

How Adult Educators Can Support Internationally Educated Immigrants and Refugees

In the United States, **more than two million immigrants and refugees with college degrees are unemployed or underemployed**. Sixty percent of these individuals hold credentials earned abroad. Adult education programs are often an early point of contact for those seeking to resume their careers in the U.S. Students in these programs already have post-secondary education and often have specific English language learning (ELL) and academic needs.

2,000,000+

immigrants and refugees in the U.S. with college degrees are unemployed or underemployed



 = 25,000 people

60% hold credentials earned abroad

Addressing Systemic Barriers

Individuals who have received their professional training or education in another country often face unique systemic barriers as they try to resume their careers in the U.S. Their education and work experience may not be recognized or meet the requirements for certain careers. In some cases, internationally trained workers need to obtain additional training, certification, or licensure to be able to work in their field.

An increasing number of local, national, and field-specific programs and resources are now being offered to help those who are internationally trained overcome these challenges and support them as they re-enter the job market. Some examples of successful programs are highlighted in the “Model Initiatives” section below.

At a Glance:

- **48 percent** of recently arrived immigrants hold at least a four-year college degree.
- **English language proficiency is the single most significant career barrier** this population faces. More than half of immigrants reporting low or no English skills are underemployed in jobs far below their level of education, as are a third of those who report speaking English well.
- **Race and gender present additional career barriers:** Internationally educated Black immigrants are 54 percent more likely and Hispanic immigrants are 40 percent more likely than White immigrants to be underemployed. Among all internationally trained immigrants, women are significantly more likely than men to be unemployed or underemployed.

Barriers Impeding the Economic Mobility of Immigrants and Refugees



Individual Barriers

- Limited English language proficiency
- Inadequate recognition of international credentials and experience
- Insufficient social capital and networks
- Lack of U.S. work experience or education
- Inadequate career guidance
- Inability to access training or wraparound supports

Adult Education Practitioners Can Help Address These Barriers



English Language Proficiency

Internationally trained individuals often have English language needs that differ from those of other ELL students in adult education. They may be familiar with technical terms in their field, for example, but need guidance on making small talk for effective networking. Conversely, they may be conversationally proficient, but need English instruction targeting the professional terminology and jargon of their field.

Internationally trained adult education students often test out of standard adult ELL class offerings because of the students' high level of written English proficiency. Contextualized ELL instruction related to their professional field, on the other hand, can be the bridge these individuals need to successfully resume their careers. Contextualized ELL programs are increasingly being offered in a variety of adult education settings. These programs can facilitate access to commensurate employment and promote economic mobility.

Adult Education Practitioners Can Help By:

- Assessing career and language goals during the intake process
- Considering ELL classes for internationally trained adult education students that offer:
 - **Contextualized learning:** Students learn vocabulary relevant to their field of professional interest.
 - **Intensive study:** Students meet at least 12-15 hours a week, allowing them to master English more efficiently.
 - **Managed enrollment:** Classes meet for a fixed number of weeks.
- Providing information on TOEFL and other ELL tests



Credential Evaluation

A credential evaluation is an expert analysis of an individual's international education. It helps the individual gain recognition for their previous studies by providing a degree equivalency, which is a determination of how the education they received in another country compares to a similar degree or diploma in the U.S.

A credential evaluation enables academic institutions, licensing boards, professional associations, and employers to understand the level and content of an individual's education from another country. Evaluations can be used to help immigrants and refugees gain admission to academic programs, pursue professional licensing or certification, or qualify for employment.

In the U.S., unlike in most other countries, education and professional licensing systems are decentralized. Specific procedures for recognizing credentials from other countries can vary by state, profession, institution, and employer. It is therefore important to research what type of evaluation report may be required, and whether it must be obtained from a specific provider. Many independent providers belong to the [National Association of Credential Evaluation Services \(NACES\)](#), which maintains a membership directory. However, regulated professions often require or prefer reports from services specific to their field, and many of these providers operate independently of NACES.

Students can preview the U.S. equivalency of their highest completed degree by using the [free WES equivalency tool](#).



The [WES Gateway Program](#) provides assistance to eligible refugees and other displaced people who do not have access to their educational records.

Policies and practices vary regarding credentials from other countries. Frontline staff such as admissions counselors, case managers, program managers, and ELL teachers—as well as immigrants and refugees themselves—may incorrectly assume that a person with credentials from another country must start their education or training over in the U.S. For someone who was trained in another country, exploring educational and career pathways begins with an understanding of the U.S. equivalency of their existing education.



Learn more about [WES Credential Evaluations](#).

Adult Education Practitioners Can Help By:

- Informing students that their existing education from another country may be recognized in the U.S.
- Providing accurate information on the credential evaluation process
- Helping students determine whether a credential evaluation from a specific provider is required for their purposes
- Offering guidance on navigating the credential evaluation application



Career Support and Networking

Internationally trained immigrants and refugees come to the U.S. with professional credentials, skills, and work experience, yet they are often advised to take on entry-level jobs. Adult education career support should focus on an internationally trained student's transferable skill set and develop a career plan from there.

Adult Education Practitioners Can Help By:

- Setting goals starting with a student's career goal and working together with the student to identify steps needed to achieve that goal.
- Sharing relevant information about licensure guidelines and career pathways. WES offers career pathways resources for internationally trained immigrants and refugees, including a new interactive tool to explore career pathways that adult students may be eligible for in the U.S.—careers in the field in which they were educated, as well as related or alternative careers where they can apply their skills.

Adult Education Practitioners Can Help By: *(cont'd)*

- Training staff to act as career navigators who can help with career readiness and planning.
- Teaching networking skills. Many who are new in the country are unfamiliar with the social nuances of networking, such as how to make small talk and even why it matters. Because networking plays a larger role in professional life in the U.S. than it does in many other countries, immigrants can benefit from explicit instruction.
- Referring students to a local American Job Center for résumé and other career support.
- Checking for local programs that might offer students more specialized career guidance.
- Contacting local immigrant-serving organizations to explore potential ways to combine resources or otherwise collaborate.

Model Initiatives

The following initiatives have created programming that effectively addresses a variety of barriers preventing internationally trained immigrants and refugees from accessing commensurate employment.

The 20-week **Empowering Professional Immigrant Careers (EPIC)** program at the Chemeketa Community College in Salem, Oregon, includes:

- Guidance through the credential evaluation process
- Assistance navigating career and education possibilities
- Optional English language or “college transition” courses
- A Cooperative Work Experience (CWE) in the participant’s professional field, for college credit
- Test and tuition fee exemptions for refugees

The New Mainers Resource Center (NMRC) offers a **Skilled Professional Program** with the following services for internationally trained immigrants who hold at least a bachelor’s degree:

- Individualized career guidance
- Assistance navigating the credential evaluation and licensure processes
- Job search skills instruction and support
- Networking opportunities and training
- Field-specific professional upskilling
- Connections to opportunities for training, internships, or volunteering

The state of Washington’s **Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training Program (I-BEST)** is a contextualized program that combines English language and career instruction through team teaching in the same classroom. This method is designed to allow students to acquire skills in both areas more efficiently and effectively, and to earn college credit or professional certificates in the process.

The Welcome Back Initiative is a network of 10 centers focused on integrating internationally trained health care workers into the workforce across eight states. Services are free of charge and include:

- English for health workers
- Education about the U.S. health care system
- Career counseling
- Credential evaluation and professional relicensing support
- Connections to volunteer and employment opportunities
- Education about alternative careers

Synergy Texas is a volunteer group of adult educators aiming to compile and develop resources to help internationally trained immigrants resume their careers in the U.S. Synergy Texas provides resources for both practitioners and immigrants.

The African Bridge Network (ABN) is an organization in Massachusetts working to build a supportive community that leverages the professional potential of internationally trained immigrants and “turns it into reality.” ABN partners with several other organizations to provide comprehensive support. Services include:

- Orientation workshops
- Professional mentorship and fellowship programs
- Individualized career advising
- Networking opportunities such as the Professional Speaker Series



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