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**BRIDGING THE GAP: A STUDY OF THE RYERSON UNIVERSITY, CHANG
SCHOOL OF CONTINUING EDUCATION, INTERNATIONALLY EDUCATED
SOCIAL WORK PROFESSIONALS BRIDGING PROGRAM**

by

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in the Program of

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Master of Arts
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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the Internationally Educated Social Work Professionals Bridging Program at Ryerson University facilitates the integration of Internationally Educated Social Workers (IESWs) into the Canadian labour market. Research indicates that Internationally Educated Professionals (IEPs) often face significant barriers that restrict them from effectively utilizing their foreign-obtained human capital. Occupational bridging programs are one type of program that has proven effective at increasing the employment rates of the IEPs who participate in them (Adamowicz, 2004; Dean Marie, Austin, & Zubin, 2004; Alboim, Finnie, & Meng, 2005). Through individual interviews conducted with program participants and key stakeholder representatives, this study identifies the barriers that IESWs face in the labour market, the challenges facing the IESW bridging program, and the perceived benefits of the program. The findings of this study reveal that unlike other labour market integration programs the IESWs bridging program comprehensively addresses many of the individual and systemic barriers that restrict IESWs from maximizing the returns to their human capital.

Key words: Bridging programs; Internationally Educated Social Workers (IESWs); Internationally Educated Professionals (IEPs); skilled immigrants; human capital; foreign credentials

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980's, the Canadian economy has undergone a significant transformation from an industrial based economy to a post-industrial knowledge based economy. As a result of the shift towards a knowledge-based economy, education has gained increasing importance in the Canadian labour market. Subsequently, the rise of the knowledge-based economy has corresponded with a shift in Canadian immigration policy, which now emphasizes education over all other criteria in the selection process. The emphasis on education and other forms of human capital in the points-based selection process is based upon the assumption that immigrants who meet this criterion will easily integrate into the Canadian labour market. Since the implementation of a human capital focused immigrant selection policy, the education levels of Canada's recent immigrant cohorts have steadily increased (Reitz, 2005).

Canada's current immigrant selection system follows the central tenets of human capital theory, that individuals with the same level of education and training will receive similar financial returns in the labour market (Becker, 1975; Mincer, 1958). However, despite rising education levels, the economic performance of recent immigrants continues to decline (Frenette & Morrisette, 2003; Galarneau & Morrisette, 2004). This trend indicates an apparent flaw in the current immigrant selection system. Human capital theory focuses on individual attributes as the determinants of economic performance while ignoring the effect that factors such as systemic discrimination and individual barriers may have on the economic performance of recent immigrants (Li, 2003).

The barriers that skilled immigrants face in the Canadian labour market are well documented and have been the subject of a growing body of research. Upon reviewing the relevant literature, it is apparent that there are several possible factors that may explain the

devaluing of immigrants' foreign-obtained human capital. These factors include, but are not limited to, language difficulties (Conference Board of Canada, 2004; Chiswick & Miller, 2003; Aydemir & Skuterud, 2004), a lack of both Canadian experience and knowledge of Canadian workplace norms and practices (Conference Board of Canada, 2004; Alboim et. al, 2005), a lack of access to informal social and employment networks (Harvey & Chakkalakal, 2001; Preston & Man, 1999; Kunz, 2003), discrimination based on race, ethnicity and religion (PROMPT, 2005; Ornstein, 2006; Teelucksingh & Galabuzi, 2005; Kunz; 2003), and changes in the composition of the labor force (Reitz, 2001a). In addition, a reduction in adequate settlement services for skilled immigrants can impede successful labour market integration (Shields, 2003; Sadiq, 2005; Man, 2004). Although difficult to determine the individual impact, it is apparent that a range of factors may restrict skilled immigrants from effectively utilizing their foreign-obtained human capital within the Canadian labour market.

The inability of internationally educated professionals (IEPs) to fully utilize their human capital has significant social and economic consequences. Estimates suggest that the discounting of foreign obtained education and labour market experience cost the Canadian economy billions annually in lost revenue (Bloom & Grant, 2001) and is a major cause of rising low-income rates among Canada's immigrant population (Picot, 2004).

Skill underutilization also has significant social costs as well. When immigrants are unable to effectively utilize their foreign-obtained human capital and achieve economic integration their overall social integration is hindered. The "social inclusion" of immigrants is determined by their participation in all aspects of society, including the economy. Therefore, the inability of immigrants to obtain equal participation in the labour market negatively impacts their overall social integration (Omidvar and Richmond, 2003).

It is apparent that there is a need for adequate settlement services that can facilitate the integration of immigrants into the Canadian labour market and assist IEPs to fully utilize their foreign obtained human capital. Currently, there exist several programs that support IEPs in their efforts to become employed within the Canadian labour market. Examples include internship and mentoring programs, credential assessment services, resume and cover letter writing workshops, as well as other job finding resources. Although these programs are beneficial, their approach is often too narrowly defined and fail to comprehensively address the individual and systemic barriers that IEPs face when accessing their professions in the Canadian labour market (PROMPT, 2005).

Occupational bridging programs are one type of program that has proven effective at integrating IEPs into their designated professions (Adamowicz, 2004; Dean, Marie, Austin, & Zubin, 2004). The success of bridging programs can be largely attributed to their comprehensive approach. Unlike other employment integration programs, bridging programs tend to offer components that address several of the common barriers that IEPs encounter when accessing their professions in the Canadian labour market. For instance, bridging programs can function on a variety of levels to provide the necessary upgrades in terms of education, work experience, and language training that may otherwise pose significant barriers to IEPs in the Canadian labour market (Alboim, et. al., 2005).

Due to the demonstrated success of occupational bridging programs, it became the goal of this study to determine how these programs address the individual and systemic barriers that contribute to the devaluing of IEPs foreign obtained human capital. Because of time constraints, this study focused specifically on the bridging program for Internationally Educated Social Workers (IESWs) at Ryerson University. Focusing on a small sample of IESWs who participated

in the bridging program at Ryerson University, this study sought to determine what aspects of the program assisted the participants in overcoming the barriers they faced in the labour market. By using the IESW bridging program as a case study, it was the aim of this study to link the findings with the larger issues of skill underutilization, the devaluing of foreign obtained human capital and the barriers that all IEPs face within the Canadian labour market.

The following questions guided this research project:

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the bridging program for Internationally Educated Social Workers (IESWs) at Ryerson University?
2. How does the bridging program address the individual and systemic barriers that IESWs face in the Canadian labour market?
3. What are the current challenges facing the bridging program?
4. What are the perceptions of employers, the professional association, program staff, and the program participants of the bridging program?
5. How are the barriers faced by the IESWs bridging program participants' reflective of the common barriers that IEPs face in the Canadian labour market?

In order to answer these research questions, it was necessary to carry out individual interviews with both the program's key stakeholders and the program participants. The interviews with the program participants revealed their perceptions regarding the barriers that they encountered within the labour market and how the bridging program had assisted them in overcoming these barriers. The interviews with the stakeholder representatives revealed what aspects of the bridging program were the most positively perceived by employers and the professional association and what are the challenges currently facing the program.

The potential benefits of this study include identifying the components of the bridging program that have been successful at addressing the individual and systemic barriers that IESWs encounter in the labour market while simultaneously determining what aspects of the program the study's participants believe need further emphasis. Another potential benefit of this study is to contribute to the larger discussion concerning the barriers that IEPs face in the Canadian labour market and the ongoing issue of skill underutilization.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The integration of immigrants into the Canadian labour market is an essential component for their successful social inclusion (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003). There are various interpretations concerning the barriers and challenges internationally educated professionals (IEPs) face in the Canadian labour market. Different theoretical frameworks have guided these interpretations. In order to better understand the processes and factors that influence the integration of skilled immigrants into the Canadian labour force, this study will draw upon four different theoretical perspectives, including human capital theory, social capital theory, two-tier system theory, and social inclusion theory. The four theoretical perspectives provide different interpretations of the barriers and challenges that skilled immigrants face in the labour market, as well as the solutions required to address these current challenges.

Human Capital Theory

One of the central tenets of human capital theory is that education and labour market experience are the main determinants of individual income levels (Mincer, 1958; Becker, 1975). Factors that have been found to influence an individual's level of human capital, and consequently their level of income, include level of education, labour market experience, language proficiency, occupational training, duration of residence and even parental socioeconomic background (Morawska, 1990; Hirschmann, 1982). Within the human capital framework, education is viewed as a direct investment that will eventually bring about economic returns in the labour market (Becker, 1975). The human capital model assumes that the higher the investment in education, the larger the financial returns in the labour market. In addition, human capital theory suggests that individuals with similar levels of education should receive similar economic returns in the labour market (Becker, 1975; Mincer, 1958). Following the

tenets of human capital theory, it is assumed that immigrants who arrive in Canada with a high level of education and labour market experience will consequently receive high economic returns in the labour market.

Canada's current points-based immigrant selection system is highly influenced by human capital theory, as the system emphasizes education as a form of human capital that would assist a skilled immigrant to successfully integrate into the Canadian labour market and contribute to the development of the knowledge based economy. Li (2003), however, argued that human capital theory, upon which the current immigrant selection system is based, overemphasizes the significance of individual merit and responsibility and fails to acknowledge the effect that structural constraints may have on the economic performance of skilled immigrants. Li (2003) stated that the human capital theory "views the capitalist economy as an open market in which individuals compete freely and fairly for earnings or social status based on their level of human capital" (p. 101). One of the limitations of human capital theory is that it over-emphasizes the importance of individual ability and does not take into consideration the systemic barriers and inequity that IEPs face in the Canadian labour market (Li, 2003). Similar to Li's argument, Hiebert (1997) claimed that human capital theory overlooks the effect that factors such as gender, race, social class, and nativity may have on the integration of immigrants into the Canadian labour market.

Within the human capital framework, the failure of IEPs to achieve employment and earnings levels that are reflective of their education levels and labour market experience can be attributed to an array of factors. For instance, proficiency levels in one of Canada's two official languages can impede an IEP from fully utilizing their human capital within the Canadian labour market. Another possible factor is the inability of IEPs to have their foreign obtained credentials

assessed to the level of their Canadian equivalent and recognized by employers and professional regulatory/licensing bodies.

From a human capital perspective, the underutilization of immigrants' skills can be attributed to the inability of current settlement agencies and programs to provide the necessary services required to successfully utilize immigrants' human capital. This perspective, however, still focuses on the human capital attributes of the individual immigrant as the cause for the underutilization of skills, while ignoring larger structural constraints, such as employer hiring practices, availability of jobs within the labour market, and other factors such as gender and racial inequalities that exist in the Canadian labour market. Again Li (2003) claimed that the focus on immigrants' individual human capital levels as the cause of their declining economic performance is a failing of human capital theory and more emphasis should be given to the large structural constraints that exist in the Canadian economy.

As mentioned, Canada's current points-based immigrant selection system adheres to the rationale of the human capital theory. Prior to 1967, immigrant selection was based primarily upon country of origin and race. With the introduction of the points system, human capital such as education and labour market experience became the basis of the immigrant selection system in Canada.

Under the current selection system, the majority of points awarded to applicants are based upon their level of education. According to human capital theory, the function of education is to develop skills that are in demand within the labour market. In addition, the skills and knowledge developed through education can be utilized for the benefit of society. Following these tenets of human capital theory, the Canadian immigrant selection system emphasizes human capital in order to select immigrants with high levels of education and the desired knowledge and skills

that could potentially benefit Canada economically and socially. The emphasis on human capital in the immigrant selection system generates expectations that economic immigrants should be able to match if not exceed the income levels of the native-born (Li, 2003).

The declining economic performance of Canada's recent immigrant cohorts reveals an apparent flaw in the current immigrant selection system. Reitz (2005) stated that the current economic performance of Canada's recent immigrants contradicts the human capital theory. This claim is based on the observation that although the education levels of recent immigrants continues to rise, their economic performance continues to decline.

Li (2003) argued that immigrants' human capital does influence their earnings; however, the returns that they receive are not equivalent to the earnings that the Canadian born with similar levels of human capital receive. Several factors may explain this earnings disparity. As mentioned, the devaluing of foreign-obtained human capital has a significant effect on immigrants' earnings. Despite the rising education levels of immigrants, evidence indicates that their economic performance continues to decline. This trend contradicts the human capital theory as immigrants go unrewarded for their human capital in the Canadian labour market. Human capital theory fails to take into consideration the structural constraints and inequalities that may explain the devaluing of foreign obtained human capital and the declining economic performance of recent immigrants.

Social Capital Theory

Social capital theory examines how the economic performance of immigrants is related to their social networks in Canada and how those networks facilitate labour market integration. Social capital refers to "features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitates coordination and cooperation for mutual benefits" (Putnam, 1995, p. 65). One of

the central tenets of social capital theory is that social networks play a critical role in the integration of immigrants into the receiving country. Consequently, social networks play a crucial role in the integration of immigrants into the labour market. Immigrant communities with well established community networks do not face as great of a difficulty in achieving labour market integration when compared to newer immigrant communities that may lack the strong employment networks that better established immigrant communities possess (Preston & Man, 1999). Many immigrants, therefore, may be disadvantaged by the informal methods that employers use in their hiring processes. For example, recent immigrants may be disadvantaged as employers often rely on contacts and referrals to fill vacancies within their organizations. Immigrants often lack the social capital or access to the necessary social networks that would facilitate their ability to establish employment contacts and referrals (Harvey & Chakkalakal, 2001).

Kunz (2003a) claimed that social capital is just as important as human capital when it comes to successful labour market integration. Social capital is different from human capital as it is based on more intangible factors such as community networks and associations between people, whereas human capital is based upon more definitive factors such as educational credentials, occupational training and language proficiency (Coleman, 1988). Two forms of social capital have been identified as crucial to the successful economic and social integration of immigrants into the receiving country. These two forms of social capital are referred to as bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital is understood as the associations between relatives and members of an ethno-racial community. Alternatively, bridging social capital is defined as the associations that exist between various ethno-racial communities as well as the relations that

exist between immigrants and the native-born population within a receiving country (Kunz, 2003a).

Bonding social capital appears to play a significant role in the successful integration of immigrants into the receiving society as newcomers often rely heavily on family and community networks to assist them in securing employment upon arrival. This form of social capital is often limited to an immigrant's own ethno-racial community, therefore bridging capital is necessary for immigrants to extend their networks and integrate more successfully into the larger society and labour market. By means of extending one's social networks, immigrants are improving their social and economic prospects in the receiving country. Bridging capital is therefore the most significant form of social capital for skilled immigrants as it provides more extensive social and employment networks. Thus, it can be said that bridging and bonding capital assists a skilled immigrant to fully utilize and receive the full economic returns to their human capital (Kunz, 2003a).

Social capital theory provides a framework in which to better understand the differences in the economic performance that exist between various immigrant communities, based on factors such as length of residency and strength of social networks. Additionally, social capital theory examines how social networks play a critical role in the integration of immigrants into the receiving country both socially and economically. Social capital theory, however, fails to provide an explanation for the declining economic performance of recent immigrant cohorts when compared to past immigrant cohorts with comparable social capital levels. Two-tier system theory provides an explanation for this apparent disparity by examining the structural changes that have occurred in the Canadian economy.

Neo-liberal Restructuring and Two-tier System Theory

Two-tier system theory examines the declining labour market performance of immigrants within the context of neo-liberal restructuring of welfare state. In terms of the economic performance of immigrants, two-tier system theory explores how neo-liberal restructuring has reduced the capacity of immigrant settlement agencies (ISAs) to provide the essential services that they have in the past to facilitate the integration of skilled immigrants into the Canadian labour market

It is necessary to contextualize these trends in order to understand the deteriorating economic performance of recent immigrants in Canada. The deteriorating economic performance of recent immigrants corresponds with a period of economic and social restructuring in Canada. Guided by neo-liberal principles, the economic restructuring of the Canadian economy has brought about a change in the nature of work. Informal, flexible, temporary, and insecure forms of employment increasingly characterize work. Those most affected by the restructuring of the Canadian economy are women, racial minorities, and immigrants (Galabuzi, 2006).

According to Shields (2003), immigrants are increasingly used as part of the flexible and disposable labour force. This flexible and disposable labour force has been created to meet the demands of the globalized economy. In addition, neo-liberal restructuring has eroded away at Keynesian principles that have traditionally provided a social and economic safety net in Canada. Historically, social programs and the labour market have assisted with the integration of immigrants into Canadian society. The neo-liberal-influenced restructuring of these two central institutions has had a negative impact on the integration of newcomers into the Canadian labour market (Shields, 2003). More than ever, employment services for newcomers are crucial for their successful integration as barriers to employment increase and many immigrants face greater

difficulty in the foreign credential assessment process. However, due to neo-liberal restructuring, these services are being reduced at a time when they are needed the most (Simich, 2000). The restructuring of these two main institutions has been a contributing factor to the over-representation of immigrants in the flexible and marginalized sectors of the Canadian labour market and the devaluing of immigrants' human capital.

Currently, neither the federal or provincial governments provide direct services for immigrants. Instead, both the federal and provincial governments transfer responsibility down to non-governmental and not for profit ISAs by means of competitive contracting for services (Sadiq, 2005). As a result, ISAs and other non-profit social service providers are now highly dependent upon government contracts for their continuing source of funding (Jackson & Sanger, 2003).

Restructuring of the settlement service sector's funding has meant a shift from core program funding to program specific funding. Under this new funding system, ISAs receive funding for programs that the government considers necessary, rather than receiving funding to provide the services that an organizations considers necessary for its clientele. Consequently, ethno-specific ISAs reconfigured their community specific programs and have instead adopted broader non-specific programs that are considered essential by the federal government. In order to address the reduction in funding resulting from neo-liberal restructuring and the rising demand for settlement services, many ISAs are now charging their clients fees for some of the services they provide. The result is that the level of accessibility to these services is decreasing for immigrants who cannot afford them. The reduction of settlement services consequently reduces the ability for immigrants to integrate successfully into the labour market (Man, 2004). As Reitz (1998) found in his comparative study of various countries' settlement service structures, the

level of public support for settlement services is crucial for the successful economic and socio-political inclusion of immigrants.

Two-tier system theory is capable of explaining the structural changes that have affected the labour market outcomes of recent immigrant cohorts in Canada. Neo-liberal restructuring of the welfare state has directly impacted the services available to recent immigrants in Canada. This reduction in appropriate settlement services, especially in terms of employment, may explain the difference in economic performance found between immigrant cohorts in Canada.

Social Inclusion Theory

The previously discussed theoretical frameworks have all been utilized to better understand the integration of immigrants into the Canadian labour market. These theoretical perspectives contain overlapping characteristics and separately they cannot completely account for the current labour market situation facing immigrants, however as a whole they do provide a comprehensive approach to understanding the numerous factors that have an effect on the integration of immigrants into the Canadian labour market.

These theoretical perspectives tend to focus on the individual immigrant and the various factors and processes involved in their integration into the labour market. These perspectives, however, tend to ignore the larger interaction between the individual immigrant and the larger social structure. It is, therefore, important to understand how socially constructed opportunities and barriers within Canadian organizations and institutional processes impact the labour market integration and the overall social integration of immigrants. To understand the inclusion/exclusion of immigrants in Canadian society, this study will turn to social inclusion theory as set out by Omidvar and Richmond (2003).

Social exclusion/inclusion theory was first developed in Europe in the 1980's as a solution to increasing social inequalities that were brought about by changes in the labour market and the inability of welfare systems to address these growing social problems. For the purpose of this study, the concept of social inclusion will be examined as it is applied to improving the settlement process for immigrants.

Omidvar and Richmond (2003) claimed that social exclusion is understood as the impact of existing social and economic systems on marginalized groups within society. Conversely, social inclusion is defined as the mobilization of resources and the development of solutions to address issues of social exclusion. Social inclusion theory provides a framework for the development of policies and programs that aim at achieving equity for all citizens.

Omidvar and Richmond (2003) apply social inclusion theory to understand the effects the deteriorating economic performance of recent immigrants has on their overall integration process into Canadian society. When discussing the integration of immigrants and refugees into Canadian society, Omidvar and Richmond (2003) define social inclusion as follows:

Social inclusion involves the basic notions of belonging, acceptance and recognition. For immigrants and refugees, social inclusion would be represented by the realization of full and equal participation in the economic, social, cultural and political dimensions of life in their new country. In a simple but useful sense, therefore, social inclusion for immigrants and refugees can be seen as the dismantling of barriers that lead to exclusion in all these domains (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003, p.1).

Many factors can contribute towards social exclusion. Such factors include poverty, racism, and lack of political clout. People are denied recognition within the dominant society and face powerlessness, economic vulnerability, and limited life experiences and life prospects (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003). Omidvar and Richmond, therefore, suggest that policy makers must take into consideration the experiences of immigrant and refugee families when developing

settlement service programs and policies, in order to facilitate the equal participation of all immigrants in the economic, social, cultural and political dimensions of Canadian society.

Social inclusion theory can thus be applied to the current difficulties skilled immigrants face accessing trades and professions in Canada. In order to fully utilize the skills of Canada's immigrants, there is a need for more effective policies that address the economic inclusion of skilled immigrants in the Canadian labour market. Alboim and The Maytree Foundation (2002) argue the need for major policy reforms that would facilitate access to trades and professions for skilled immigrants. Social inclusion theory provides the framework through which existing policies can be re-examined and developed in order to address the experiences of skilled immigrants in the Canadian labour market. By doing so, policy makers would be promoting the equitable participation of skilled immigrants within the labour market and subsequently their integration into Canadian society (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003).

The different theoretical perspectives examined in this section guide the various interpretations concerning the current barriers and challenges IEPs face in the Canadian labour market. Each perspective gives a different interpretation on the processes and factors involved in the integration of IEPs into the Canadian labour market. Individually, each perspective cannot fully explain the current labour market situation facing immigrants. Together, however, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive approach to understanding the numerous factors that have an effect on the integration of immigrants into the Canadian labour market.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is little relevant literature that specifically addresses occupational bridging programs for Internationally Educated Professionals (IEPs). The literature that does address bridging programs is mainly evaluative and descriptive in nature. However, the literature does indicate that these programs have been successful at increasing the employment rates of the IEPs who participate in them (Adamowicz, 2004; Dean, Marie, Austin, & Zubin, 2004). Due to the limited amount of literature on bridging programs, the aim of this literature review is to situate the analysis of bridging programs within the larger context of the barriers that IEPs face in the Canadian labour market and the devaluing of foreign obtained human capital.

Canada's current points-based immigrant selection system emphasizes education, labour market experience, and other forms of human capital in the assessment process. As a result, the current selection system favours skilled immigrants with high levels of human and financial capital. On average, the education levels of recent immigrants in Canada are higher than the native-born population and they continue to rise. However, despite immigrants' rising levels of education, their earnings continue to decrease (Reitz, 2005). It is apparent that certain factors must restrict skilled immigrants from fully utilizing their foreign obtained human capital. Human capital theory, upon which the current selection system is based, fails to take into consideration the structural constraints and inequalities that may explain the devaluing of foreign obtained human capital and the declining economic performance of recent immigrants (Li, 2003).

The Devaluing of Foreign-Obtained Human Capital

When the earnings of immigrants are broken down by region of origin, apparent differences emerge. Evidence indicates that the economic returns to education and work

experience vary based upon the region of origin from which they were obtained (Freidberg, 2000).

Thompson (2000) found that employers were more likely to discount educational qualifications obtained from non-traditional immigrant source regions when compared to educational qualifications obtained within traditional source regions such as North America and Western Europe. Considering that the majority of immigrants to arrive in Canada over the past three decades have originated from non-traditional source countries, it is reasonable to suggest that the devaluing of foreign obtained credentials acquired in non-traditional source countries may be a major contributing factor in the declining earnings of recent immigrants.

The devaluing of foreign obtained education and its relation to the declining economic performance of immigrants is the subject of several research studies (Galarneau & Morissette, 2004; Bratsberg & Ragan, 2002). For instance, empirical research conducted by Alboim, Finnie and Meng (2005), revealed that immigrants' foreign obtained education is significantly discounted in the Canadian labour market. Basing their study on data from Statistics Canada's Survey of Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities, Alboim et. al. (2005) found that foreign obtained degrees received economic returns in the labour market one-third less than their Canadian equivalent. Alboim et al. (2005) claimed that immigrants may be unaware of the worth of their credentials or the necessary steps that they must take to upgrade their skills in order for their human capital to be effectively utilized within the Canadian labour market.

Bratsberg and Ragan (2002) carried out a comparative study of the earnings of immigrants who obtained education within the U.S. and immigrants who possessed foreign obtained education. The study found that the earnings were greater for those who obtained education within the U.S. They also determined that returns to foreign education varied between

the countries of origin from which the education was obtained. Education obtained from countries with well-developed economies, where English was an official language, received higher returns. Education obtained within the U.S. was the most important determinant of economic success for immigrants who originated from non-English speaking countries with underdeveloped economies.

There are, however, varying interpretations of the relationship between foreign-obtained education and the decline in immigrant earnings. For instance, in his study of the 1996 census, Li (2001) compared the market value of foreign and domestic-obtained education in Canada. Controlling for variables of gender and visible minority status, Li (2001) found that foreign-earned education only had a minor negative effect on immigrants' earnings potential.

In addition, a study of the last five Canadian national censuses, carried out by Aydemir and Skuterud (2004), found that foreign-obtained education had little or no effect on immigrants' income levels. The study found that three main factors could explain the deteriorating earnings of Canada's recent immigrants. The study determined that one-third of the deterioration in earnings for immigrant men could be explained by the poor returns to foreign labour market experience, and was attributed mainly to immigrant men originating from non-traditional source countries. Another third is attributable to declining proficiency rates in one of Canada's two official languages. When labour market entry conditions were taken into account, the study found that immigrants who arrived between 1995 and 1999 should experience higher earnings than immigrants who arrived between 1965 and 1969. However, the economic performance of recent immigrants to Canada indicates that this is not the case.

Similar to Aydemir and Skuterud's study, Alboim et. al. (2005) determined that foreign-obtained labor market experience is significantly discounted by employers, more so than foreign-

obtained education. Foreign-obtained labour market experience receives only one-third the economic returns of the Canadian obtained equivalent. Although foreign-obtained education may be difficult for employers to properly assess, labour market experience appears to be even more difficult.

Barriers, Inequalities and Constraints

Based upon the research examined thus far, it is apparent that foreign obtained human capital is significantly discounted in the Canadian labour market. There are several possible factors that may explain the devaluing of foreign-obtained human capital. For instance, cultural differences may act as a barrier to successful integration into the Canadian labour market (Conference Board of Canada, 2004; Alboim et. al, 2005). Secondly, low proficiency levels in one of Canada's two official languages may restrict immigrants from maximizing the returns to their human capital (Conference Board of Canada, 2004; Chiswick & Miller, 2003). In addition, discrimination may impact immigrants' economic performance and the devaluing of foreign-obtained human capital (PROMPT, 2005; Ornstein, 2006; Teelucksingh and Galabuzi, 2005; Kunz, 2003b). Finally, changes in the composition of the labor force may also be contributing factors (Reitz, 2001). Although there is a range of possible factors that may explain the devaluing of foreign obtained human capital, it is difficult to determine the effect that each of these individual factors may have on IEPs ability to utilize their human capital within the Canadian labour market. This section will explore how these factors may be responsible for the devaluing of IEPs' foreign obtained human capital.

A lack of understanding of cultural norms often poses a barrier for immigrants in the Canadian labour market. A Conference Board of Canada report (2004) found from focus group studies that immigrants claimed that they lacked an understanding of Canadian business norms

and values. Participants in the study demonstrated a desire to understand cultural values in order to effectively integrate into the Canadian business world, but realized that adjustment to the “Canadian way” would take time.

Proficiency in one of Canada’s two official languages is another factor that often obstructs immigrants from maximizing the returns to their human capital. The Conference Board of Canada (2004) reported that language was the number one barrier to successful employment identified by immigrants. For many immigrants, the language barrier is difficult to overcome, as it requires a significant investment of time and money, and immigrants have little of these two things. Immigrants also reported that employers may negatively perceive an accent and possibly use it to screen out immigrants.

According to a study conducted by Chiswick and Miller (2003) on data from the 1991 census, language ability has a direct effect on immigrant earnings. The study found that for immigrant men, earnings levels rise with increasing levels of proficiency in one of Canada’s two official languages. Chiswick and Miller (2003) concluded that high proficiency levels in one of Canada’s two official languages allowed immigrants to receive higher returns to their foreign-obtained human capital.

Another possible factor responsible for the devaluing of IEPs’ foreign obtained human capital is discrimination based on race, ethnicity, and religion. The assumption that racial discrimination is a contributing factor in the devaluing of IEPs’ foreign obtained human capital is based upon the fact that the majority of immigrants who have migrated to Canada following the introduction of the points system in 1967 are racial minorities (Drieger, 2001; Harvey, Siu, & Reil, 1999). Given that the majority of recent immigrants are visible minorities, it is difficult to

deny that racial discrimination may play some role in the devaluing of foreign-obtained human capital and the declining economic performance of recent immigrants.

Studies indicate that visible minority status may have a significant impact on income levels (PROMPT, 2005; Hum & Simpson, 2002; Ornstein, 2006). Based upon data from the 1996 and 2001 censuses and other labour market statistics, Teelucksingh and Galabuzi (2005) found that racialized persons, immigrant and native-born, had a median after-tax income 23.2 percent lower than non-racialized persons in 1996. This number fell to 13.3 percent in 2001. The study also found that young males who were members of a racialized group, native-born or immigrant, were the most economically disadvantaged, with a median after-tax gap of 38.7 percent. Teelucksingh and Galabuzi (2005) concluded that the findings of the study indicate that the labour of racialized minorities is highly devalued in the Canadian labour market.

In addition, Kunz (2003b) found that visible minority immigrant youth had higher rates of unemployment and faced significant barriers in the Canadian labour market. The immigrant youth who participated in the study suggested that these barriers were compounded by employer discrimination based on factors such as race, ethnicity, and religious affiliation.

Changes in the composition of the Canadian labour force may have also affected the ability of IEPs to utilize their foreign obtained human capital. For instance, Reitz (2001a) attributed the decline in immigrant earnings to the rising educational levels of native-born Canadians between the period of 1971 and 1996. Native-born Canadians have been acquiring training in knowledge-based professions, professions that skilled immigrants have traditionally gravitated towards. The result has been increased competition between skilled immigrants and native-born Canadians within the labour market, especially the knowledge-based professions.

Employers' Perceptions Regarding the Challenges of Hiring IEPs

Employers' perceptions regarding the challenges of employing IEPs tend to correspond with several of the barriers identified thus far. Employers claimed that the most significant barriers/challenges to hiring IEPs were, language barriers, unfamiliarity with foreign credentials and lack of Canadian work experience. From a human capital perspective, these barriers/challenges would impact the ability of IEPs to successfully utilize their foreign obtained human capital within the Canadian labour market. The Canadian HR Report Survey (2005) posed the following question to employers, "What, if any, challenges do you foresee in bringing a skilled immigrant into your organization?" There were three main responses to this question, as 82 percent of employers identified language issues, 36 percent identified lack of Canadian experience and 34 percent identified the difficulty associated with properly assessing foreign obtained credentials. These findings are based on 271 responses from 133 employers.

An Environics' Survey (2004) further supports these findings. One quarter of employers who participated in the study claimed that they would be hesitant to hire an IEP who had no Canadian experience. Another quarter of employers claimed that they would take into account foreign obtained labour market experience when reviewing potential applicants' credentials; however, they would not consider it equivalent to a similar level of Canadian obtained labour market experience. Of all the employers who participated in the survey, only 39 percent considered foreign obtained work experience as equal to Canadian obtained experience (The Public Policy Forum, 2004).

Employers expressed similar reasons as to why they considered Canadian experience important. For instance, 32 percent of employers considered it evidence that immigrants could function effectively in a Canadian work environment, 14 percent claimed it proved that

immigrants were able to meet Canadian standards in their professions and 11 percent claimed that it reduced the possibility of hiring an employee that would have difficulty fitting into an organization (The Public Policy Forum, 2004).

Based upon these findings, it is apparent that Canadian labour market experience holds a great deal of significance to employers when it comes to assessing potential job applicants. It not only indicates that an individual has been successfully employed in a Canadian organization or business, but rather that an employee has the necessary language skills and knowledge of Canadian business culture required to perform in the Canadian context (Harvey, 2001).

The aforementioned evidence indicates that the majority of employers consider Canadian labour market experience, language skills, and Canadian-obtained credentials as indicators of not only professional knowledge, but also an individual's ability to communicate and function within a Canadian workplace. For employers, it is important for potential employees to be able to readily adapt to a workplace without any major obstacles that could cost an organization valuable time and resources. For many IEPs, difficulties associated with foreign credential recognition, language ability, and lack of Canadian experience act as systemic barriers to their successful integration into the Canadian labour market. Canadian experience in particular is a significant barrier as it creates a catch twenty-two scenario, where the IEP must acquire Canadian experience in order to gain entrance to their profession, however, in order to acquire experience, you must first get access to the labour market. This scenario is exceptionally difficult for internationally educated newcomers to overcome (The Public Policy Forum, 2004).

Economic and Social Consequences

Several possible factors may contribute towards the devaluing of foreign obtained human capital; however it is difficult to determine the effect that each of these individual factors may

have. It is clear that the devaluing of foreign-obtained human capital has both negative economic and social consequences. For instance, a Conference Board of Canada report estimates that the Canadian economy loses between 4.1 billion and 5.9 billion annually due to the discounting of foreign-obtained education and labour market experience (Bloom & Grant, 2001). Reitz (2001) provided a slightly lower estimate, claiming that because immigrants do not receive the same returns to their human capital as the native-born, they lose a total of 2 billion annually in potential income.

The Canadian economy suffers due to the unnecessary re-training of IEPs and the loss of potential tax revenue that would be contributed if immigrant unemployment rates were reduced. In addition, the deteriorating economic performance of Canada's immigrant population may place greater strain on Canada's already over-burdened social services. As well, the economic imperative upon which Canada's immigrant selection policy is based on will be challenged by the failure of the policy to maintain economic growth through immigration (Grant & Sweetman, 2004).

The costs of skill underutilization are, however, the most significant for newcomers in Canada. During the 1990's, low-income rates among immigrants had risen while the low-income rates amongst the native-born population decreased (Picot, 2004). Ornstein's (2006) analysis of census data for the Toronto CMA from 1971 to 2001, found that the income gap between European and non-European ethno-racial groups grew steadily throughout this period. Ornstein's analysis concluded that out of the more than one hundred ethno-racial groups studied in the Toronto CMA, visible minority groups were over represented in the most economically disadvantaged groups. Considering that the majority of individuals within these groups were

foreign born, it indicates that immigrants are more economically disadvantaged compared to the average population.

In addition to the obvious economic consequences of skill underutilization, there are considerable social costs as well. The current points-based selection system favours individuals with high levels of education and training. Immigrants often arrive in Canada with the expectation that the skills upon which they were selected will yield them successful employment. This expectation is often confronted with significant barriers in the labour market. Employment is a necessary component to successful settlement and integration. When immigrants are unable to effectively utilize their foreign-obtained human capital in the labour market, their ability to integrate and feel accepted within the receiving country is hindered. According to Omidvar and Richmond (2003), the “social inclusion” of immigrants and refugees is determined by their level of participation in all facets of society, which includes the economy. The inability of immigrants to gain equal participation in the Canadian economy therefore affects their overall sense of “social inclusion” within the receiving society.

Settlement Services

In order to avoid the negative social and economic consequences associated with skills under recognition, it is necessary to address the structural barriers that impede the successful integration of immigrants into the Canadian labour market and provide the essential settlement services to assist immigrants to overcome these barriers. Historically in Canada, immigrants have gravitated towards employment in the manufacturing and agricultural sectors, which did not require a high degree of official language proficiency. Today’s economy, however, places greater emphasis on knowledge-based occupations. The knowledge-based economy requires a well-educated labour force. This reality is reflected in the current immigrant selection system

that emphasizes education over all other attributes. Within the knowledge-based economy, strong communication skills have become a necessity. Therefore, settlement services need to address the barriers that immigrants face in the knowledge-based economy, such as language education and credential recognition (Reitz, 2005).

Settlement services provided by the federal government do not adequately meet the needs of skilled immigrants. Settlement services at the federal level address the basic needs of newcomers to Canada, such as the Language Instruction for Newcomers (LINC) program and Immigrant Settlement and Adaptation Programs (ISAP). The federal government does not provide the necessary settlement services to assist IEPs to fully utilize their human capital within the Canadian economy.

A study conducted by R. J. Sparks Consulting Inc. (2001) found that successful labour market integration for skilled immigrants was dependent upon whether immigrants received adequate settlement services. However, due to neo-liberal-influenced restructuring, the institutions that have traditionally assisted immigrants with integrating into the labour market have been reduced at a time when they are needed the most. Recent immigrants now face a job market where stable forms of employment are difficult to find and they lack the necessary settlement services to navigate past these barriers (Shields, 2003).

There is a need for settlement services that can facilitate the integration of immigrants into the Canadian labour market and allow IEPs to fully utilize their foreign obtained human capital. Profession specific bridging programs for IEPs are one example of a successful intervention into the issue of skill underutilization. Bridging programs address the barriers and challenges IEPs face in the labour market on a profession specific basis, as they assist and expedite integration into the labour market. These programs can function on a variety of levels to

provide the necessary upgrades in terms of education, work experience, and language training that otherwise may pose significant barriers to IEPs in the Canadian labour market. In addition, bridging programs allow IEPs to develop their social capital by establishing the necessary networks within their professions (Alboim et. al., 2005). The Internationally Educated Social Workers (IESW) bridging program at Ryerson University addresses several of the barriers that IESWs and all IEPs face in the Canadian labour market by providing instruction on cultural norms and practices in Canada, occupation specific language training, as well as placement opportunities to gain the “Canadian experience” so often demanded by employers. In addition, the program also provides participants with the opportunity to develop their social and professional networks.

This literature review reveals that foreign obtained human capital is significantly discounted and devalued in the Canadian labour market. There are several possible factors that may impede IEPs from successfully utilizing their human capital. The focus of this study will be to examine how professional bridging programs can facilitate the integration of skilled immigrants into the Canadian labour market by overcoming the barriers and challenges that keep IEPs from fully utilizing their human capital.

METHODOLOGY

This study followed a qualitative research approach. The research is based on individual interviews with Internationally Educated Social Workers (IESWs) and representatives from the key stakeholder groups involved in the Internationally Educated Social Workers' Bridging Program, including representatives from the program's staff team, social service employers, and representatives from the professional association. By taking a qualitative research approach to the study, the researcher was able to gain a better understanding of the participants' "experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge" (Patton, 2002, p. 4). In addition, a qualitative research approach enabled the researcher to seek clarification of opinions, views and ideas that may not have been possible if a quantitative research approach was taken (Bryman, 2001).

This research project was also exploratory in its approach, as little research exists on bridging programs for Internationally Educated Professionals (IEPs). Although this study is framed within the larger discussion of the devaluation of foreign obtained credentials and the barriers skilled immigrants face in the labour market, little research has been carried out on the role of bridging programs as one possible intervention strategy to address the ongoing issue of lack of foreign credential recognition by employers. The focus of this research was open and flexible for the purpose of examining several aspects of the IESW program.

Neuman (2006) claims that exploratory and descriptive forms of research often blend together. Therefore, this study is also descriptive in nature since it sought to answer how the IESW bridging program is successful at integrating its participants into the Canadian labour market. Specifically, the researcher examined: (1) who participated in the program; (2) what common experiences do the participants' share; and (3) and what are the common barriers that IESWs face in the labour market?

Building upon the exploratory and descriptive aspects of the research, the purpose of this study was to also find out why the bridging program for IESWs is necessary. In addition, the study attempted to reveal the reasons why the bridging program is successful or not successful at integrating IESWs into the Canadian labour market, and how do the labour market experiences of the IESWs who participated in the program reflect the experiences of other IEPs in the Canadian labour market?

Given the time limitations of the major research paper, the qualitative research for this study focused on one specific program and group within a limited time frame. It was beyond the scope of this study to conduct longitudinal qualitative research on bridging programs. The study did not include quantitative data analysis, but rather a focused case study conducted over a short time period with a small group of participants. The objective was to perform an in-depth examination of the experiences of a few participants who took part in the IESW bridging program and the various stakeholders who were connected or involved in the program.

Working with a small sample of IESWs who participated in the bridging program at Ryerson University, it was the intention of this study to use these subjects to illustrate the issue of the devaluation of foreign obtained credentials and, in general, the barriers that IEPs face in the Canadian labour market. By examining the IESW bridging program as a micro-level case study, it was the intention of this study to connect the findings with the larger macro-level context of the effects of foreign credentials on employment outcomes for recent immigrants, and the barriers that all IEPs face in the Canadian labour market.

Research Design and Methods

The qualitative data obtained for the purposes of this research project was obtained from semi-structured individual interviews conducted with the program participants and

representatives from the various stakeholder groups. The study consisted of seven individual, face-to-face interviews lasting thirty-five to forty-five minutes each. Interview participants were selected based on a non-random purposive sampling. In order to fulfill the study's objectives, the purposive sampling technique was employed to acquire interview participants who adequately represented the various stakeholder groups and program participants. As Patton (2002) stated, "Purposeful sampling involves studying information-rich cases rather than generalizing from a sample to a population" (p. 563). The researcher selected cases with a particular purpose and was unaware as to whether the selected cases represented the entire population under study (Neuman, 2006). Purposive sampling allowed for a thorough examination of "information-rich cases" in order to develop a greater understanding of the issues that were the focus of the study.

Subjects

As mentioned, in order to fulfill the objectives of the study, purposive sampling was employed to attain the seven individual interviews. Of the total seven interview participants, three were former participants of the IESW bridging program at Ryerson University. The remaining participants were representatives from the various stakeholder groups, including, employers familiar with the IESW bridging program, a representative from the professional association for social service workers in the province of Ontario, and a representative from the bridging program staff team at Ryerson University. All individuals who participated in these interviews did so on a volunteer basis and were self-selected. Prior to the initiation of this study, all recruitment materials, consent forms and interview guides were approved by the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board.

The IESWs and the representatives from the bridging program staff team were recruited from Ryerson University's Chang School of Continuing Education. A letter of support for the

study was obtained from the program director of the Gateway for International Professionals Program at the Chang School of Continuing Education. The recruitment of social service employers was carried out with the assistance of the IESW bridging program staff who distributed a recruitment email on behalf of the principal researcher to organizations that were involved in the IESW program. The representative from the professional association was contacted on an individual basis. Similar to the other interview participants, the representative from the professional association was familiar with the IESW bridging program at Ryerson University.

By conducting interviews with the IESWs who had participated in the bridging program at Ryerson University, it was the aim of this study to gain insight into the barriers that they face within the Canadian labour market and how the bridging program has assisted or not assisted them in overcoming these barriers. By interviewing representatives from the key stakeholder groups, it was the intention of this study to develop an understanding of what aspects of the bridging program were the most positively perceived by employers and the professional association as well as what are their continuing issues of concern.

Data Collection

For the purpose of this study, the researcher carried out seven individual interviews that were based on semi-structured questions (see Appendices A-D for the Interview Protocols). The semi-structured nature of the interviews permitted the researcher to probe and clarify participants' answers and to direct the discussion towards answering the proposed research questions (Bryman & Teevan, 2005). In addition, the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed participants to address aspects of the questions that required further clarification. As well, the semi-structured questions permitted the researcher to conduct the interviews with some

degree of control while providing participants with a framework to express their own opinions and perceptions (Patton, 2002). By utilizing prompts and probing questions, the researcher was able to draw out further information related to the original research questions from the participants during the course of the interview.

Data Analysis

All of the individual interviews conducted were audio recorded and then later transcribed by the researcher and an assistant. Audio recording of the interviews was helpful as it allowed for the continuing analysis of the data as the study progressed. In addition, transcribing provided a word for word record of the interviews, thus ensuring the accuracy of the data. The data analysis began with the organization and coding of the interview transcripts. By doing so, connections were established between the various data segments in order to reveal the major concepts and themes that were present within the data. Coding data can be viewed as the process of reducing and simplifying the vast amounts of raw data collected during the interview process into more manageable categories. The coding process also enabled the researcher to organize the data into broader conceptual categories from which data segments could be easily retrieved for future interpretation (Neuman, 2006; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

Strauss (1987) believes that coding is a fundamental procedure in the analytical process. Following the analytical procedure set out by Strauss, data coding in this study was carried out in three main phases, and utilizing a different form of coding during each phase (Strauss, 1987). In the first phase of coding, referred to as open coding, the data was separated and categorized into large data segments consisting of the major themes and concepts. These major themes and concepts originated from the previously established research questions, theoretical frameworks and the accumulated data. Although this method of coding does not necessarily provide a

thorough analysis of the data, it does, assist the researcher to effectively organize the vast amounts of qualitative data obtained into more manageable categories for further analysis (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

The first phase of coding involved the condensing of the qualitative data into broad groupings and themes, which in turn facilitated the further organization and categorization of the data. The second phase of coding, referred to as axial coding, was carried out by re-examining the codes and themes established in the first phase of coding, and then establishing connections between those codes. Bryman and Teevan (2005) stated that, “This is done by linking codes to contexts, to consequences, to patterns of interaction, and to causes” (p. 285). The second phase of coding enabled the researcher to further break down the larger more generic themes, established in the first phase of coding, into smaller and more specific sub-categories. During this process, not only were linkages between the concepts and themes established, but also some themes established in the first phase of coding were discarded while others became the focus of more intensive examination. Additionally, this second phase of coding allowed the researcher to strengthen the links between the qualitative data and the major themes and concepts (Neuman, 2006).

The third and final phase of coding, referred to as selective coding, was more thorough in the analysis of the emerging themes and concepts. This process allowed the researcher to identify cases within the data that exemplified the major themes and concepts. Sub-categories established in the third phase of coding were more precise in character and were more reflective of the major concepts and themes. The coding process included a review of the transcribed interviews in order to verify the categories and sub-categories established in the previous coding phases and to perform any required revisions. In order to verify the reliability of the sub-category findings, it

was necessary to compare and contrast between the codes, themes and concepts that were identified in the individual interviews. This step was necessary to ensure that there were no inconsistencies within the findings. Theoretical saturation was achieved through this process. Theoretical saturation is achieved when no new categories or sub-categories can be extracted from the data and the relationships that exist among the various categories are well established. The coding process is therefore complete when theoretical saturation is achieved (Bryman & Teevan, 2005).

Once the data was coded and the final categories and sub-categories were established, the information was then re-examined to ensure that there were no contradicting themes or findings within the transcribed records. Tutty, Rothery, and Grinnell (1996) suggested that this step should be carried out in order to improve the data analysis procedure. In addition, by re-examining the data, the researcher was better able to link the theoretical concepts to the final codes, categories, and sub-categories in order to establish meaning (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). This interpretative stage of the data analysis process involved an examination of how the analytical concepts that were extracted from the data were connected to the original research questions. This final stage of the data analysis process produced the study's final conclusions.

In order to determine the credibility of the study's findings, member validation was carried out with the study's participants. By carrying out member validation before the study was finished, can promote the legitimacy and credibility of the study's final conclusions (Bryman & Teevan, 2005; Tutty, Rothery, & Grinnell 1996). Member validation, otherwise referred to as participant feedback, is a type of analytical triangulation that increases the credibility of the study's conclusions, as it allows participants to react to and question the data (Patton, 2002). In order to carry out member validation, the study's findings were sent to each of the individual

interview participants for them to review and verify. Participant feedback allowed for an evaluation of the study's finding, in order to determine their "accuracy, completeness, fairness and perceived validity" (Patton, 2002, p. 560). Gaining feedback from the participants also improved the dependability of the findings by allowing participants to elaborate upon what they had discussed in the original interview. Four of the original seven participants replied to the member validation request. All of the four respondents who replied to the participant feedback request reconfirmed the study's conclusions. In addition to member validation, triangulation was achieved by examining the common themes that were identified by the various participants who came from different backgrounds and perspectives such as employers, students, a representative from a professional association and a bridging program staff member.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of any qualitative research is the subjectivity of the researcher and its effects on the study's findings. As Bryman (2001) stated,

...because qualitative research often begins in a relatively open-ended way and entails gradual narrowing-down of research questions or problems, the consumer of the writings deriving from the research is given few clues as to why one area was the chosen area upon which attention was focused rather than another (p. 282).

It is true that in qualitative research studies, such as this one, the researcher decides what data is the most significant and will comprise the study's final conclusions. In order to address this limitation, I, as the researcher, attempted to make the research approach taken by this study as transparent as possible. In addition, the limitation of researcher subjectivity was addressed by quoting the participants directly and in length in the presentation of the research findings, in order to allow the reader to understand how the researcher established the study's final conclusions. The final categories and themes were established by reviewing the transcribed

records several times until “category saturation” was achieved (Tutty, Rothery, & Grinnell, 1996, p. 106). Category saturation was achieved when no new categories or themes could be extracted from the data and the relationships that exist among the various categories were well established (Bryman & Teevan, 2005).

The purposeful sampling technique utilized in this study can be viewed as another limitation of the research. Considering that the sample was purposive and not based on probability or quota sampling, it can be assumed that the study’s participants were not truly representational of a population. However, the sample was not meant to be representational of a population. Instead, the qualitative data was gathered in order to develop theoretical inferences rather than to make generalizations (Bryman, 2001). The purposeful sampling technique allowed for the examination of information rich cases to shed light on the issues that were at the centre of this study.

The data analysis process itself can be identified as another limitation of the study. Particularly, during the coding process, it is possible that extracting segments of text from the transcribed records could lose the context of what was said by the interview participants. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) suggested that the coding process breaks down the data and therefore the narrative of the conversation can become lost to the reader of the study.

FINDINGS

This section will examine the individual interviews that were conducted with the program participants and representatives of the key stakeholder groups. The participants' responses revealed themes regarding the Internationally Educated Social Work Professionals Program at Ryerson University as well as the challenges that IESWs and other IEPs face in the Canadian labour market. The research findings discussed in this section include the employment expectations of the program participants, challenges and limitations facing the program, the perceived barriers to employment for IESWs, the perceived benefits of the program, the development of stakeholder awareness regarding the employment barriers IESWs face, and finally, the perceived benefits of employing IESWs.

Employment Expectations

Program participants expressed feelings of disappointment and assumed that their foreign-obtained skills would be transferable within the Canadian labour market. This assumption was often incorrect and became a source of frustration for the program participants.

Aware of poor language proficiency, participant one (P1) reported that he/she expected to have difficulty finding employment.

P1: I knew from the beginning it would be a hard time for me to find employment because my language skills wasn't very good when I arrived.

Yet, even two other program participants (P2 & P3), who were fluent in English, also thought that they would be able to find employment within the social work field based upon their previous education and labour market experience.

P2: I expected to get work in social work and I got in on the basis of my profession. I got in because of my points and my social work profession and I have had nothing but trouble getting work, which is why I changed direction and sort of scrapped the idea of social work.

P3: My expectations were that I get a job just based on my experience back home. I expected to get employment here within 6 months to one year in the same field. And with my husband's experience of not... of his MSW not being recognized, I did not apply.

Many internationally educated professionals (IEPs) believed that because they were selected under the points-system based upon their human capital, they would be able to utilize their skills within the Canadian labour market. When IEPs arrive in Canada and attempt to access their professions, they are often confronted with significant barriers. The inability to utilize their foreign-obtained skills can result in disillusionment and frustration for many IEPs, including internationally educated social workers. (PROMPT, 2005).

Challenges and Limitations of the IESW Bridging Program

As a pilot project, this bridging program is continuing to develop and evolve to better address the needs and concerns of the program participants and the key stakeholders. Still in its formative stages, some challenges and limitations exist. To address these challenges and limitations, program staff engage in consultations with the program participants and key stakeholders to determine what components of the program may require further development. The participants were asked to identify what they believed to be the current challenges facing the program. One program participant suggested that when designing and administering the program, staff should take into consideration the many difficulties and constraints that newcomers face during the settlement process and how these factors may impede their ability to participate in such a program.

P1: I think [the] University has to take care of this program and be aware of the complexity of the newcomer's life, because all of us are like part of a family [and we have] a heavy responsibility for the family. At the time [I] start[ed] the program, I had a lot of economic responsibilities, [especially] financial responsibilities. So it was very hard for me to study and work at the same time [in Canada] and to deal with a lot of internal problems in my family because domestic life is hard.

P1: ...Many of us students have the same problem. I don't know if [my classmates have] the same problems as me, but [the] financial problems [make us] feel this pressure. I am not [saying] that this is bad or good, because all of us accept these conditions...

Similarly, another program participant commented that certain factors hindered their ability to participate in the program.

P3: Now doing the bridging program was very tough for me because I was also doing the internship. I have two small children and my husband had just got a job like after his... he went... 2004 to 2005, he was studying at York. So, this is how I started. So, financially, in all ways, I was... you know my situation was not... to begin with, it was not the best. So I had to struggle a lot in the program initially, the first three months, which is the toughest, I struggled a lot.

The program staff representative (PSR) expressed an awareness of the many difficulties and challenges that the program participants and all IEPs face during the settlement process, and how these challenges may hinder their ability to access or perform well within the program. The PSR suggested that the program should remain vigilant of the difficulties IESWs face when accessing and participating in the program.

PSR: I think we don't often enough, in terms of bridging programs in general, look at how much time is required and commitment to doing a bridging program. And [for IEPs] to give up full time employment when you have instrumental needs such as housing, employment, childcare, transportation and then you come back to a program without a guarantee of employment is a really tough decision to make and we try to be very mindful of it.

PSR: It is extremely stressful when you are dealing with a number of transitions and settlement, isolation, systemic barriers, and then coming into a program. It's a challenge. It's a challenge for time and money and consideration and stress. So I think we have to just continue to think about that when we do design bridging programs. [For example,] the cost of tuition is also a concern for us. I think ensuring that our admission eligibility is fair is something that is definitely something we have to constantly revisit.

An additional challenge confronting the program is the sustainability of funding. Both the PSR and the representative of the professional association (RPA) cited the sustainability of program funding as a major concern.

PSR: I think in terms of a lot of bridging programs sustainability is [a major concern] and probably for a lot of projects funded through the provincial or federal government and [within] the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration. So we receive funding to start a program and we had three years to start this program, but an expectation of the program is to make it sustainable. But independent of publicly funded money with the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, it is difficult to get something going, doing the outreach for that, establishing you know [the program], making sure that you are doing the day to day operational revision and changes, and making sure that there is a quality program. But on the other side, you always have to think of sustainability and I think with bridging programs, they do tend to be more expensive [to run] because there is that customized focus to the bridging program.

RPA: I think that one of the biggest challenges is likely to be the withdrawal of funding and I think that that would be unfortunate.

RPA: They [the government] should be investing. I think that it is important for programs like this to be self-sustaining. But I think it would be very unfortunate if [the] government isn't prepared to provide supportive funding to take the program further and if something isn't done to look at those professions that are coordinated through Ryerson that are working very effectively and to look at some of the issues that they are beginning to unearth... that need for money for further research, and that need for the development of further skills. There needs to be money put forward for scholarships. But to treat this, as just simply the flavour of the day would be really, I think, very foolhardy.

An additional challenge and/or limitation facing the program is the ability to provide the program participants with a customized and balanced learning experience that can effectively address their individual needs within a limited time frame. When discussing the key challenges of developing a bridging program, the PSR stated the following:

PSR: I think it's balancing what is the most relevant just amongst the course[s] in addition to curriculum within a very short period of time for individuals who come from very many different countries, who might of practiced in many very different contexts and paradigms, and in different societal structures, and how do you sort of balance all of that within a 10 month period in a part-time program?

One of the most significant limitations and/or challenges facing the bridging programs identified in the interviews was the perception that bridging programs may only be addressing the individual barriers that the program participants face, such as language skills, Canadian

experience, and knowledge of the profession within the Canadian context. Although bridging programs may be capable of addressing these individual barriers, the PSR expressed a concern that bridging programs, in general, may fail to address the larger systemic barriers that IEPs face within organizations.

PSR: I think one of my fears is that there might be an over reliance on bridging programs [in general] as a solution that fits all and our concern is are we a secondary or primary barrier to employment for IEPs. Or, are we helping so that there is a constant sort of continuum of support and continuum of pathways for IEPs and that we don't also ... we also don't redirect rather than look[ing] at our own systems within organizations and within regulatory bodies that are barriers to access to employment, retention and mobility.

PSR: ...I feel [what] bridging programs should really [continue to] look at is how we are invested in challenging systemic barriers, such as [within] bridging programs, it's not just about getting people into jobs its also about understanding issues around systemic barriers, racism, and other kinds of oppressions that are happening within the workplace.

The PSR emphasized that the program must remain aware of its position within the larger system in order to ensure that the program itself does not become another barrier or obstacle to employment that IEPs already face. Data presented later on in this section indicates that the IESW bridging program effectively addresses both the individual and systemic barriers that IESWs face.

Perceived Barriers to Employment for IESWs

In their discussion of the employment barriers they encountered in the Canadian labour market, the program participants referred to several barriers that IEPs commonly face when attempting to access their professions in Canada. The barriers identified, included a lack of knowledge regarding their profession within the Canadian context, a lack of relevant Canadian experience, registration with the professional regulatory body, competition with the Canadian educated, a lack of social and employment networks, and racial discrimination.

One program participant, who was not fully proficient in English, reported that his/her language difficulties served as a major barrier to employment:

P1: I think the most important one [barrier] is the language, because for me to speak fluently until now I didn't get the opportunity to work in an English environment...

The literature concerning the barriers that IEPs face in the Canadian labour market indicates that language difficulties can significantly impede skilled immigrants from maximizing the returns to their foreign obtained human capital (Conference Board of Canada, 2004; Chiswick & Miller, 2003). Therefore, the difficulties that this program participant faced reflect those of many other IEPs who are less than proficient in the English language.

Two of the program participants identified registration with the professional regulatory body and the associated costs as another obstacle to employment in their profession.

P1: Another kind of barriers that you find very very often [is] when you find a job [and] the college [for] the professional organizations. It's [Ontario College of Social Service Workers and Social Workers] like they self-protect themselves and they ask the newcomers to get the credentials.

P1: You have to pay to be part of the social workers association. You have to pay every month like 60 dollars and this is a big amount for a newcomer family.

P2: I already was registered with the Ontario College of Social workers... I am registered with them, which is a very expensive business, especially for someone who is not working and I am hoping that it will improve my chances. I just have to wait and see and be patient.

A lack of relevant Canadian experience was identified as another significant barrier to employment.

P2: Well Canadian experience was the initial [barrier].... [and] you don't have enough Canadian experience. In the absence of proof I'm not quite sure if that is it. But, I think experience is a factor, [that is] lack of [Canadian experience].

In addition, competition with Canadian-educated social workers was identified as another barrier to employment. As stated by Reitz (2001), competition with the Canadian-educated may

be a significant factor in the declining employment outcomes of skilled immigrants in Canada, as the education levels of the Canadian-educated population continue to rise.

P2: Competition, you know, young people who have more recent training and MSW's (Master of Social Work Degree), I have a BSW (Bachelor of Social Work Degree). So there's [a] lot to compete against.

Racial discrimination was identified as another barrier that impeded IESWs from utilizing their foreign-obtained human capital. Only one of the program participants claimed to have encountered overt racial discrimination when attempting to access the Canadian labour market. Two of the program participants suggested that discrimination was a possible factor that affected the employment outcomes of IESWs; however they only mentioned this point a few times. Similarly, employers and the RPA cited racial discrimination as a possible barrier to employment for IESWs. They, however, did not elaborate on the topic at any length. The program participant who encountered racial discrimination stated the following:

P3: I did face some amount of racism. So, even the fact that you volunteer, you are employable technically but you are not being employed. That's [the] kind of systemic racism right there. Yeah, but apart from that, I have also faced racism like it's like that people, [that is], employment counselors telling me you know like they give [you] promises of getting a job somewhere but no job, they say you have to change yourself. They tell you [that you] have to change your accent, you have to change the way you...

Interviewer: They told you, you have to change your accent?

P3: Yeah, accent, the food we eat because you know we smell, you know, all these things.

P3: So, these were the barriers I basically faced. Racism. Not so much from the so-called white population. I am just saying that, it's more like from within; I would say internal racism also. Like you know people who are just like you and say that you have got to change. I have changed, so you also change. But, I don't believe in that.

When asked to describe what they perceived to be the barriers to employment that IESWs face in the Canadian labour market, employers reported many of the same barriers that the program participants had conveyed.

E1: I think [that] there's [these] perceptions [out there]. I think that there is racism that's not acknowledged and the language can be a barrier if the accent is so strong that people really have to struggle to understand or if the written skills are not up to par.

Corresponding to the difficulties reported by P1, one employer reported that language difficulties could pose a significant challenge for IESWs when integrating into a Canadian organization. When asked about the current challenges facing the program, one employer stated:

E1: Probably, one of the challenges that I see with some of the students is the English and to get into the program they have passed a basic English course that shows they are literate, but certainly from what we need here I know the two students who were placed here this year did not have the written skills that they would be able to just step into a job. So I think, and I believe [that] there is a component where they can get some tutor[ing] and extra help, but I think [that] there needs to be a real focus on that for some students. Some of them have better language skills than others, but those who are identified as not being able to write in the format that we expect here are going to need some remedial help.

Another barrier identified by an employer was that employers are averse to hiring IESWs because they maintain the perception that IEPs require additional training and guidance when compared to Canadian-educated professionals.

E2: In terms of the barriers, I think more than anything it's the perception, and it may or may not be the reality, of the additional time that it can take for integration in terms of the high volume, [and the] high pressure kinds of case loads that people carry.

E2: ...in some sense I think we've been stuck with this misfit in our minds of there is very little time for training and orientation. We need people to be able to come and be able to do the job from day one and that is just not true and it is just not working and I think IEPs could fall into that same category of bias.

The RPA echoed the concern that employer aversion to hiring may be related to the perception that IEPs require additional training. The RPA, however, also believed that racism

and a lack of adequate employment and social networks may have a negative impact on the employment outcomes of IESWs.

RPA: Unfortunately there are employers who are not comfortable with racial and cultural difference. They tend to select people who look or behave like them. In the past fifteen years, there also has been little investment in staff training and development. Organizations are now much less likely to hire people who appear to need training or supervision. So if you look like you can hit the ground running. Terrific. So I think it just becomes more extreme when you have graduated from a university that is not easily recognizable, when you perhaps speak with an accent, [and] when your skin-colour is different. So it just becomes more and more ... and when you don't have networks to support you. And I think that over the last probably ten years... one of the dilemmas for anyone who doesn't graduate from a school of social work in Ontario is that they don't have those networks. They don't have a supervisor whose name is likely to be recognizable to someone. They don't have classmates who they can say what's happening in your agency, [and know] are there any jobs [out there]? Even if they are very temporary jobs. So I think that those issues are heightened.

Perceived Benefits of the Program

Overall, the study found that both the program participants and the key stakeholder representatives believed that the program was effectively addressing the individual barriers that obstruct IESWs from accessing their profession. For instance, the program participant who reported language difficulties as a major barrier to employment claimed that the program helped to improve his/her English language skills.

P1: I have the opportunity in this course to learn a little more like the English laboratory here in this building. And, ...I have to read a lot to develop a lot of relations with classmates with the teachers. So, in anyway. I [hope to] improve my English. So, when I start my placement, I [can] have better skills and I think in the placement organization, [it] was the first opportunity here in Canada to work in an actual English environment and that was great. I think I improved [in] my English a lot.

In addition to improving their English language abilities, P1 stated that the program assisted him/her by helping to identify how his/her foreign-obtained skills were transferable to the social work profession within the Canadian context. The ability of the program to highlight

the transferability of the participant's foreign-obtained skills consequently increased the participant's confidence to discuss his/her foreign-obtained skills during interviews with potential employers.

P1: Before this program, I found some barriers in the sense when I went to the interviews. I didn't know very well how to match my experience from the third world to [a developed country]. [In a] developed country like this, I have a lot of doubts. I know many of these skills was ... was possible to use here. This program show[s] you how many of these skills are very useful here and that [can] help you in your confidence. Now, before I went to the interviews, I was like a little afraid. Now I have a little more confidence.

Additionally, P1 suggested that not only has his/her confidence in his/her own abilities increased, but so has the confidence of employers in their abilities. P1 comments that because they had completed the program, it demonstrates to employers that they had gained knowledge of their profession within the Canadian context and was capable of working effectively in a Canadian organization.

P1: Now, in some way, after this course, I feel confident about me [and] in myself. I think [that] the employers feel more confiden[t] about me because they think ok maybe this person can work with me ... they pass the course and they have this knowledge about the Canadian environment...

In their discussions about how the bridging program helped them to overcome the barriers they faced in the Canadian labour market, the program participants claimed that the program provided them with a greater understanding of the social work profession within the Canadian context, such as profession specific terminology and an ability to practice by participating in mock interviews with social service employers. Program participants also claimed that they benefited from the networking opportunities with both fellow students and social service employers that were provided by the program.

P2: Well, getting more familiar with the terminology. The more current terminology and what employers are looking for.

P2: It was excellent learning the different theories and learning a little about the policies. [I] developed networking with other students and like-minded people, and that's important.

P3: [The program helped me] by keeping me informed about [the] Canadian social work practice [and] by raising my self-awareness on oppressive practices and anti-oppression. [It helped] me with learning how to... basically how [the] Canadian school work[s], like how to do essays and how to write articles, and things like that. I'm more confident about that. It's helped me in interviews, gave me more confidence to impress cases in the interviews. That's it, right? Oh, yeah, contacts, yeah? I mean I still maintain contacts...

P1: The program...tried to train you [on] how to do interviews, at the end of the program, [and] how to face the interviews. They have a very good net of networking to get info about jobs.

The program was also able to address the barrier of Canadian experience by providing the program participants with a placement opportunity in a social service providing organization.

Research indicates that Canadian experience, or lack thereof, can be a significant barrier for any IEP when attempting to access their profession (Aydemir & Skuterud, 2004; Alboim et. al., 2005). Relevant Canadian labour market experience can demonstrate to an employer that a potential employee has a working knowledge of their profession within the Canadian context and that the employee can function effectively within an organization (The Public Policy Forum, 2004; Harvey, 2001).

Many of the perceived benefits of the program that were reported by the program participants were reaffirmed by employers and the RPA. When asked why he/she thought the bridging program was successful at integrating IESWs into the Canadian labour market, one employer stated:

E1: I think that there is a difference in how social work is practiced in other countries and how it is practiced here. So I think that it [the program] does give them some knowledge and the opportunity to find out what's different about social work there as to how it is practiced here. So they can learn about the laws [and] they can learn about how things are different. I think that the placement is really important to give them actual ... that they can say that they have

experience. Again having participated in that interview process, how we do interviews here and how they've done them is a huge difference and I think to get them to understand how interviews are done in Canada is really important if they want to get their foot in that very competitive door.

The RPA reported similar benefits of the bridging program:

RPA: The goal of the bridging program is to bring them up to speed in terms of the nuances of legislation in this province that, for example, [the] Canadian welfare legislation and requirements in terms of reporting concerns about child neglect or abuse. I think the program is very clear and I think [that] there is quite the emphasis on identifying what the related pieces of legislation that may impact on a practice. Then providing a job placement so that there's an opportunity for the individual to have experience working in a Canadian organization.

The PSR reported additional benefits of the program that were not expressed by the program participants or representatives of the other key stakeholder groups.

PSR: I think one of the advantages of bridging programs is that they tend to be profession specific so you have a staff or a team that is working towards something that is very focused in terms of understanding what are the requirements of the profession. The bridging program provides relevant theoretical and practical curriculum that can address the professional practice and competencies within that practice or however you want to phrase it [within different professions]. Often you have knowledgeable or committed staff and instructors who would understand what are the professional requirements and would hopefully understand what are the systemic and individual barriers to employment for IEPs. I think another key element in terms of success is having customized placements that really sort of match the needs and experience of IEPs. [So there are] opportunities for a continuum of mentorship and job coaching, individualized employment support [and] prior learning and assessment. It really is [a] sort of customized for the individual and sort of focuses both on their needs, but also recognizing their experience.

PSR: Well I think one of our strengths is that we do have committed, knowledgeable instructors and staff. I think I am very proud that the representation of our staff is that we have a number [of] instructors who are internationally educated professionals or from racialized communities who I think have a certain understanding about the settlement process and also have [a] strong theoretical, analytical and practical experience [that] really gives, I think, a really worthwhile educational experience to our candidates.

Building Employer Awareness and Involvement

One of the most significant findings of this study was that, not only is the bridging program effectively addressing the individual barriers that IESWs face, but also it simultaneously addresses the larger systemic barriers that exist within organizations. The data indicates that the program participants and the representatives of the key stakeholder groups believe that the program is generally effective at addressing the individual barriers that IESWs encounter when attempting to access their profession in the Canadian labour market. However, as the PSR stated, it is their fear that the bridging programs may only be addressing the individual barriers while redirecting focus away from the larger systemic barriers that impede IESWs from utilizing their foreign-obtained skills. This study found that the IESW bridging program addresses both the individual and systemic barriers that IESWs face when accessing employment.

The program addresses the larger systemic barriers by engaging employers and other key stakeholders in consultations in order to build awareness and challenge individuals to examine the barriers that exist within their own organizations. In addition, the bridging program challenges employers and other key stakeholders to re-evaluate their perceptions of hiring IEPs. At the same time, the program promotes the benefits associated with hiring IESWs. Program participants and representatives of the key stakeholder groups reported that employer consultation was a significant benefit of the program. For instance, when discussing how the bridging program addressed the barriers IESWs faced, one program participant stated:

P3: Another thing they are doing really good is meeting with... they have I think, I believe twice they have conducted these sessions, workshops for employers on how to [work with] new immigrants and what are the challenges immigrants face when [they] start work or something like that.

P3: ... my supervisor and he gave me the impression that [the workshop] was very useful.

When asked what he/she thought were the strengths of the bridging program, the PSR claimed that the program attempts to build awareness amongst employers and other key stakeholders about the systemic barriers that exist within their organizations. Additionally, the program actively promotes the benefits of hiring IESWs to social service employers.

PSR: ...What are employers doing around reflecting on their own practices and policies? What are employers doing around their own sort of access and equity mandates within their workplaces and also [are they] thinking about inclusion? What kind of systemic barriers do they put in place in order to limit the access of IEPs and IESWs into the workplace? I think a lot of work we are trying to do is build some of those bridges and to be some sort of a conduit in which there is [a] sort of mutual learning [among stakeholders] and there is [a] kind of an understanding and building of community that is not just about IEPs or IESWs. It's about how we can sort of improve ourselves overall [as a profession].

PSR: [For employers, we look for whether] there is an opportunity to volunteer your time doing job coaching, to do mock practice interviews with our candidates, to come to special events and recognition events, to really sort of get connected and engaged, to really sort of understand the presence of the program and also [to know] who IESWs are and [for IESWs] to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and experience. And we find that when we do that you sort of build a profile for the program, but you also build a better understanding around really what are some underlying assumptions that people have about IESWs that become really dispelled once you sort of encounter and meet and really understand what the value and contribution IESWs can offer to the profession, but really don't have access to.

Consultation with employers has proven effective. Employers reported that the program has increased their awareness of the barriers that IESWs face in the labour market and within their own organizations. At the same time, the program has increased employer awareness about the benefits associated with hiring IESWs. When asked if the bridging program was effectively addressing the problem areas that he/she as an employer viewed as problematic when hiring IEPs, two employers commented the following:

E1: I don't know that the school can change that. I think it's something organizationally and I suspect it's across the board in most places. It's made me a lot more aware since I've become involved with this program, of what some of the issues are here. I knew that there were issues but not to the degree that I have and I have the trust of those social workers who are sharing incidences with me about what's happening here in the organization. But I've never had that first hand experience before. So that's really good.

E2: One of the strengths that I am very aware of is the fact that it [the program] has been positioned from day one as not just what do internationally trained professionals have to offer us as employers, but really have to offer us as professionals. This mutuality of experience I think is something that has been positioned from day one, but it isn't just if you know you are able to do the job we have available it's what else can an organization and individuals ... how else can we benefit from [the] varied expertise and I think that's been from day one [that has been] a really important component.

E2: I think it [the program] just keeps underscoring for everybody the challenges inherent in the experience for internationally trained professionals and kind of keeps it in front of everybody and helps us to continue to educate ourselves about what the issues and experiences are because I think [the] attitude continues to be the most significant issue. I just think it has done a great job at heightening [the level of the] employers' awareness.

The RPA also reported that consultation with key stakeholders was a successful component of the bridging program.

RPA: Well I think it is successful for a number of reasons. I think that the project has been very successful in bringing together employers, the regulatory body, and the professional association, [that is] my organization. And I think that has resulted in a buy in... in a way that means that there is a commitment that goes beyond it simply being valued as a good idea. I don't think any of the participants from the agencies or the professional association or regulatory body wouldn't have supported it in concept, but I think the project has taken us one step further and I think [that] there is something really very important about modeling in the professional community. And modeling that we have a commitment to [the] members of our profession and that we see a responsibility to be ensuring that the labour market is able to integrate [IESWs] and that barriers are addressed and that foreign trained social workers have every opportunity to understand and improve their skill levels so that they won't be disadvantaged.

Benefits of Hiring IESWs as Perceived by Employers

The study found that employers and the RPA believe that there are significant benefits to hiring IESWs, as they bring a great deal of valuable experience to an organization. Also, employers reported that it was beneficial to develop a staff that is representational of the ever-diversifying client population in southern Ontario.

E1: ...because I personally feel that if we get a lot of people who apply for jobs who are brand new graduates and I would much rather have somebody whose got ten, fifteen years experience in social work and people skills even if its not in Canada those are totally transferable and they could bring a maturity to the job. Plus our patient population here is coming from the same places that the IESWs are. So [I think that] they bring a huge knowledge base to us and it has been highly successful. Programs where they are practicing here in the hospital can't value them enough.

E1: And I think they [IESWs] add value to the organization and so I think that's really really important. I think [that] there are more people who need to feel that because I'm one person and one organization.

E2: I think the benefits we talked about just in terms of the richness of experience and ability to have staff be reflective of who our population is.

RPA: Well I think it's necessary for a whole lot of reasons. I think there are the very practical reasons that ... if we are going to integrate people into the community we need people with foreign skills. Certainly in southern Ontario, we're not providing adequate services to people because we don't have the people with the right skills in place. And many of those people that would have the skills are foreign trained social workers. There is no way that someone like me, with my background, with my limited language and cultural skills is going to able provide mental health services to someone form rural Africa, who needs those services. I don't think that there are people who can give me those skills. So we have this wonderful resource that needs to be tapped.

DISCUSSION

The findings presented provide insight into how the Internationally Educated Social Workers' (IESW) bridging program facilitates the labour market integration of its program participants. Additionally, the data reveals the perceptions of the individual program participants, social service employers and other key stakeholder representatives concerning the benefits and challenges of the bridging program and the labour market experiences of IESWs.

The labour market experiences of the program participants mirror those of other internationally educated professions (IEPs) in the Canadian labour market. For instance, the program participants indicated that their pre-migration employment expectations were often met with disappointment when they first attempted to access their profession in Canada. Similar to the perceptions of other IEPs, the program participants assumed that they were selected for entry into Canada based upon their level of human capital and that their skills would be valued and transferable within the labour market. The participants, however, were often confronted with the realization that their pre-migration employment expectations were not what they had hoped to be as their foreign-obtained human capital was often devalued and discounted by Canadian employers.

This observation is not only indicative of the labour market experiences of other IEPs, it also highlights the apparent disconnect between the objectives of Canada's points-system and the actual employment outcomes of IEPs. As Reitz (2005) claimed, the underutilization of IEPs' skills reveals a flaw in the current immigrant selection system. The current selection system follows the central tenets of human capital theory, which maintains that education and labour market experience are the primary determinants of individual employment outcomes (Mincer, 1958; Becker, 1964). Considering that the economic performance of recent immigrants in

Canada is declining while their education levels continue to rise, it is clear that there are certain factors that impede IEPs from maximizing the returns to their human capital. Human capital theory focuses specifically on individual merit as the key determinant of economic performance and does not take into consideration the impact individual and systemic barriers may have on the employment outcomes of IEPs (Li, 2003).

The study's participants made reference to several of the common barriers and inequalities that are known to impede IEPs from fully utilizing their foreign-obtained human capital. The barriers reported included language difficulties, employer demand for Canadian labour market experience, insufficient context-specific knowledge of the social work profession in Canada, racial discrimination, lack of social and employment networks and the perception amongst employers that IEPs require additional training.

The findings indicate that the components of the bridging program effectively address many of the common barriers that the program participants encountered in the Canadian labour market. The program was able to achieve this goal in a variety of ways. For instance, the program offered opportunities for participants to improve their English language abilities by means of the placement experience and in-class instruction. In addition, the program provided the participants with a more thorough understanding of the social work profession within the Canadian context by teaching the participants profession-specific terminology and legislation. Also, the placement component of the program provided the participants with valuable Canadian experience, which is often demanded by employers as it can indicate that a potential employee possesses a working knowledge of their profession within the Canadian context and that they can operate effectively within a Canadian organization (Harvey, 2001; The Public Policy Forum, 2004). Furthermore, the program provided valuable networking opportunities that helped to

develop the participants' social capital, which has been found to greatly impact the integration of immigrants into the labour market (Preston & Man, 1999; Harvey & Chakkalakal, 2001; Kunz, 2003a).

Overall, the study found that employers expressed a positive opinion of the bridging program and of hiring IESWs. The employers emphasized the benefits associated with employing individuals who possessed a great deal of foreign-obtained labour market experience. Although the employers interviewed claimed that the foreign-obtained experience held by the IESWs was both valuable and transferable, the program participants believed that a lack of Canadian experience was a major barrier to employment. Existing literature corresponds with the concerns of the program participants, claiming that foreign-obtained labour market experience is often highly discounted and devalued by employers (Alboim, et. al., 2005; Aydemir & Skuterud, 2004). Evidence suggests that the discounting of foreign credentials by employers may perceivably be linked to systemic discrimination that exists within the policies and practices of organizations and institutions (Reitz, 2005; Reitz, 2001b; (Beck, Reitz, & Weiner, 2002). For instance, employer demand for Canadian experience as a prerequisite for employment can be perceived as a barrier that is influenced by underlying racial attitudes that Canadian experience is superior to foreign-obtained experience. Such a perception may lead employers to ignore the transferability of foreign-obtained experience and discount such experience (PROMPT, 2004).

The employers interviewed made reference to the fact that IESWs are much needed within social service providing agencies in order to develop a staff that is more representational of the ever diversifying client population in Toronto. In order to provide adequate services to Toronto's diverse communities, social workers, along with other social service providing professionals, must be able to effectively communicate with the client population and provide

culturally sensitive services. Employers, along with other study participants, suggested that the foreign-obtained skills and expertise that IESWs bring to an organization are essential, as the client population originates from the same countries as the IESWs. Therefore, IESWs are better positioned to provide culturally sensitive services than their Canadian-born counterparts.

Interestingly, one of the most significant observations of this study was the mutuality of learning and the exchange of knowledge that was facilitated by the program. Representatives of the key stakeholder groups claimed that the program served as a conduit for the exchange of knowledge between social service employers and IESWs. The program was able to promote an awareness and appreciation amongst employers around the value and knowledge that IESWs can provide to an organization. At the same time, the program participants gained valuable insight into how their profession operated within the Canadian context via in-class instruction and the work placement opportunity. Both employers and the representative of the professional association agreed that the program has been highly successful in this regard.

Despite the apparent success, the bridging program is not free of challenges. One of the most significant challenges facing the bridging program is the issue of program sustainability. Both the representatives of the bridging program staff and professional association referred to the difficulties associated with developing a self-financing program that is not dependent upon government funding. The difficulty of developing a financially self-sustaining program highlights the larger issue concerning inadequate government funding for programs that address the needs of skilled immigrants. In the absence of appropriate government funding, labour market integration programs, such as the IESW bridging program, must increasingly rely upon paid-for services in order to operate. Consequently, the accessibility of services is diminished for immigrants who cannot afford the program fees. The reduction of funding for settlement services

that address the needs of skilled immigrants further impedes successful labour market integration (Man, 2004). Evidence indicates that labour market integration for skilled immigrants is reliant upon access to sufficient settlement services (R.J. Sparks Consulting Services Inc, 2001) Without access to adequate settlement services skilled immigrants may experience downward economic mobility, while still being unemployed and underemployed in the Canadian labour market (Alboim et. al., 2005).

An additional concern identified from this study was that bridging programs may themselves, become another barrier to employment for IEPs. The program staff representative expressed a concern that there may be an over reliance upon bridging program as the only solution or route that IEPs can take to successfully integrate into their chosen profession. Such an expectation to upgrade one's skills for employment in Canada may function as an additional obstacle that skilled immigrants must overcome in their attempts to integrate into the Canadian labour market. It was also a concern of the program staff representative that by focusing solely upon developing the skills and competencies of the individual IEP, bridging programs could conceivably be redirecting attention away from addressing the larger systemic barriers that may impede IEPs from fully utilizing their foreign obtained human capital.

From this concern emerged the most noteworthy finding of this study that the IESW bridging program addresses both the individual barriers and systemic barriers that the participants face. By building awareness amongst employers and other key stakeholders, the bridging program moves beyond simply addressing the individual difficulties that the program participants face to addressing the larger structural inequalities and constraints that participants encounter within organizations and the labour market. The program simultaneously tackles the larger systemic barriers by engaging in consultations with employers and representatives of the

professional regulatory body with the objective of challenging them to re-evaluate how the policies and procedures within their own organizations may serve as barriers to employment for IESWs and other IEPs. Furthermore, the program also attempts to breakdown and dispel the negative biases and perceptions that employers and members of the professional regulatory body may hold regarding the hiring and accrediting of IESWs, while simultaneously promoting the value and contribution that IESWs can offer to social service providing organizations in Canada.

Labour market integration programs tend to focus specifically on assisting the individual immigrant, while ignoring larger factors such as racial discrimination and systemic barriers that impede skilled immigrants from maximizing the returns to their human capital (PROMPT, 2005). The IESW bridging program, however, effectively addresses the needs of the individual while simultaneously working with employers and the professional regulatory body to address the larger structural constraints that impede labour market integration. By taking such a comprehensive approach, the IESW bridging program is able to take into consideration the multiple factors that restrict the program participants from accessing their profession. By assisting with all facets of labour market integration, the IESW bridging program promotes the equitable participation of the program participants within the labour market, which in turn facilitates their integration into Canadian society and improves their overall sense of social inclusion (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003).

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Interview Guide – Program Graduates

1. How long have you lived in Canada?
2. What is your primary language?
3. What is your level of education? What education did you receive outside of Canada?
What education did you receive within Canada?
4. What were your employment expectations upon arriving in Canada? Were these expectations corrected or incorrect?
5. In your opinion, what were the strengths and weaknesses of the bridging program?
Prompt: What components require more emphasis?
Prompt: What components require improvement?
6. What were the challenges and barriers you faced in the Canadian labour market prior to entering the bridging program?
7. What are the challenges and barriers that you continue to face in the Canadian labour market following the completion of the program?
8. In your opinion, how did the bridging program help you to overcome the barriers and challenges that you faced in the labour market?
9. In your opinion, how did the bridging program assist you with becoming accredited or employed in your profession?
10. In your opinion, what barriers or challenges did the bridging program fail to address or did not address sufficiently?
11. Do you have any recommendations or suggestions to improve the bridging program and/or the current difficulties IEPs face in the labour market?

Interview Guide – Representative of the Professional Association

1. What do you know about the bridging program for internationally educated social workers at Ryerson University?
2. In your opinion, why is the bridging program successful at integrating internationally educated social workers (IESWs) into the Canadian labour market?
3. In your opinion, what are the current challenges facing the bridging program?
4. In your opinion, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the bridging program?
Prompt: What areas require emphasis?
Prompt: What areas require improvement?
5. In your opinion, is the bridging program effectively addressing the problem areas that a professional regulatory body would view as problematic when certify/licensing an internationally educated social worker?
6. Do you have any recommendations or suggestions to improve the bridging program and/or the current difficulties IESWs face in the labour market?
7. What role or what level of involvement did your organization have in the development of the bridging program at Ryerson University?
8. What are your perceptions' of certify internationally educated professionals?
9. In your opinion, what are the barriers that IESWs face in the Canadian labour market?

Interview Guide - Employers

1. What do you know about the bridging program for internationally educated social workers at Ryerson University?
2. In your opinion, why is the IESW bridging program successful at integrating internationally educated social workers (IESWs) into the Canadian labour market?
3. In your opinion, what are the current challenges facing the bridging program?
4. In your opinion, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the bridging program?
Prompt: What areas require emphasis?
Prompt: What areas require improvement?
5. In your opinion, is the bridging program effectively addressing the problem areas that you as an employer view as problematic when hiring internationally educated social workers?
6. Do you have any recommendations or suggestions to improve the bridging program and/or the current difficulties IESWs face in the labour market?
7. What role or what level of involvement did your organization have in the development of the bridging program at Ryerson University?
8. What are your perceptions of hiring internationally educated professionals?
9. In your opinion, what are the barriers that IESWs face in the Canadian labour market?

Interview Guide – Program Staff Representative

1. In your opinion why are bridging programs successful at integrating IEPs into the Canadian labour market?
2. In your opinion, what are the current challenges facing the bridging program?
3. In your opinion, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the bridging program?
Prompt: What areas require emphasis?
Prompt: What areas require improvement?
4. Do you believe that the bridging program is effectively addressing the problem areas that employers and professional regulatory bodies view as problematic when hiring/licensing internationally educated professionals?
5. Do you have any recommendations or suggestions to improve the bridging program and/or the current difficulties IESWs face in the labour market?
6. What are the key challenges to developing and implementing the bridging program?
7. What is the process involved in developing a bridging program?
8. To what degree are the various stakeholders (employers, regulatory/licensing bodies, academic institutions, settlement service providers, and internationally trained professionals) involved in the development of the bridging program?
9. What are the issues concerning access to the bridging program?
Prompt: How are individuals assessed?
Prompt: What is the demand?
10. How are gaps in an IEP's education and training identified and addressed?

11. How successful has the bridging programs been at integrating IEPs into the Canadian labour market?
12. In your opinion, what are employers' and professional regulatory/licensing bodies' perceptions of the bridging program?

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