

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration Review of Australia's skilled labour migration and temporary entry programs

The Western Australian Department of Training plays an important role in the settlement of new migrants to Australia through its association with the State Settlement Planning Committee, the State Settlement Steering Committee and through the post migration settlement related services of the Department's Overseas Qualifications Unit (OQU), and Independent Assessment Service (IAS).

The Department is able to offer comments on the following terms of reference:

- ◆ international competition for skilled labour;
- ◆ the degree to which quality permanent skilled migrants are being attracted to Australia and settling well;
- ◆ whether there are policy and/or procedural mechanisms that might be developed to improve competitiveness; and
- ◆ settlement patterns for new arrivals, including the role played by State and local authorities.

International competition for skilled labour.

International competition for skilled labour is a policy issue of growing importance in the majority of OECD countries. As the shortage of human resources in information technology-related industries and science professions becomes more apparent, an increasing number of countries are implementing measures to facilitate the recruitment of foreign skilled workers. Ireland is one such country that is actively pursuing more flexible migration options to boost the countries tightening work force.

Australia is one of few countries with a 'skilled migration program', and competes on a global scale with other English speaking countries, the United States, Canada and New Zealand in particular.

Opportunities for migrants with skills in the oil, mining and gas industries, which attract a highly mobile and well paid international workforce, and the provision of employer sponsored arrangements contribute to Australia's ability to attract skilled migrants with backgrounds in these industries.

However, barriers relating to language and cultural differences are also present for migrants from countries where English is not the main language and may effect Australia's ability to compete for skilled migrants from these countries. As such, the quality and level of Australia's post-migration settlement services plays a crucial role in ensuring that Australia remains an attractive option for skilled migrants.

Western Australia's workforce of one million is among the highest in the world for its level of education and technical skills. The State's vocational education and training sector is highly responsive to existing and emerging skill needs of industry as it works

closely with broad industry sectors to identify and deliver the required training and technological knowledge.

Recent developments within the State's resource sector have resulted in an increasing demand for highly skilled and educated labour in the Burrup Peninsula. While the VET sector is working closely with the Burrup Skills Taskforce to ensure that the skill needs of the Burrup projects are met, it is anticipated that Western Australia will need to attract some skilled labour from other countries to strengthen its workforce in the shorter term.

Degree to which quality, permanent skilled migrants are being attracted to Australia and settling well.

Terms of Reference

There is concern about the use of the word 'quality' in this term of reference. This word is open to interpretation and does not give a clear indication of the categories of skilled migrants considered to be beneficial to Australia for the purposes of this review.

Background

Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) figures for Western Australia indicate that, for settlers arriving between January 2000 and August 2002, a total of 14,462 migrated under the skilled migration stream.

There has been significant research into the settlement experiences of migrants to Australia. Findings have consistently shown that there are several key factors which contribute to a positive settlement experience for skilled migrants, including:

- ◆ access to relevant and timely skills recognition processes;
- ◆ ability to secure gainful employment; and
- ◆ occupational pathways.

Where skilled migrants are quickly absorbed into the labour market, this has a positive effect on labour market flexibility and reduces the social and monetary costs associated with unemployment.

In assessing the success of Australia's skilled migration program, it is essential to focus on the post migration issues of skills recognition and the provision of equitable and accessible assessment processes, employment and occupational pathways.

Access to relevant and timely skills recognition processes

At a meeting of a special working party of the Western Australian Overseas Qualifications Network (4 October 2002), the following issues of concern were raised in relation to skills recognition and overseas assessment processes:

- ◆ overseas assessment processes for immigration purposes are often misleading and fail to inform applicants that further recognition processes may be required onshore. Applicants for skilled migration are assessed offshore for migration purposes but are not made aware of the recognition process required to gain employment or the cost of this process. Limited or no communication between offshore and onshore recognition bodies has resulted in a lack of accurate information being given to offshore skilled migration applicants.

This is of particular concern for migrants with trade qualifications who have been assessed offshore by Trades Recognition Australia and issued with a statement for migration purposes only. Many are unaware of the need to pursue trade recognition processes onshore which are often costly (up to \$1000) and time consuming; and

- ◆ an additional issue for migrants with trade skills in Western Australia is the fact that the trades recognition process is largely based in Queensland. As Western Australia no longer has a representative from Trades Recognition Australia, the assessment process is facilitated by mail, except in instances where an assessor is flown to Western Australia from Queensland. This further complicates the already lengthy and expensive process of trades recognition for skilled migrants.

Ability to secure gainful employment

The ability to secure gainful employment is essential to successful settlement and for the social and monetary benefit of Australia. Unemployment of significant numbers of highly skilled migrants not only results in wasted intellectual investment and opportunity, but also often contributes to frustration within families and communities.

Employer attitudes to overseas trained applicants and a lack of awareness of the value of overseas trained employees is often an inhibitor to acceptance in the workplace for migrants, particularly for those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

In addition, some skilled migrants assessed off-shore are unable to secure employment in Australia due to registration requirements for specific professions or trades, such as electricians or engineers.

Occupational pathways.

A need for clearer information on occupational pathways and requirements, particularly where assessments do not necessarily allow for immediate or direct entry to the occupation, has been identified as a settlement issue for skilled migrants.

A major problem for many migrants is that they do not qualify for English language assistance necessary to enable them to pursue further studies or function in an English speaking work place. The level of English proficiency deemed to be functional by DIMIA falls below that required for entry into further study at either TAFE or university and would not enable an individual to work at a para-professional or professional level in most occupations. For migrants from non- English speaking backgrounds who achieve the functional level of English, there is limited support to enable them to pursue occupational or professional pathways.

Policy and/or procedural mechanisms that might be developed to improve competitiveness.

The Department of Training has been involved in a number of mechanisms designed to ease the settlement process for skilled migrants. These initiatives contribute to a positive settlement experience and improve Australia's ability to compete in the global arena.

The mechanisms implemented by the Department are, in the main, policies and procedures aimed at improved training and employment outcomes for skilled migrants.

Through the OQU, the following projects have provided mechanisms for improving post settlement services to skilled migrants and hence improving Australia's competitiveness in the global arena for attracting skilled migrants:

- ◆ facilitation of assessment and recognition issues for overseas qualified nurses with two assessment and bridging programs assisting 100 overseas-trained nurses and 60 child care workers into employment. The average cost of the program for each nurse was \$900 as against a cost of \$50,000 to produce an inexperienced nurse through the State training system;
- ◆ Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Orientation Program for Overseas Qualified Teachers at Murdoch University; and
- ◆ development of good practice recognition and assessment procedures for overseas trained teachers in Western Australia.

In addition, some training programs offered by TAFE colleges target skilled migrants who require short bridging courses in order to secure employment in their profession in Australia. The Adult Migrant English Program- Migrant Pathways Program at Central TAFE is one such program which targets migrants and refugees with skills in aged care, nursing, engineering and information technology. Participants in this program undertake skills recognition and are fast-tracked through certificate level courses with English language support. The program has succeeded in helping skilled migrants into employment by offering occupational pathways.

Further activities and strategies which could be adopted to improve the post migration training and employment services to skilled migrants include:

- ◆ provision of a Western Australian representative from Trades Recognition Australia to facilitate expedient trades recognition processes for skilled migrants in Western Australia;
- ◆ development and implementation of strategies to promote skilled migrants to Australian employers with a focus on the benefits of employing migrants;
- ◆ improved communication of information to ensure that information provided to skilled migrants offshore is comprehensive, accurate and relevant;

- ◆ development and implementation of strategies to provide clearer occupational pathways and short term bridging programs for skilled migrants; and
- ◆ provision of English language assistance to enable migrants with functional English to pursue further studies and operate in an English speaking work place.

Settlement patterns for new arrivals, including role played by State and local authorities.

The State Settlement Planning Committee is the peak body in Western Australia responsible for developing and implementing the *State Settlement Plan*.

The *State Settlement Plan* is part of the *National Integrated Settlement Strategy* (NISS), an inter-governmental planning framework, which aims to improve the provision of settlement services to migrants and refugees in Australia.

Planning activities focus on:

- clarification of responsibilities for provision of services;
- coordination of service delivery;
- better targeting of resources to avoid gaps and duplication; and
- better outcomes for clients in the form of appropriately targeted and accessible services.

State Settlement Plans are developed in each State by State Settlement Planning Committees. The committees comprise representatives from Commonwealth, State and Local Government and the community. The WA State Settlement Planning Committee was convened by the Office of State Development from its establishment until a change of government in 1993. The committee was reconvened in October 1993 to develop the first *WA State Settlement Plan*.

In Western Australia, a State Settlement Steering Committee, comprising senior representatives of relevant agencies, including the Department of Training, endorses the Plan each year.

The *WA State Settlement Plan* includes:

1. an outline of existing access programs and policies which agencies currently deliver specifically for migrants (Tier 1); and
2. current priority migrant settlement issues in Western Australia and strategies to address these issues during the (12 month) life of the Plan.

Through the State Settlement Planning Committee and the *State Settlement Plan*, the Department of Training has developed strategies to contribute to the settlement experience of newly arrived migrants by:

1. Increasing awareness of, and access to, the full range of training and employment programs through:
 - delivery of English language training; and
 - implementing information dissemination strategies targeting people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.

2. Increasing the representation and achievement of people from CaLD backgrounds across the full range of VET through:
 - implementing strategies to improve access to community courses and apprenticeships and traineeships; and
 - improving support for students from CaLD backgrounds in VET courses.

3. Increasing access to employment through:
 - the activities of the OQU;
 - supporting Joblink projects at three metropolitan migrant resource centres through the Department's State Employment Assistance Strategy (SEAS); and
 - implementing a work experience pilot in the public sector for people from CaLD backgrounds.