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Frustrating the use of foreign credentials

From Friday's Globe and Mail

Immigrants should be encouraged to deploy their skills, but the accounting groups are hobbling them by forbidding them their postnominal initials

Many foreign-trained accountants who move to Ontario continue to proudly display their educational credentials on business cards and other materials. And fairly so - they are not making false claims to training or certification they have not earned. While many Canadians may be unfamiliar with the foreign designations such as CIMA (from the British-based Chartered Institute of Management Accountants), it's hard to imagine that anyone displaying these credentials could be harming the public or, worse, committing a crime.

Ontario's Liberal government doesn't see it this way. Legislation winding its way through the province's legislature would make it an offence - punishable by a \$10,000 fine - for people to display postnominal initials if they include any portion of the letters CA (chartered accountant), CMA (certified management accountant) or CGA (certified general accountant) - the three major accounting designations available in Canada. The rules mean, for example, that members of CIMA or of the British-based Association of Chartered Certified Accountants would no longer be allowed to put their credentials on letterhead, business cards or possibly even job applications.

The province, supported by the three largest accounting bodies, has defended the provision on the grounds it is meant to protect the public from confusion or from outright fraud. Foreign-trained accountants say there is no evidence of a major problem that needs such a fix, and argue the provision goes far beyond those goals, to significantly limit their ability to display legitimate credentials.

While the legislation will not stop foreign-trained accountants from working in the province, it will add another hurdle to the challenges already facing immigrants as they try to get a toehold in their professions. And it comes at a time when governments claim they are working to help foreign professionals transfer their accreditations more easily once they arrive in this country.

Last week, Michael Bach, national director of diversity at the accounting firm KPMG, told a Queen's Park committee that 300 people working at KPMG in Ontario have certifications from other accounting bodies, and those credentials are a key business advantage when serving clients with foreign operations or those who want expertise with international accounting standards being adopted by Canada. But their "invaluable" experience "will be severely diminished" if KPMG cannot tell clients about their training, he said.

Foreign-trained accountants have offered a sensible compromise, saying they could put a bracket after their designation to identify the country it comes from. The proposal has been rejected in a demonstration of inexplicable intransigence. The unwillingness to find reasonable compromise makes it hard not to conclude the real intention of the rule is to close doors for highly skilled immigrants.

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