



**REDUCING BRAIN WASTE:  
CREATING CAREER PATHWAYS FOR FOREIGN-  
EDUCATED IMMIGRANTS IN WASHINGTON STATE**



# CREDITS

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## About OneAmerica

OneAmerica is the largest immigrant advocacy organization in Washington State. Founded in 2001, as Hate Free Zone in response to the backlash facing immigrants and refugees following the 9/11 attacks, OneAmerica's mission is to advance the fundamental principles of democracy and justice through building power in immigrant communities. In collaboration with key allies, OneAmerica works to improve policies, funding, and services for immigrants and refugees in the areas of human rights, economic and environmental justice, education, and immigrant integration. Through community organizing, policy advocacy, and innovative communications campaigns we ensure that immigrant communities are civically engaged and at the center of crafting effective policy solutions that impact their lives in the local, state and federal level.

## About the Authors

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# FOREWORD

By Han Nachtrieb

Our world-class economy in the United States is a result of centuries of immigrant contributions and their integration into our communities and workforce. Recent years have brought a new wave of immigrants and refugees, and many states across the country like Washington are seeing a significant increase in foreign-educated adults making a life for themselves and their families as new Americans. These individuals bring diverse and impressive educational backgrounds and skills: engineers, scientists, doctors, teachers, and social workers, to name a few, come with skills and expertise capable of enriching the American economy. Yet many find themselves underutilizing their advanced degrees and instead working in low-wage jobs to make ends meet.

Throughout my career in human resources, I have come to know a number of immigrants who come to Washington with ambitions and dreams to continue their careers – a driving force which compels me to serve on the board of OneAmerica. I would like to share the story of one of our doctoral candidates studying at the Fred Hutchinson Research Institute. In 2015, he received national recognition for his research on gene editing in cells to establish protection from HIV infection. This research is truly amazing and a sign that he will likely change scientific knowledge in this field someday.



*Han Nachtrieb*

*Vice President of Human Resources at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center; member of the OneAmerica Board of Directors.*

He is an immigrant, a scientist-of-color, and also comes from a low-income background. Despite being a brilliant scientist with a bright future ahead of him, this student has spoken about experiences of being dismissed and marginalized because of where he comes from. Yet his passion for his work and the opportunities he has had to thrive and advance drives him to overcome barriers. This individual is unique, yet in my time I have seen a thousand others like him.

Our current workforce and employment systems erect barriers, whether intentional or accidental, that result in an unfortunate

outcome: incredible minds and skills of new Americans are prevented from contributing to our economy in a more meaningful way and from reaching their full potential. This issue, foreign-educated immigrants who are experiencing underemployment and unable to utilize their skills and education is called “brain waste.” To have more stories like our immigrant professional discussed above – a brilliant mind advancing our knowledge and economy – we must begin conversations and build systems that welcome the expertise and skills of immigrants. As Americans, our strength and future as a nation depends on our ability to embrace our immigrants to the fullest extent.

We can and must do better to bring practical solutions through policy shifts and adapting “how we do business” to help immigrants with skills, education, and expertise move beyond survival jobs and back into careers where they are able to optimize their talents and professional assets. Policymakers, industry leaders, and community-based organizations have the opportunity to come together to create smart immigrant integration strategies that tap into a growing population - foreign-educated immigrants – and connect it to where it is most needed in our economy.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last 25 years, the number of foreign-educated immigrant professionals with degrees in Washington State has increased greatly. Building the infrastructure to integrate these individuals into the workforce will help increase their productivity, household earnings, and tax contributions to benefit all Washington residents. Dismantling the numerous barriers facing underemployed educated immigrants and refugees seeking re-entry into professional careers will also address growing workforce shortages, particularly in the healthcare and education sectors examined in this report. Additionally, these sectors gain a labor pool with strong multicultural and linguistic skills, a capacity important to both reducing health disparities and improving student educational outcomes in an increasingly diverse state.

Tens of thousands of foreign-educated immigrants and refugees with degrees in Washington are either unemployed or underemployed. With careers as engineers, doctors, nurses, scientists, accountants, and teachers in their home countries, they find themselves working as nannies, cashiers, security guards, and cab drivers in the U.S. This enormous underutilization of human resources has been dubbed “brain waste” and is a problem that has attracted the attention of policy makers and workforce development practitioners throughout the United States and across the globe.

To shed light on the opportunities created by the presence of immigrant professionals in our state, this report will:

- Provide a description of this immigrant population in Washington State;
- Explain the scope and significance of the “brain waste” problem;

- Describe the barriers that keep foreign-educated immigrants from re-entering their professions;
- Show how the integration of foreign-educated immigrants can bolster the state’s economy; and
- Examine how two sectors in particular – nursing and teaching – could benefit from the more effective utilization of this immigrant talent pool.

The barriers facing foreign-educated immigrants are many: a lack of information and guidance around career re-entry requirements; limited proficiency in English, especially in vocationally-specific language and usage; recertification hurdles and costs; the tendency of some employers to discount foreign training and experience; and limited professional and social networks in the U.S.

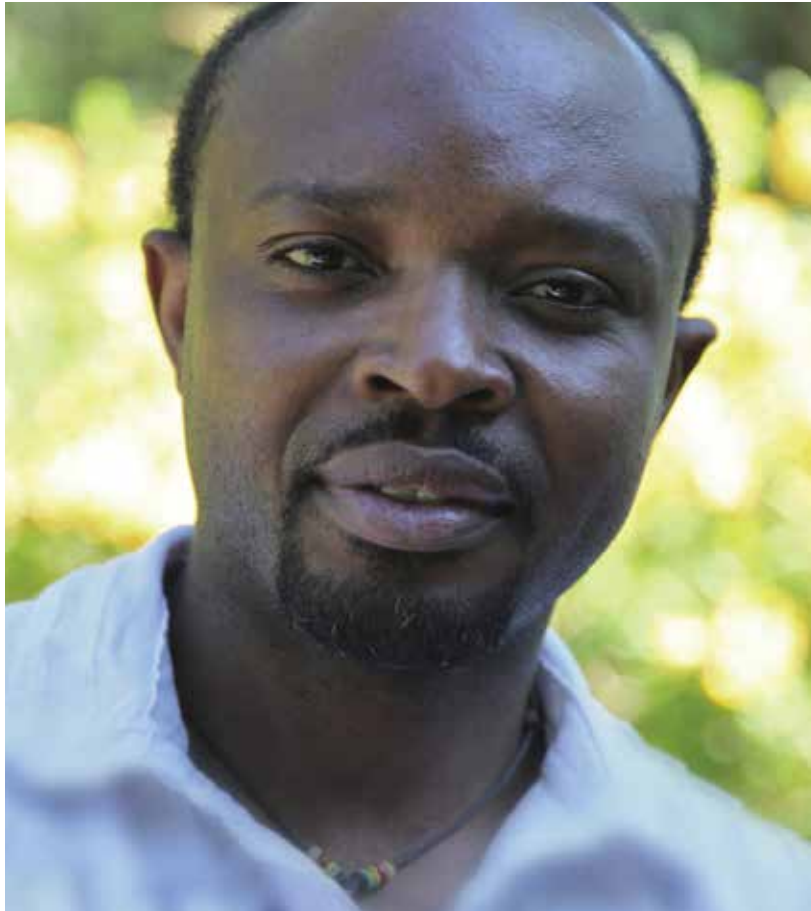
We propose a series of steps that can be taken by policymakers and workforce development practitioners to overcome these barriers, and identify twelve key levers of systemic change: data collection and measurement; case management capacity; online resources; bridge programs; alternative routes and pipelines to recertification and employment; licensing reform; professional connector programs; standard-setting for credential evaluation; financial assistance programs; employer engagement;

**Washington’s immigrant and refugee professionals form a rich talent pool with the potential to mitigate worker shortages, improve problem-solving through the addition of diverse perspectives, and much needed linguistic abilities and cultural competencies to broaden the skill base of Washington’s workforce.**

## WASHINGTON STATE'S COLLEGE-EDUCATED WORKFORCE

	U.S.-BORN	FOREIGN-BORN	
		Foreign educated	U.S. educated immigrant
<b>College educated</b>	<b>898,600</b>	<b>84,600</b>	<b>82,300</b>
<b>High-skill employment</b>	59%	58%	63%
<b>Middle-skill employment</b>	23%	19%	21%
<b>Low-skill employment</b>	13%	18%	12%
<b>Unemployed</b>	5%	5%	5%
<b>Affected by brain waste</b>	18%	23%	16%

Source: Migration Policy Institute, State Immigration Profiles, 2013



multi-sector collaborations; and training. We describe each of these steps and give examples of promising practices in each area.

Achieving systemic change to eradicate brain waste will require commitment, planning, and resources. Cross-cutting issues like this one often fall between the cracks of state and local agencies. Comprehensive change will require an intentional effort to coordinate policy and programming across public and private sectors, collect reliable data, build capacity on multiple levels, increase support and utilize resources efficiently, and shift culture for better collaboration and engagement practices. To implement these changes in an efficient manner – drawing on the resources and expertise of community-based organizations and different agencies and departments of state government – we recommend the establishment of a state Office of New Americans with broad responsibility for the economic, social, and civic integration of immigrants. This new office should create a special task force dedicated to maximizing the economic potential of foreign-educated immigrants.

Creating career pathways for foreign-educated immigrants in Washington State is an important step for successful immigrant integration. Through building awareness and responsiveness to the needs of foreign-educated immigrants, implementation of the strategies and approaches outlined in this report, and investments dedicated to this underserved population, many talented individuals will make major contributions to their respective professions and serve as catalysts for growing the larger state economy.

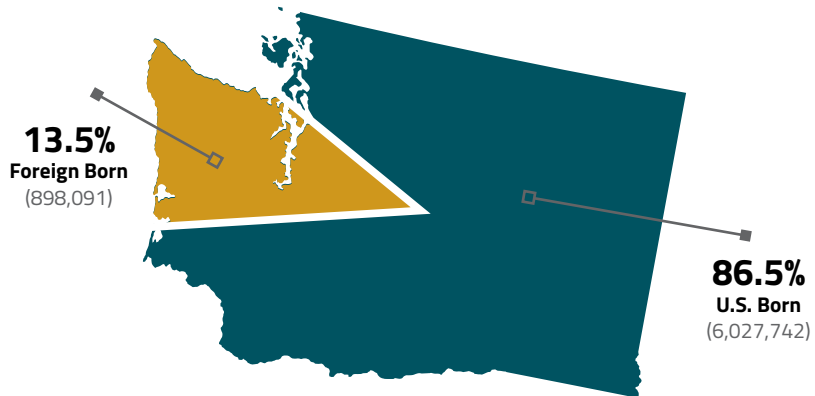
# INTRODUCTION

**Engineers, doctors, nurses, scientists, accountants, and teachers in their home countries, foreign-educated immigrants now find themselves working as nannies, cashiers, security guards, and cab drivers in the U.S., if they find work at all.**

International migration is a powerful force in Washington State's economy. It fuels entrepreneurship, supplies needed labor and skills, stimulates innovation, and connects the state to the rest of the world. The percentage of foreign-born to total population has grown from 6.6 percent in 1990 to 13.5 percent today. Immigrants and refugees represent 15 percent of business owners in the state,<sup>1</sup> 17 percent of the workforce, and contribute approximately \$1.5 billion annually in tax revenue to the state's economy.<sup>2</sup> The state is currently home to nearly one million immigrants and refugees who make up a multi-lingual, multi-cultural population rich in talent, energy, and creativity.

Important changes have occurred over recent years in the composition of the immigrant flow to the United States. In 1980, there were twice as many low-skilled immigrants (i.e., those without high school diplomas)

## WASHINGTON STATE POPULATION



**Total Population in 2013: 6,971,406**

*Source: 2013 U.S. American Community Survey*

as high-skilled (i.e., those with college degrees or higher).<sup>\*</sup> However, in 2010, the number of high-skilled immigrants exceeded the number of low-skilled immigrants for the first time. This national trend is even more pronounced in Washington State, where 31.7 percent of the adult immigrant population is high-skilled, compared to 29.6 percent of the national immigrant population. Skill ratios are even more skewed in the greater Seattle metropolitan area, where there are almost twice as many high-skilled immigrants than low.<sup>3</sup>

Local service agencies working with immigrant and refugee populations in the Seattle/King County area, such as the Puget Sound Welcome Back Center and Jewish Family Services, report more clients coming to them with college degrees and professional experience, yet the many processes one must navigate for career re-entry are often unclear and lack any guidance or support, effectively becoming barriers that prevent these individuals from entering the professional workforce. While client cases are unique they weave a common narrative of a workforce system that lacks the infrastructure and resources to utilize their skills.

The growing number of foreign-educated immigrants as an untapped talent pool presents an opportunity that is both practical and innovative for growing the Washington State economy. Though Washington was second in the nation for employment growth in 2012-2013,<sup>4</sup> state agencies and employer workforce surveys report a growing skills gap where finding qualified individuals to fill tens of thousands of jobs is a significant human resource challenge.<sup>5</sup>

\* Although we use the terms "high-skilled" and "low-skilled" in this report, they are borrowed from the literature and refer only to levels of education. We do not mean to imply that "low-skilled" immigrants are lacking in skills. We use the terms 'high-skilled' and 'foreign-educated' interchangeably to refer to immigrants who hold advanced degrees (bachelor's degree or higher) from abroad. Holders of H-1B visas and foreign-educated immigrants who are recruited from overseas by employers to fill specific positions typically do not experience the barriers associated with brain waste/underemployment. As a result, this population will not be covered in this report.

By 2018, it is estimated that:

- 67 percent of all jobs in Washington will require post-secondary education, placing the state 6th in the nation in this category;<sup>6</sup>
- Nearly 300,000 jobs in healthcare and education will also require some post-secondary education;<sup>7</sup>
- Nearly 1 million jobs will become available due to the creation of new positions, as well as vacancies from retirement.<sup>8</sup>

Healthcare, educational services, and professional, scientific, and technical services will have the highest rates of projected growth by 2021.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, degree production at Washington's higher education institutions cannot adequately keep pace with the human resource needs of local industry.<sup>10</sup>

The confluence of growing demand for professionalized labor with an increasing supply of foreign-educated, high-skilled immigrants is a promising development for Washington's economy. Making the most of this human resource, however, requires attention to numerous barriers and challenges.

For reasons that we will discuss in this report, many foreign-educated immigrants and refugees with professional degrees are either unemployed or underemployed. This trend of underemployed foreign-educated immigrants unable to utilize their skills and expertise is termed 'brain waste.'

Fortunately, this form of brain waste can be addressed with effort and investment: policy-makers and practitioners around the country concerned about the underutilization of immigrant talent are beginning to identify and address the systemic causes of this problem.

The stakes are high for both immigrants and the larger society. Creating pathways for foreign-educated immigrants into the professions in which they are educated and trained not only bolsters the economy but also strengthens families and communities. Through the integration of foreign-educated immigrants into the economy, immigrants earn better family-sustaining wages, children thrive in school because parents can dedicate more time to their development, and local communities attain greater levels of stability. Moreover, immigrants bring their cultural and linguistic skills into the workforce, improving service capacity and quality in key industries. This is especially true in the healthcare and education fields.

Creating a diverse workforce that reflects the skills, talents, and linguistic and cultural strengths of all of Washington's residents also helps to ensure the health and well-being of current and future generations. Disparities in health outcomes and gaps in educational outcomes reflect a system that fails to represent the needs of Washington's demographics. Working to strengthen diversity in sectors such as healthcare and education will lead to healthier communities and better educated citizens.

Helping internationally educated professionals return to their chosen fields enables them to re-enter to work they love and, at the same time, enriches our workplaces with multi-cultural and linguistic expertise. These newcomers bring, as they always have, a special dimension to American life.

**Linda Faaren,**  
*Puget Sound Welcome  
Back Center, Director*

To illuminate the opportunities created by foreign-educated immigrants residing in our state, this report will:

- Provide a description of the foreign-educated immigrant population in Washington State;
- Explain the scope and significance of the "brain waste" problem;
- Describe the barriers that keep foreign-educated immigrants from re-entering their professions;
- Show how the economic integration of foreign-educated immigrants can bolster the state's economy; and
- Examine how two industries in particular, nursing and teaching (both sectors with worker and diversity shortages), would benefit from more effective utilization of the foreign-educated immigrant talent pool.

We will conclude with a series of policy recommendations for policy makers, educators, funders, and service providers interested in affecting change on this issue.





# FOREIGN-EDUCATED IMMIGRANTS: A Valuable but Underutilized Resource for Washington State

The majority of Washington’s foreign-born residents are working age adults, often arriving with their families to build new lives in America. Their college completion rate of 31.7 percent is comparable to that of the native-born population, yet many college-educated immigrants earn less and hold lower-skilled jobs than their U.S. peers. Immigrants and refugees comprise 16 percent of the college-educated adults over the age of 25, and more than half – 84,600 adults – earned their degrees at foreign universities.<sup>12</sup>

Although most foreign-educated immigrants are work-authorized, most do not have employers as sponsors and as a result, many begin their economic integration into the U.S. without the professional networks, cultural knowledge, and language proficiency essential to securing a living wage job. Many arrive in Washington with years of professional experience in high-skilled careers, but find themselves facing numerous barriers, including anti-immigrant bias and inflexibility in industry licensing. Twenty-three percent of Washington’s foreign-educated immigrants are unemployed or underemployed in low wage jobs, unable to utilize their education and years of work experience. A survey of immigrant professionals in six U.S. cities, including Seattle found that Seattle’s immigrants had the lowest rates of “professional success,” defined as the ability to earn at least \$50,000 and make at least “some use” of their higher education degree on the job.<sup>13</sup>

The problem of brain waste is more serious for immigrants of color. Nationally, the rates of underemployment are much higher for foreign-educated black and Latino immigrants. A study commissioned by the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education of the U.S. Department of Education found an underemployment rate of 36 percent for all immigrants with foreign degrees, rising to 46 percent for those from Latin America and 47 percent for those from Africa.<sup>14</sup>

Evidence also points to higher rates of underemployment among foreign-educated immigrant women professionals, who gravitate towards helping professions that tend to be undervalued in western countries.<sup>15</sup> As we grapple with the problem of brain waste, it is important to remember its disproportionate racial and gender impacts.

## THE IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION ON WASHINGTON STATE

Immigrants and refugees have been significant drivers of Washington’s growth over the last few decades. As noted in OneAmerica’s 2009 report, *Building Washington’s Future: Immigrant Workers’ Contributions to Our State’s Economy*, immigrants are “indispensable” and “essential” workers who “keep our communities functioning and our economies stable as the American workforce grows older.”

Washington gained a congressional seat as a result of population increases from 2000 to 2010, spurred in large part by the arrival of new Americans. The state’s total population grew by 14.1 percent during the decade, but the immigrant population grew by 44.2 percent, accounting for 32.1 percent of the increase.

Growth in immigration is most visible in Washington’s schools. Students of color make up 43 percent of Washington’s public school enrollment, and 219 different languages are spoken. By 2025, it is estimated that 1 in 4 students will be English Language Learners (ELL).<sup>16</sup> Many schools and districts are implementing dual language programs as a means to better educate and support this changing demographic which also has created an increased demand for bilingual teachers and education professionals.

**EDUCATION ATTAINMENT OF WASHINGTON STATE ADULTS,  
AGE 25 OR OLDER**

	U.S. Born	Foreign Born
<b>Population</b>	<b>3,909,812</b>	<b>796,292</b>
<b>Bachelor's degree</b>	21.4%	18.5%
<b>Graduate or Professional Degree</b>	11.5%	13.2%

*Source: Migration Policy Institute, State Immigration Profiles, 2013*

The problem of immigrant skill underutilization is attracting attention internationally. According to a recent Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development report covering 34 countries, foreign-educated immigrants, if employed, are 47 percent more likely than the native-born to be in jobs for which they are overqualified.<sup>17</sup>

The current and potential value of foreign-educated, high-skilled immigrants to the state economy cannot be underestimated. Because their education costs were paid for outside the United States, their participation in the labor market represents a net gain to the economy. Moreover, given the right combination of policies and supports, their path to professional employment can be comparatively short, thus quickly transforming potential into performance. Washington's Employment Security Department points out that utilizing transferable skills is a much more productive strategy than trying to catch up with a skills shortage,<sup>18</sup> making the integration of educated, highly skilled immigrants and refugees into professional sectors with worker shortages a practical workforce development strategy.

It is important to point out that foreign-trained and educated immigrants are already making vital contributions to the economy. Two-thirds of the 820,000 foreign-born healthcare professionals in the United States received their professional education outside the country.<sup>19</sup> Foreign-born nurses make up 18 percent of the nation's nursing profession, and 63 percent of them have foreign degrees.<sup>20</sup> Those who succeed in re-entering their professions do so by dint of luck, hard work, and persistence.

Reducing barriers would enable many more to contribute their skills to the economy. Washington's Employment Security Department estimates that the difference in annual earnings between holding an Associate's degree and Bachelor's degree is an average annual dollar gain of \$32,265,<sup>21</sup> yet foreign-educated immigrants are not experiencing this earnings growth.

To realize this gain, policymakers and practitioners must address the unique needs of this population. With their education, skills, and experiences, Washington's immigrant and refugee professionals form a rich talent pool with the potential to mitigate worker shortages, improve problem-solving through the addition of diverse perspectives, and introduce much needed linguistic abilities and cultural competencies to broaden the skill base of Washington's workforce.

**Because immigrant professional's education costs were paid for outside the United States, their participation in the labor market represents a net gain to the economy. Given the right combination of policies and supports, their path to professional employment can be comparatively short, thus quickly transforming potential into performance.**

## WELCOME BACK INITIATIVE: SUPPORTING HIGH-SKILLED WORKERS

Launched in 2001, the Welcome Back Initiative began by recognizing that foreign-trained immigrant health professionals in San Francisco could not secure employment in their chosen fields without credentials mandated by state law. The first Welcome Back Center created a service model to help foreign-trained health professionals bring their skills, knowledge, and experience into their new communities by supporting clients in obtaining the necessary licenses in the U.S. The model proved to be successful and soon was expanding to multiple locations nationally.

Washington State has two centers as part of this national initiative: the Puget Sound Welcome Back Center at Highline College, and the Northwest Washington Welcome Back Center at Edmonds Community College. Both are located in Western Washington and partner with immigrant and refugee medical professionals seeking support in career re-entry. At each campus, Welcome Back Centers serve nurses, pharmacists, speech therapists, occupational therapists, technicians, psychologists, social workers, health educators, dentists, and other medical professionals, providing a wide range of assistance to clients for career re-entry.

Both centers are vital resources for the immigrant and refugee communities they serve through a common objective of assisting professionals re-joining the healthcare workforce. To guide them through the complex system of medical professional licensing, local Welcome Back centers provide high-level case management to clients, including individual assessment and certification and career planning assistance. Welcome Back Center clients also have access to important resources such as English as a second language (ESL) classes, orientations to the licensure process, professional development workshops, networking opportunities, and referrals to job and educational opportunities.

Though the Puget Sound Welcome Back Center does not advertise their services, in November 2014, the center had 40 new clients walk through their doors seeking support to re-enter the healthcare workforce. The Puget Sound Welcome Back Center has broadened their services from a focus just on healthcare to serve all immigrants with a foreign degree. This includes expanding to fields such as education, engineering, and science and technology.

### National Approaches for Skilled Immigrant Workforce Integration

#### **MASSACHUSETTS IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE ADVOCACY COALITION (MIRA):**

Strategies for skilled immigrant workforce integration is a core part of MIRA's Integration Institute. Back to the Office is an online web resource for skilled immigrants navigating career re-entry, provides crucial research and data on the labor market for immigrants residing in Massachusetts, and policy advocacy through coordinating a statewide taskforce on immigrant healthcare professionals. The Task Force released a report with program and policy recommendations in December 2014 to better integrate immigrant healthcare professionals into the local workforce.

**UPWARDLY GLOBAL:** Upwardly Global works in a number of cities like New York, Chicago, and San Francisco to help skilled immigrants - physicians, engineers, information technology (IT) professionals, and scientists - integrate into the professional workforce in the U.S. In addition to their physical locations, Upwardly Global also provides services virtually to connect skilled immigrants with resources and supports. Their programming focuses on supporting job search/placement and networking with employers to raise awareness of assets of the high-skilled immigrant population as well as the barriers experienced around career re-entry.

#### **MICHIGAN'S GLOBAL ENGINEERS IN RESIDENCE (GEIR) PROGRAM:**

Marking the first partnership between Upwardly Global and the state of Michigan, this pilot program combines case management and support for internationally-trained engineers to re-enter their careers through state subsidized full-time internships with employers needing additional engineering capacity. GEIR has been successful in connecting employers with the talent they need while foreign-trained engineers are able to gain U.S. work experience.

# THE BARRIERS TO PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT

Washington State's economy thrives on innovation fed by talent attracted to the Pacific Northwest. But for foreign-educated immigrant professionals, finding a way to bring one's talents and skills into the workforce means dealing with a series of barriers, often at the same time as immigrants are experiencing the pressures and challenges of adjusting to a new society. The issue of brain waste is complex, and addressing it will require engagement, collaboration, and partnership between multiple stakeholders in industry, adult education institutions, local and state government, non-profit organizations, and immigrant communities. In this section, we describe the various barriers that block the path to career re-entry for high skilled immigrants.

## Lack of Information and Guidance

Immigrant professionals are often unfamiliar with the process of acquiring U.S. certification and/or advancing in the U.S. job market. Essential skills for success in the U.S. work environment, like interviewing, writing cover letters and resumes, and networking, need to be taught and practiced. For these reasons, efforts to communicate with foreign-educated immigrants, either through specialized casework, online portals and publications, or other means are important strategies in a comprehensive approach to expedited career re-entry.

Three groups that are blazing a trail in this regard are the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, the Michigan Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs, and Upwardly Global all of which have produced a series of professional licensing guides for foreign-educated immigrants. The information gap also exists among personnel at one-stop job centers, community-based organizations, and educational institutions, who may interact with this population but not know how to respond to their needs. Staff training workshops, such as those offered by the Global Talent Bridge Program of World Education Services, are also a means to address this problem.

## The Challenge of Language

English language learning opportunities exist in many communities for immigrants, yet foreign-educated immigrants have unique learning needs compared to traditional English as a second language (ESL) students. Successful career re-entry may require vocational-specific ESL to help high-skilled immigrants gain vocabulary in a new language to effectively communicate in the workplace. However, a shortage of publicly funded advanced ESL classes and the lack of vocational-specific ESL, sometimes called VESL, has left minimal opportunities for foreign-educated immigrants to enroll in such contextualized, advanced ESL classes. Traditional providers of ESL and adult education often lack the capacity, resources, and knowledge to support the level of English language acquisition required for foreign-educated immigrants to re-enter their careers.

A recent survey by IMPRINT of almost 10,000 foreign-educated immigrants across six U.S. cities – Seattle, Boston, Miami, San Jose, Detroit, and Philadelphia – found that strong English skills “were correlated with virtually every possible measure of immigrant economic success.”<sup>22</sup> One institution that has taken steps to address this problem is Oregon's Portland Community College, which

has created a 2 to 3-term credit career pathway for ESL students who are foreign-trained accountants.<sup>23</sup>

## Certification Challenges

Often the first step for career re-entry into regulated professions is degree evaluation, which can be a lengthy, costly, and confusing process, yet an obligatory first step for those seeking re-certification. An applicant must select from a list of approved evaluators and determine which would be the most appropriate, arrange for original documents to be sent, have documents translated by a certified translator, pay all necessary fees, and then wait for a response.

Without guidance from state regulatory authorities, selecting a credible or appropriate credential evaluator can create uncertainty and unease. Another challenge facing immigrants and refugees from war-torn or politically unstable countries is obtaining original transcripts and other documents for evaluation, in the first place. Delays in obtaining documents are not uncommon even from educational institutions in stable countries, where work values and timelines may differ from those in the U.S. Another finding of IMPRINT's research found that immigrant professionals in Seattle were “significantly less likely” to have applied for credential evaluation (50 percent) compared to respondents in

other cities (61 percent)<sup>24</sup> possibly pointing to the number of complications and barriers in navigating this system.

### Cost Issues

Meeting requirements for entry into regulated professions involves time and financial investment. For foreign-trained immigrants, the costs are greater and the climb much steeper than for U.S.-born candidates. The additional steps may take months to complete and entail spending hundreds or even thousands of dollars. With limited resources, this burden can be substantial. For many immigrants and refugees, providing for their families is the first priority – a stark reality that pushes many foreign-educated immigrants into low-wage survival jobs and delays the credential evaluation process.

For those who need supplemental coursework for professional certification, rules for federal financial aid (the FAFSA) deem applicants with college degrees ineligible for aid, regardless of the fact that their degrees were obtained abroad.<sup>25</sup> Many immigrants and refugees feel compelled to underreport their education levels in order to qualify for financial aid. This reluctance to reveal their true educational history interferes with the collection of accurate demographic data and leads to an underreporting of individuals affected by brain waste.

### Gaps in Education

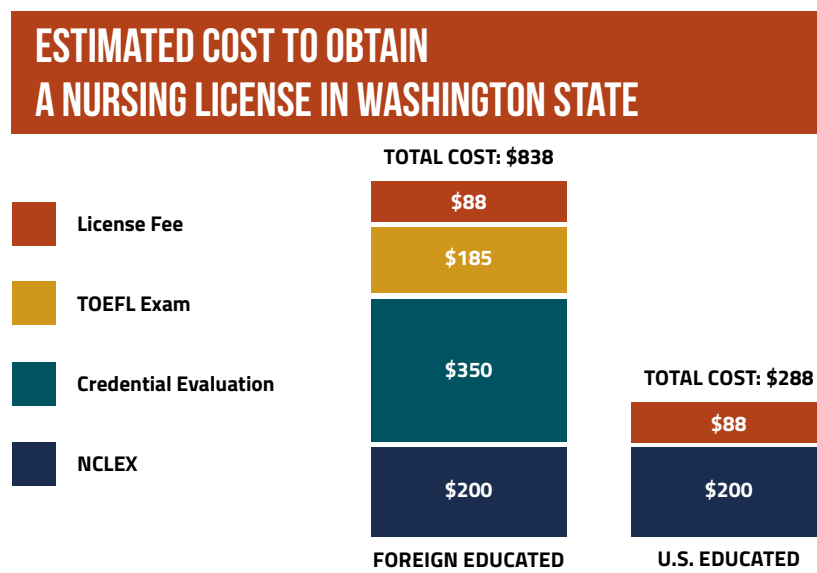
The degree evaluation process sometimes has an unintentional, time-consuming, and costly outcome for applicants. Nursing, for example, requires the mastery of a specific body of knowledge codified in Washington State law. Because of the differences in how nursing curricula are structured and designed, the review process may identify gaps in education requiring supplemental coursework. Enrolling in the missing coursework, however, may pose a challenge. Many nursing programs are designed to be comprehensive and sequential in building the knowledge and skills prescribed by law, and run on cohort models. When missing coursework is identified, a foreign-educated nurse must find a way to fulfill the course requirement even though many institutions are reluctant to allow single nursing courses to be taken. As mentioned above, such courses must also be



paid out-of-pocket much of the time, as FAFSA deems degree holders ineligible for financial aid. Many foreign-trained nurses find re-booting their entire degrees to be the only viable option, even if it means delaying career re-entry by years.

### Lack of Professional Networks

Another major challenge facing foreign-educated immigrants is their limited access to U.S. professional networks – a form of social capital critical to career success. U.S.-born or educated professionals rely on networks for career development strategies, job tips, and references. The IMPRINT study found that “there was a remarkably powerful correlation between the size of an immigrant’s self-reported social network and his or her likelihood of achieving success.”<sup>26</sup> Programs serving immigrant professionals, such as the Professional Connector Program of the St. Louis Mosaic Project,<sup>27</sup> and Tatweer,<sup>28</sup> a pilot program of Jewish Family Services in King County, seek to connect immigrants to peers in their respective professions, thereby enabling immigrants to overcome a major obstacle in accessing the job market.



## Employer Bias

While employers may express a desire to diversify their workforce, they may also harbor a bias against foreign degree holders. Due to the employers' lack of familiarity with foreign degrees and foreign educational systems, employers may dismiss or undervalue foreign work experience. Immigrants often find themselves in the quandary

of being rejected for lack of American work experience but unable to find a job to gain that experience. For some employers, insistence on American work experience masks an underlying racial bias against applicants of color.<sup>29</sup> Enlisting employers and employer organizations as allies is one way to address this problem. As an example, recognizing that the

skills of immigrant professionals could be more effectively harnessed to spur growth and development, the Canadian government has established the Federal Internship for Newcomers (FIN) program to permit immigrants to gain Canadian work experience and acquire a mentor in the process.<sup>30</sup> Canadian authorities have also established an employer-focused public education campaign promoting the advantages of hiring foreign-educated immigrants.<sup>31</sup>

The relevance and significance of each of these barriers will vary depending on the profession and profile of each immigrant. However, most of them must be addressed to develop systemic solutions to the problem of skill underutilization. By seeing the problem in a holistic fashion and acting accordingly, Washington State will be better able to build a career re-entry support system that reduces worker shortages in key industries and increases the capacity of Washington State organizations to connect with diverse communities and the broader global networks they represent.

To better understand the process of career re-entry, we examine two sectors that are regulated by Washington State: nursing and teaching. These professions – and the people they serve – stand to gain greatly from the expertise, experience, and language skills of foreign-educated immigrants. Our examination of these professions will hopefully offer insights into the barriers facing immigrants from other professional backgrounds.

## CHERYL: A CASE MANAGER'S PERSPECTIVE

### Puget Sound Welcome Back Center at Highline College

As a case manager with the Welcome Back Center at Highline College in South King County, I work on a small team that assists foreign-educated immigrants with career re-entry, with most of our clients intending to re-enter the healthcare field. As the education case manager, I'm usually the first person clients see when they walk through our doors or the person who responds to their calls and emails about becoming a nurse again. Clients are quite diverse, coming from many different countries. Some are already fluent in English, and they are often supporting families both in the U.S. and in their home countries. Many are working low-wage survival jobs that are well below their skill level. This situation results in frustration and a loss of dignity which is heartbreaking to see in our clients.

Words can't fully capture my clients' dedication and commitment as professionals who love the careers they had prior to their arrival in the U.S., and who want nothing more to return to that work. Yet, despite their education and passion they often take low-paying jobs that do not fully utilize their skills due to 1) cumbersome, overly bureaucratic, and time-consuming certification requirements, 2) lack of financial resources to cover the costs of career re-entry, and 3) lack of a support system that can help educated professionals transition out of low-skill, low-paying jobs.

I wish that employers and industry leaders knew what I know and saw what I see: professionals who are competent and dedicated to their fields. Many employers are unfamiliar with our clients. They view their foreign training as second class, even though some industries recruit talent internationally to address worker shortages despite having qualified professionals in their own backyard. Our workforce and communities have so much to gain from immigrant professionals who have global healthcare experiences different from U.S.-trained individuals, but that's only if newcomers are seen as assets for the 21st century workforce.

# BRAIN WASTE AND THE NURSING PROFESSION

Gap analysis regularly conducted by Washington’s Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board (WTECB) assesses worker supply and demand in various occupational categories. A recent WTECB analysis of the healthcare industry found that registered nursing was among the top four occupations projected to have an insufficient supply of graduates to fill healthcare job openings from 2015 through 2020.<sup>32</sup> The American Nurses Association cites Washington as a job market with a projected annual growth of 20 percent or more from 2012-2022.<sup>33</sup> Registered nursing also ranks among occupations requiring the highest skill levels, and the nursing workforce has been expanding significantly faster than other non-healthcare professions, even during the recent recession.<sup>34</sup> A demographic trend spelling trouble for the future is the aging of the nursing workforce. The average age of a Washington nurse is almost 50, and the largest age group of nurses is between the ages of 55 to 59.<sup>35</sup> When these nurses retire, they will have to be replaced. Foreign-trained nurses can help alleviate this looming staffing crisis. The patient population in the state is also more diverse than ever before, driving the demand for a culturally responsive and bilingual nursing workforce.

However, the barriers to licensing for nurses in Washington State have prevented many qualified foreign nurses from finding employment, despite the pressing need for their services. Rates of underemployment for foreign-trained nurses are four times higher than for U.S.-born nurses. Various screening practices, such as the use of extensive and standardized

Levels of Employment for Nursing BA/BS Degrees			
	U.S.-BORN	FOREIGN-BORN	
		Foreign educated	U.S. educated immigrant
<b>Nursing Graduates</b>	<b>31,100</b>	<b>2,800</b>	<b>2,800</b>
<b>High-skill employment</b>	22%	14%	14%
<b>Middle-skill employment</b>	73%	61%	79%
<b>Low-skill employment</b>	4%	18%	7%
<b>Unemployed</b>	2%	7%	4%
<b>Affected by brain waste</b>	6%	25%	11%

Source: Migration Policy Institute, *Select Labor Force Characteristics of College-Educated Native-Born and Foreign-Born Adults, 2014*

**Rates of underemployment for foreign-trained nurses are four times higher than for U.S.-born nurses.**

testing, fail to adequately assess the prospective nurse’s skills and experience, as measured against the real requirements of the workplace. Hiring new nurses from a talent pool that mirrors the multilingual and multicultural communities of Washington could fill shortages of primary care workers in underserved communities. Employers could benefit immensely, yet obstacles stand in the way.

## Becoming a Nurse in Washington State

In order to ensure that foreign-trained nurses meet the requirements of the nursing profession, the Nursing Commission of the Washington State Department of Health has established a four-step process required to determine eligibility for licensing: evaluation of foreign credentials; passing a rigorous English proficiency exam; submitting an application to the Commission; and passing the National Council of Licensure Examination (NCLEX), designed by the National Council of State Boards of Nursing.

The process of credential evaluation is often, in practice, an insurmountable hurdle. All the appropriate documentation must

be sent to one of three approved private evaluators who require a minimum of six weeks to complete their review. As cited earlier, obtaining transcripts can be problematic for many applicants, especially those from war-torn countries. If all goes smoothly (i.e., transcripts are received and reviewed successfully), nursing candidates may discover that, from the perspective of Washington State's curricular guidelines, there are gaps in their education in the form of missing coursework. As there may be a scarcity of course offerings designed to address the educational deficits of individual immigrants, some immigrants give up and accept lower-wage work in non-licensed assistant positions or leave the healthcare field entirely. Others incur the financial burden associated with repeating two to four years of their nursing education. This is how, despite many years – even decades – of real world experience in the field, many foreign-trained nurses either abandon their careers or start over from the very beginning.

Demonstrating English language competence is another obstacle to overcome. All foreign-trained nurses seeking a Washington State license, with the exception of applicants from Canada and a few other English-speaking countries, must

pass an English proficiency exam. These exams do not necessarily reflect nor assess the level of language actually needed to function on the job. Previously, applicants struggled through this test with high failure rates, wasting precious years taking and retaking the test. Today, largely through advocacy by the Puget Sound Welcome Back Center and with the cooperation of the Washington State Nursing Commission, another and more appropriate testing option has been introduced, and more foreign-trained nurses are clearing the English language hurdle (see sidebar for details).

## THE RIGHT MEASURE FOR THE RIGHT SKILL

For speakers of other languages wishing to study or work in English-speaking countries, proficiency exams are the most common measure of a candidate's level of English. However, not all English proficiency exams are created equal. Two of the most widely used exams are the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exam and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam.

The TOEFL exam is a computer/online-based exam most commonly used by colleges and universities to measure the English proficiency and readiness for academic study of prospective students. The level of English required to pass is very high and even native English speakers often struggle to earn a passing score.

The IELTS exam offers two formats to measure English proficiency: one for academic aptitude for English language university study and another general training exam that only measures English proficiency for work and non-academic training.

Until 2014, in Washington State, passing the TOEFL was the only way for a foreign-educated nurse to gain their license. As a result of successful advocacy by the Puget Sound Welcome Back Center, the Washington State Nursing Commission expanded English proficiency testing in 2014 to include the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam as an option. In its pilot year, more foreign-trained nurses have successfully overcome this barrier, getting one step closer to becoming licensed in Washington State.

### New Programs Open Doors of Opportunity for Foreign-Trained Nurses

While the challenges for foreign-educated, high-skilled immigrants are many, there are initiatives around the country trying to prevent this waste of human resources. These initiatives recognize that work-related standards in different countries are not interchangeable and that some supplemental training may be necessary.

Despite their high level of skill and education, foreign-trained nurses are often unfamiliar with U.S. healthcare practices; they need to learn the methods, procedures, vocabulary, professional ethics, workplace structures, and technology of the U.S. nursing profession.<sup>36</sup> The Massachusetts Board of Registration in Nursing (BORN), in an effort to guide foreign-educated nurses through this retraining process, maintains a list of local nursing schools that allow foreign-educated nurses to enroll in "à la carte" courses when they have been found deficient in a particular content area.<sup>37</sup> BORN also has a web page especially geared toward foreign-trained nurses.



Welcome Back Centers at LaGuardia Community College in New York City and at Highline College in South King County both offer an intensive, eight-month training course for foreign-educated nurses, pairing vocational English language instruction with supplemental professional skill development specific to a U.S. context. While enrolled in the program, students work with an educational case manager who advises them on the various steps of the credentialing process.<sup>38</sup> The Puget Sound Welcome Back Center at Highline College is dedicated to helping immigrant and refugee nurses navigate the recertification process in order to address workforce needs and provide stable, living wages for their families. The demand for services offered by Welcome Back Centers across the country suggests the important void they are filling and reflects a workforce and licensure system that unduly restricts entry to competent professionals. It is clear that the availability of innovative, accessible, and well-resourced bridging programs for foreign-educated nurses would make an important difference in Washington State.

Making further headway in addressing the barriers facing foreign-educated nurses will require commitment from the nursing sector, career centers, and training programs to ensure a pathway for qualified nurses, regardless of where they were trained, to have real opportunities to resume their careers.

## MOHAMMED: MY STORY AS A PUBLIC HEALTH NURSE

My name is Mohammed and my career began in Ethiopia nearly 20 years ago. My first job was as a Junior Clinical Nurse until I finished university in the late 1990s. With a degree in public health and nursing, I began working in healthcare providing counseling and support to AIDS patients and their families.

In 2011, I immigrated to the U.S. with my wife and children seeking economic opportunities and stability for my family in Seattle. Given all my work experiences, I thought it would easily be able to secure a job in healthcare. I was surprised and disappointed that the only job I could find was as a certified nursing assistant (CNA), a position significantly below my training and skillset. The job did not pay well and I felt like I was taking steps backwards from my work in Ethiopia.

Feeling unhappy and underutilized in my position, I decided to find my way back into nursing. I applied for my registered nurse (RN) license in Washington State and was initially cleared by the Washington State Nursing Care Quality Assurance Commission to take the nursing licensing exam (NCLEX). Unfortunately I did not pass the test the first time. Shortly after, I received a letter from the nursing commission stating that my education did not meet the minimum requirements and I was no longer eligible to retake the test without completing more coursework. I did not have the time or financial resources to retake classes for a degree I had already earned or train for a job I had done for over a decade in my home country. Given that the NCLEX is a national exam, I qualified to take the exam in Hawaii and passed with a very high score.

My next step was to transfer my license to Washington State. After several months of waiting, I learned that the Washington State Nursing Care Quality Assurance Commission denied my license again although I had proven my competencies on a nationally recognized test. Even though I received help and support, I was confused about how much the rules and regulations varied from one state to another. A few months later, in a desperate attempt to support my family, I left my wife and children behind in Seattle and moved to Minnesota where I received my RN license and found work right away.

Utilizing my training and working as a nurse makes me happy but being separated from my family is heartbreaking. I even tried to get my license in Washington again for the third time thinking that with an RN license from two other states, 'surely this time, they will accept me' but again I was denied.

I never imagined that my career in the U.S. would mean navigating so many barriers and roadblocks just to work in my field of practice. I want to be reunited with my family but also have to provide for them. Unless Washington finds a way to effectively integrate foreign-education immigrant nurses, like myself, my situation is hopeless.

# BRAIN WASTE AND THE TEACHING PROFESSION

The integration of foreign-trained teachers and other immigrant professionals into the educational system also demands attention from policy makers and promises to bring about positive change in the educational experience of Washington State students.

The education sector has one of the highest forecasted rates of growth of any occupational category in the state, but the field is also highly professionalized: over 75 percent of jobs require at least a bachelor's degree.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, foreign-educated teachers show the greatest rate of underemployment compared to other immigrant professionals like nurses and engineers.<sup>40</sup> They are also nearly three times more likely to be underemployed compared to their U.S.-born peers with the same education level. Those who can find work in the education system typically hold jobs that do not reflect their level of education or experience, often employed as instructional assistants or para-educators, and, in some cases, even janitors or school bus drivers. While the state has a responsibility to screen teacher candidates for competence and essential pedagogical skills, the exclusion of so many potentially highly qualified diverse professionals is a great loss to the educational system.

This loss occurs at a time when the demographic profile of students in Washington State has changed dramatically. While 43 percent of students in the state identify as people of color, only 12 percent of teachers are from these backgrounds;<sup>41</sup> in a 2014 study, Washington ranked 24th among the states in the Teacher Diversity Index.<sup>42</sup>

Levels of Employment for Teaching BA/BS Degrees			
	U.S.-BORN	FOREIGN-BORN	
		Foreign educated	U.S. educated immigrant
<b>Teaching Graduates</b>	<b>97,400</b>	<b>5,300</b>	<b>3,400</b>
<b>High-skill employment</b>	69%	34%	47%
<b>Middle-skill employment</b>	16%	26%	26%
<b>Low-skill employment</b>	11%	32%	21%
<b>Unemployed</b>	4%	6%	3%
<b>Affected by brain waste</b>	15%	38%	24%

*Source: Migration Policy Institute, Select Labor Force Characteristics of College-Educated Native-Born and Foreign-Born Adults, 2014*

The percentage of English language learners has also steadily increased, reaching 10.2 percent of the student body in 2012-2013,<sup>43</sup> creating a strong market for qualified bilingual teachers. Demographic projections indicate that, by 2025, 1 in 4 of our students will be English language learners.<sup>44</sup> As student diversity increases, we must build a teacher workforce that reflects this diversity. Foreign-educated immigrants – whether teachers in their home countries or holders of other advanced degrees – can help as a pool to meet this demand.

## Improving Student Outcomes: Why Diversifying Washington's Teacher Workforce Matters

Establishing pathways for foreign-educated teachers or other professionals to pursue teaching careers brings much needed language and cultural skills, as well as rich experience and training, into the classroom.

The importance of teacher diversification as a strategy for closing the opportunity gap has been widely recognized in research and by community advocates.<sup>45</sup> Establishing a more representative education workforce is also among the top ten priorities identified by the state for improving educational outcomes.<sup>46</sup> Addressing and implementing efforts to diversify the teaching workforce often brings many improvements and positive outcomes for the morale of students, staff, and schools. Diverse teachers are more likely to understand the perspectives of marginalized students, which can be a powerful learning experience for students beyond academic curricula. Diverse teachers also bring culturally or linguistically based teaching approaches that expand the views represented within a school's teaching staff.

## WASHINGTON TEACHER WORKFORCE DIVERSITY



■ White Teachers ■ Non-White Teachers

*Based on Teacher FTE in 2011-2012 School Year,  
Superintendent of Public Instruction*

## WASHINGTON K-12 STUDENT DIVERSITY



■ White Students ■ Non-White Students

*Based on Teacher FTE in 2011-2012 School Year,  
Superintendent of Public Instruction*

This is particularly true for schools with a high English language learner (ELL) student population who stand to benefit from models of bilingual instruction.

As a growing educational initiative, dual language or bilingual instruction, benefits ELL students who learn subject matter content in their native language and simultaneously acquire English skills. ELL students in these classrooms typically outperform their peers by fifth grade when compared to English immersion models.<sup>47</sup>

However, districts have consistently reported difficulty hiring qualified bilingual teacher candidates to teach their ELL students as well as in bilingual/dual language classrooms and world language courses.<sup>48</sup>

Career entry for foreign-educated immigrants into the teaching profession would also alleviate shortages in the early childhood sector, which is undergoing rapid expansion and now requires lead teachers to hold an associate's degree or higher, with the equivalent of 30 college credits in early childhood education.<sup>49</sup> Opening doors for immigrant professionals would obviate the need to conduct expensive out-of-state and out-of-country recruitment efforts for both bilingual and early learning teachers. Connecting recruitment and outreach efforts among local immigrant and refugee communities to teaching opportunities could

provide savings for the educational system and improved economic and education outcomes for local communities.<sup>50</sup>

### Becoming a Washington State Teacher

Many Washington State school districts have a strong desire to hire teachers who can add diversity or bilingual instruction to their classrooms. Bringing bilingual, diverse instructors from the immigrant talent pool will, however, require programmatic and systemic supports from state agencies, school districts, schools, and education degree programs to recruit, train, and retain these individuals as teachers in their communities. As a regulated profession, teaching is governed by state law, which stipulates standards for knowledge, experience, and pedagogical preparation. Determining and administering these provisions are two state agencies: the Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB) and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI).

Current requirements to obtain a teacher certification and endorsements include: a bachelor's degree (or higher) from a regionally accredited college/university; completion of a state-approved or regionally-approved college/university teacher preparation program; and teacher assessment exams, namely the WEST-B, a basic skills test, and the WEST-E, which measures content knowledge for teaching endorsements in a particular subject.<sup>51</sup> Applicants who meet these requirements will be issued a Residency Teacher Certificate qualifying them for employment.

For potential teacher candidates who wish to pursue their training via non-traditional paths, the state also permits alternative routes to certification for qualified individuals who meet certain criteria. (See the sidebar for detailed information about Alternate Routes to Teaching Certification). Washington's Alternate Routes to Teaching Certification program supports "grow your own" models for school districts designed to encourage local residents to become teachers. The Seattle Teacher Residency program is an example of a "grow your own" model that has brought in foreign-educated immigrants and refugees to address areas of need while increasing teacher diversity.<sup>52</sup>

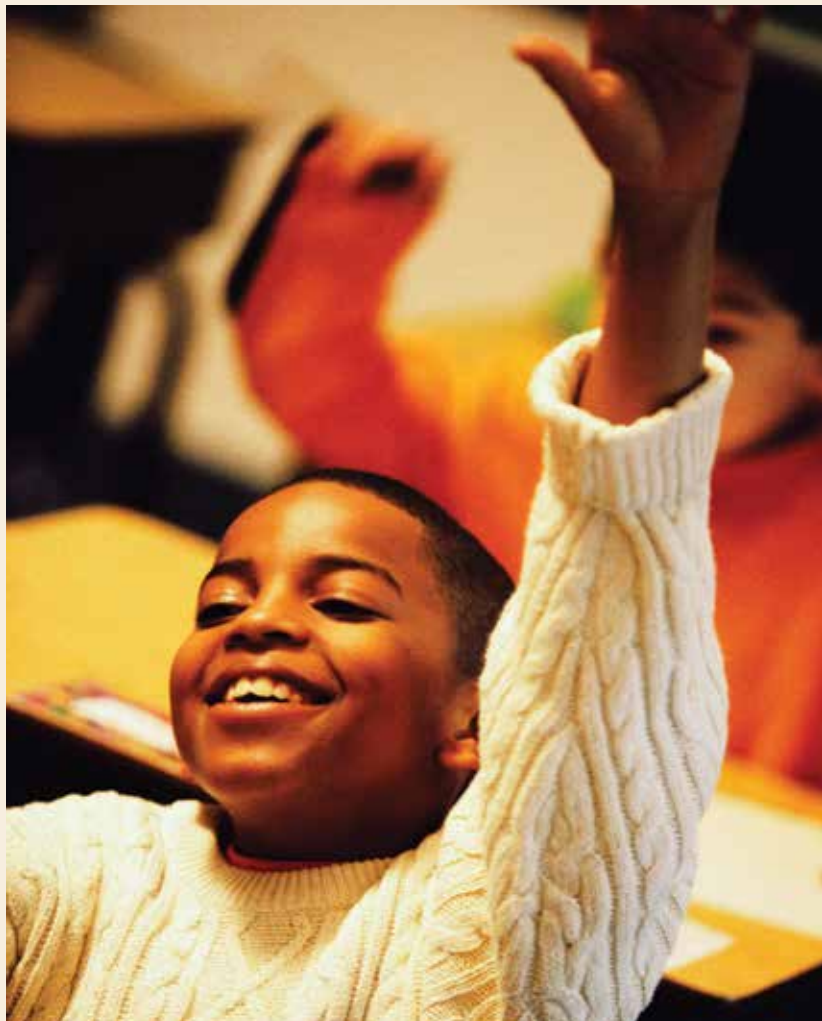
Washington's teacher licensing procedures can be complex and difficult to navigate,<sup>53</sup> even for U.S.-born or trained candidates. For many foreign-trained teachers and professionals, they appear as ramparts that cannot be breached. Although state policy allows the evaluation of foreign degrees to satisfy the degree requirement with a list compiled by OSPI of approved external evaluators, procuring the necessary documents can be a lengthy, cumbersome, and expensive process for which state

## DAWET\*: MY JOURNEY FROM SCIENTIST TO CLASSROOM TEACHER

My name is Dawet\* and I am from East Africa. Finding a job in the U.S. has been harder, at times, than pursuing a PhD. I'm an educated scientist with degrees from universities in East Africa and Europe. I was halfway through a Ph.D. in Ecology when my family had the opportunity to come to the U.S. I came with them in 2011 and thought I had enough education to secure a well-paying job in my field.

I realized quickly that finding a job is very challenging particularly when you don't understand the culture and practices of the professional world. I had to have my credentials evaluated but didn't know where to turn. I applied for many jobs but rarely got invited for interviews. I struggled to communicate in professional settings although I consider myself fluent in English. Overall, I did not find supports for someone in my situation, a highly educated immigrant, to secure employment in my field of study.

After some time I gave up on ecology and explored opportunities where I could still utilize my education as well as my multilingual skills. I finally found work with Seattle Public Schools (SPS) when I applied for a job opening as a para-educator requiring fluency in Amharic and Tigrinya. Although it was not my dream job, I felt good about my work because I could still use my education and support students from my home country. After over two years in this role, I received an email about the Seattle Teacher Residency program. They were recruiting district staff with bachelor's degrees, people like myself, to become teachers in



schools where students need us most. The district would cover the costs in exchange for a commitment to teach in local schools. Through careful guidance from my mentors and district staff, I applied and was accepted into the program. After a year of intensive training in the classroom working side by side with an expert teacher and completing rigorous coursework with others in my cohort, this Fall I started as a teacher in my own elementary school classroom.

Many of the students in my class speak a language other than English at home, and I know it makes a difference that their teacher understands their experience. Though teaching is not the career I thought I would find myself in when I first came to the U.S., I am so grateful that I landed this well-respected teaching position that allows me to support my family, utilize my educational and language background, and most importantly, contribute to society in a positive way.

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\*name has been changed to protect anonymity

agencies or education colleges offer little support. The requirement for successful completion of a state-approved teacher preparation program is also a formidable barrier. These programs are competitive and require a major investment of time and money.

Alternate Routes to Teaching Certification program can, in theory, offer a point of entry, particularly for immigrants currently working as para-educators or career changers, yet Alternate Routes is not a sufficient solution on its own to support this population. The absence of a clear alternate pipeline for foreign-educated immigrant professionals and advising around navigating the process is a missed opportunity to tap into a bilingual, diverse talent pool our schools so desperately need. In the face of these obstacles, many foreign-educated immigrants interested in pursuing careers in education choose to work as para-educators, or even as volunteers, losing out on the chance to play a leadership role in educating the growing number of children from diverse backgrounds.

Washington State has the potential to build on the existing Alternate Routes to Teaching Certification infrastructure to strengthen career pathways for foreign-educated teachers or those with a foreign degree who wish to make a career change and pursue teaching. Community colleges, traditionally places for adult learning and career training, would be a natural place to recruit and support this population's entry point into continuing their careers in education. With the state's reputation for innovations in education, Washington can be a trailblazer in marrying the rich resources of the immigrant community with the needs of children in our school systems.

## ALTERNATIVE ROUTES TO TEACHING CERTIFICATION

"Alternate Routes" is a teacher certification program created by the Washington State Legislature and designed by Washington's Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB) in partnership with local universities to address teacher shortages. With the goal of enriching the teaching workforce by encouraging local residents to become teachers, this program is designed to assist classified school district staff and eligible professionals to become lead classroom teachers.

According to their education level, candidates must identify which of the four Alternate Routes is the most appropriate and apply (and get accepted) to an approved program. Upon acceptance, candidates will receive a conditional scholarship to complete their course of study. Prior to placement in an Alternate Routes program, candidates must take a teacher assessment exam – the WEST-B, which measures basic knowledge, and the WEST-E, which measures subject area competency, if applicable – and a pre-classroom preparation course. Other steps include securing additional funding, and, for some, continuing to actively teach in a classroom while pursuing their certificate.

Alternate Routes offers four teacher certification pipelines:

1. Para-educators or emergency substitute teachers who wish to transition their associate's degree to a bachelor's degree, the education attainment level necessary to qualify as a lead teacher;
2. Para-educators who already have their bachelor's degree but still require a teaching certificate;
3. Qualified, educated subject matter experts with an advanced degree who are looking for a career change into teaching;
4. Those who hold a bachelor's degree and enter conditional certification agreements with school districts agreeing to complete coursework within a set timeframe.

Foreign-educated immigrants may qualify for routes 2, 3, and 4, depending on their degree(s) and work history. They either are employed as para-educators with a bachelor's degree or have a degree and subject matter expertise, in teaching or another subject, but are not working in the profession. The routes, however, are primarily designed for those educated in the U.S. The addition of an explicit path for foreign-trained educators, which includes recruitment, advising, developing tailored teacher training programs, and securing employment in the field, would open many opportunities for this population and recognize the valuable role they can play in the education of Washington's children.

## LILIYA: HAVING MY CREDENTIALS EVALUATED OPENED MY LIFE



My name is Liliya and I am from Ukraine. Ever since I was a child I have always loved the English language. The sounds and culture fascinated me so much that I started learning English at a young age (in addition to Romanian, Russian and of course Ukrainian). I lived this passion all the way to the University of Moldolva where I earned a degree in English and planned to become a teacher. Right after graduation, my husband and I were married in anticipation of the opportunity to immigrate to the U.S. with his family. We arrived in Seattle with no social network and uncertain how we would make a life for ourselves.

My love for English meant I was fluent and could find employment rather quickly but coming from a Soviet nation, where choices were often dictated, I was unaware of my career options. When I arrived, I was never asked about my education level by any of the immigrant assistance agencies and I never thought to question it. So I took the first job I could find at a fast food restaurant. Years went on and I continued working in fast food, doing what I needed to do to support my family. Yet my passion for English and education never went away. I had friends who encouraged me to “follow my dreams.” I saw no viable way out of my current situation until I learned of a nearby school district hiring interpreters. Although I speak Romanian, English, Ukrainian, and Russian I did not realize these were skills that were desirable to a school district and furthermore could gain me employment in the education field.

So I called the district every day until they finally hired me as an interpreter and later a para-educator. This led me to later become a para-educator.

I came alive when I was in the classroom with students. Although I experienced a lot of skepticism and bias around my abilities, some of my colleagues saw me as a natural instructor. When they learned of my degree from Moldolva, they encouraged me to become a teacher. Even though the certification process is very expensive, my husband agreed that, after years of working in a low-wage job wasting my potential, it was time to pursue my dream. So we saved up almost \$5,000 and sent my degrees out of state to be evaluated. I was surprised to learn that my degree from Moldolva was considered equivalent to a master’s degree in the U.S., yet I still had to fight with the Washington State to validate my education and training. Nonetheless, I worked to obtain my teacher certification and began teaching much sooner than I expected.

After a total of 10 years teaching in the classroom, today I work as district administrator to support English language learner students in one of the most ethnically diverse school districts in the country. I’m very fortunate for the support I have received that pulled me out of my fast food job and led me to a brighter future. I love the U.S. and the life my family has built here; we feel a deep desire to give back to the community that gave us so much. Yet I can’t help but wonder about others like me – foreign-educated immigrants – who were never asked about their education when they arrived, nor had the opportunity and support to realize their full potential.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

Local and state government, institutions of higher education, community-based organizations, businesses, foundations, and other community members all play a part in supporting the integration of highly skilled immigrants and refugees. Demographic realities including the state's growing need for educated workers, and the growing percentage of foreign-educated, high-skilled immigrants in the state make the effective integration of high-skilled immigrants a priority. Foreign-educated immigrants also bring a rich blend of cross-cultural and multilingual skills that can greatly improve health and educational outcomes for disadvantaged groups. In order to act on this priority, OneAmerica recommends the following strategies.

## Establishing Centers of Planning and Coordination for Integrating New Americans

High-level leadership and the coordination of multiple public and private actors are essential to this effort. Many state agencies, including the State Board of Education, the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board, the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, and the Department of Health, should contribute their resources and expertise to this effort.

**OFFICE OF NEW AMERICANS:** To strengthen and better coordinate immigrant integration efforts across state agencies in collaboration with public and private sector partners, we recommend the establishment of a new statewide Office of New Americans housed in the Governor's office. With a broad mandate, this office will address a range of issues related to immigrant and refugee economic, social, and civic integration. One of the office's first priorities should be to pursue system reforms leading to the full integration of foreign-educated immigrants into our workforce. Such an office would draw on best practices from model offices that exist in several other states, including Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, and New York. The Michigan Office for New Americans, established by Governor Snyder (R-MI) in early 2014, has already spearheaded the launch of multiple initiatives to better integrate foreign-educated immigrants, including the Michigan Global Engineers in Residence program and the Michigan International Talent Solutions program.

Establishing this new Office of New Americans also reflects the recommendations from the White House Task Force on New Americans, which consists of representatives from 18 federal departments and agencies, and which recently produced a plan of action to promote the civic, social,

and economic integration of immigrants.<sup>54</sup> Through such an office, Washington State would be well positioned to participate in any initiatives that originate at the federal level in this area.

**TASK FORCE FOR FOREIGN-EDUCATED IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION:** Under the auspices of the State's new Office of New Americans, the state should establish a Task Force on the workforce integration of foreign-educated immigrants, comprised of employers, relevant state agencies, economic and workforce development agencies, educational institutions, and community based organizations working with this population. By working in an advisory capacity to state agencies, the Task Force should identify ways to improve outreach to foreign-educated immigrants, streamline and simplify licensing requirements, and create easier and better-articulated pathways to career re-entry. The Task Force should also review data on this population and develop short and long-term goals while monitoring implementation of those goals by relevant agencies and groups.

**LOCAL AND COUNTY EFFORTS:** Local and county offices dedicated to immigrant integration, such as the City of Seattle's Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs, should also focus on the needs of foreign-educated immigrants. Such offices can look for opportunities to use the resources of local government to advance the integration of skilled immigrants.

## Programs, Data, and Supports

In developing a plan of action to address the problem of brain waste in Washington State, the following components should be included:

**MEASUREMENT:** In keeping with the principle 'we value what we measure,' state agencies, educational institutions, and other entities should collect and analyze more detailed data about the immigrant population (brain waste degrees earned, majors, and amount of field experience), so that the size and scope of brain waste can be better measured, and progress in reducing the problem can be assessed. For example, colleges could collect prior degree information at the time of student enrollment to provide more accurate data than what is captured by FAFSA data. Industries such as school districts can survey their classified staff to learn more about their educational background.

**CASE MANAGEMENT:** Case management should be an integral aspect of Washington’s approach. Implementing such a model should entail greater support for and expansion of Washington State’s two Welcome Back Centers. Expansions should provide additional funding for case managers to develop specific expertise in industries such as teaching, engineering, and accounting, as well as increased capacity to serve more individuals across a wider geographic area through satellite offices. Washington State should also support the development of a local affiliate of Upwardly Global, an organization dedicated to the advancement of foreign-educated, highly-skilled immigrants with offices in San Francisco, New York, Chicago, and Silver Springs and virtual operations in other locations. Given the complexity of skilled immigrant integration, it would be appropriate to create centers of expertise on these issues, rather than, for example, trying to build direct service capacity into Washington’s network of WorkSource Centers. A “one-stop shop” approach would make it easier for foreign-educated immigrants to navigate the complex process of skill recertification. Funding from state or local government should be made available to support advising for foreign-educated immigrants to pursue entry into the U.S. professional workforce.

**ONLINE PORTALS:** Organizations serving immigrants and refugees should develop websites, web pages, or web resources addressing the needs of high-skilled immigrants. Private industry, as well as state offices such as the Professional Educator Standards Board, should also make this information clear and readily available. Examples include the Back to the Office initiative of the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition, the online career guides of the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, and the virtual job fairs of the Global Cleveland organization.

**BRIDGE PROGRAMS:** Educational institutions, in partnership with immigrant service organizations, should develop integrated classes that provide vocational/ contextual English language and skills refresher courses to help bridge training deficiencies and prepare foreign-educated immigrants for the American workplace. The curriculum should also cover interviewing skills, resume writing, navigating job markets, and the importance of English and networking (i.e., social capital) to economic success.

**ALTERNATIVE ROUTES:** The existence of alternative routes into teaching reflects Washington State’s recognition that there should be multiple paths for talented individuals to enter the field. Creating career pathways to support foreign-trained individuals who bring culture and language to enrich the profession is a logical extension of this approach. Washington’s Alternate Routes to Teaching

Certification program should create an articulated pathway to welcome foreign-trained, bilingual teachers and immigrant professionals with degrees in other fields to the education workforce. This pathway should require funding for recruitment, advising, financial support for credential evaluation and scholarship, accessible teacher education programs at community colleges or institutes of higher education, and training/supports/incentives for school districts to hire these individuals. Models for supporting bilingual teachers already exist in other states, such as the Bilingual Teacher Pathway Program at Portland State University in Oregon.

Another approach would be to allow foreign-trained teachers or other professionals to function temporarily in professional positions with the stipulation that they work under special supervision and complete “learning contracts” within a specified time frame. “Fast-tracking” foreign-educated, healthcare (and other) professionals into their fields of practice is growing increasingly common in other major immigrant-receiving countries.<sup>55</sup>

**PROFESSIONAL CONNECTIONS:** Opportunities should be created for foreign-trained immigrant professionals to build networks of fellow professionals in the same field. Such opportunities would enhance the social capital of immigrants and help employers find and recruit international talent. Immigrants would also gain a better understanding of the job market and build the confidence to succeed in the American workplace. One program that is pioneering in this area is Global Talent Idaho, which is recruiting U.S.-born professionals to serve as mentors, coaches, and guides for skilled new Americans. Another program is the Tatweer initiative of Jewish Family Services in Washington’s King County, which pairs skilled refugees with mentors from the same professional background. Efforts to connect professionals should build on the success of similar models spearheaded and supported by business organizations across the U.S., including the St. Louis Regional Chamber of Commerce and the St. Louis Mosaic Project, Global Detroit, and the Greater Louisville International Professionals program at Greater Louisville, Inc.

**LICENSING REFORM:** Licensing boards should assess whether licensing requirements pose an unintended barrier for foreign-educated candidates and update regulations accordingly. Licensing information and applications should be translated into the languages spoken most frequently in Washington State (Spanish, Russian, Mandarin, and Arabic to name a few). Applications and websites with information on the credentialing process should become more user-friendly and provide clearer instructions for licensing in regulated industries.



**STANDARD-SETTING FOR CREDENTIAL EVALUATION:**

As credential evaluation is not a regulated service in the United States, the reliability, cost and quality of service vary widely. For this reason, state professional licensing boards should develop criteria for approving credential evaluators and publicize the list of approved evaluators. State licensing boards should also provide a resource guide and better customer service and support for applicants and career navigators seeking to better understand the process. In this way, candidates for licensure would avoid wasting time and money on redundant or unapproved evaluations. A model in this regard is the State of California, which sends all evaluators a questionnaire to complete at the time of renewal every five years. The questionnaire seeks to ensure that evaluators are abiding by a set of minimal standards. An alternative model is for states to do evaluations in-house – the approach taken by New York State.

**SCHOLARSHIP OR LOAN PROGRAMS:** Local agencies with private sector partners should consider creating a scholarship or loan program to offset the costs associated with career re-entry for immigrant professionals. Priority should be given to those who can demonstrate financial need, and grants or loans should only be used for costs associated with career re-entry, such as credential evaluation, document translation, license application fees, and tuition for classes deemed necessary to supplement an individual's skills and education. One model worth considering is a program developed by the New York City Economic Development Corporation, under contract with three local non-profits. The program offers low-interest loans of between \$1,000 and \$10,000 to foreign-educated immigrants for re-credentialing purposes. Such loans or subsidies can be subject to condition, e.g. an individual accessing funds must agree to work for a number of years with entities that have supported their career re-entry. For example, the Seattle Teacher Residency program includes a stipend, health insurance, and certification for participants, but requires a commitment to teach in Seattle Public Schools for a minimum of five years in schools serving diverse student populations or low-income communities.

**EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT:** Employer support and engagement should also be an important driver of systems change. Some employers, particularly those with foreign-educated workers who have already proven their value, will be strong allies. Other employers may need to be educated about the potential of this talent pool. Reaching out to employer associations offers an efficient way of spreading the message, building valuable relationships, and developing workable strategies to integrate internationally educated immigrants into the labor force.<sup>56</sup> One example could be establishing industry specific externships/

apprenticeships for the foreign-educated immigrant population to gain the workforce skills and social capital needed to secure employment.

**MULTI-SECTOR COLLABORATIONS:** While the state, through its convening and regulatory authority, should play an important role in system reform, the complex nature of reducing brain waste will require other public and private actors to contribute their expertise and resources to the success of this effort. Collaboration across sectors will help all organizations better serve and anticipate the future needs of clients and customers by increasing capacity while supporting coordinated immigrant integration efforts. Local governments, for example, especially in areas of high immigrant concentration, could invest in programs to promote skilled immigrant integration. Foundations could help launch new demonstration projects, and members of professional associations could help to mentor immigrant professionals. Industry and other leaders could reduce bias by building public awareness of the many strengths and benefits that foreign-educated immigrants bring to our local workforce and economies.

**TRAINING:** Interactions with foreign-trained professionals will become more common in the years to come. Staff at community-based organizations, adult education centers, libraries, one-stop centers, community colleges, industries and other institutions need to understand the special needs and challenges facing this population. As Washington State builds an infrastructure to support foreign-educated professionals, these staff members must be made aware of the available resources and how to access them, in order to properly advise skilled immigrants in their spheres of influence. Short-term training should be offered to meet this need and should emphasize the assets that the foreign-educated immigrants possess rather than deficiencies.

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## Closing

OneAmerica hopes that this report will serve as a blueprint for state and local leaders as they seek to capitalize on the skills and experience of Washington State's immigrant population. Everyone loses – immigrant and native-born alike – when talented people are denied the opportunity to realize their full potential. Washington State has a great asset in its globally connected immigrant population, capable of transcending barriers of language and culture and filling skills gaps in the economy. Through greater attention to the needs of foreign-educated immigrants, implementation of the strategies and approaches outlined in this report, and wise investments, foreign-educated immigrants will make major contributions to their respective professions and serve as catalysts for the larger state economy.

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