

From: South Metropolitan Migrant
Resource Centre, WA.

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Statement for the Joint Standing Committee on Migration Inquiry into Skills recognition, upgrading and licensing

- 1. Investigate and report on current arrangements for overseas skills recognition and associated issues of licensing and registration for:**

Skills stream migrants who obtain assessment prior to migrating

Issues:

- It is common for skills stream migrants that I have seen, to **believe that the letter they received for migration purposes means that their skills are recognised in Australia** and they can automatically commence work in their profession. They are often shocked to hear that they must seek recognition or licensing with recognised authorities and that it may be costly and time consuming and they must prove that they have the required skills.
- Skills stream migrants often have **skills gaps**, as their occupation in Australia may not be exactly the same as in their country of origin. This commonly means delays in accessing employment and time and cost to gain the skills required
- People with **English as a second language (ESL)** often have difficulty accommodating **industry terminology or technical terms** for their occupation; therefore they often fail assessment and testing.
- Many of my clients are not working in their field due to difficulties associated with seeking recognition. Many work in unskilled occupations, such as taxi drivers, cleaners, factory workers etc. while **skills that could be utilised go to waste**

Solutions:

- **Off shore information processes need to be reviewed** to ensure skilled migrants understand that they have only been assessed for migration purposes.
- Provide better information to skilled migrant applicants about their professions before they arrive in Australia. If they are aware that they have skills gaps, they may be able to address them before they migrate or at least be prepared for training and assessment when they arrive.
- Migrants from a Non English Speaking Background (NESB) need to be able to access ESL classes that fast track acquisition of industry terminology and technical terms in their field.

Families of skill stream migrants, family stream migrants and humanitarian entrants who seek assessment/registration/upgrading after arrival

Issues for Humanitarian entrants:

- **Settlement issues** which consume humanitarian entrants' time, energy and money when they first arrive in Australia, include; attending English classes, family, health and housing issues, schooling of children, concern for relatives in the country of origin, the need to

secure a job quickly to bring money in to send home to family members in their country of origin. To be burdened with complicated recognition issues increases the stress associated with settlement

- Lack of understanding of **Australian systems** in relation to skills recognition
- **Lack of funds** for assessment and testing
- Spending long years in **refugee camps** causing a time gap in the use of their skills and lack of confidence in demonstrating a skill after a long period
- **Loss of papers**, evidence that will support applications (due to war and displacement)
- **Obtaining accurate translations** – including the cost of translation
- Coming from areas of the world where skills and work practices are vastly different from Australia (not a neat fit into the workforce)
- Lack of sufficient English skills to competently sit tests and understand industry terminology in their area of expertise.

Solutions:

- Adequate funding for programs that make it easy for refugees to be able to upskill in their field (see later ideas)

2. Cannot comment – outside my area of expertise

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

- **Communication of processes to users**

Issues:

- Most newly arrived migrants and refugees are totally unaware of the **systems in Australia** and find it difficult to find and get information in easy to understand formats, in addition people from a NESB face **additional difficulties because of language**
- Users have to find their own way through the **maze of information from various sources**, pamphlets, Web sites, application forms, receptionists. Therefore they often seek assistance from Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) and Overseas Qualification Units (OQU) to understand what they need to do.
- Feedback from clients indicates registering bodies are often rude and dismissive and give limited information; it leaves an impression with the clients that they do not wish to assist, leaving the applicant feeling inadequate and afraid to ask questions.
- Dealings I have had with registration bodies whilst **advocating** and advising my clients have often been negative. Some are reluctant to speak through an advocate, insisting on speaking directly with the client.
- **First contacts** to Web sites and receptionists often confuse rather than make clear what is needed and why.
- Communication is often conveyed in an officious manner using jargon that the applicant does not understand. **Good customer service** does not seem to be a central ~~concern~~-concern.

Solutions:

- Recognition authorities need to have a **policy for dealing with people from a NESB** and their staff to be trained to apply the policy
- To foster approaches which are **migrant friendly, encouraging and facilitate the process of recognition** rather than hindering it
- To adopt a **customer service focus** which is friendly, helpful and treats people fairly and with respect.

▪ **Efficiency of processes and elimination of barriers**

Issues:

- Processes seem to be **exclusive** rather than **inclusive** of overseas trained applicants. There seems to be a **gate keeping mentality**
- Processes are **inflexible** and don't take into account peoples' **language or cultural understanding**
- **Processes vary from state to state**, making it confusing to applicants
- Applicants may not be able to speak to an officer in their own State, which can be a significant barrier to a client from NESB who must then communicate via the telephone
- **Tests and assessments may be applied via the telephone**, which may be totally inappropriate for a person from a NESB
- Forms which are required to be filled out are often difficult to understand and easy for clients from NESB to make mistakes
- **All the processes cost money**, in some cases a lot of money, if the client fails in their first attempt and needs to re-apply they have to pay again (with further impacts prospects on successful settlement)
- **Processes often take a long time**, with applicants left with no indication when their case will be dealt with or what the time lines are

Solutions:

- A **review of existing processes** to include how to provide easy to understand information to people from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) background.
- Consult migrant specialists such as AMES and MRCs to **review written materials to ensure they are easy to understand** by people from NESB
- Review processes to ensure they are **administered fairly** for all applicants across all states and territories

▪ **Early identification and response to persons needing skills upgrading(e.g. bridging courses)**

Issues:

- If people are unable to enter their profession shortly after arrival to Australia, they are forced to **look for alternative employment**. **Thus** clients often get stuck in occupations such as taxi driver, cleaner, factory worker etc while their real skills go to waste.
- It is ~~not easy~~ not easy to access **bridging courses**, as there don't seem to be many of them and some require permission from the registration body to access. This is clearly an area where improvements could be made.

Solutions:

- Long work experience, induction programs, skills gap training and bridging courses need to be offered on a regular basis, so that clients can access them when they need to
- Registering authorities need to review their processes to ensure they facilitate the process of registration rather than impede it
- Employers could be involved in upskilling and assessment

▪ **Awareness and acceptance of recognised overseas qualifications by Australian employers**

Issues:

- Employers seem to prefer local qualifications and experience
- Employers seem to more readily accept overseas trained workers when there is a skills shortage, indicating flexibility when it suits them.
- Employers are often put off by accents and obvious difference, which seems to affect their judgement when recruiting

Solutions:

- Educate employers about the **skills migrants and refugees bring to Australia** that can be utilised or upgraded.
- **Educate employers** to look at the long term needs of their company and train on the job rather than import workers from overseas when a shortage arises.
- **Involve employers in the process of recognition** in partnership with recognition bodies. Employers will eventually employ people with recognised skills so should have input into the recognition process
- Employers to be given a **monetary incentive to encourage them to create on the job induction/bridging/work experience programs** for overseas recruits into their industry.

▪ **Achieving greater consistency in recognition of qualifications for occupational licensing by state and territory regulators**

Issues:

- Registering requirements **differ from state to state**. It is possible for a qualification to be accepted in one state but not in another.
- Registering authorities have told clients to travel to other states to obtain registration and upon return the registration can be accepted under **mutual recognition principles**
- Some **recognition bodies do not operate in every state**. Therefore an applicant in one state may be able to physically visit the office to obtain information and be assessed face to face, while one from another state has to interact via the telephone and in some cases be assessed and tested via the telephone
- The **inflexibility** involved and the unfairness of many processes is commented on by clients on a regular basis

Solutions:

- This is an area where it would be very useful if **consistency existed across all states and territories** for every profession. It is very confusing for clients to be told that Australia has different requirements and regulations from state to state.
 - The process of recognition of qualifications and skills needs to be **fair and consistent across all states and territories**. The inconvenience and monetary costs involved for applicants in states where regulatory bodies do not exist is grossly unfair
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- **Alternate approaches to skills assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications**
 - A **focus group** of overseas trained job seekers run at SMMRC, stated that they wished for a **type of program similar to a traineeship**, where they could receive a training wage for **gaining experience in their profession** (i.e. approx 1 year of experience on the job). In this way they could practice their English language, gain work place terminology, pick up new skills, fill skills gaps, understand Australian work place practices and gain confidence. Participants felt they would be far **more employable** and able to successfully seek registration after attending such a program
 - Employers could be encouraged to take on overseas trained workers by offering an **incentive to take people who are seeking registration on an induction program** (6 months to a year). This could be part time while attending English ~~classes~~ undertaking classes, undertaking other gap training or waiting for registration. Or could be run as a post trade orientation program which includes ESL.
 - In addition to or instead of bridging courses, **employers could train/induct overseas trained workers on the job** i.e. they attend the workplace under training; they buddy a registered worker or work under supervision (i.e. as a trades person/assistant). As they demonstrate/achieve competency in an area, they could be ticked off as competent by a work place assessor. In this way skills gaps, work place terminology, English, understanding Australian workplace culture would be tackled at the same time in a real work place under training, utilising existing skills and could be part of the process of assessment for registration.
 - **Fast track courses/on the job training that include ESL.**