

Geoscientists Canada Facilitates New Framework for Assessment Processes in the Licensing of Professional Geoscientists in Canada

Keith Johnson and Oliver Bonham

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Article abstract

Recent modifications to Chapter 7 of *Canada's Agreement on Internal Trade* (AIT) – the Labour Mobility chapter – and the introduction of new provincial legislation in some jurisdictions, concerning fair access to the regulated professions, have necessitated changes to the way credentials of individuals seeking licensure as professional geoscientists are assessed. In particular, Chapter 7 of the AIT now provides that any licensed (registered) professional in any one of Canada's provinces or territories, be eligible for registration in another without reassessment, retraining or retesting. Fundamentally this amounts to legislated mutual recognition between all regulatory authorities across Canada, for each profession. Some regulated professions in Canada have met this change by centralizing much of their credentials-assessment activity, by setting up and using a national admissions administration agency. In some cases, this has resulted in reduced autonomy and flexibility for provincial authorities. The authorities for geoscience in Canada (which in many provinces are the same organizations that regulate engineering) have met the need for harmonization via a different mechanism.

The *Framework for assessment processes in the licensing of Professional Geoscientists in Canada/Cadre pour l'évaluation menant à l'attribution du permis d'exercice aux géoscientifiques en sol canadien* developed by Geoscientists Canada with and for its constituent associations, is designed to achieve consistency in admissions decisions across Canada without compromising standards or impinging on the independence of individual authorities. This paper outlines the rationale for this approach and the development process that was followed; it also summarizes the resulting Framework.

PROFESSIONAL AFFAIRS



Geoscientists Canada Facilitates New Framework for Assessment Processes in the Licensing of Professional Geoscientists in Canada

Keith Johnson¹ and Oliver Bonham²

¹Project Manager

Geoscientists Canada's International Trained Geoscientist Project (2010-2012)

Toronto, ON, Canada

Email: keithjohnson.pm@gmail.com

²Chief Executive Officer

Geoscientists Canada

Burnaby, BC, Canada

Email: obonham@ccpg.ca

SUMMARY

Recent modifications to Chapter 7 of *Canada's Agreement on Internal Trade* (AIT) – the Labour Mobility chapter – and the introduction of new provincial legislation in some jurisdictions, concerning fair access to the regulated professions, have necessitated changes to the way credentials of individuals seeking licensure as professional geoscientists are assessed. In particular, Chapter 7 of the AIT now provides that any licensed (registered) professional in any one of Canada's provinces or territories, be eligible for registration in another without

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SOMMAIRE

Les récentes modifications apportées au chapitre 7 de l'*Accord canadien sur le commerce intérieur* (ACI) - le chapitre sur la mobilité de la main-d'œuvre, et l'apparition de nouvelles législations provinciales dans certains cas, concernant l'accès équitable aux professions réglementées, ont nécessité des modifications sur la manière d'évaluer les compétences des personnes requérant un permis d'exercice au titre de géosci-

entifique professionnel. En particulier, le chapitre 7 de l'ACI prévoit désormais que tout professionnel licencié (enregistré) dans l'une des provinces ou territoires du Canada, puisse l'être aussi dans une autre province ou territoire sans réévaluation, formation de reclassement ou nouveaux examens d'admission. En somme cela équivaut à une reconnaissance légale mutuelle par toutes les autorités de réglementation à travers le Canada, pour chaque profession. Certaines des professions réglementées du Canada ont réagi à ce changement en centralisant leurs activités d'évaluation des compétences, par la création et l'utilisation des services d'une agence nationale d'administration des accréditations. Dans certains cas, cela s'est traduit par une réduction de l'autonomie et la flexibilité d'opération des autorités provinciales. Les autorités de réglementation des géosciences au Canada (qui sont les mêmes qui réglementent les professions du génie dans de nombreuses provinces) ont répondu à la nécessité d'harmonisation par un mécanisme différent.

Le *Cadre pour l'évaluation menant à l'attribution du permis d'exercice aux géoscientifiques en sol canadien* / *Framework for assessment processes in the licensing of Professional Geoscientists in Canada* » élaboré par Géoscientifiques Canada en collaboration et pour ses associations constituantes, est conçu pour assurer la cohérence dans les décisions relatives aux permis d'exercice au Canada sans compromission sur les normes, ni empiètement sur l'indépendance de chacune des autorités. Le présent article décrit les grandes lignes de l'argumentaire de cette approche ainsi que le processus qui en a découlé. On y présente également le Cadre qui en a résulté.

INTRODUCTION

In November 2011, Geoscientists Canada's Board of Directors accepted a newly developed consensus document aimed at harmonizing due diligence procedures used across Canada to assess applicants for registration as professional geoscientists, and recommended it for use by its 10 constituent associations – i.e. the provincial/territorial regulatory authorities (Geoscientists Canada 2012a). The document is entitled *Framework for Assessment in the Licensing of Professional Geoscientists in Canada/ Cadre pour l'évaluation menant à l'attribution du permis d'exercice aux géoscientifiques en sol Canadien* ('the Framework'; Geoscientists Canada 2012b – see www.ccpq.ca for the complete text). The Framework represents a pioneering achievement in the field, which will be of great benefit in facilitating labour mobility within Canada and internationally. Work on this initiative formed part of a larger Geoscientists Canada project focused on the assessment of internationally trained geoscientists applying for licensure in Canada, funded through Human Resources and Skills Development Canada's Foreign Credentials Recognition Program (Geoscientists Canada 2010).

Geoscientists Canada is the national organization of the provincial and territorial professional associations – the regulatory authorities – charged by governments with the self-regulation of geoscience practice across Canada. The member organizations (constituent associations) of Geoscientists Canada are as follows: The Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of the Province of British Columbia, The Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Alberta, Northwest Territories and Nunavut Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists, Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Saskatchewan, The Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of the Province of Manitoba, Association of Professional Geoscientists of Ontario, Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of New Brunswick, Professional Engineers and

Geoscientists of Newfoundland and Labrador, Ordre des géologues du Québec, and Geoscientists Nova Scotia.

Bonham (2010) described in some detail the developments, activities and relationships of Geoscientists Canada in the context of the work it does for the profession and its constituent associations and how it engages with the larger geoscience community on matters of a professional nature. Geoscientists Canada's principal advisory committee is the Canadian Geoscience Standards Board (CGSB), which has, as part of its mandate, the duty to provide guidance and co-ordination on matters relating to admissions requirements and admissions processes for professional registration.

Following the conclusion of earlier comprehensive work by the CGSB, Geoscientists Canada published, in April 2009, the booklet entitled *Geoscience Knowledge and Experience Requirements for Professional Registration in Canada/ Connaissance et expérience des géosciences requises pour l'inscription à titre de professionnel au Canada* (Canadian Council of Professional Geoscientists 2009). Although this booklet sets out, in general terms, the admissions requirements to become a professional geoscientist in Canada, it does not address the vetting processes to be used to determine that admission requirements have been satisfied. The CGSB recognized that beyond the setting of expectations on requirements for professional registration, of equal importance was the way in which due diligence was undertaken to ensure that requirements were indeed being met.

This paper outlines the rationale and development process that was followed, and summarizes the resulting Framework. It is an adapted and expanded version of an earlier short article published in *The Keystone Professional* – the member magazine of the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Manitoba (Johnson and Bonham 2012).

RATIONALE

In addition to the recognized need for robust due diligence and consistent vetting procedures, impetus for a collective approach to admissions assess-

ment procedures arose in response to, and has followed in parallel with, other national trends. For example, changes in inter-provincial labour mobility and in the regulation of professions that have occurred in Canada in recent years include:

- the enactment of 'fair access to the professions' legislation in four provinces – Ontario (2006), Nova Scotia (2008), Quebec (2009), and Manitoba (2010). Although the specifics and purpose of these statutes vary provincially, generally they seek to ensure that assessments of professional credentials are done transparently, fairly, consistently and expeditiously by qualified personnel;
- the establishing of the Foreign Credential Recognition Program at Citizenship and Immigration Canada by the federal government in 2007. This led to the opening, later that year, of the Foreign Credentials Referral Office, which is a resource facility providing information to prospective immigrants on regulated professions and occupations, foreign credential recognition and labour markets;
- the publication of a joint federal, provincial and territorial initiative, *A Pan-Canadian Framework for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications* (Foreign Credentials Referral Office 2009). Work is under way to ensure that those occupations targeted in this document (architects, engineers, financial auditors and accountants, medical laboratory technologists, occupational therapists, pharmacists, physiotherapists and registered nurses) are compliant with its requirements in the near term;
- the introduction by the Council of the Federation (Canada's premiers) of significant revisions to Canada's Agreement on Internal Trade (AIT), Chapter 7: Labour Mobility (Internal Trade Secretariat 2009). According to these provisions, any professional who has been licensed to practice in one province or territory in Canada can apply to become re-licensed in another, without the requirement of

reassessment, retraining or retesting;

- the publication of *Pan-Canadian Quality Standards in International Credential Evaluation* (Council of Ministers of Education Canada 2009); and
- most recently, in April 2012, the opening of a new national website by the Forum of Labour Ministers, through its Labour Mobility Coordinating Group, specifically to establish a centralized body of information on AIT (Chapter 7). This website, at http://www.ait-aci.ca/index_en/labour.htm, provides information to regulatory authorities and regulated workers on issues related to labour mobility, including information on additional certification requirements, answers to Frequently Asked Questions and a detailed list of current exceptions to labour mobility across Canada. It also houses contact information for jurisdictional labour mobility coordinators and contains links to important initiatives and resources related to labour mobility in Canada (Internal Trade Secretariat 2012).

Parallel developments internationally include the European Union's Bologna Process on higher education in Europe (European Commission – Education and Training 2012); the Lisbon Convention on recognition of academic credentials, of which Canada is a signatory (Council of Europe – Treaty Office 2012); and, specific to geoscience, the European Federation of Geologists' EURO-AGES – the European Accredited Geological Study Programmes Project (European Federation of Geologists 2012).

Most important in this context are the changes to AIT (Chapter 7), which in effect establish treaty-based mutual recognition between all regulatory authorities for each licensed profession in Canada. In general, there are upwards of 35 regulated professions in each province and territory; for example, Ontario identifies 40 regulated professions, including 26 health professions and 14 non-health professions (Ontario Office of the Fairness

Commissioner 2012). Transfer applicants between provinces now have labour mobility and, subject to certain conditions only, must be re-registered without reassessment and without delay. Under Chapter 7 only one jurisdiction, the regulatory authority that receives the initial application for professional registration, now undertakes an individual's complete assessment. Thus, the criteria and methodology used by any one jurisdiction directly addresses the competence of practitioners working in all jurisdictions. Greater harmonization of assessment practices and policies for both domestically and internationally trained applicants is therefore vital in ensuring the integrity of the entire admissions system, nationally.

The confluence of these regulatory trends and forces necessitated the geoscience profession taking a shared, pan-Canadian approach to due diligence in assessing the competence of all individuals seeking licensure as professionals.

DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Core research for the Framework initiative included a study, conducted in 2010, involving a 134-question survey detailing current local geoscientist assessment and admission practices, completed by representatives from all ten regulatory authorities that make up the membership of Geoscientists Canada. This was followed by debate on the survey findings and related research among the regulatory authorities, together with consultations within the geoscience community. Much of the construction of the resulting Framework was based on best practices in the field of credential and competency assessment already in use across Canada in geoscience, in engineering and in other regulated professions. Also considered were due diligence approaches in use in admissions assessment at professional geoscience organizations outside Canada. During the two and a half year task, the Canadian Geoscience Standards Board held seven meetings (five of which were face-to-face) to hear results of data gathering and research, to analyze findings and to draft and then refine the text for the resulting Framework. At all stages, extensive

consultation – both formal and informal – was undertaken, with admissions staff and volunteers representing all of the professional associations.

OUTCOME

The outcome Framework is specifically intended to address all the challenges that were identified. It consists of a series of broad and visionary practices and protocols that the profession and Canada's geoscience admission officials collectively agree should be used, in the context of the following key topics:

- Document authentication and assessment
- Academic training assessment
- Practice experience assessment
- Timeliness and communications
- Reconsiderations and appeals
- Quality assurance

The Framework, being as it is a 'framework', is of course neither prescriptive, nor legally binding. It is designed to serve as a companion document to the aforementioned booklet, *Geoscience Knowledge and Experience Requirements for Professional Registration in Canada/Connaissance et expérience des géosciences requises pour l'inscription à titre de professionnel au Canada*. Whereas the latter outlines expectations on admissions requirements to become a professional geoscientist in Canada, the Framework describes the processes used to determine that admissions requirements have been satisfied (Geoscientists Canada 2012b). Having this Framework in place will help ensure high standards of admissions and greater protection of the public, while at the same time greatly facilitating both inter-provincial and international mobility for all geoscientists (Geoscientists Canada 2012a).

Other regulated professions in Canada have responded by centralizing their credentials assessment activity; that is, by setting up and using a single national admissions administration agency. For example, the accounting profession requires all candidates for licensure as Chartered Accountants to sit and pass the Unified Evaluation – an examination administered on behalf of its 10 regulatory authorities by a national Board of Evaluators

(Chartered Accountants of Canada 2012). Similarly, all internationally educated applicants applying to become registered physiotherapists (outside of Quebec) are assessed by the Canadian Alliance of Physiotherapy Regulators (Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials 2011a). A parallel arrangement exists for medical laboratory technology and is facilitated by the Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science (Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials 2011b). A number of other professions, including occupational therapy (College of Occupational Therapists of British Columbia 2010) and audiology/speech language pathology (Canadian Association of Audiology and Speech-Language Pathology Regulators 2012), are also in the process of developing similar centralized bodies to carry out some, or all, assessment processes on behalf of provincial regulatory authorities.

In some cases, this has resulted in reduced autonomy and flexibility for individual authorities. Those for geoscience in Canada (which in many provinces are the same organizations that regulate engineers) have met the need for harmonization by making a commitment to use consistent procedures. The Framework is thus designed to guide the assessment and admission of applicants in Canada by promoting consistency in the process and thus similarity in outcomes across jurisdictions, without impinging on the independence of individual authorities.

Taken together, *Geoscientists Canada's Geoscience Knowledge and Experience Requirements for Professional Registration in Canada/Connaissance et expérience des géosciences requises pour l'inscription à titre de professionnel au Canada*, and the new *Framework for Assessment in the Licensing of Professional Geoscientists in Canada/Cadre pour l'évaluation menant à l'attribution du permis d'exercice aux géoscientifiques en sol canadien* should ensure similar outcome decisions across the country, when applicants to the profession are assessed and ultimately admitted. Together they will ensure that geoscientist competencies required for licensure can be demonstrated in a consistent and fair manner across the country, while at the same time provid-

ing improved due diligence, transparency and efficiency of process. This in turn will lead to greater overall protection of the public, greater inter-provincial mobility of practitioners, and improved admissions systems for both domestically and internationally trained geoscientists seeking to enter the profession anywhere in Canada.

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