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Abstract

Despite claims that prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) can act as a transformative social mechanism and a means of social inclusion, this study reports that PLAR has become a serious barrier to adult learning rather than a facilitator. Drawing from Foucault's concept of governmentality, the study examines the difficulties that immigrant professionals have experienced in having their foreign credentials and work experience recognized in the contexts of Canada and Sweden. Using document analysis and interviews, the study analyses how PLAR has created a system of governing through technologies of power and technologies of the self which work as dividing practices in discounting and devaluing immigrants' prior learning and work experience. The study concludes that PLAR has become a technical exercise and a governing tool rather than a form of social transformation.

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Introduction

Prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR), or recognition/accreditation/assessment of prior (experiential) learning (RPL/AP[E]L), is claimed by many educators as an alternative approach to understanding adult learning. Thomas (1998), a Canadian scholar, argues that PLAR is potentially ‘the most radical innovation since the introduction of mass formal education for children and youth in the last century, and its extension to adults in this one’ (Thomas 1998: 341). Some British researchers (Whittaker, Cleary and Gallacher 2002) also maintain that APEL can act as ‘a transformative social mechanism’ and ‘a means of social inclusion’ particularly for non-traditional learners from marginalised groups (e.g. women, minority groups, older learners, and learners with disability). Despite such claims, this article argues that PLAR has become a serious barrier to adult learning rather than a facilitator. In fact, it has become an assessment tool and a technical exercise. This article explores the politics of recognition in PLAR for immigrant professionals in Canada and Sweden, and these cases are discussed in relation to different aspects of Foucault’s concept of governmentality.

Background

Canada and Sweden are two immigrant countries with populations of 30 million and 9 million people, respectively. Immigration has played an important role in transforming both countries into ethno-culturally diverse and economically prosperous nations. Both countries share similar driving forces behind immigration that are social, political, economic and

demographic, but there are also differences between the two countries. In Canada, from its Confederation in 1867 to the 1960s, the selection of immigrants was based on racial background, with the British and Western Europeans being deemed the most desirable citizens, while Asians and Africans were considered unassimilable and, therefore undesirable. To illustrate, immigrants of European origins were brought in for what became a massive 19th century migration as a strategy to populate and develop Western Canada. At the same time, the Canadian government brought in Chinese workers to build the railroad so fundamental to the expansion of the West, imposed a head tax in 1885 in order to keep out their families, and passed a restrictive Chinese Immigration Act in 1923 that virtually prohibited Chinese immigration into Canada until its repeal in 1947. Hence, very early in the history of Canada, immigration has served as a means of social and ideological control based on superficial racial and cultural differences. In deciding which immigrants are the most desirable and admissible, the state sets the parameters for the social, cultural and symbolic boundaries of the nation.

Immigrants come to Canada and Sweden under four major categories: the skilled worker class, the business class, the family class, and refugees. In Canada, skilled workers are admitted under a point system using prescribed selection criteria based on education, occupation, language skills, and work experience. Sweden does not use a point system *per se*. The selection of skilled workers is mainly based on the needs of labour market and the availability of jobs. Presently, Sweden mainly issues residence and work permit under this category to professional specialists and executives in multinational companies who come on short-term assignments. However, new regulations are proposed for labour immigration in Sweden, where employers rather than public authorities will determine the need (Migrationsverket 2008). The second category, present in Canadian but not explicit in

Swedish policy, seeks to attract experienced business people who are expected to invest or establish businesses in the hosting societies. Canada has three classes of business immigrants, investors, entrepreneurs and self-employed persons, each with separate eligibility criteria. Skilled workers and business immigrants are also referred to as economic immigrants. Both Canada and Sweden admit immigrants under the family reunion category and on the basis of humanitarian ground. Family class immigration reunites close family members of an adult resident or citizen of the hosting countries, such as child, parents, a spouse, and common-law partner. Refugee protection is usually offered to those who fear returning to their country of nationality or habitual residence because of war, and fear of persecution, torture or cruel and unusual treatment or punishment. In addition, Sweden also grants residence permit to long-term foreign residents or citizens who moved to Sweden from another EU country as part of the EU agreement.

The history of immigration in Canada may be divided into four periods, each governed by a state policy that defined who would count as desirable immigrants (Li 2003). The first, from 1867 to 1895, was a period of open immigration, but only from Britain and the United States. The second period, 1896-1914, covered the wheat boom at the beginning of the 20th century, which attracted a record number of immigrants from Europe to Canada. During the third period, 1915-1945, Canada continued to accept European settlers for agricultural development. Immediately after the Second World War, Canadian immigration policy continued to be highly restrictive, despite external and internal pressures for an open-door policy (Knowles 1997).

Yet the post-war period marked the beginning of a new era in Canada's immigration history. By the mid-1960s, Canada was experiencing 'the greatest postwar boom' in Canadian history

(Whitaker 1991: 18). Skilled labour was required to help Canada build its expanding economy, but Europe as the traditional source of immigrants was not able to meet the needs of Canada because of its own post-war economic recovery. The Canadian government thus turned its recruitment efforts to traditionally restricted areas – Third World countries. In 1967 a point system was introduced by the Liberal government, which based the selection of immigrants on their education, skills and resources rather than their racial and religious backgrounds. This new system represented ‘a historic watershed,’ and ‘did establish at the level of formal principle that Canadian immigration policy is “colour blind”’ (Whitaker 1991: 19). However, the new selection method was criticized for excluding the impoverished, especially from Third World countries (Matas 1996, Whitaker 1991).

Despite these criticisms, the point system was successful in shifting the pattern of immigration from Europe to one that favoured Asian and other Third World countries. By the mid-1970s, more immigrants arrived from the Third World than from the developed world. The largest number came from Asia, followed by the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa. Between 1968 and 1992, Canada admitted 3.7 million immigrants, of which 35.7% came from Asia, 7.4% from the Caribbean, and 4.8% from Africa (Li 2003). The population of visible minorities continued to grow throughout the 1990s. The 2001 Census reveals that of the 1.8 million immigrants who arrived between 1991 and 2001, 58% came from Asia; 11% from the Caribbean, Central and South America; and 8% from Africa (Statistics Canada 2003b).

Additional major shifts occurred in the last two decades of the 20th century in Canada. In the late 1980s, a business programme was created to favour an entrepreneurial class of

immigrants who would invest in the country's continuous development. Since the mid-1990s, immigrant selection practices have continued to favour economic immigrants over family-class immigrants and refugees, placing even greater emphasis on education and skills. Economic-class immigrants made up more than half of all immigrants admitted throughout the late 1990s. Among them, a considerable number were highly educated immigrant professionals, particularly scientists and engineers. In the year 2000, of a total of 227 209 immigrants and refugees admitted, 23% (52 000 individuals) were admitted as skilled workers (Couton 2002). This new shift was based on the assumption that economic immigrants brought more human capital with them than family-class immigrants and refugees, and therefore were more valuable and desirable (Li 2003).

The main difference between Canada and Sweden is that Sweden does not have a long history of immigration. Swedish migration history is characterized mainly by emigration. Beginning in the 17th century and with a peak in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Swedish emigration patterns are similar to those of other Western European countries. During the period 1851-1930, almost 1.2 million Swedes left for North America (Nationalencyklopedin 1991). Given a total Swedish population of about 6 million in 1930, this out-migration was enormous. Even taking into account the refugees who came during the Second World War, Sweden remained, at least until the middle of the 20th century, essentially a mono-cultural country. Since the 1930s there have been more immigrants than emigrants, but the number of immigrants arriving over the 1930s and 1940s was low.

In the middle of the 20th century, Sweden was a step ahead of many other European countries in terms of conditions for economic development. The Second World War did not have much impact on Sweden because it was not actively involved in the War and remained officially

neutral. Economic development grew significantly, but there was a lack of qualified labour. To meet this need, many skilled worker-class immigrants came to Sweden at the end of the 1940s and into the 1950s. In addition, a number of refugees came from Eastern European countries, for example Hungarians fleeing the 1956 uprising. In the 1960s there were still a high number of worker-class immigrants, and refugees from Eastern Europe and Greece (Gustafsson, Hammarstedt and Zheng 2004). The difference in the 1960s was that the immigrants had lower qualifications, as they were needed for less-qualified positions in industry (Bevelander 2000). After the 1960s, decreasing labour demand led to a more restrictive immigration policy, and the number of immigrants from outside the Nordic countries declined (Gustafsson, Hammarstedt and Zheng 2004).

Since the 1970s, although the number of unskilled immigrants has been reduced, the number of refugees and family-class immigrants has increased significantly. Refugees came mainly from Chile in the 1970s, the Middle East in the 1980s, and the former Yugoslavia and the Middle East in the 1990s (Gustafsson, Hammarstedt and Zheng 2004). Overall shifts in the origins of immigrants are shown in the following figures: In 1970 more than 90% of those born abroad came from Europe (60% of these from the Nordic countries). By the end of the 1990s, 30% of immigrants were born in the Nordic countries, 35% in other European countries, and 35% in countries outside of Europe (Ekberg and Rooth 2000). Today, 13% of the Swedish population are born abroad, which marks growth when compared with 1% in 1940 and 7% in 1970 (Ekberg and Rooth 2000, Statistiska centralbyrån 2007). The development of immigration has, among other things, resulted in a growing interest in the recognition of foreign vocational competence (Andersson, Fejes and Ahn 2004).

Today, there is also a discussion in Sweden concerning the need for more professional immigrants. There is a growing labour shortage in the more qualified segments of the labour market, owing to demographic changes (many will retire in the next few years) and changes in the labour market for more qualified personnel. Therefore, beside the interest in recognition of foreign competence, a renewal of the immigration policy could be expected, if the need for qualified labour is to be met.

Generally, both Canada and Sweden have enjoyed international reputation as open and tolerant societies, demonstrating a commitment to diversity and social justice. However, both countries have been criticised for failing to move beyond 'tolerance' to fully embrace differences as valid and valuable expressions of human experience. With respect to this criticism, one of the most outstanding issues pertains to the non-recognition of the foreign credentials and work experience of immigrants.

Research on PLAR for Immigrants

A number of studies reveal that many highly educated immigrant professionals experience deskilling or decredentialising of their prior learning and work experience on their entry to Canada and Sweden (Basran and Zong 1998, Krahn, Derwing, Mulder and Wilkinson 2000, Mojab 1999, Berggren and Omarsson 2001, leGrande, Szulkin and Ekberg 2004). In a study of 404 Indo- and Chinese-Canadian immigrant professionals in Vancouver, Basran and Zong (1998) report that only 18.8% of their respondents worked as professionals (doctors, engineers, school/university teachers, and other professionals) after immigrating to Canada. They also discovered that the most important factor for their inaccessibility to professional occupations and resulting downward social mobility was the non-recognition or devaluation of their foreign credentials. Highly educated refugees encounter similar barriers in Canada. In

a study of 525 refugees, Krahn, Derwing, Mulder, and Wilkinson (2000) found that refugees with high educational and occupational qualifications experienced downward occupational mobility after arriving in Canada. In comparison with Canadian-born professionals, refugee professionals are more likely to experience unemployment and under-employment (such as part-time and temporary employment). Non-recognition of prior learning and work experience was identified as the major contributing factors for this downward mobility. Immigrant women experience even worse conditions. Mojab (1999) found that skilled immigrant women faced de-skilling in Canada. She maintains that advanced capitalism simultaneously creates and destroys jobs, and requires both skilling and de-skilling of the labour force. Highly-skilled immigrant women are usually seen by Canadian employers as a potential source of manual labour. They face unemployment or are pressured into non-skilled jobs. As a result, both the immigrants themselves and Canadian society suffer severe economic impacts (Li 2001, Reitz 2001).

An analysis of non-European immigrant professionals with at least three years' higher education arriving in Sweden from 1991 to 1997 shows problems of non-recognition similar to those found in Canada (Berggren and Omarsson 2001). The authors found that in the 26-45 age cohort, 65% of this more highly educated group of immigrants had a job, compared with 90% of similarly educated Swedish-born workers. Furthermore, it is less likely that working immigrants have a job that corresponds to their formal qualifications; 39% of those born outside Western Europe had a qualified job (i.e. corresponding to their formal qualification), compared with 85% of those born in Sweden (Berggren and Omarsson 2001). Notably, even among those with a formal qualification from Swedish institutes of higher education, only 64% of those born outside Western Europe had a qualified job. About one third of those from Africa and Asia could expect to get a qualified job, half of those from Latin America and the

rest of Europe, and two thirds of those from North America (Berggren and Omarsson 2001). In a study of PLAR in Sweden, Andersson, Hult and Osman (2006) show how immigrants could experience a 'de-qualifying' recognition of their competence. For example, assessment and recognition of foreign nurses' prior learning could result in recognition as an assistant nurse, i.e. a qualification on a lower level than the original foreign qualification. Thus, there is a problem with the recognition of foreign credentials in Sweden, but the problem varies depending on one's origin. Even with a Swedish education, a foreign-born citizen is much less likely to have a qualified job compared with native citizens.

The experiences of educated immigrants in Canada and in Sweden are two cases that illustrate the general problems of non-recognition and de-credentialing. However, there have been relatively few critical analyses focusing particularly on PLAR until recently, when a number of studies have been carried out in this area. Andersson and Harris' (2006) meta-analysis presents examples of PLAR in international contexts which draw varyingly on assessment theory; the sociology of education; poststructuralism; situated knowledge and learning theory; activity theory, actor-network theory and complexity theory; and symbolic interactionism. However, analyses from a Foucauldian perspective, as presented in this article, are rare. A study of the official Swedish policy is one exception Andersson and Fejes (2005) focus on the role of PLAR (in Sweden 'validation') as a technique for governing the adult subject. The focus of PLAR in Swedish policy today is on the value of specific experiences. Earlier the focus was on the value of more general experience and the ability to study, and these different foci have contributed to the construction of somewhat different adult learner subjects. Peters (2005) has a similar approach in a critical discourse analysis of PLAR/APEL in higher education, which shows how assessing learning from experience for credit conforms to other academic assessments, instead of valuing learning from experiences

outside the academia on its own premises. In other words, when the validation discourse is something candidates have to learn rather than something that acknowledges what they already know, the result can be control and exclusion.

On a more general level, this is a common theme in the PLAR research – PLAR as a technique for transfer between contexts. That is, PLAR is used to facilitate the transfer of competence and qualifications between contexts like daily life and academia. Here, the transfer of immigrants' competence and qualifications between countries becomes particularly interesting. However, prior research has highlighted problems that are inherent in such processes, especially when PLAR is adapted to an existing educational and labour market system (cf. Andersson, Fejes and Ahn 2004). For example, Michelson (1996, 1997) discusses the problems in the Western individualistic approach to PLAR that does not take the situated and collective character of knowledge and experience into account. Further, Starr-Glass (2002) argues that a focus on predictive validity in the assessment of prior learning, instead of concurrent validity, would put focus on future potential in academia and the work life, instead of on equivalency to a present definition of a subject area. He also maintains that it could make a broader scope of competence visible if we start the assessment from the language and experiences of the candidate.

The situation of migrant women in Europe, and particularly in the UK, is discussed by Clayton (2005). The current occupations of the migrant women interviewed by Clayton correspond neither to their formal qualifications (varying from low to high) nor to their former occupations. To a large extent, the experience is that they are seen as 'blank slates' and their 'hidden treasure remains buried'. In other words, Clayton's results show that the degree of transfer of knowledge and experiences is low. The use of APL/APEL is thus

recommended for recognizing their experiential learning and ‘existing level of education, skills and abilities rather than treating them as blank slates’ (Clayton 2005: 238). A particular aspect that Clayton highlights is the problem of getting recognition from employers and the need to be ‘normal’.

Outside a particular group (stereotypically: young, but not too young; male, though only in high status occupations; white; educated, except for the ‘over-qualified’; middle class), it is not enough that individuals are ‘employable’; they (or advocates on their behalf) have to prove it with much greater effort. The sub-text to ‘employable’, then is ‘normal’ in addition to the other attributes of ‘employability’, such as the possession of a range of skills (Clayton 2005: 229).

The problem of transfer/recognition of knowledge between the three spheres of work, academia, and the personal life, and especially the traditional university monopoly of knowledge, is discussed by Armsby, Costley and Garnett (2006). They find APEL within processes of work-based learning to be a way to overcome not only the power and control of universities and disciplines, but also factors like ‘the social influence of students and assessors’ gender, race and class’ (Armsby, Costley and Garnett 2006: 369).

Thus, PLAR is identified as a tool for transfer of knowledge and experience, among different spheres of life as well as among countries. But there are also issues of control and exclusion present in the discussion. The PLAR processes are on the one hand potentially inclusive and carry promises of a better transfer, but on the other hand, these promises are not necessarily fulfilled, unless the exclusive characters of certain processes are overcome.

Techniques of governing

This article discusses how the assessment and recognition techniques of PLAR may be read as technologies of the self and technologies of power, normalizing dividing practices that govern the immigrant professional. The discussion is based on Foucault's concept of governmentality, in the general sense of rationality of governing, ideas concerning the practice of governing (Foucault 1991). As will be shown, PLAR is a device to govern through encouragement and surveillance.

Firstly, 'governmentality' is understood as an indirect way of governing through potential but invisible surveillance and encouragement, or 'technologies of the self', that has been identified as signifying the advanced liberal society (Dean 1999). The possible but invisible surveillance is illustrated by Foucault (1977) through Bentham's idea of the Panopticon, the prison where an observer is able to see the prisoners, who themselves are unable to tell whether they are actually being observed. Thus, in the context of PLAR, the possibility that one's knowledge may be seen and examined could govern the way one makes one's prior learning visible and how one supplements it with further learning.

Secondly, the rationality of governing where disciplinary power functions through 'technologies of power' – surveillance, observation, examination and normalization – is also identified as a dimension of PLAR as a (or a number of) technique(s) of governing. This rationality means that the population is governed through examination and 'measurement', a governmentality of surveillance that Foucault identified as evolving instead of the ancient governing through physical punishment (Foucault 1977). Actually, PLAR per se describes techniques of governing where knowledge and competence are examined and measured.

These techniques work as dividing practices between acceptable and non-acceptable knowledge and competence, and thus between accepted and non-accepted professionals.

To conclude, the ‘figure of thought’ – the idea that is present ‘under’ and together with other ideas make up a discourse (Asplund 1979) – of PLAR is governing subjects in both these aspects. When the idea of PLAR is present in discourses of professional competence, it is ‘fabricating’ the desirable immigrant professional in specific ways. The existence of PLAR encourages the subject to be examined and measured, and the specific assessment techniques construct and normalize certain understandings of professional competence. That is, the techniques of PLAR fabricate both specific ways of construing what and who the professional immigrants are, and the division between subjects who are examined as professionals or non-professionals.

The governing of immigrant professionals: two case studies

This study uses Canada and Sweden as two case studies to examine the techniques of governing, as manifested in the non/recognition of foreign credentials and prior work experience of immigrant professionals in the two countries, through the process of PLAR. The results are based on an analysis of data drawing from written documents and interviews. Two individual cases are explored to illustrate PLAR processes in the two countries, but it should be noted that the names of these individuals are pseudonyms.

Canada

Canada’s immigrant selection system is a dividing practice that awards points to applicants with advanced educational qualifications. In the last decade Canada has been successful in recruiting well-educated immigrants, which also means that less educated immigrants are

excluded. In addition, focus is placed on professional immigrants who are formally included in the Canadian society. Yet even these immigrants have to navigate through a complex and possibly lengthy, costly and frustrating process in order to have their qualifications and experiences properly assessed and recognised.

In Canada there is no central or national place where immigrants can go to have their credentials evaluated. Depending on the purpose of the evaluation (i.e. general employment, studying in Canada, or professional certification or licensing), immigrants may need to approach one or all of the following organizations: 1) provincial and territorial credential assessment services; 2) regulatory or professional bodies; 3) educational institutions; and 4) employers. Five provincial and territorial credential assessment agencies provide credential assessment services to immigrants. Small licensing bodies may access these organizations for help with determining equivalencies for foreign credentials. However, large professional associations (e.g. APEGGA – the Association of Professional Engineers, Geologists and Geophysicists of Alberta) usually conduct their own assessments to determine whether applicants need further training or tests in order to re-enter their professions in Canada. The assessment of foreign credentials for the purpose of academic study usually resides in the hands of educational providers (such as universities and colleges). If such institutions do not have the expertise to evaluate foreign credentials, they may also refer the applicant to one of the provincial assessment services. Thus a network of loosely connected institutions is responsible for implementing and executing the governing technique of PLAR, which examine, normalize and include/exclude competencies and subjects, based on definitions of accepted professional competences that can vary widely. Additional governing techniques encourage immigrants to take action in certain ways by determining what immigrants can and should do to obtain recognition for their actual competencies and formal credentials.

To facilitate an understanding of how techniques of governing are deployed in Canada to devalue the qualifications and experiences of immigrant professionals, this section of the study will present the story of a Chinese immigrant who recently went through the process of PLAR with the International Qualifications Assessment Service (IQAS) in the Province of Alberta. The data are collected from the Chinese Leaver-Stayer Project, which examines the underlying forces that influence the ‘move-stay’ decision for Chinese immigrants after their arrival in Canada.

Shanwei Wang – a petroleum engineer?

Shanwei Wang moved to Canada from China in 2004. He received his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from two prestigious Chinese universities. Prior to leaving China, he was a petroleum engineer, researcher, and project manager for eight years. Shanwei is in his mid-30s, the ideal person that Canada tries to recruit – young, well-educated, and experienced. He chose to settle in Edmonton because of its oil industry. He learned from his Chinese friends that to get an engineer’s job, he had first to become a member of APEGGA, the provincial licensing body for engineers and geologists. However, he could not achieve this without Canadian work experience or without having his Chinese credentials recognised. At this stage the normalizing dividing practice of APEGGA acted as a technology of power, preventing Shanwei from obtaining a professional membership which allows him to work in the profession. Instead, the normalizing process in terms of language meant that he had first to spend eight months upgrading his English. Meanwhile, he applied to the Petroleum Engineering Technology Program in Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) located in Calgary, where he planned to move to. He wanted to get into the petroleum engineering field as a technologist, then use this as a springboard to enter the engineering

profession. However, he did not realise the hurdles that he would have to face in order to enter a college diploma programme.

When he submitted his application, SAIT did not know how to evaluate his Chinese qualifications, so they asked him to send his credentials to IQAS for evaluation. Since this assessment was for an application for a post-secondary programme, the normalization inherent in the assessment meant that IQAS needed his school transcripts in order to find the Canadian school equivalency. Shanwei brought his university records with him to Canada, but he never thought he would need his high school records. IQAS did not know what to do. At first they insisted on having Shanwei provide his school transcripts. After rounds of communication with IQAS, Shanwei persuaded them to accept his undergraduate and graduate records for this evaluation. Three months later, he received the evaluation results. From Shanwei's perspective, the evaluation had partially excluded his prior learning and competence. When asked about his opinion of the results, he said: 'It's not a fair assessment'. Shanwei stated that the results were much lower than he anticipated. He particularly commented on the mathematics assessment. He said he had taken more advanced mathematics courses in both undergraduate and graduate programmes. The scores were higher than what he had received on the assessment of his high school math.

Since 'it is competitive to get into the Petroleum Engineering Technology Program', he said, he decided to take some high school upgrading courses, including Computer, English, Math, and Chemistry. The voluntary enrolment in these courses demonstrates how 'technologies of the self' work in the process of governing through non-recognition. When asked about what he thought of these courses, he described them as 'a waste of time' because they were so easy. Furthermore, as one of the entrance requirements, he had to take TOEFL (Test of

English as a Foreign Language). At the time of the interview, he had passed TOEFL and met all the entrance requirements. Coming with a master's degree, Shanwei still ended up spending eight months taking English courses, and another eight months taking high school upgrading programmes. Now he needs to find \$12 000 to finance a two-year diploma programme (\$2 CND = £1 GBP, approximately).

This case raises many important issues about PLAR. It reveals that PLAR acts as a dividing practice for applicants with foreign credentials and experiences. Using techniques of measurement, it creates a system of governing that discounts and devaluates immigrants' prior knowledge and competence. Furthermore, the 'technologies of the self' are governing immigrant professionals through a technique of self-surveillance. And despite the claim that PLAR is not looking for 'exact match', a normalizing one-size-fits-all governing technique is applied, and outliers are automatically excluded.

Sweden

Like Canada, Sweden has different PLAR organizations where immigrants can go for help. Unlike Canada, Sweden has a national system for evaluation and recognition of foreign qualifications. Foreign degrees are assessed in terms of their equivalence to Swedish counterparts. The National Agency for Higher Education evaluates higher education programmes leading to the recognition of a qualification for at least two years. This evaluation does not mean that a Swedish qualification is awarded; rather, it is intended to provide guidance for employers. It can also be used in an application for Swedish higher education, which is necessary in order to secure a Swedish qualification.

To get the evaluation, there are certain requirements. As mentioned, there has to be a complete qualification. The applicant has to present a diploma, but the Agency also has to evaluate the contents of the qualification. Thus, a diploma supplement is important for the applicant to be able to show evidence for the contents of the educational programme. This system is both inclusive and exclusive. It is inclusive in that the foreign qualification does not have to be equivalent to its Swedish counterpart. As long as it is a complete qualification, it is assessed. Still, this process of assessment and evaluation is exclusive in other ways. Only those who have a complete and documented qualification may be assessed. Those who have not, for example refugees who have fled from their home country, are not included. And, an evaluation does not guarantee that a qualification is recognised in terms of a Swedish qualification. On the contrary, it is only seen as a normalizing recommendation for employers and higher education institutions.

If one requires recognition in terms of a Swedish qualification, one first has to be admitted to the required programme in question at a university or university college. These institutions are obliged to assess the 'real' (actual, existing) competencies of applicants who lack formal eligibility. A right to the recognition of this 'real competence' in relation to admission requirements (eligibility) has been introduced nationally by the government. However, even this first step of assessment in terms of admission can be problematic for foreign professionals. The requirement for eligibility is to be able to study in higher educational institutions, which is normally assessed via high school records rather than professional experience and credentials. An assessment of 'real competence' means that proofs other than Swedish school records should be recognized, but it is still for example normally necessary to speak/read Swedish, as most courses are in Swedish, which is an obstacle to immigrants.

Second, for those who are admitted, PLAR for credit is also possible. An evaluation from the National Agency of Higher Education of foreign credentials (see above), and/or other proofs, might be used as the basis of PLAR for credit. This can make the way to a Swedish qualification shorter, but the evaluation from the National Agency is no guarantee for credit – as mentioned it is only a normalizing recommendation. Further, there is no system for assessment and recognition of professional competence developed in work life. Work life competence is not necessarily equivalent to the requirements of higher education, and is more or less excluded in this PLAR system.

The case of Pierre Ndavi, an African refugee, illustrates the Swedish system. Ndavi has experienced a sub-ordinate process of inclusion in the Swedish society. That is, he is included, but nevertheless his position remains sub-ordinate even after this process.

Pierre Ndavi – a political scientist?

Pierre Ndavi was about 30 years old when he came to Sweden as a refugee in 2001. He left his home country in Africa because of a civil war there. He was active in an organization that was working against genocide, and he did not feel safe at home. In his home country he had studied four years at the university and had a Licencié en science politique, roughly equivalent to a Master's degree in political science. In his home country, he had worked one year as a teacher and one year as a headmaster, and later two years in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In addition to his African mother tongue, he speaks French (his second language), Swahili, English, and, since coming to Sweden, Swedish.

Pierre's arrival in Sweden was the beginning of a long process of settlement, adaptation and (this far sub-ordinate) inclusion – obtaining a resident permit, getting recognition of his credentials, taking courses, and finding employment. Five years after his arrival in Sweden he

was still unable to find a job. First, it took him eight months to obtain the permission of permanent residence. As he had taken a four-year university programme and had an examination, the National Agency for Higher Education could evaluate his credentials. However, to get this evaluation, it was necessary for Pierre to present his formal credentials. It took about 18 month to receive these from his home country. The evaluation process took additional six months, and in 2005, he finally received the evaluation. In the meantime, Pierre worked for 10 months in a factory, and took adult education courses in Swedish, English, and the use of computers.

When Pierre received the evaluation of his examination, the result was that it was equivalent to a Swedish Bachelor in political science (which normally means a three-year study programme). The examination was thus partially recognizing, but also partially excluding his prior qualification. The National Agency for Higher Education recommended him to take some supplementary, normalizing, Swedish courses.

In December 2005 he was admitted to an ‘aspirant programme’ in a Swedish university. This programme is designed to introduce immigrants with foreign qualification to the Swedish system, and targets those who seek recognition as professionals in their new home country. The one-year programme includes some courses in Swedish political science, a course in Swedish, and practicum in the work life – in this case in the governing office of a Swedish municipality.

After the aspirant programme, Pierre sought a job commensurate to his qualifications. He experienced an additional problem because of his work experience in another country – the informal assessments made by employers demonstrated a normalizing preference for

experiences from the Swedish work life. Here it should be noted that political scientist is a ‘vague’ term, at least in Sweden, where it is an unregulated profession which does not require licence in order to find a job in the area (cf. Johansson 2007). Therefore the formal qualifications are not as important to be included in this profession as in other, more regulated professions. Pierre is encouraged, recommended, to have his credentials evaluated, to take certain courses, to enter the ‘aspirant programme’ etc. There are no technologies of power forcing him to do this, and there is no promise of a job as a political scientist, but nevertheless he ‘has’ to follow the recommendations – this is the way of inclusion he is offered.

Recognition of regulated professions

The system described above for recognition of foreign qualifications in Sweden is mainly for ‘non-regulated’ professions, like political scientist. In certain ‘regulated professions’ where formal authorisation, certification etc. are required (e.g., teachers, physicians and attorneys-at-law), the qualifications are subject to the review of the responsible professional and regulatory authorities. For example, the National Board of Health and Welfare assesses foreign qualifications of physicians and other professions in the health care sector, and the qualifications of teachers are assessed by the National Agency for Higher Education. This system of recognition is somewhat different, in that it looks at the requirements of the workplace to a greater extent than the system for non-regulated professions described above. The system for recognition of qualifications of teachers will be used as an example.

The National Agency for Higher Education issues ‘teaching certificates’ to immigrant teachers. The Agency assesses whether a completed (foreign) teacher training programme – on its own, or combined with professional experience – corresponds to a Swedish degree in education. This assessment is inclusive, meaning that the foreign teacher-training programme

does not necessarily have to be equivalent to a Swedish programme. Professional experience could be ‘counted in’. Further, older foreign qualifications can result in a Swedish teaching certificate – similar to the case for Swedish teachers holding older Swedish degrees, who still have their qualifications.

However, there are normalizing techniques of exclusion in this process as well. The Swedish teacher qualification is used as a guideline, and there is a law that governs the school system, including requirements of teachers, which has to be followed. In addition, there are requirements concerning competence in the Swedish language, which means that language training is normally required. If an application for certification is not accepted, the applicant gets a document showing what requirements must be met to receive teaching certificate. One requirement can be to spend an introduction period in a Swedish school, to get to know the Swedish school system.

It should be mentioned that there are also various systems for language tests, language courses and complementary training courses for these groups with a background in ‘regulated’ professions. Furthermore, there are differences in the extent to which immigrants in regulated professions experience inclusion/exclusion. When it comes to (for example teacher) qualifications from within the European Union, the in/exclusion per se is regulated, and these qualifications must be recognised, unless there are ‘essential’ differences from the Swedish counterparts. If not, additional education cannot be a requirement, but it could be required to spend some ‘adaptation time’ in a Swedish school, or to take a ‘suitability test’. Thus, there are not only examining technologies of power acting, but also observation and ‘surveillance’ in terms of introduction periods and adaptation time, maybe ending up in a test of suitability.

Conclusion

Through analyses of the difficulties that immigrant professionals have experienced in having their foreign credentials and work experiences recognized in the contexts of Canada and Sweden, this study reveals that PLAR has created a system of governing through excluding, normalizing, and dividing practices. By the exercising of technologies of power, such as surveillance, observation, and examination, immigrants' prior learning and work experience are devaluated and discounted. The knowledge possessed by immigrants is not acceptable, transferable, or recognisable because their experiences and credentials are deemed different, deficient and, hence, inferior.

The study also shows how the term 'immigrant professional' is 'fabricated' in specific ways through the PLAR process. First, the analysed PLAR techniques instill a normalizing understanding into the minds of immigrants, employers, and professional associations of what constitutes an immigrant professional and who will be accepted as a professional in a new context. Through the assessment process by professional regulatory bodies and PLAR agencies, immigrant professionals will be told who can be included in or excluded from the profession. Furthermore, even if the assessment process might result in favour of immigrants, foreign qualifications are not necessarily accepted as they are, but instead will be subordinately included. In fact immigrants are often required to renew their qualifications – a process to comply with the local standard and norm. Second, as a 'technology of the self' PLAR indirectly governs the immigrant, who voluntarily adapts to the demands to be accepted as professionals in their new country. Immigrant professionals try to fulfil the employer's demands for work experience in the new country, for example by spending

‘adaptation time’ in a work place, taking tests, or enrolling in programmes to upgrade or learn the dominant language in the new country.

Despite claims that prior learning assessment and recognition can act as a form of social transformation, the conclusion of this study is that PLAR acts as a technical exercise and an assessment tool. It has created a system of exclusion, normalization, and governing. In the context of immigration in Canada and Sweden, the ‘R’ (recognition) is often missing from the PLAR as the process has become techniques of non-recognition. As technologies of power and the self, the process of PLAR can lead to the devaluation and denigration of immigrants’ qualifications and experience. While certain forms of knowledge are legitimised as valid, the learning and work experience of immigrants has often been viewed inferior. This article calls for a more inclusive framework for understanding PLAR in a culturally diverse society.

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