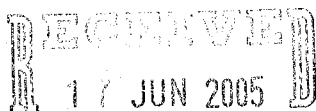


The Secretary
Joint Committee on Migration
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

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Dear Sir/ Madam

BY: MIC

I wish to draw the attention of the Committee to what appears to be an anomaly in the skills assessment process in relation to trades people.

Trades people who wish to apply for permanent residence in Australia are required to first have their skills assessed by Trades Recognition Australia (TRA). It has recently been announced by TRA that applicants holding an AQF Certificate III will only be able to receive a favourable assessment of their trades skills if, in addition, they have "relevant and directly related work experience equaling not less than 900 hours". The work experience must be obtained outside the classroom or training environment and must be carried out under the supervision of a fully qualified person in the relevant occupation.

A simple calculation will show that, on the basis of a 40-hour working week, the 900 hour requirement equates to 22.5 weeks, or almost six months.

On the other hand, for many years now the government has held it out as a carrot to overseas students that upon completing an Australian qualification (including an AQF Certificate III) following two years of full-time study in Australia, they will immediately be eligible to apply for skilled migration, without the need for the skilled work experience which is required in the case of overseas applicants for skilled migration. The new criteria imposed by TRA appear to conflict with the policy of the government.

Furthermore, it is a requirement for a student applying for skilled migration on the basis of having completed an Australian qualification that he or she must lodge the application within six months of completion of the qualification. The effect of this in combination with the new TRA criterion is that nobody will in future be able to apply for skilled migration on the basis of completion of an AQF Certificate III. Such a student will need to first complete nearly six months of full-time work (assuming he or she can find such work) following the completion of the certificate¹. However, the student's visa conditions do not permit him or her to work a 40-hour week. Indeed, if the course has been completed and the student is not applying for onshore migration (as he or she will not yet be in a position to do, in this case), then he or she is expected to leave Australia.

¹ TRA will apparently accept work done during training, e.g. by work placement, if the training organization arranges this for its students, but it is unlikely that such work will amount to anything like 900 hours; furthermore, TRA may or may not accept such work as being adequate.

The TRA assessment process will also take at least 3 months from the time when the student applies until the time when the assessment is issued.

It seems quite irrational to say, on the one hand, that a student may apply for skilled migration immediately upon completion of an Australian qualification and, on the other hand, that in the case of one of the most important and widely-sought qualifications this will be impossible. It seems particularly irrational in circumstances where numbers of overseas students are already dropping off due to reduced chances for migration as a result of recent raising of the bar in the points test and the onerous obligations attached to student visas, and where it is generally agreed that there is a serious shortage of skilled tradespeople in this country. One might have thought that the sensible thing to do would be to make it easier, rather than more difficult, for people with appropriate skills to migrate to Australia. TRA, however, appears to be going the other way. It seems to be generally tightening its criteria, demanding increased documentation, and showing little understanding of the realities of trade training in many overseas countries where it tends to be informal and practice-based without rigorous documentation.

It may be that there is legitimate concern that some Australian trade courses are of inadequate standard. This would be a not surprising consequence of the current tendency to treat education as a money-making enterprise. The proper way to deal with inadequate standards, however, would be to monitor the courses and the education providers, not to make migration even harder for international students. Consideration might also be given to universal and independent testing of trade students, either before the award of an AQF Certificate III or at the time of skills assessment.

TRA advises that its new 900-hour requirement will not apply to those whose courses began before 1 February 2005. This much, at least, is fair. However, in the period of about eighteen months which will elapse before the requirement begins to affect the students who have enrolled since that date, I suggest that officers of TRA and of the Department of Immigration should sit down together and take a long hard look at the issues. At present there is a serious conflict of policy which needs to be resolved at a high level.

Yours sincerely

(Dr Rory Hudson)
Director
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