



# FOREIGN TRAINED PROFESSIONALS: MAINE'S HIDDEN TALENT POOL

*FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS  
REGARDING CERTIFICATION AND LICENSURE*

New Mainers Resource Center, Portland Adult Education



## New Mainers Resource Center, Portland Adult Education

### About Us

The New Mainers Resource Center (NMRC) is a program within Portland Adult Education serving area immigrants and refugees. It includes:

- a skilled professional program
- employment case management
- advising regarding credential evaluation and licensing
- intensive classes focused on job readiness skills
- professional networking groups
- workshops and other offerings.

These offerings are designed to help new Mainers, of all professions, overcome barriers to entering the US workforce. NMRC participants take advantage of the other classes and programs offered at Portland Adult Education. NMRC also serves as a member of the national Welcome Back Initiative. Additionally, NMRC works closely with area employers to help them meet their workforce needs.

### Mission

To support Maine's economic development by meeting employers' demands for a skilled and culturally diverse workforce.

### Vision

- To grow Maine's **economy** by fully utilizing the skills of foreign trained professionals.
- To help **employers** hire and retain qualified workers for a skilled and diverse workforce
- To help Maine's immigrant and refugees **overcome barriers** and resume their professional careers

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# **Foreign Trained Professionals: Maine’s Hidden Talent Pool**

## **Findings and Recommendations Regarding Certification and Licensure**

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# **Foreign Trained Professionals: Maine's Hidden Talent Pool**

## **Findings and Recommendations Regarding Certification and Licensure**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

#### **Issues to be Addressed**

Licensing and credential evaluation are some of the most challenging aspects of a foreign trained professional's entry into the US workforce. This is particularly true for those who have come to Maine as refugees or asylum seekers. The United States has a decentralized system of regulating professions with no one entity responsible for professional certification of licensed professionals. Additionally, the number of factors that each individual pursuing a license must take into consideration also means that there is not an easy answer for how to simplify the licensing and certification process in Maine.

#### **General Scope of this Project**

There are steps that Maine can take to help facilitate the evaluation and re-licensure process. This project sought to identify some of the challenges that exist and provided recommendations for addressing them. We did this by undertaking the following steps:

- Undertake a review of occupational licensing policy nationally and locally
- Review a number of key licensed professions of greatest interest to new Mainers and develop licensing guides for these professions. These professions included: engineers, lawyers, teachers, doctors, nurses and CPAs
- Draw from the experience NMRC has working with hundreds of foreign trained professionals as they move forward with their careers
- Produce a report that will identify barriers and possible strategies.

#### **Findings and Recommendations**

As discussed above the system for professional licensing is very decentralized which means that there are a lot of different stakeholders that are involved in Maine's licensing process, including national organizations that dictate how a process must work. Our findings and recommendations cut across this decentralized system. Some recommendations may be very minor including how information should be displayed on a licensing board's website and others may attempt to address systemic issues regarding access to documents or resources needed to cover the costs associated with licensing. The Findings and Recommendations are organized according to the following issue areas, after which we have provided recommendations specific to the professional licensing boards we researched.

- Lack of Understanding of How the Licensure Process Works
- The Value of Foreign Degrees
- Accessing Transcripts

- Costs of the Licensure Process
- English Proficiency Requirements
- Work Experience Requirements
- Additional Educational Requirements – Limited Access to Financial Aid

The recommendations for specific licensing boards include:

- Maine State Board of Nursing – Nurses
- Maine Department of Education – Teachers and other Educational Professionals
- State of Maine Board of Accountancy – CPA – Certified Public Accountant
- State Board of Licensure for Professional Engineers – Engineers
- Maine Board of Bar Examiners – Lawyers
- State of Maine Board of Licensure in Medicine – Physicians

### **Professional Licensing Guides**

The major problem with understanding professional licensing is access to information about the process for each particular profession and knowing whether or not it is possible to fulfill all of the requirements for licensure. As a way to help address that problem, the main focus of this project was to develop professional licensing guides for those professions which seem most in demand by participants in NMRC's programming. These include: nurses, teachers, CPAs, engineers, lawyers and doctors. These guides are available on the NMRC's website at: [www.nmrcmaine.org](http://www.nmrcmaine.org). While we believe these guides go a long way to make the information for each of these professions more understandable, the process for each is still very complicated. It is our recommendation for people who want information about a specific profession to reach out to the appropriate licensing board for clarification or to seek the assistance of an advisor who is familiar with the licensing process for that profession.

### **Conclusion**

According to the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) there are 7.2 million college educated immigrants in the US, with more than half of them with degrees obtained in another country. Maine's immigrant population, particularly those who are coming with college degrees and professional experience, provides a tremendous resource to the state that could help Maine address its workforce needs. Given this pool of experienced trained professionals it is well worth the attention and effort necessary to try to address the different barriers and challenges they face with licensing and help facilitate the entry of these foreign trained professionals into Maines workforce at the fullest extent possible.

# Foreign Trained Professionals: Maine's Hidden Talent Pool

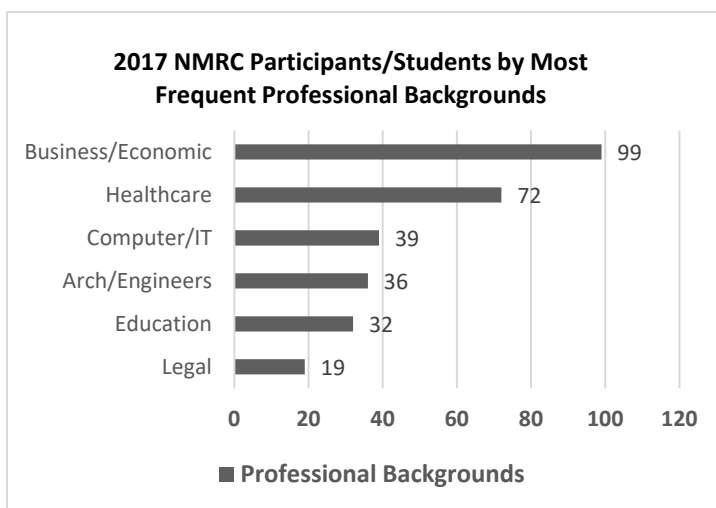
## Findings and Recommendations Regarding Certification and Licensure

### BACKGROUND

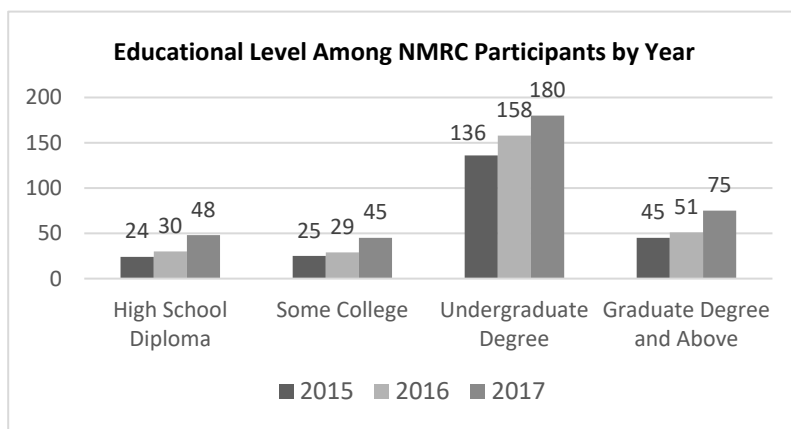
#### Problem Statement

The New Mainers Resource Center (NMRC) was established at Portland Adult Education (PAE) by the Maine Legislature in 2013. The establishment of this initiative allowed PAE to build on and expand its workforce development programs. Portland Adult Education served over 2,200 English as a Second Language (ESOL) students coming from more than 80 countries in the 2017/2018 school year.

Serving over 400 students in each of the last 2 years, the New Mainers Resource Center focuses on skilled immigrants, and developing targeted programming that meets the unique needs of those with an advanced degree and experience in a professional field. Data from 2017 shows that NMRC program participants cut across all sectors. For the past 3 years, a majority of NMRC participants come with college degrees and many of them with graduate degrees and above. Given the workforce shortages facing the state, Maine's highly educated and experienced immigrants are a resource we cannot afford to ignore. Licensure and certification are a decentralized problem which means that at every level, whether as an employer, licensing board, policymaker or educational institution we must work to gain a better understanding of the challenges foreign professionals face in trying to get recognition of their training and professional experience. We must all take whatever steps we can to remove those barriers and work to help facilitate that process. If we are successful at supporting this hidden talent pool, we will all benefit from the contributions Maine's foreign trained professionals are able to make to our communities, economy and state.



Credential evaluation is one of the most challenging aspects of a foreign trained professional's entry into the US workforce. Unfortunately, given the number of factors that must be taken into consideration, there is not an easy answer for how to simplify this process. From a systems perspective, licensing is a very decentralized process with no central body that oversees professional licensing or certification. From a foreign trained professional's perspective, the number of factors that must be considered regarding licensing in the US include: profession, national and state licensing or certification requirements, country of origin, year of graduation, ability to obtain documents, training experience, educational or professional goals, immigration status and conditions in home country, financial resources or obligations, English proficiency, amongst others.



With 5 years of experience working with hundreds of professionals from all different sectors there are some specific challenges that NMRC has encountered helping new Mainers understand the credential evaluation and licensing process and whether pursuing licensure is an option for them. For example, when is it necessary to have an evaluation done, who should do it, what documents are

required and how will the costs be covered. Evaluation of a degree is also only one step in the licensing process and navigating this process is challenging at best and for many insurmountable. Other aspects of the licensing process typically include: demonstration of English proficiency, extensive testing which typically requires both a high level of English as well as knowledge of the professional content area, US work experience such as an internship, US references and possibly some college level courses to fill in any gaps in coursework.

Generally, each licensed profession allows some alternative path to licensure so that it is not necessary for a person to repeat their entire education. These alternatives usually include requirements set by the state board of that profession and by some national association which is typically made up of professionals in that field and state professional licensing boards from across the country.

Just locating information about the process to obtain a professional license in Maine is a major challenge that new Mainers face. Information about licensing requirements for foreign trained professionals is typically not easily accessible on Maine's licensing boards' websites or included in information about the licensing application process. It is sometimes necessary to dig into agency rules to find information, or search through state and national websites and various guides and manuals for information about the different steps in licensure.

Most of the licensed professions in Maine fall under the Department of Professional and Financial Regulation's, Office of Professional and Occupational Regulation. Within this department only a handful of the professional licensing boards, such as those for physicians or engineers, have their own dedicated staff. The other dozens of boards share staff. Some boards, such as for lawyers and teachers are outside of this department. Consequently, it is a very decentralized system with most boards needing to comply with policies and procedures set by a national counterpart.

As will be discussed in the Findings section of this report, locating and understanding information about licensing is just one challenge foreign professionals face related to licensure and certification. Each step in the process presents its own barriers that may be insurmountable for some to overcome. These include being able to:

- Access their school transcripts and diplomas
- The costs of the process – translation and evaluation of degrees, application and test fees, test prep courses, etc.

- Missing coursework
- Immigration status and eligibility for educational programs and financial aid
- English proficiency
- Need for volunteer or work experience in the US
- Need to support US family and/or family back in home country.

## **General Scope of Project**

This project was able to draw from several different sources to inform its Findings and Recommendations. These sources included: work that was done with support received from the Betterment Fund to undertake a review of professional licensing procedures, develop several licensing guides and produce a report; NMRC's years of experience working one on one with new Mainer professionals; and NMRC's participation in programming and policy development at the national, state and local level to address barriers to licensing. The general scope of this project and report is as follows:

1. Undertake a review of occupational licensing policy nationally and locally with a goal of understanding best practices to inform strategies in Maine and to replicate where possible.
2. Review several key professions (5-7) of greatest interest to new Mainers with the goal of making information about licensing procedures more accessible so that skilled professional license seekers are better informed of the steps they need to take to obtain a license.
3. Through a better understanding of board functioning, determine the best approaches for working collaboratively with licensing boards to address issues, and improve transparency in the process and assist those seeking a license.
4. Produce and disseminate a report that will inform policymakers, licensing bodies, and other interested stakeholders of identified barriers and possible strategies to bring about change to reduce those barriers.

## **PROCESS**

### **1. Producing Report on Findings and Recommendations**

The intent of this project and its final report is to have more people better informed. In addition to the specific work discussed below to develop the licensing guides and the direct experience that NMRC has working with foreign professional pursuing licensing, this project has also researched best practices nationally and been able to draw from the experience that NMRC has working in the policy arena at the local, state and national level. NMRC has been a member of the Welcome Back Initiative since 2015. This is a national initiative of 10 programs around the country designed to build a bridge between internationally trained health workers in the US and the need for a linguistically and culturally competent health services in underserved communities. (<https://www.wbcenters.org/>) Some of these programs, like Maine serve more than just health professionals. This allows NMRC to



be up to date on best practices and policy initiatives nationally. Additionally, in 2016, NMRC led a team that was invited to participate in a White House Conference on New Americans, National Skills and Credential Institute. This provided a great opportunity to interact with others from around the country who were also recognized for implementing best practices. This final report will draw from all this experience to offer some findings on challenges and barriers, offer some recommendations and identify next steps and specific issues to be addressed.

To determine which 5-7 licensed professions to include in this project NMRC selected those that reflected the numbers of new Mainers in that profession seeking assistance from NMRC. The licensing paths for these professions are also the most complicated, difficult to navigate, costly and for some people, will have barriers that they will not be able to overcome. The professions we reviewed include:

- Nurses
- Doctors
- Engineers
- Teachers
- CPAs
- Lawyers

## **2. Preliminary Research**

It was important to understand what licensing information was available to foreign trained professionals in their respective fields. A preliminary search of the website of each regulating body showed directions specific to those with international credentials. Maine-specific websites often link to other regulating bodies such as evaluation and test administration companies. These websites were also searched for relevant directions and guidance, revealing any online directions that were difficult to understand or lacked continuity. The documentation of this search showed what a foreign trained professional would see without doing additional inquiries (calling or emailing the board or evaluation companies, etc.). Initial research also included a review of any guides already available to foreign-trained professional, so that we could incorporate existing work or address gaps in the available information.

We found that there is general guidance for foreign-professionals through World Education Services (<https://www.wes.org/>), and there are state-specific guides for a few states available through Upwardly Global (<https://www.upwardlyglobal.org/get-hired/professional-licensing-guides/>) for those states that have partnered with Upwardly Global to produce professional guides. Our review revealed that general guidance for foreign-trained professionals in the U.S. is not specific enough at the state level to be useful to licensure candidates in Maine.

## **3. Verifying Information**

The next step was to speak with the licensing boards for each identified profession, evaluators and test administrators to understand the details of each licensure process. In many cases, a Maine's board works closely with a national company that conducts the evaluations and/or administers the testing. For example, while the Maine Board of Nursing sets the requirements for nursing licensure in Maine, many of these requirements are reviewed and managed by the Commission on Graduates of Foreign Nursing Schools (CGFNS). Looking for consistency and clarity between each Maine board's website and the associated regulating organization was important in creating the guides.

#### **4. Forming Important Partnerships with Colleges and Universities**

Since each licensing process includes an educational requirement, it was important to talk to the local and online educational institutions and programs where licensure candidates could fulfill potential educational deficiencies. Often licensure candidates do not need to complete full degrees or certificates, but instead only need a few courses. Talking with the program chairs and admissions departments revealed what taking courses would look like for non-matriculated students with foreign degrees. Different program chairs and admissions departments revealed what specific course pre-requisites individuals would need to take, and whether there was an English proficiency requirement for the course and in some cases if they would even be allowed to take the course if they were not fully enrolled in the program.

#### **5. Creating the Guides**

The guides were designed to show licensure candidates in each of the chosen professions the requirements for being licensed or re-licensed in Maine in that profession. Most guides include a flow chart, showing candidates a recommended path based on their education, required documents, experiences and personal resources (time and money) to successfully complete the licensure path. Whenever a document, webpage, company or resource is mentioned, the guide will link or hyperlink the viewer to the relevant source to make the guide navigable and useful to online readers. All timing and financial specifications are included in the guides, as well as alternate careers, test preparation resources and information about where in Maine a candidate can pursue further education or take required coursework.

#### **6. Adding Alternative Career Pathways and Education Options**

We conducted research to identify other non-licensed jobs in each professional field. Licensure candidates could consider these positions as a stepping stone job or a valid career if the licensure path includes too many barriers. Additionally, we realized that many licensure candidates will need to consider additional coursework, so for most guides, we included information on the local and online universities and programs and included entrance requirements for these courses.

#### **7. Sharing with Boards and Regulating Bodies**

Each board and other regulating body we communicated with received a copy of the guide. Through this exchange we were able to verify the content of the guides, altering information to be more consistent with board standards, if necessary. This was also an opportunity to speak with boards about some of the steps that seem most significantly prohibitive to foreign-trained licensure candidates, laying the foundation for the future work of modifying and clarifying licensure requirements for foreign trained professionals.

#### **8. Using Experience with Foreign Professionals to Inform Work**

Since its establishment in 2013 the New Mainers Resource Center has worked with hundreds of foreign trained professionals. Providing individual advice regarding licensing and credential

evaluation has been a significant aspect of that work. NMRC has also been acknowledged statewide as having developed an expertise in this area. This experience has helped to inform the design of the guides and the information that new Mainers, as well as other service providers, will need to understand and navigate these very challenging licensing procedures. The real life experiences of our students and our efforts to provide them services has also helped to inform the findings and recommendations of this report.

## **FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **I. LACK OF UNDERSTANDING OF HOW THE LICENSURE PROCESS WORKS**

In creating each guide, we contacted the appropriate licensure board and staff to seek clarification and confirmation on our information and sources. Many of the Maine licensure boards share staff with other regulatory agencies or are occupied reviewing applications. When they were able, they provided us with helpful guidance and provided feedback on the guides. The following general and board-specific recommendations, if enacted, would hopefully help provide information to an applicant before they contact the board. Additionally, they may have questions that fall outside the purview of the board. Then, if they still need to reach out to a board, they may be better informed and have questions more specific to their own situation. This will help candidates gain a better understanding of all requirements before they begin, what in most cases, is a timely and costly application process. While it is important that Maine's professional licensing boards have an individual, who is available to respond to inquiries from applicants, having information clearly available on a website for applicants as well as workforce and other advisors will help generally in keeping people better informed about how the licensing process works.

One of the motivations for beginning this project is that outside of each licensing board, there is limited guidance specific to Maine foreign trained professionals, and limited information for guiding those professionals as they determine how best to pursue their career paths. During the past several years the New Mainers Resource Center has begun to develop a level of expertise in this area, but the number of individuals needing guidance and the complexity each board's procedures has made this a very daunting undertaking. Due to the limited amount of guidance and advising that is available around licensure and certification, most foreign trained professionals either receive some of the information they need to make an informed decision, receive incorrect information, are not aware of the specific requirements they must meet or their options for other career opportunities. Even when licensure is a valid option, they may still need assistance and support to successfully complete the different steps in the process. Others are not even aware of their licensing option and re-enroll in a degree program thinking they must re-do their entire education.

*A. Recommendation* - Each board's website references foreign-credentialed candidates differently. Often, foreign-trained applicants are mentioned within a reference to those licensed in other states. Our general recommendation would be for each board's website to make explicit reference to those with foreign credentials and educations in the FAQ section, and include relevant links to evaluation or testing sites, if appropriate.

*B. Recommendation* - Some boards determine the deadlines for when an application opens and closes. For example, nursing, sets a 1-year limit on applications. Because foreign-trained professionals often need to spend a significant amount of time requesting and receiving official documents, improving their English, fulfilling missing courses and passing complex tests, we would recommend that application deadlines be extended without penalty for foreign-trained applicants.

*C. Recommendation* - We recommend that each board post or link to our guide somewhere on their website to cut down on direct inquiries and incomplete applications from foreign-trained applicants. Additionally, the guides contain information outside of the purview of the board, such as information about testing resources, local educational programs and alternative career paths. This information may be helpful to applicants but not specifically related to the licensure application. The Board of Licensure for Professional Engineers, for example, was able to link to the engineer guide and share it with their whole community through their regularly published newsletter. Other boards could do the same, sharing the guide with their larger community through newsletters, listservs, etc.

*D. Recommendation* - Some of the steps in the licensure process for many professions could be considered preliminary or evaluative. For example, the Board of Bar Examiners will review a foreign education before allowing an individual to officially apply. These steps help an applicant determine if they will be able to pursue licensure or not. First, we recommend that these steps become more common with other boards, if possible, potentially saving applicants considerable time and money. We would also recommend that the fees associated with this evaluative step be deducted from the eventual licensure application if the candidate does decide to pursue licensure.

*E. Recommendation* - While this project only provided us an opportunity to review six professional licensing boards, these boards should review these recommendations for improvements on their websites. Other professional licensing boards should also look at their websites and how information is presented so that information for foreign trained professionals is clearly visible and explained on their websites. It should contain current, easily navigable and active links to direct information of related national licensing bodies. As part of their application materials boards should have identified someone within that board to respond to inquiries regarding the process for those with foreign credentials and make that information available on the website.

*F. Recommendation* – Career advisors, adult education programs, workforce professionals and others should receive training about advising foreign trained professionals on their options regarding licensure and certification and the various factors that need to be taken into consideration. This training should focus not only on professional licensure but generally the topic of credential evaluations and when and how they should be done and alternative career paths. The NMRC professional guides and other resources and this report can provide some of the information necessary for this training.

## II. THE VALUE OF FOREIGN DEGREES

There are many factors that will influence the success of a skilled immigrant's entry into the US workforce at a livable wage or above: English proficiency, recognition of credentials, some US training or education, US work experience, networking and employer contacts. The focus of this report on the challenges around licensing and credentials is meant in no way to suggest that those other factors are not critically important steps to an immigrant's successful pursuit of their career. However, as programs are developed around Maine, both those specifically for immigrants and those geared toward raising the educational and skill level of Mainers overall to fill Maine's workforce gaps, they need to consider the resources immigrants bring to the state. How can Maine take advantage of the skills and training Maine's newest residents bring with them? Given the limited access to financial aid that many immigrants will have, this is especially important to keep in mind. Additionally, if training and resources can be more targeted toward specific needs, the limited resources available will be used more efficiently. For example, assisting a foreign trained nurse working toward licensure is less costly and more efficient than if that same nurse had to repeat his/her full nursing education.

*H. Recommendation – Training and workforce initiatives in Maine need to develop specific strategies for new Mainers, and to look at existing programs geared toward Maine's overall population. How can those existing programs meet the needs and special circumstances of Maine's immigrants? This is of particular concern for those who have degrees and*

### **BRAIN WASTE**

"The underutilization of immigrant professionals' talent, which contributes to significant U.S. economic loss. According to the Migration Policy Institute, there are approximately 7.2 million college-educated immigrants in the U.S. An estimated 52% of these immigrants obtained their degree in a foreign country. However, more than a quarter of these highly-skilled immigrants are either unemployed or working in jobs that do not make appropriate use of their knowledge and skills. This phenomenon, often termed "brain waste," represents a significant social and economic cost for both the individuals affected and for our society as a whole." (*Steps to Success*, Executive Summary, pg. 2)

*experience that can and should form a foundation for any further training or education. For example, Mainespark includes supporting immigrants to efficiently transition to education and careers in Maine as a priority under its "New Opportunities." It would also be appropriate to make sure that the needs of immigrants, particularly those with foreign degrees, are also taken into consideration in the priorities listed under "Adult Promise" as many of these initiatives would be very beneficial to new Mainers who may need to access support through these initiatives. It is also important that Mainespark seeks out individuals with expertise in this area to help inform their planning and programming.*

*I. Recommendation – As Maine's policymakers continue to address Maine's workforce needs with initiatives such as the *Task Force on Maine's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Economy and Workforce* and any of its successors, it should continue to keep in mind the unique resources that foreign trained professionals bring to Maine. They must also consider the challenges they face, particularly licensing, as they attempt to pursue their careers. The state's objective should be to support the entry of these professionals into the workforce at the fullest potential possible. There is much that can be learned*

from national initiatives or other states who are also grappling with this issue. Additionally, there may be other populations, such as veterans, and their families, who are also struggling with issues of licensure and trying to take advantage of their skills and training to move forward with their careers.

### **III. ACCESSING TRANSCRIPTS**

For many foreign trained professionals, accessing their official documents (transcripts, diplomas, in some cases course descriptions, etc.) is the most significant barrier to re-entering their field. By accessing transcripts, we mean being able to have their transcripts, diplomas and any other required documents sent from the school they attended in their home country to the evaluation company designated by the licensing body of their profession. This is particularly challenging for people who have fled war torn countries as refugees or who have come to Maine as asylum seekers fleeing for their safety and from political persecution. In some countries the schools no longer exist or do not function in any reliable way. What in the US would be a simple document request that is easily handled online, in some countries could take months to process, if at all, and/or require the individual to pick up any documents in person. In other countries, documents are not released as a way to keep people from leaving the country, or a request made for a transcript may put an asylum seeker's family in danger. Fortunately, most foreign professionals seeking assistance from NMRC have been able to bring either original documents or copies of their transcripts and diplomas with them to the US.

In recognition of the challenge that millions of people face in accessing their documents, World Education Services (WES) in Canada recently undertook a pilot project in response to the large number of Syrian refugees who were not able to access their educational documents from schools that have closed or were not responsive. This pilot project, which accepted documentation from sources other than the schools, such as transcripts that a candidate might have, proved to be successful. This could be an alternative model for other licensing entities that require documents sent from a school, for the millions of people, refugees and asylum seekers, who are displaced because of war, political persecution, natural disasters and other factors beyond their control, that make it impossible for them to access their documents through their school.

While all the licensing boards reviewed in this project require that candidates present official documents as some point in the process, most boards require that official documents are sent directly from the issuing institution, while others allow the candidate to present official transcripts they have in their possession. The Maine Department of Education (MDOE) requires that transcripts and documents be evaluated by any NACES (National Association of Credential Evaluation Services) accredited evaluator. The benefit of this is that a candidate can choose an evaluation company that accepts official transcripts from the applicant and does not require that documents come officially from the issuing institution.

Most boards, however, such as the Board of Nursing, Board of Licensure of Professional Engineers, Board of Licensure in Medicine and the Board of Accountancy partner with evaluation companies that require that transcripts and other licensing documents arrive directly from the issuing institutions. The engineering board offers a possible alternative path for those without official documents. Any candidates for licensure with the above boards, who cannot get their educational institutions to send

their official documents will need to consider an alternative career path or possibly re-do their education. Even for those who will eventually be able to access official documents, the uncertainty and wait time presents a significant challenge to meeting board and testing deadlines.

*J. Recommendation* – For those entities that rely on documentation being sent from an individual’s school to the evaluation entity, it is recommended that alternative approaches be considered in recognition of the fact that millions people who are fleeing their home countries as refugees or asylum seekers or because of natural disasters may never be able to access their documents through their home school so licensure in their profession will not be an option for them. Fortunately, most foreign professionals seeking assistance from NMRC have been able to bring either original documents or copies of their transcripts and diplomas with them to the US. In many cases, when an evaluation of a degree is required for employment or education, an evaluation done by a NACES (National Association of Credential Evaluation Services) member company is seen as an acceptable method of verifying the authenticity of the degree. Although these companies may vary somewhat in the types of documentation that they require, as a NACES member, they must all meet the same standards for professionalism, quality and trustworthy service.

*K. Recommendation* - The Engineering Board in Maine presents a method for working with individuals who cannot access official documents. They defer to NCEES (National Council of Examiners of Engineers and Surveyors) for the educational evaluation and examination portion of their licensing process. While NCEES must receive official documents to conduct their evaluation, an individual who cannot access official documents can get a waiver from the Maine Engineering Licensing Board. NCEES could then complete the evaluation of an unofficial transcript with a waiver. This shows that even if an external company is conducting the evaluation, a local board may be able to exercise its own judgement when it comes to official documents. While there may still be drawbacks, such as being limited to practicing in Maine, this approach could be considered by other boards who are looking to welcome otherwise qualified foreign trained professionals to seek out licensure.

*L. Recommendation* – For those individuals that are unable to access their transcripts, consider models or approaches that are skill based and/or incorporate prior learning assessments so that individuals have alternative ways to demonstrate their skills.

#### **IV. COSTS OF THE LICENSURE PROCESS**

Each step of the licensure process has a significant price tag attached to it. Licensure candidates may spend hundreds of dollars on evaluative steps before learning if they will be able to proceed or not. Most fees are non-refundable and at this point, there are generally no resources to support individuals in this process. Over the course of the whole process, foreign-trained applicants will typically need to pay application fees to the board, transcript evaluation fees, translation fees, application fees to exam administrators and exam preparation course fees. Each step commonly has late or delayed fees if an individual needs to keep an application open or misses a testing window, for example.

In addition to having to undertake a costly process for licensure, many foreign trained professionals do not have access to traditional sources of financial aid. Many of Maine's immigrants are lawfully present asylum seekers who have not yet obtained permanent status, which for some could take 3 – 5 years. Until they are granted asylum and become an asylee with permanent status, they are not able to access traditional forms of federal financial aid or participate in some educational programs. While coming with a degree from another country is a great advantage, unfortunately people with degrees are also not eligible for federal financial aid.

#### **LICENSING COSTS FOR NURSING PROFESSION**

The Commission of Graduates of Foreign Nursing Schools (CGFNS) which regulates and processes nursing transcripts and requirements for Maine, charges \$350 dollars for the evaluation report plus \$85 dollars for the required English proficiency report. Applicants will need to pay for certified translation fees (could be \$40-\$70 dollars a page) and may need to pay their institution to send official documents. Taking the English proficiency test itself costs from \$195-240 dollars. The evaluation is technically completed before the board can inform the candidate if they are eligible to take the required nursing exam. If they are eligible to test, registering for the National Council for Licensure Exam (NCLEX) test is around \$200 dollars, and the licensure application to the Board itself is around \$75.00. NCLEX preparation courses are between \$150-\$500 and are most likely necessary for foreign trained nurses to pass the NCLEX. If the applicant is otherwise successful and does not need to take further course work, the process will cost between \$1500-\$1700 dollars. That is all assuming things go according to plan, but often, there may be deadlines that needed to be extended or repeated test attempts. If a candidate needs to return to school to take required courses, additional costs could be \$400 – 900 per course and there is often no financial assistance available.

*M. Recommendation* – Tuition reimbursement provided by employers can be a tremendous resource for a foreign professional trying to move up in their career. For example, a pharmacy technician who is working toward licensure as a pharmacist, or someone who is working as a bus driver or lunch aide at a school who is working toward teacher certification will have thousands of dollars of expenses for application and test fees, college course work, etc. Unfortunately, many tuition reimbursement programs are very narrowly focused and will only support coursework or certification related to the individual's current position. If employers want to help support foreign professionals move up in their careers and work their way through their licensing requirements, employers should broaden their tuition reimbursement policies to include expenses related to the licensing and certification costs for this type of career advancement.

#### **TEACHER ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AND TESTING REQUIREMENTS**

Teacher certification candidates will need at least four Praxis tests (teacher certification tests – reading, writing, math and a test for the subject area they will be teaching), which are geared towards graduates of U.S. bachelors or master's programs. Additionally, most teacher-candidates will need to complete college-level courses for their certification requirements, and they may need to demonstrate their English proficiency before enrolling in those courses.



*N. Recommendation* – Even the initial step of an evaluation for licensing can be cost prohibitive and can keep an individual from moving forward with his/her career. Training and workforce initiatives and programs, such as Parents as Scholars, Competitive Skills Scholarship, Maine State Grant, Apprenticeship and others throughout state should keep foreign trained professionals in mind and should be mindful of their need to access funds to help them through their licensing process. In addition to the direct costs related to licensing, since these paths will be unique to each individual, there is also a need to provide support for advisors who can provide the case management and the expert guidance they will need.

*O. Recommendation* – Licensing boards should help address the non-refundable costs associated with steps in the licensing process that could be considered ‘evaluative.’ This recommendation concerns the fees associated with initial or preliminary evaluations set by the boards. Licensing boards can make sure all document requirements are clear before an individual starts an application or signs up for a service. By providing clear information about EXACTLY what documents will be required of each candidate before they initiate and pay for their online evaluation application a candidate will know how and which documents need to be produced and if they will be able to do so. For example, NASBA (National Association of State Boards of Accountancy) and CGFNS will require some documents specific to where a candidate is from, but they cannot access that specific list of documents until they sign up and pay for the service. Since they may never be able to provide those specific documents, they should know this before signing up.

## **V. ENGLISH PROFICIENCY REQUIREMENTS**

While the nursing and education boards are the only licensing bodies included in this report that include an English proficiency exam as a specified part of the licensure process, English proficiency will be the most important factor for all candidates at some point in their licensure process. Each profession involves the successful completion of a challenging exam, which is always timed. While foreign-trained professionals often have extensive knowledge in their respective fields, the format of the licensing tests and the strong emphasis on English mastery presents a challenge.

*P. Recommendation* - Educational institutions and licensing bodies could include more explicit information around the English proficiency levels that will be required, both to take specific course work, or to be able to pass the licensure exams. Regardless of where exams are in the licensure process, licensure candidates should know well in advance if they can achieve the required scores. This recommendation also concerns the educational institutions where licensure candidates will seek out courses. Workforce training, adult education and community colleges and in-person test prep centers can work to create sector-specific English courses and content to help foreign-trained licensure candidates begin their test preparations.

## **VI. WORK EXPERIENCE REQUIREMENT**

The accounting, engineering, education and law licensing processes include a work experience mandate for all candidates seeking initial licensure, or re-licensure. Engineers must work for four years under a licensed professional engineer; CPA candidates must have two years of work experience before applying for licensure and teacher candidates must complete one year of student

teaching. Foreign-trained lawyer candidates must have been licensed and practiced for three years before applying to take the Bar Exam. A teacher who may have more than 20 years of experience teaching in a foreign country will need to do a year of student-teaching before qualifying for certification. In some cases, this work experience requirement could be a significant hurdle for foreign-trained professionals, such as the residency requirement for physicians which is very competitive and almost impossible to obtain.

While the scope of this project was to produce licensing guides for several professions, NMRC's experience working with other licensed professions, confirms that the difficulty in fulfilling a work requirement is a common challenge across most professions, particularly in the health care field. An inability to fulfill these requirements keeps candidates from moving ahead with their applications and/or licensure. For example, pharmacists need to work 1,500 hours as a pharmacy intern. Applicants for physician assistant programs must have both clinical experience and undertake a job shadow with a physician assistant. Applicants to medical residencies need to have clinical experience and observerships to be considered competitive to apply for a residency. Another challenge is that fulfilling the work experience requirement could represent a significant drop in income to the licensing candidate if they must resign from other employment to fulfill the requirement, such as an Educational Technician needing to quit that position to fulfill their student teaching requirement. While most foreign-trained professionals have significant work experience in their home countries, if not done under a US licensed professional (such as a CPA or a PE) or verifiable with specific paperwork, their work cannot be counted towards this licensure requirement.

*Q. Recommendation* – This recommendation is directed to employers. Many foreign trained professionals, particularly in the healthcare sector, need to fulfill some type of work-related experience. An inability to do so will keep them from moving forward with their licensure or application process. Many health and other employers may already have such arrangements with local colleges and universities, such as pharmacy interns from the UNE pharmacy school or student teacher from USM. The type of experiences could range from short term observerships for medical residency applicants, to those individuals who are applying to the UNE PA program and need a 20-hour shadowing with a PA, or a former physician or physical therapist looking for a volunteer opportunity. Employers should develop a systematized approach for providing these types of experiences for foreign trained professionals who may need these types of work or volunteer experiences but who are not typically associated with a school program that may facilitate making arrangements for these opportunities.

*R. Recommendation* - A closer examination of the work experience required of foreign-trained accountants seeking licensure showed that eleven states in the U.S. have adopted the 'Experience Verification Service', a process that may be able to verify work not done under a licensed CPA. Maine could adopt this approach. The Board of Engineering Licensure in Maine asks foreign-trained engineers with significant work experience to submit their experience to the board, even if they are unable to have a licensed engineer sign-off on their work. These individuals are then considered on a case-by-case basis, and the board may ask for further information, demonstrated skills, or interviews. Other boards could consider this approach, using diverse methods to find alternative routes to verify work experience.

*S. Recommendation* – Many foreign trained professionals will need to be working while they are considering how to move forward with their career. As employers hire new Mainers talking to them about their options for advancement and supporting them in their efforts to move up in their careers can make a big difference in terms of the longevity of employment of that individual as well as their success in career advancement. Some examples include: CNA to registered nurse, educational technician to teacher and technician to assistant engineer or engineer.

## **VII. ADDITIONAL EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS – LIMITED ACCESS TO FINANCIAL AID**

Many licensed professions will require some additional coursework as part of the licensing process to make up for any gaps in the applicant's education. For example, someone applying for teacher certification in math may be required to take a math teaching methods course, a course on teaching exceptional students and a year of student teaching. To fulfill Maine's nursing licensure requirement an applicant may need to take a course in psychiatry or obstetrics. Although there will be costs associated with these courses, it is much more efficient for the applicant than repeating their entire education as there will be many fewer courses and will take much less time and money. This is important to take into consideration as many of these applicants will not have access to traditional financial aid to cover these costs.

Another need some foreign trained professionals have may be for courses to meet pre-requisite requirements for applying to other programs, bridge or subject area review courses to help them build up their English proficiency as well as the substantive information they need to learn for the professional licensing test they will be required to take. As we were gathering information about educational programs for the licensing guides it was our experience that it was not always clear what the requirements were for non-matriculated students. In some cases, they hadn't really thought about it, in others not all courses would be open to non-matriculated students, and at other schools they would not even consider a student who was not fully enrolled in the program. For many programs it was also not clear if there was any English proficiency requirement to take the course.

*T. Recommendation* – Educational programs, particularly those that are required for licensure for a profession, like nursing or teachers, should clearly state their policies on accepting students who do not want to fully enroll in the programs but are only interested in taking a limited number of courses to meet certification and licensure requirements and what the admission criteria are for those students. Where possible, educational programs are encouraged to consider ways they might be able to accept and support these students.

*U. Recommendation* – Many foreign professionals might benefit from some type of bridge programming that will help them reach the English proficiency level for the college level course work they may need to take. Besides just focusing on English proficiency, bridge courses could also include the substantive material and vocabulary associated with that profession that will also help prepare people for the licensing test that they will need to take.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SPECIFIC LICENSING BOARDS

### **VIII. The Maine State Board of Nursing - Nurses**

The nursing board was very helpful in clarifying complex nursing licensure requirements. While the board sets the requirements for licensure eligibility, the Commission for Graduates of Foreign Nursing School (CGFNS) conducts the consolidation and evaluations of credentials to determine if a candidate is ready to test. Nursing candidates are asked to apply to the board and for the NCLEX test before they find out if they are eligible to sit for the exam.

*V. Recommendation* - If the Board could determine a candidate's eligibility to apply for the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX), before they actually apply, a candidate who might be ineligible could potentially save the cost of the non-refundable exam registration fee.

*W. Recommendation* - The board should make it clear on their website that if official documents and test scores are submitted to their partner company (CGFNS), they do not need to be re-submitted to the board.

*X. Recommendation* - The board should include information about required English scores on their website, so applicants fully understand licensure expectations regarding English proficiency before they begin their application process.

### **IX. The Maine Department of Education – Teachers and other Educational Professionals**

The Maine Department of Education (MDOE) determines and regulates certification requirements for teachers and spends much of their time reviewing teacher applications for certification. The guide we created, and our recommendations, could help to cut down on incomplete applications and direct inquiries to the Board. Teachers are required to complete a student teaching experience, along with other requirements. In researching all the teaching programs in the state that could support foreign-trained teachers' fulfillment of their licensure requirements, we found that the student teaching course is particularly difficult to access for students who are not fully matriculated in a program. Another difficulty with meeting the student teaching requirement, which is not unique to foreign-trained teachers, is that someone working as an Educational Technician would have to quit that position in order to undertake a student teaching position. This could be financially cost prohibitive for most people.

*Y. Recommendation* - MDOE could consider changing the way that the student teaching requirement can be fulfilled, or work with teaching programs to make this course more accessible.

*Z. Recommendation* - Educational institutions, school districts and MDOE are encouraged to find ways to utilize someone's existing employment as an Educational Technician or other work within a school system, to meet the student teaching requirement. MDOE could consider alternative ways to give foreign-experienced teachers credit for their past work, or their more recent work as Educational Technicians, if applicable.

## **X. State of Maine Board of Accountancy – CPA – Certified Public Accountant**

One of the licensure requirements for a Certified Professional Accountant is the work experience component, where a licensed CPA must sign off on the work experience of the candidate. A foreign-trained applicant with considerable experience outside of the US may not be able to have a licensed CPA sign off on their past work. A closer examination of this requirement revealed that eleven states in the U.S. have adopted the 'Experience Verification Service', a process that could verify work not done under a licensed CPA.

*AA. Recommendation* - Maine could adopt the 'Experience Verification Service' that could verify work not done under a licensed CPA. Additionally, if the board had adequate time and resources, they could review and consider the past work experience of certain candidates on a case-by-case basis through interview and/or request for additional documentation, if all other licensure requirements are met.

## **XI. State Board of Licensure for Professional Engineers - Engineers**

The Licensure Board for Professional Engineers has designated staff and was able to answer our inquiries with specificity, timeliness and directness. Additionally, they shared our completed licensure guide on their website and through their newsletter. Professional Engineer applicants need to complete a work experience requirement, and if there is a foreign-trained applicant who has otherwise completed licensure requirements, the board is able to consider their past work experience done in another country, possibly calling applicants in to learn more about their experience through an interview, etc. This is a process that other boards, if resourced adequately, could adopt. The Professional Engineers Board partners with National Council of Examiners for Engineers and Surveyors (NCEES), who conducts their evaluation only with official transcripts sent directly from the institution. If a candidate's institution will not send official documents, the applicant can request that the board waive this, over-riding the NCEES requirements, an approach that other boards could consider in similar situations.

*BB. Recommendation* – The approach adopted by the Licensure Board for Professional Engineers for candidates who are unable to have transcripts sent from their educational institution could be a model for other boards to consider.

## **XII. Maine Board of Bar Examiners - Lawyers**

We spoke with the Maine Board of Bar Examiners to clarify what would make a foreign trained lawyer eligible to sit for the Bar Exam. The board uses an initial step: "Predetermination of Equivalence of Foreign Education", which helps foreign trained lawyers understand if they have the educational background to be eligible to take the exam. This is a helpful preliminary step that other boards could adopt to help candidates understand, early on, what they will need to be able to proceed to the next step. To decrease confusion between lawyers applying for the Maine Bar from other states and those coming from other countries, we would recommend that there is a specific application for those applying by motion from other countries. Additionally, when the results of the education evaluation are shared with the applicant, it is important to communicate about the best, most efficacious educational path to take. More specifically, if an applicant only needs a few courses, the board can

communicate to the applicant about their agreement with the University of Maine School of Law. This key communication could help an applicant fulfill educational requirements without needing to fully matriculate into a long and expensive law degree program.

*CC. Recommendation* – The Board of Bar Examiners should clarify which application procedures apply to applicants from out of state versus those from another country.

*DD. Recommendation* – Like the Board of Bar Examiners, if educational requirements are not already clearly stated, other boards should consider the possibility of how they might be able to provide a predetermination of whether or not a candidate's education meets the licensing requirements. This will allow the candidate to know at the beginning of the process if they qualify to move forward with the rest of the licensing process.

### **XIII. State of Maine Board of Licensure in Medicine - Physicians**

A link to the requirements for medical licensure in Maine is prominently provided at the top of the board's website. The link goes to a straight forward document that has a section devoted to the licensure requirements for international medical graduates. This document also provides information about how to reach the board by phone with questions. Unfortunately, the simplicity of this document does not convey the real challenges faced by foreign physicians who are interested in obtaining a medical license in Maine. To become licensed as a physician in the US, everyone is required to complete a residency. For Maine, a residency must be at least 36 months long. Unlike most other licensed professions where there is nothing that controls the actual number of practicing professionals, the number of residency spots available in the US is limited. This in turn limits the number of physicians who are able to practice in the US, making it almost impossible for foreign trained physicians to become licensed in the US. Foreign trained physicians are competing with recent US medical school graduates for these residency spots. There are many factors that work against them some of which they have no control over, such as age and years out of medical school, which will keep them from being competitive for the residency spots. The overall result of this is that those foreign trained physicians who have the most experience and training do not have a path to practicing as a doctor in the US. Additionally, foreign trained physicians bring with them a very wide scope of practice and training that encompasses some aspect of most other health professions. Unfortunately licensing or certification requirements for these other health professions typically follow a very proscribed path and do not recognize the training or experience for someone, like a foreign trained physician, who has gained that knowledge and experience through an alternative path.

*EE. Recommendation* - The Licensure Board in Medicine should make information available to foreign medical graduates about the complexity and competitiveness of the licensure process so that each individual can make an informed assessment of their chances of successfully being licensed as a physician in the US.

*FF. Recommendation* – The Licensure Board in Medicine should look at other models and approaches that would allow foreign trained physicians to work in some capacity. One example would be to create a new category of health professional, such as was done in Missouri, where they created an

“assistant physician” for those individuals who passed the USMLE exams but were unable to secure a residency.

*HH. Recommendation* – Foreign trained physicians bring with them a tremendous amount of experience in a wide scope of practice that could be applied to other health professions that are more narrowly defined in the scope of their work. Health professional licensure boards, health employers and health professional education programs should consider alternative ways to give recognition for and assess this experience and training and develop educational, training and career paths that build on this experience and to the extent possible, determine ways to address the unique qualifications that foreign trained physicians bring with them to these other health professions.

## LINKS TO NMRC PROFESSIONAL LICENSING GUIDES

[NMRC Teaching Certification Guide Maine](#)

[NMRC Physician Licensure Guide Maine](#)

[NMRC Maine Nursing Licensure Guide](#)

[NMRC Engineering Licensure Guide Maine](#)

[NMRC Lawyer Licensure Guide Maine](#)

[NMRC Certified Public Accounting Licensure Guide](#)

## RESOURCES

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Welcome Back Initiative - <https://www.wbcenters.org/>

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New Mainers Resource Center  
*Maine's Welcome Back Center*  
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