



BY: MIL

Paola Cerrato-D'Amico
The Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Migration
Parliament House
CANBERRA, ACT 2600

RD'A

24th June 2005

Dear Paola,

Re: Inquiry into skills recognition, upgrading and licensing

With reference to your letter of 12th May 2005, please find attached comments from the Multicultural Development Association Inc. (MDA) in respect of issues raised in the Terms of Reference of the Joint Standing Committee on Migration's inquiry into skills recognition, upgrading and licensing.

MDA is a not-for-profit community organisation that was formed in May 1998 to promote multiculturalism and act as a strategic mechanism for the empowerment of people from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. MDA achieves its aims through a range of service delivery activities including migrant and refugee settlement support services, a multicultural advocacy program, a grants access program and an employment and training program.

While much of our work relates to providing assistance to refugees and humanitarian entrants, our Community Settlement Service Scheme (CSSS) provides settlement assistance to all migrants who have been living in Australia for less than five years, including those entering Australia under the skilled migration stream. In addition, our Employment Program provides job search training, intensive assistance with the job application process, and access to work placement programs for all migrants and refugees from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Given the nature of our work, we are not able to comment on current arrangements for overseas skills recognition and associated issues of licensing and registration, nor to consider how Australia's arrangements compare with those of other major immigration countries. In view of this, we have confined our comments to identifying areas where Australia's procedures might be improved, as per the Terms of Reference (1.20.3). In particular, our comments focus on:

- Communication of processes to users;
- Efficiency of processes and elimination of barriers;
- Awareness and acceptance of recognised overseas qualifications by Australian employers; and
- Alternative approaches to skills assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications

Multicultural Development Association

If you require any additional information about the comments made in our attached submission, please do not hesitate to contact Behice Bagdas, Employment and Training Coordinator (3394 9307) or Linda Leonard, Employment and Training Officer (3394 9308).

Yours sincerely

Lyn Ellison
Assistant Director

Multicultural Development Association

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration Inquiry into skills recognition, upgrading and licensing

24th June 2005

1. Background to the submission: MDA's Multicultural Employment and Training Program

MDA's Employment and Training Program commenced in May 2002, as a result of a need for this type of service that had been identified through our Multicultural Advocacy Program.

Our Employment Program operates two distinct services: employment assistance, which includes resume writing, job search activities, and interview preparation, and an administration work experience program through a multicultural community jobs plan scheme.

MDA has assisted in excess of 300 job seekers since its Employment Program commenced in 2002. In the last twelve months, MDA has formally registered 113 job seekers on its Employment Assistance program and 33 people on its Community Jobs Plan programs. Both of these programs are funded by the Queensland State Government under its 'Breaking the Unemployment Cycle' initiative.

In addition, many more people have been provided with assistance through a series of Job Search Workshops, referral to other employment assistance programs and Job Network agencies, as well as through advice and information, even though they were either not eligible for registration on our programs or were unable to be registered due to the limited numbers of places available.

The comments and information that is provided below arise out of our work with migrant and refugee job seekers from non-English speaking backgrounds.

2. Identify areas where Australia's procedures can be improved including in terms of the following areas:

2.1 Communication of processes to users

While migrants and refugees are given written information about the qualification and skills recognition processes on arrival in Australia, our experience of working with Skilled Migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds indicates that some people remain unclear about how to access the process and what is involved. In addition, many have little idea of how to search for work, or how long it may take to find work, in their chosen field.

The process of finding work in Australia is often very different to that in their country of origin. For example, many of the people that MDA has worked with have little or no experience of using web sites as a job search tool, of addressing selection criteria, or of attending formal job interviews.

Multicultural Development Association

Many migrants to Australia also fail to realise that most Australian employers require job applicants to have some local work experience and to provide local referees and/or checkable references. This means that they may have to be prepared to accept work at a lower level, or in a different field of work, to that which they were doing in their country of origin. Alternatively, migrants may have to be prepared to work in a voluntary capacity to obtain the necessary work experience.

Example

“I’ve been here in Australia for 9 months. Initially, I thought it would be easy for me to find a job because I gained more than 8 ½ years of working experience as a Secretary and Executive Assistant with various corporations, in the Philippines where I come from. It’s hard to find a job here because employers are always asking for Australian local work experience. Even though I have many years of experience behind me, I still had to begin my career by applying for entry level positions.”

Migrants need to arrive in Australia with a realistic picture of what is expected of them and what they will need to do to meet employer expectations.

To assist in this regard, all applicants under the skilled migration stream should be provided with an Information Session at Australian overseas missions. In addition to providing information on the process for qualification and skills recognition, the purpose of these sessions should be to inform prospective skilled migrants about:

- The current labour market situation in Australia and, in particular, which professions are currently experiencing a skills shortage;
- How to be competitive for jobs in the Australian context;
- How to look for work in Australia;
- How to apply for work in Australia; and
- Employer expectations

2.2 Efficiency of processes and elimination of barriers

All immigrants, no matter what their qualifications or skill level, should be provided with the opportunity to access contextual employment-related training shortly after arrival in Australia. This training should cover things like workplace health and safety, relevant employment and industrial relations legislation, the Australian taxation system and the Australian education and training system.

A short training course, perhaps provided through the tertiary education network, would assist in the elimination of barriers to employment and ensure that skilled migrants are more equipped to achieve success in the Australian employment market much sooner after arrival. Alternatively, many tertiary institutions already have links with overseas education providers in many countries and this type of training may be able to be provided in the country of origin for some skilled migrants.

Currently, skilled migrants receive no access to the full services offered by the Job Network agencies for their two-year initial waiting period. The Job Network system is focused solely on those who have been out of work and registered with Centrelink for 12 months or more. For those who have to endure a two-year waiting period before

Multicultural Development Association

eligibility for Centrelink benefits, this effectively means that they cannot access the services of the Job Network agencies until three years after arrival.

MDA would argue that skilled migrants need to be given assistance in securing work in the competitive Australian job market much sooner after arrival in Australia. It is very difficult to meet your undertaking to support yourself (and where relevant your family) if you have difficulty in accessing sustainable employment.

In view of this, MDA considers that the two-year waiting period should be waived and should not be tied to eligibility for Centrelink benefits in respect of assistance offered by Job Network agencies. These agencies should also be provided with added incentives to assist skilled migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds.

2.3 Awareness and acceptance of recognised overseas qualifications by Australian employers

MDA considers that more work needs to be done to promote the benefits of employing migrant workers to Australian employers, as many skilled migrants from both refugee and skilled migration backgrounds are not being hired, despite having relevant experience, skills and qualifications.

While there is much media commentary on the current skills shortage, MDA's experience suggests that this may be exacerbated by a lack of awareness amongst employers of the range of skills, experience and qualifications held by migrants already in Australia, and an apparent preference for employing those whose first language is English.

The experience of MDA clients suggest that employer prejudices do still exist (whether overtly or covertly) and that something needs to be done to bring about a change of employer attitudes in order to assist the skilled jobseekers that are already in Australia into work.

Examples

"I have a Bachelor in Business Administration obtained in Brazil. I am married to an Australian citizen. Since my first week in Australia, I started my search for employment. I submitted my resume to numerous recruitment agencies and received my first phone call not long after that. But unfortunately at that time I did not have any knowledge of MYOB and for this reason I could not go any further with my application in seeking administration work.

I continued applying for jobs using the Seek website, CareerOne and others. Many times I received a phone call but it seemed that as soon as the person recruiting on the other side of the line heard my accent the position would become unavailable. I was very frustrated with that... Through MDA, I was given my first Australian work opportunity."

Multicultural Development Association

“As a migrant I experience hardship in trying to get work due to several factors. One was that I sincerely think that Queensland still discriminates strongly against migrants, especially if they have an accent, no matter how good their English level is. Second, even though I had extensive experience in the workforce acquired back in my country, for the Australian employers it was not good enough. I believe sometimes it's fair enough depending on the job position. However, there are some job positions where my skills could have been appropriate and others would be transferable skills, but because of the way some employers think this is not good enough”.

MDA would recommend that arrangements be made for people entering Australia under migration streams *other* than the Skilled Migration stream to more easily access the procedures for recognition of overseas qualifications and for skills assessment.

MDA has also come across instances where overseas qualifications have been recognised by DIMIA, as part of the skilled migration application process but the relevant professional body here in Australia will not accept this recognition and therefore refuses membership of the professional body. It would therefore appear that coordination and information sharing between DIMIA and relevant professional bodies could be improved.

Example

MDA was approached for assistance by a qualified civil engineer. This individual was originally from Africa but had extensive work experience in his field in Cairo, Egypt. He successfully completed the process for translation (from French) and recognition of his qualification. His qualification was deemed to be equivalent to the Australian university Bachelor of Civil Engineering.

However, when he applied for Registration with the relevant professional body, his application was declined, as they did not accept the equivalence of his overseas qualification, nor his overseas work experience. He has therefore been unable to obtain work in the field for which he is qualified, as all employers require membership of the professional body as an essential criterion for employment.

In addition, MDA would suggest a promotional campaign, featuring examples of employers that have hired migrant workers, particularly those for whom English is a second language, and highlighting the benefits both to the employer and, where possible, to the wider community, that employing these workers has brought.

Multicultural Development Association

2.4 Alternative approaches to skills assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications

An alternative approach to skills assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications would be to provide skilled migrants with an opportunity to enter a short bridging course in the equivalent degree to their existing qualification and then to sit an equivalent to the final year assessment offered at tertiary institutions in Australia. In terms of the trade qualifications, skilled migrants could be provided with the opportunity to enter the later stages of the training elements related to the relevant Apprenticeship in their field and, again, undertake the equivalent of the final assessment to indicate current competence in the required skills.

This would enable a determination of the equivalence of their qualifications as being comparable to graduates and qualified trades people from Australia, whilst also enabling a degree of contextual education for those whose qualifications, experience and skills have been gained in a different work environment.

This approach may also assist in the early identification of, and providing a response to, those whose skills need upgrading.

The harmonising of apprenticeship schemes and related training across Australia, enabling the creation of portable qualifications would be of immense assistance in this respect.