

Program helps skilled immigrants

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Dr. Amy Wongkanlayanush taught economics at a university of Thailand for seven years. When she arrived in Victoria, she was happy to find a retail job.

Wongkanlayanush came to Canada last September to be with her 17-year-old son.

"I wanted my son to have a good education," she explained. "But I waited one year to make a decision. It was very risky to come here, because I had such a good job in Thailand."

Wongkanlayanush's job search began two weeks after her arrival.

Her applications for teaching positions were rejected without explanation and her attempts to find work as a researcher were futile.

"At first I felt very frustrated," she admitted. "I thought it was because my PhD wasn't from North America."

Then she heard about the BC Skills Connect for Immigrants Program offered by the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society.

The three-year pilot program was implemented to help immigrants find work in their field of expertise. Job coaches offer one-on-one coaching, helping immigrants through the job search process.

Through networking and improvements to her portfolio, Wongkanlayanush landed a job as a business development economist at the Ministry of Tourism, Sports and the Arts.

But she's one of the lucky few.

VIRCS's job counsellor Fred Eckert-Maret says he's rejected more applicants, than he's accepted.

"It's almost two to one."

Eckert-Maret blames the restrictions of the program, one of which limits access to immigrants who have lived in Canada for five years or less.

"Why not make it 10 years or have no barrier at all? Why can't everybody do this?"



Sharon Tiffin/News staff

Despite a PhD, Thai immigrant Dr. Amy Wongkanlayanush couldn't find work in Canada without a little help.

The provincial government introduced the program in 2005 to help meet labour demands in hospitality, business services, retail, construction and health care.

B.C. receives more than 35,000 immigrants each year and 64 per cent are between the ages of 20 and 59.

But one of the biggest barriers to immigrants gaining employment is getting their credentials recognized, Eckert-Maret said.

While the provincial government is keen to use skilled immigrants to meet increasing labour shortages, professional associations are "raising the standards so nobody can get in."

According to Wongkanlayanush, it's a waste of talent.

"They have potential to make a contribution to Canada, but they don't have an opportunity to do that."

Eckert-Maret advises immigrants they have two choices: get accredited (which costs money) or upgrade skills in a related field.

"If you have an economist degree, go into business or earn a diploma or certificate. The moment you have a two-year certificate then all of the sudden all of your other credentials are valued more highly."

Wongkanlayanush is an example to other immigrants, Eckert-Maret said.

"Amy is a particular kind of person. She was proactive, she was persistent and she had a really good attitude."

For more information on the B.C. Skills Connect for Immigrants Program contact Fred Eckert-Maret at the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society, 535 Yates St., third floor, 361-9433 ext. 218.

BC Skills Connect standards:

- lived in Canada for five years or less
- three years of pre-landing skilled employment
- intermediate English language ability

Program features:

- Career planning
- Prior learning assessment
- Qualifications assessment/credential evaluation
- Connections to professional regulating bodies
- Work experience
- Industry specific training
- Networking
- one-on-one job coaching