

Speakers Discuss Problem of 'Brain Waste' Among Skilled Immigrants Educated Abroad

By Laura D. Francis

May 15 — Brain waste—highly skilled immigrants winding up either unemployed or in low-skilled jobs in the U.S.—continues to be a problem both for the immigrants themselves and the states where they reside, speakers said May 14 during a webinar hosted by the Migration Policy Institute.

The speakers presented updated MPI figures that built on a 2008 report about immigrants with bachelor's or higher degrees working in low-wage occupations such as dishwashers, security guards and taxi drivers (205 DLR A-8, 10/23/08).

Margie McHugh, director of the institute's National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy—who moderated the discussion—said the current research focuses specifically on immigrants in engineering, nursing and teaching and looks at state-level initiatives to get immigrants in jobs that reflect their education and experience.

The initiatives are “trying to figure out how to really get the work right” for skilled immigrants and address “actual barriers” facing foreign-trained immigrants in a variety of professions once they come to the U.S., McHugh said.

According to Jeanne Batalova, the MPI senior policy analyst who conducted the research and who co-authored the 2008 report, immigrants' ability to find work that uses their education and experience and provides compensation consistent with their human capital is a measure of their social and economic integration.

Batalova said more than 45 million individuals age 25 and older who are in the civilian labor force have at least a bachelor's degree. Of those, 7.2 million are immigrants or refugees. The percentage of workers who are immigrants among those with at least a bachelor's degree has gone up, to 16 percent today from 10 percent in 1990, she added.

More than half of the immigrants with bachelor's degrees or higher—3.7 million—earned those degrees abroad, Batalova said.

'Extent of Brain Waste Is Significant.'

However, Batalova added, “the extent of brain waste is significant,” with 1.6 million, or 23 percent of college-educated immigrants, either working in low-skilled jobs or not working at all. Another 1.6 million college-educated immigrants work in medium-skilled jobs that require at most an associate's degree, she said.

The brain waste problem becomes more prevalent if an immigrant obtained his or her education in a foreign country, in large part a result of the inability to transfer foreign credentials, Batalova said. For example, she said, 26 percent of college-educated immigrants who were educated abroad are either unemployed or working in low-skilled jobs.

On the other hand, Batalova said, the rate of unemployment and underemployment of immigrants who obtained their education in the U.S. is similar to that of U.S.-born workers.

Immigrants with limited English skills also are much more likely to work in low-skilled jobs than those with strong English skills, Batalova said, adding that the ability to speak English generally isn't the issue so much as the ability to communicate fluently with clients and colleagues. However, there are few opportunities for immigrants to obtain such language skills, she said.

Looking at engineers, nurses and teachers specifically, Batalova said foreign-trained engineers tend to fare better in the U.S. than other foreign-trained professionals. For instance, 64 percent of foreign-trained engineers work in high-skilled jobs, compared with 52 percent of foreign-trained professionals in general, she said. However, Batalova pointed out that 73 percent of U.S.-trained engineers work in high-skilled jobs.

For nurses, "the story is different," Batalova said. Only 17 percent of foreign-trained nurses are in jobs that require a nursing degree, but 67 percent are in medium-skilled jobs and 16 percent are in low-skilled jobs. Only 10 percent of U.S.-educated nurses are in low-skilled jobs, she said.

Batalova acknowledged that nursing hasn't always required a bachelor's degree, but that level of education is increasingly becoming more common as a job requirement.

Finally, Batalova said 36 percent of foreign-educated teachers are in high-skilled jobs in the U.S., while 41 percent work in low-skilled jobs.

Although she said she didn't do much work comparing the outcomes of immigrant professionals and those of U.S.-born professionals, Batalova said "the differences are significant." Even when controlling for factors such as the level of degree (bachelor's versus master's or doctorate), English language proficiency and access to a second household income, foreign-trained immigrants still are more likely to hold low-skilled jobs, she said.

Similar Patterns in Illinois

Fanny Lopez, immigrant integration policy fellow with the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, spoke about efforts in her state to combat brain waste among highly skilled immigrants.

There are about 1.8 million immigrants in Illinois, or 14 percent of the population, Lopez said, with 1.1 million identifying as limited English proficient. While this population dynamic creates a need for bilingual nurses, only 1.7 percent of registered nurses in the state identify themselves as Spanish, Hispanic or Latino, Lopez said.

And although there are 10,300 foreign-educated nurses in the Illinois labor force, 10 percent work in low-skilled jobs, and another 2 percent are unemployed, she said. Only 17 percent of such nurses work in high-skilled professions, she said.

Lopez said a "major barrier" for immigrant nurses is the current requirement that they have 14 years of education, because many foreign-trained nurses have only 12 or 13 years. She noted that recent changes to the licensing requirements will reduce the minimum education to 13 years, but that "doesn't completely eliminate the barrier."

In addition, Lopez said the complexity of the professional licensing process is problematic because the validity period of an immigrant nurse's English proficiency exam or foreign credential evaluation might expire by the time he or she is able to take the licensing exam.

Need for Engineers

Lopez added that Illinois currently is in need of engineers, particularly civil engineers, because major repairs are needed to the state's water and transportation infrastructure. "The demand for engineering services will continue to grow," she said, with engineering jobs expected to increase by 8.9 percent by 2020.

With that increasing demand, foreign-born engineers "will be essential," Lopez said.

But out of 48,200 foreign-educated engineers in the Illinois labor force, 15 percent are in low-skilled positions and 5 percent are unemployed, she said. In addition, although 64 percent of foreign-educated engineers in Illinois are in high-skilled jobs, Lopez said most of them don't hold actual engineering positions.

The "major barrier" for foreign-trained engineers in Illinois is the "lack of recognized professional experience," Lopez said. Engineers who didn't receive their degrees at an accredited school—and most non-U.S. institutions aren't accredited—are required to work for four years abroad under a U.S.-trained engineer before they can take the licensing exam, she explained.

That means that foreign-trained engineers with engineering experience that doesn't involve a U.S.-trained engineer have to gain that experience to work as an engineer in the U.S. And, Lopez said, depending on the circumstances of the immigrant's departure from his or her home country, he or she may not be able to document prior work experience.

Skills Gap in Washington

Roxana Norouzi, education policy manager at Washington state-based OneAmerica, said her organization is working with highly skilled immigrants to help them fill some of the vacant jobs in the state. According to Norouzi, currently there are 25,000 unfilled jobs in the state because of skills gap, a gap that will widen to almost 1 million unfilled jobs in the next 10 years.

Norouzi said immigrants make up 13 percent of Washington's population, but 16 percent of its college-educated population. At the same time, 23 percent of immigrants in the state who were educated abroad work in low-skilled jobs or are unemployed, she said.

Out of 2,800 foreign-educated nurses in Washington, 18 percent work in low-skilled positions, as opposed to 4 percent of U.S.-educated nurses. Norouzi added that 14 percent of foreign-educated nurses work in high-skilled jobs, versus 22 percent of U.S.-educated nurses.

But Norouzi said a larger barrier for immigrant nurses appears to be the English proficiency exam rather than the nurse licensing exam. She added that foreign-trained nurses who are missing only one or two classes needed to obtain their licenses in Washington often aren't able to simply fill in the gaps in their education, but must re-enroll in the entire nursing degree program.

Not Keeping Up With Student Demographics

Norouzi focused mainly on teachers, stressing that the state's teacher workforce isn't keeping up with the changing demographics of the state—25 percent of all students will be English language learners by 2025.

Foreign-educated teachers have a bigger problem with brain waste than engineers and nurses, Norouzi said, pointing out that 32 percent of such teachers work in low-skilled jobs, making them three times more likely than U.S.-educated teachers to work in low-skilled jobs.

Foreign-educated teachers face similar barriers as other foreign-educated professionals, including difficulty in getting foreign degrees and credentials recognized in Washington, Norouzi said. She said the cost of having foreign transcripts evaluated can be a barrier because the lack of a state evaluation agency means credential evaluation is run by private, for-profit organizations.

Norouzi added that foreign-trained teachers often are working in low- or middle-skilled jobs while attempting to get into teaching positions, making it difficult to take classes or otherwise find ways into teaching.

Finally, she said, Washington doesn't provide contextualized English language support so that foreign-trained teachers can learn English terms in their fields of specialty.

Health Care Professionals in Massachusetts

Jeffrey Gross of the New Americans Integration Institute at the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition (MIRA) talked about his organization's efforts to get more skilled immigrants into health care professions in the state—including doctors, nurses and physical therapists.

Those efforts have resulted in the creation of a statewide task force on health care professionals that will be making recommendations for state action this year, he said.

While MIRA has been able to bring “quite a diverse range of people to the table”—including health care providers, educators and representatives of state licensing boards and labor groups—the organization's biggest challenge has been connecting with the immigrant health care professionals themselves, Gross said.

In addition, working with professional associations and employers in an effort to get more foreign-earned credentials recognized in Massachusetts has “been a bit of a challenge,” he said.