

SUBMISSION TO JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON MIGRATION'S INQUIRY INTO OVERSEAS SKILLS RECOGNITION, UPGRADING AND LICENSING

Background to submission by Migrant Network Services

Migrant Network Services (MNS) receives core funding from the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) as the regional settlement organization for Northern Sydney Region¹. It also delivered employment services to skilled migrants through the NSW Government's Skilled Migrant Placement Program (SMPP) from April through to June 2004, when the NSW Government ceased funding for the program.

Two key characteristics of settlement in Northern Sydney are: a pattern of dispersed settlement across the Region, which reduces the visibility or impact of relatively small ethno-specific community groups in relation to accessing funding or services; and a significant level of skilled migration². The area of employment is one of the key areas of concern raised by MNS's new and recently-arrived migrants, particularly those in the Skilled Stream.

Migrant Network Services made representations in 2004 to the Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs, the Hon Peter McGauran MP, following closure of the Skilled Migrant Placement Program, about the importance of providing employment-related assistance to new and recently-arrived migrants to support their effective settlement. MNS convened a roundtable meeting of local providers and industry and Government representatives in January 2005, at Minister McGauran's request. This meeting was also attended by the Federal Attorney-General, the Hon Philip Ruddock MP, in whose electorate Migrant Network Services' main office is located.

This submission focuses on the first and third areas of identified concern for the Inquiry. It is based on Migrant Network Services' delivery of direct settlement services since 1998, its delivery of employment support services under the Skilled Migrant Placement Program, its community capacity building activities, consultations with communities in the Region, and its work in identifying service gaps and working in collaboration with government and non-government services to address those gaps.

Response to Inquiry questions

1. Current arrangements for overseas skills recognition and associated areas of licensing and registration

- A key concern which is regularly raised by new and recent arrivals attending orientation interviews at MNS is the apparent confusion between offshore assessment of skills for the purpose of visa grant, and onshore assessment of qualifications for the purposes of actual employment post-arrival. Obtaining appropriate employment is a key concern for most new settlers in the immediate period following their arrival³; this confusion about assessment is a particular

¹ including Hornsby, Hunters Hill, Ku-ring-gai, Lane Cove, Manly, Mosman, North Sydney, Pittwater, Ryde, Warringah and Willoughby

² DIMIA Settlement Database figures indicate that over 60 per cent of the intake in the past five years (1 July 1999 – 30 June 2004) to Northern Sydney were entrants in the Skilled Stream.

³ particularly for General Skill Migration and Business Entry visa holders

problem at a time when they are dealing with so many other matters of concern in their early settlement, including obtaining accommodation, placing children in schools, etc.

- A number of skilled migrants have also expressed their concern about the perceived lack of parity between the skills and qualifications which they have obtained overseas, usually in their own country, and those which obtain in Australia. Some see this assessment as a slight on the educational system under which they obtained their overseas qualifications; this can in turn impact negatively on their perceptions of work in Australia, and their capacity to obtain appropriate work. This can be a particular issue for entrants whose qualifications and skills are not the primary basis of their visa grant, and who seek post-arrival assessment of skills and qualifications – for example humanitarian entrants, and the family of skilled migrants.
- Time is usually of the essence for new arrivals in seeking employment, and the time which it takes to settle, identify the relevant assessment body, send proof of skills and qualifications, and then wait for assessment advice are all constraints on new arrivals seeking employment. The requirement for some to undertake bridging courses, or a longer period of further study, creates further concerns.
- It is important to have the capacity, within settlement service provision, to talk and support new arrivals through the onshore process of skills recognition, particularly in skill areas where the process is more complex.
- A number of skilled migrants have expressed concern to MNS that assessing bodies such as VETASSESS⁴ and NOOSR⁵ have been using the Country Education Profiles, prepared by NOOSR, as the main instrument or reference tool for recognition. Concerns include:
 - the fact that the booklet used for assessments in relation to Peru was dated June 1993, and the information it contained was therefore some 12 years old.
 - inaccuracy in the information contained in the booklet in relation to some universities, even at the time of printing, in relation to assessment and comparison of a small group of universities as “good”, to the detriment of others which are of equal or better educational level.
 - the lack of transparency in the process which are reflected by such inaccuracies and out of date information. Concerns are further exacerbated by the continuing sale of the booklet, and its price;
 - the unnecessary (and redundant) requirement placed on the applicant to undertake a lengthier assessment process than would be required if the institution in question at which the applicant had studied had been properly identified. This is time which many skilled migrants do not have to spare, particularly if they are claiming points for age and are close to the age limit at which they will lose points, or need the assessment to proceed with employment onshore, etc.
- The offshore assessment of professionals such as IT engineers is not consistent from country to country. For example bachelor degrees in certain countries are assess as a lower level than the Australian degree, and are given a rating similar

⁴ which undertakes offshore skills assessment for more than 50% of the Managers and Administrators, Professionals, Associate Professionals and other Occupations in DIMIA's Skills Occupations List (Form 1121i)

⁵ which undertakes offshore and onshore skills recognition assessments for teachers at Pre-Primary, Primary and Secondary levels

- to technician; if a professional from the same country and similar degree has studied a masters degree in a country other than their own, they are recognised at the masters level.
- Accountants migrating to NSW face other kinds of issues. They usually have to study 3 more subjects, including Australian law, to be officially recognised and be able to practice in Australia. The subjects they have to study are only taught in universities and are expensive for newly arrived migrants; information on government loans is not widespread. There is inconsistency when overseas skills are assessed offshore because a number of different organisations currently undertake such assessment - CPAA, ICAA, VETASSESS and NIA. There have been reports from some clients that if one assessing organization does not recognise a particular person as an accountant, they can be successful with another. This leads to a lot of confusion, and extra costs for prospective migrants who seek the advice of migration agents. The lack of clarity about which professional body would be the most appropriate for a new arrival to join once he/she has arrived in NSW, given the difficulty in new arrivals assessing the relevance of each body to different Australian states, is a concern. Provision of such information off shore or soon after arrival, could avoid or reduce a lot of the confusion.

3. Identify areas where Australia's procedures can be improved

Communication of processes to users

- The limited research available indicates that people absorb relevant information at a different rate, and in different ways. Provision of a lot of important information about migrating to Australia, particularly when sent by post through overseas immigration offices, may not be the most effective way of informing applicants about the potential complexity of the assessment process.
- It may be more appropriate for overseas posts to consider providing information seminars for potential – or indeed successful – visa applicants so that there is a better capacity to provide verbal information, and respond more directly and immediately to applicants' questions and issues. It could also be useful for government to research further the optimum rate at which migrants receive and absorb information, and develop a more staged approach to information provision.
- The Department could also consider tailoring its current pilot program of pre-embarkation information sessions for humanitarian entrants to address the issue of communicating procedures for assessing qualifications under both the Humanitarian and Migration Programs.
- There is wide spread confusion regarding the offshore skills recognition for migration purposes and for employment in Australia. It should be clearly stated in the final assessment document that the recognition is just for migration purposes and that they might have to seek further recognition to effectively practice their careers in Australia (currently they are just told "this assessment does not guarantee employment"); undertaking just one assessment for both purposes would be even better. Differences between offshore skills assessment by NOOSR, and onshore skills assessment by the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) , for example can create major issues for some migrants. MNS had one client, a female teacher from India with excellent English, an obvious passion for teaching, and more than 10 years teaching experience teaching. The rejection by NSW DET of her skills, with the comment that she had not studied in a University, but "just in a institute

similar to TAFE”, meant that these skills and dedication were lost to the public school sector. Suggesting bridging courses, or something similar, rather than neglecting the valuable experience that this teacher had brought to Australia, would have been a more constructive approach.

- Skilled migrants have suggested that providing more accurate information and better ways of accessing information, in a timely fashion, could provide better outcomes. These strategies could include the insertion of a standard paragraph by DIMIA and/or the assessing body in the letter of final assessment, advising of the importance of contacting organisations such as Migrant Resource Centres(MRCs)/Migrant Service Agencies (MSAs) where they can be guided. Distribution of settlement information, such as DIMIA's *Beginning a life in Australia*, shortly after arrival in Australia could also be a good strategy; this publication is currently translated into 21 community languages and provides information for each state and territory. MNS provides all new arrivals with a copy of this document, and helps them to access to DIMIA website as appropriate.

Efficiency of processes and elimination of barriers

- Although there is a rationale underlying the offshore pre-arrival, and post-arrival, assessment of qualifications, this appears in some cases to be double-handling of qualifications, and there could be opportunities to simplify the process in Australia, providing applicants with only one assessment process.
- MNS has attached a copy of the discussion paper which it prepared following the meeting with Minister McGauran in January 2005, for the Joint Standing Committee's consideration in relation to elimination of identified barriers. Whilst its scope is somewhat broader than that of this inquiry, it does address some of the barriers relating to skills recognition; more importantly, it identifies a range of other barriers which militate against skilled migrants, particularly those who have been granted visas on the basis of their specific skills, obtaining appropriate employment in Australia. Addressing barriers to the effective recognition of skills and qualifications is an important step in the process of ensuring that Australia's skill shortages are addressed effectively; it is likely to have somewhat limited success if other barriers to obtaining employment post-arrival in Australia are not also addressed.
- Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) and Migrant Service Agencies (MSAs) are not resourced through current funding programs to guide migrants from a range of occupations through the skills recognition process, though they are ideally placed to do to. The SMPP or a similar employment program is needed to guide appropriately these migrants towards overseas skills recognition, upgrading of qualifications and licensing to finally filled the skills shortages in Australia and contribute to the economic and social development of our country. The experience in our service shows that the lack of strategies to “welcome” migrants bringing skills to Australia appropriately, mean that many of these valuable skills and experience are wasted in low skills jobs. All the offshore process, money and time spent by both the Australian Government and overseas applicants is wasted; rather than bringing benefits to skilled migrants, their families, and the broader community, the process yields anxiety, depression and frustration.

Awareness and acceptance of recognised overseas qualifications by Australian employers

- Migrant Network Services' settlement and employment services to date indicate that there is considerable variation between different employers, and between

employment sectors and disciplines, in relation to both understanding of the nature of the skills assessment process, and acceptance of overseas skills. Acceptance of recognised overseas qualifications is not automatic on the part of some employers, and often requires intervention by a third party who is advocating for the applicant and who can talk the employer through the process and the value of the overseas qualifications.

Prepared by Migrant Network Services, June 2005