A Guide to Professional Licensure Requirements for Foreign-Trained Professionals in Massachusetts

Professionals trained in the engineering and health care fields often find it difficult to work in their field in U.S. jurisdictions, including Massachusetts. Often, this transition requires some combination or all of the following: the securing of credential evaluation, a new degree or coursework, improvement of English language proficiency – including technical language specific to one's professional field, passing professional exams, obtaining new professional licenses, gaining practical experience, and navigating the job search, application and interview processes. All of these steps can require significant amounts of time, money and effort – a challenge for anyone but particularly for recently arrived immigrants still acclimating to their new communities and often struggling to support families on the wages of unskilled jobs.

This guide aims to provide a clear road map for immigrant professionals looking to relicense in their profession as well as for career professionals working to support this transition. This guide provides information about the following professions:

- Engineer
- Physician
- Physician Assistant
- Nurse
- Dentist
- Pharmacist
- Medical Technologist/Clinical Laboratory Scientist
For some immigrants with an engineering degree from a foreign institution, the path to becoming a licensed Professional Engineer in Massachusetts is the same as for an individual who obtained their degree at a U.S. institution. This is the case for those individuals who have received their engineering B.S. from a foreign institution whose engineering curriculum has been accredited by ABET (formerly known as the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology).

However, foreign-trained engineers typically have degrees from an engineering program that has not been accredited by ABET. For those individuals, the path to becoming a licensed Professional Engineer in Massachusetts includes an undergraduate engineering program credentials evaluation by the National Council of Examiners for Engineering and Surveying (NCEES). If the individual receives a favorable credentials evaluation by NCEES, then he or she takes the first of two engineering licensing exams.

If the individual does not receive a favorable credentials evaluation from NCEES, after taking the first licensing exam, he or she has three options. First, the individual can ask the licensing board to make an independent determination to accept the individual’s undergraduate engineering training. Second, the individual can obtain an advanced engineering (Masters) degree from an ABET-accredited program. Tuition alone for a two-year Masters program in engineering ranges from about $28,000 to about $45,000 for a public institution, and costs about $80,000 at a private institution. Third, the individual can repeat his or her undergraduate education, and earn an engineering B.S. at a U.S. college or university. Tuition, room and board would cost an average of about $70,000 at a public institution, or an average of over $140,000 at a private institution.

Prior to taking the final professional licensing exam, all applicants must meet an engineering experience requirement. In general, for applicants trained in the U.S., in foreign ABET-accredited institutions, or in NCEES-approved foreign undergraduate engineering programs, the requirement is four years of engineering experience. For foreign-trained applicants who received their undergraduate engineering degree from a non ABET-accredited institution and who do not receive a favorable accreditation review from NCEES but whose undergraduate training is approved by the licensing board, the requirement is eight years of engineering experience. For foreign-trained
applicants who received their undergraduate engineering degree from a non ABET-accredited institution and who do not receive a favorable accreditation review from NCEES and then go on to complete an engineering Masters degree, the requirement is four years (vs. three years for individuals who complete both their undergraduate and Master’s training in ABET-accredited institutions).

Overseas work experience may or may not be counted towards the experience requirement.\textsuperscript{4}

The final step in the licensing process for all individuals is the second of two professional exams. The total cost of all registration, examination and licensing fees is $690.00.\textsuperscript{5} For foreign-trained individuals who require a credentials review, the total of all costs is $1,090.00.

Another option for foreign-trained engineers is to practice without a license. Unlicensed engineers can work in a variety of technical, advisory and management positions. However, the overall project must be under the direct and responsible control of a legally licensed engineer.\textsuperscript{6} In addition, unlicensed engineers may not stamp or seal designs, bid on government projects, own an engineering firm, consult independently, or offer engineering services to the public.\textsuperscript{7}
Working as a physician in Massachusetts after training abroad

In order to be licensed to practice medicine in any U.S. jurisdiction, graduates of non-Canadian foreign medical schools (known as international medical graduates, or “IMGs”) must make it through a series of complex requirements. First, they must obtain certification from the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG), which is in itself a multi-step process entailing considerable time, effort and expense.

Once the individual has attained ECFMG Certification, like all medical school graduates who wish to practice in the U.S., he or she must complete a U.S. or Canadian hospital residency program after passing the first two in a series of three examinations. For a foreign-trained physician who previously practiced in another country, this means that he or she must complete a new residency program, in addition to the residency program completed overseas. Moreover, as of Jan. 1, 2014, Massachusetts will require graduates of non-Canadian foreign medical schools to complete at least one additional year of residency, requiring a two-year residency program in contrast to one year for graduates of U.S. and Canadian medical schools.

While both graduates of U.S./Canadian medical schools and graduates of foreign medical schools must both complete a U.S. or Canadian hospital residency, for most graduates of foreign medical schools, this is usually easier said than done. According to one source, while 95% of graduates of U.S. medical schools who apply for residency programs are matched with a residency program, only 40% of their foreign-trained counterparts (both immigrants and native-born) are accepted into a residency program.

After taking and passing the last of three professional examinations, then, and only then, can the individual apply for a Massachusetts medical license, through the Massachusetts Board of Registration in Medicine. All told, the total cost of professional examinations, residency application-related costs and the licensing fee is anywhere from about $7,500.00 to about $15,000.00 for both U.S./Canadian-trained and foreign-trained individuals.

This is a long and arduous process for any would-be physician, regardless of whether they trained in the U.S. or abroad. For immigrants who attended medical school before coming to the U.S., the process is even longer and more arduous. Many do manage to reach the goal of practicing in Massachusetts: By 2005, 28% of all physicians in Massachusetts were immigrants, a remarkable
figure, given that immigrants comprise about 17% of the overall Massachusetts workforce. However, given the already difficult circumstances often faced by immigrants, many individuals who had planned to work as physicians in Massachusetts find that this is an unattainable goal. For some, other medical professions prove the best alternative.
Working as a physician assistant in Massachusetts after training abroad

For some immigrants who attended medical school overseas (some of whom worked as physicians prior to immigrating), but are unable to reach the goal of working in Massachusetts as a physician, becoming a physician assistant is an alternative path. Yet while many immigrants do ultimately obtain their license and work as physician assistants in Massachusetts (as of 2005, 28% of all physician assistants in Massachusetts were immigrants), many more foreign-educated professionals have the training and skills needed to work in this profession but lack the “right” credentials.

In order to qualify for a physician assistant license, an individual must provide documentation of a bachelor’s degree and completion of a degree from a U.S. physician assistant program (typically though not always a masters-level program). Individuals who obtained their physician assistant program degree overseas must repeat their training in the U.S. The average cost of tuition alone for a two year physician assistant graduate program is about $37,000 at a public institution, and about $67,000 at a private institution.

Total costs for examination fees, credentialing services and licensing fees range from $860.00 to $905.00.
Foreign-trained individuals appear to be under-represented among Massachusetts Registered Nurses – as of 2005, only 10% of all Registered Nurses in Massachusetts were immigrants, even though immigrants make up at least 17% of the state's workforce.

As Gurea's story illustrates, in order to be licensed as a registered nurse in Massachusetts, nurses trained outside the U.S and Canada must obtain certification or a credentials review from the Commission on Graduates of Foreign Nursing Schools (CGFNS). In addition to the CGFNS certification or credentials review process, he or she must also submit an application to the Massachusetts Board of Registration in Nursing's own credentials review service, Professional Credentialing Services, Inc.

In all U.S. jurisdictions, both graduates of foreign nursing education programs and graduates of U.S. or Canadian nursing education programs seeking a registered nurse's license must also take the National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses, known as the NCLEX-RN. To be qualified to take the NCLEX-RN, if the individual has graduated from a nursing education program whose language of instruction or textbooks, or both, was not English, he or she must show that he or she has achieved a passing score on an English language proficiency exam, such as the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). The total cost of examination and licensing fees is $430.00. For foreign-trained nurses, credentials verification and English language testing bring the total cost to $965.00 - $1,110.00.

A more accessible alternative to a registered nurse's license is a practical nurse's license. Whereas nursing education programs for registered nurses culminate in an associate's degree or a bachelor's degree, nursing education programs for practical nurses are typically certificate programs. Practical nurses exercise less autonomy, and are often under the supervision of registered nurses.
Working as a dentist in Massachusetts after training abroad

To be eligible for a license to practice dentistry, Massachusetts requires proof of graduation from an accredited U.S. or Canadian school of dentistry. Immigrants who have trained overseas as dentists and wish to practice in Massachusetts must therefore complete their DDS or DMD degree at a U.S. or Canadian dental school. Several U.S. schools of dentistry offer special two-year DDS or DMD programs for dentists who have graduated from foreign dentistry programs. The total cost of Boston University's two-year “advanced standing” program for internationally-trained dentists is about $143,000, not including the cost of housing, food, and other living expenses.

The total cost of professional examination and license application fees in Massachusetts is $2,745.00. One alternative pursued by some foreign-trained dentists in Massachusetts is obtaining a Dental Intern Limited License. Limited licensees must work under the supervision of a licensed dentist in a public health clinic, hospital, dental school, or prison, and cannot work in a private practice.

Often, foreign-trained dentists look into the possibility of being licensed to practice dental hygiene in Massachusetts. In order to do this, the individual must either a) complete a program of dental hygiene in an American Dental Association (ADA)-accredited school, or b) be in the final year of a general dentistry program leading to the DMD or DDS in an ADA-accredited school of dentistry.

Finally, some foreign-trained dentists choose to work as an “On-the-Job-Trained Dental Assistant,” which is the lowest-paying category of dental assistant.
**Working as a pharmacist in Massachusetts after training abroad**

While many immigrants do ultimately obtain their license and work as pharmacists in Massachusetts – as of 2005, an astounding 40% of all pharmacists in Massachusetts were immigrants – many more foreign-educated professionals have the training and skills needed to work in this profession but lack the “right” credentials.

In order for a graduate of a foreign school of pharmacy to be eligible to be licensed as a pharmacist in the U.S., he or she must have a Foreign Pharmacy Graduate Examination Committee (FPGEC) Certification from the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy. In addition, all applicants for a pharmacist's license must complete 1,500 hours (about 9 months of full-time work) of work as a pharmacy intern under the supervision of a Massachusetts pharmacist, of which at least 1,000 hours (about 6 months) must be completed in a pharmacy or pharmacy related setting. This requirement applies even when the individual has already been practicing as a pharmacist overseas.

Professional examination and licensing fees cost a total of $1,106.00. For foreign-trained pharmacists, the cost of FPGEC Certification brings the total of licensing-related expenses to $1,991.00.**
Working as a Medical Technologist/Clinical Laboratory Scientist in Massachusetts after training abroad

Medical Technologist/Clinical Laboratory Scientist is another profession in the health care sector that is available to immigrants with a scientific background. Individuals working in this role typically work in a hospital or doctor's office, or in a medical or diagnostic lab, and primarily do lab analysis of blood and other specimens and perform rapid tests for illness.34

While many Massachusetts immigrants are ultimately able to work in this profession – as of 2005, a remarkable 36% of all Medical Technologists in Massachusetts were immigrants35 – many more foreign-educated professionals have the training and skills needed to work in this profession but lack the “right” credentials. To work as a medical technologist in Massachusetts, most hospitals and healthcare facilities in Massachusetts require that the individual be certified as a Medical Laboratory Scientist by the American Society for Clinical Pathology (ASCP).36 ASCP certification as a Medical Technologist requires completion of a Baccalaureate degree and two to five years of laboratory training or experience, for a fee of $200.00.37 An alternative that affords less opportunity for career advancement is ASCP certification as a Medical Laboratory Technician, which requires completion of a two-year degree program, plus (unless the degree is in Medical Laboratory Technology) completion of a medical laboratory training program or three years of laboratory experience, for a fee of $175.00.38

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1 See Appendix A for detailed licensing requirements and procedures, and for citations.
4 See Appendix A for information on applying overseas engineering experience to the experience requirement.
5 Website of Professional Credential Services, Inc. at
6 Website of World Education Services at [www.wes.org/info/licaltern.asp](http://www.wes.org/info/licaltern.asp).


8 See Appendix B for detailed licensing requirements and procedures, and for citations.


10 See Appendix B for a breakdown of costs.

11 Ramon Borges-Mendez, Donna Haig Friedman et al., Immigrant Workers in the Massachusetts Health Care Industry: A Report on Status and Future Prospects (2009 The Immigrant Learning Center) at 11, available at [http://scholarworks.umb.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=csp_pubs](http://scholarworks.umb.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=csp_pubs).


13 See Appendix C for detailed licensing requirements and procedures, and for citations.

14 Another option for graduates of foreign medical schools, including those who practiced as a physician prior to coming to Massachusetts, is to become a Registered Nurse. However, this entails completion of a nursing education program, which many graduates of foreign medical schools may consider impractical or undesirable.

15 Ramon Borges-Mendez, Donna Haig Friedman et al. at 11.


17 See Appendix C for a breakdown of costs.

18 See Appendix D for detailed licensing requirements and procedures, and for citations.

19 Ramon Borges-Mendez, Donna Haig Friedman et al. at 11.

20 Sum et al. at 7.

21 244 CMR 802(1)(c); Application for Certification of Graduation from a Board-Approved Nursing Education Program Located Outside of the United States and its Territories, section (II)(2).

22 See Appendix D for a breakdown of costs.

23 Website of Mayo School of Health Sciences at [www.mayo.edu/mshs/careers/nursing](http://www.mayo.edu/mshs/careers/nursing).

24 See Appendix E for detailed licensing requirements and procedures, and for citations.
For an unofficial list of some of the available programs, visit

Boston University website at www.bu.edu/dental/about/offices/registrar/tuition/dmd-tuition/.

See Appendix E for a breakdown of costs.

27 234 CMR 4.05 and explanatory information provided to the authors by the Massachusetts Board of Registration in Dentistry. Other requirements include passing the Massachusetts Dental Ethics and Jurisprudence Examination, an open-book exam. 234 CMR 4.05(14) and Board of Registration in Dentistry website at

Information provided to the authors by the Massachusetts Board of Registration in Dentistry.

See also “Dental Assistant & Dental Hygienist Duties and Functions,” Academy of General Dentistry, available at

See Appendix F for detailed licensing requirements and procedures, and for citations.

Ramon Borges-Mendez, Donna Haig Friedman et al. at 11.

See Appendix F for a breakdown of costs.


Ramon Borges-Mendez, Donna Haig Friedman et al. at 11.


Ibid.