers of every origin, into a single figure hides the people on whom the wall leans hardest, and research broken down by gender and country of origin would bring them into view. The discounting of qualifications earned in the Global South, a wound with its own colonial history, remains half-told by a general account of bias. And the recognition programmes of organizations themselves invite the organizational theorist's question: whether their audits and training reconnect the means of inclusion to their ends or remain a mere ceremony. The reforms now underway in Canada offer something close to a natural experiment, and the coming decade will reveal whether they narrow the gap or merely add another office to a system that has learned to look busy while the wall stands.

Conclusion

I began with the people, and I will end with them, because they are why this work is critical, not merely interesting. Behind the word recognition stands a physician who wants to heal, a nurse who wants to care, a teacher who wants to teach, and a country that said it wanted them and then, too often, set their gifts aside. The cost is counted in billions, and the billions are real, yet the deeper cost has no number. It is the slow message sent to a capable person that their knowledge, and so a part of themselves, is surplus to requirements here.

To recognize a credential is to decide whether a person's knowledge will be allowed to count, which is among the most consequential things one human institution can do to another. The literature gathered here suggests that the wall these professionals meet is built of ordinary bricks, the guarded gate of the profession, the two tiers of the market, the ceremony of inclusion that earns legitimacy while leaving outcomes untouched, and the categorical sorting that makes an advantage last. Each is a structure, and structures can be changed. Naming them plainly is the first work of changing them, and it is how we keep faith with the people whose lives those structures shape, and with the truth of what they carry across the border, and what it costs us all when we leave it unused.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise, with respect to the research, the authorship, or the publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support from any funding agency, commercial body, or not-for-profit organization for the research, the authorship, or the publication of this article.

Human Participants

This article is a conceptual review and synthesis of published scholarship and publicly available statistical and policy sources. It involved no human participants, no collection of primary data, and no access to identifiable personal information. Institutional research ethics approval and informed consent were therefore not required.

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[DOI: 10.66224/johepal.7.3.119]

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Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies Statement

Grammarly was used to support wordsmithing, grammar checking, sentence structure, and clarity. All substantive content, arguments, analysis, and scholarly interpretations remain the author's own.

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