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SUBMISSION to
Joint Standing Committee on Migration
Inquiry into Overseas Skills
Recognition, Upgrading and Licensing

**"So Dentists Become
Taxi Drivers"**
by
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Introduction

This submission is based on research conducted in 2002 by the Centre for Learning and Social Transformation at the University of Western Sydney. The research was concerned with the employment seeking experiences of newly arrived skilled migrants and refugees (SMRs), more specifically their experiences in accessing employment in the NSW public sector. The research focussed on tertiary qualified SMRs only. The project included portfolio development workshops and workplace visits that assisted some participants into employment. The research also involved public sector recruiters and Skilled Migrant Placement Officers (SMPOs). The latter were funded by the NSW State Government. The funding program no longer exists.

Scope of this submission:

The submission is limited to tertiary skilled migrants and refugees. For the purpose of our research, a distinction between skilled migrants and refugees was not necessary and our submission cannot retrospectively make that distinction. All comments provided here refer to both groups and their experience.

The submission is underpinned by two key findings:

Our findings suggest that a large group of tertiary qualified skilled migrants and refugees exists who share the experience of having their qualifications and employment options downgraded after arrival in Australia. These findings are consistent with other national and international research and support the urgent need for action to overcome barriers of occupational mobility for this group.

Our research demonstrates that a possibility exists for Skilled Migrants and Refugees to enhance their employment opportunities by being provided with i) access to a comprehensive skills assessment process including the development of a contextualised portfolio of skills, experience and qualifications and ii) access to networks and peer groups linking them into the labour market and/or higher education.

- Submission -

Rhani's story...

Rhani, 30, migrated to Australia with her husband, from India in 1992 as a skilled migrant. She possesses a science degree, as well as a Masters in Forensic Science. She worked for four years in a university forensic laboratory prior to coming to Australia. Being accepted as a skilled migrant, she thought that she would be able to obtain work in her profession.

After arriving in Australia she approached several job network agencies to assist her with finding work in her field. One of the agencies did not even know what a forensic scientist did! Eventually one agency arranged some work experience for her at a morgue. She asked the workplace manager about the possibility of some paid work, saying she was prepared to work as a lab assistant, just to get some local experience. She was told there was no work available, although the manager's daughter (a year 10 school leaver) was recently employed as a lab assistant. The manager advised her to consider a change in careers. Dispirited, she returned to the job-network agency, prepared to take any kind of work. She did several clerical and computer skills courses and another work-experience placement at a public sector agency, where after completion, she was offered a paid position. She has since worked in several public sector agencies and is currently working permanent part-time, which suits her as she now has 2 young children.

Rhani however, has not given up hope in finding employment as a forensic scientist, as she has tried to keep her knowledge up to date by reading industry journals. She acknowledges that she needs to undertake further training to update her skills and is mindful that she will have to accept a position that is not commensurate with her abilities and experience.

Rhani visited the NSW Police Service for the workplace visit component of the portfolio development workshop. It was during this visit that she was told about an upcoming intake for Crime Scene Forensic Officers. She has applied for one of the positions and is hoping to be offered an interview later in 2002.

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

Most research participants said that they had received no information about the assessment of qualifications process prior to their arrival in Australia. Some of the skilled migrants said they had assumed their qualifications had been assessed and recognised as part of the skilled migration application process. It was not until participants started looking for work post arrival that they were informed about the often very complex process of having their qualifications assessed. They reported that the non-recognition, or the under-recognition of their overseas qualifications had been a disappointing, and for some, a disabling experience.

1.1 Skills stream migrants who obtain assessment prior to migrating;

We have identified several issues associated with assessment prior to migration.

- a) Not all occupations listed on the Skilled Occupation List require formal accreditation or qualifications in Australia, formal assessment should not be required of skilled migrants. In some areas, the assessment criteria applied to migrants are incongruent with criteria for employment and professional recognition in Australia. For example, welfare workers in Australia are recruited by employers because of their experience, not because of formal qualifications. In the cases where formal qualifications are required a wide range of qualifications can satisfy the selection criteria. The criteria for accreditation by the assessing body (AIWCW) are not related to employment practices nor is the assessing body a widely recognised professional organisation.
- b) Skilled migrants and especially those from CALD countries, who have their qualifications assessed prior to migration, often lack the idiomatic knowledge required to present their qualifications in a way consistent with Australian nomenclature. For example, occupational and degree descriptors do not always translate easily from one cultural context into another. My own experience can serve as an example here. My first degree is a German 4-year degree, completed with a thesis, similar to an Australian Bachelor (Hons). The German nomenclature describes this as a 'Diplom' and the related occupation is that of a 'Diplompaedagoge' concerned with the application of 'social pedagogy'. Neither the degree, the profession nor the concept exists in the same way in Australia. Instead, I have come to describe myself as adult educator, as the closest approximation after having had the time and opportunity to familiarise myself with the local context.
- c) Once applicants' qualifications have been recognised for the purpose of migration, many will conflate this outcome with getting access to commensurate employment. This is not the case. Although information provided to migrants by DIMIA stresses this point, it may not be sufficient.

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

Albert's story...

Albert, aged 34 years, is a refugee from Sierra Leone and arrived in Australia early 2002. Albert holds a degree in engineering and several post-graduate degrees in Environmental Sciences and Project Management. He has extensive working experience as an environmental project manager, working on a variety of projects in Africa, as well as facilitating training and workshops for the United Nations. He is also fluent in several languages including English, Italian and French.

Upon his arrival in Australia, he had his qualifications assessed and while his undergraduate degree was not considered equivalent to an Australian degree his post-graduate qualifications were considered equivalent to similar Australian post-graduate awards. Armed with these assessments, as well as his extensive work experience, he approached several job network agencies to seek assistance finding appropriate employment. He was told by several agencies that his was a very 'specialised' area of work and they could not offer him work in this field. However instead of referring him to an agency that may be able to better assist, they insisted he consider working in factories or as a manual labourer, remarking that he was "a strong and healthy young man, able to lift heavy boxes." Albert replied that he also had a brain!

Fortunately, Albert contacted an Skilled Migrant Placement Officer (SMPO – discontinued state government funded program, R.W.) who was very supportive and well resourced. While attending the portfolio development workshop in this research project Albert applied for a job with a public sector agency, with the assistance of his SMPO. For his workplace visit the researchers organised for Albert to visit the agency to which he had just applied for a position. As a result of this workplace visit, he was offered a work experience placement. During his work experience placement he was offered an interview for the position he had applied for. He said he was relaxed because he now felt familiar enough with the agency and confident because he knew he could perform the job. The work experience had provided Albert with information and an understanding of the workplace that resulted in him performing well in an interview situation. He also commented to researchers that through the work experience he was able to meet and make friends with other people that did the same kind of work, and that the development of these professional networks also gave him a sense of support and belonging.

Albert was successful in obtaining the position and is now working as a project officer on a project in far western NSW.

For many new arrivals skills and qualifications assessment was a difficult, confusing and long process, often requiring professional advice and assistance. For some it was a costly exercise and as is common for many new migrants, and especially refugees, financial resources are scarce and qualification assessment ends up a low priority for some.

Others were advised by the assessing bodies that their qualifications are only considered equivalent to a local diploma or certificate (sometimes equivalent only a Higher School Certificate) and advised they would need to undertake further studies to reach Australian degree or postgraduate equivalency. However some of the participants said that further studies were/are not an option for them. The cost of higher education often prohibits new migrants and refugees from participating in immediate higher education. While some universities offer undergraduate HECS places to new migrants and refugees, these places are minimal and many bridging courses are not HECS based. The question of gaining entry to the course in the first instance remains, as many are based on local University Admission Indices (UAI's).

Participants also explained that securing employment was their main priority (after housing and immediate health needs), and further training and education (even bridging courses) came second. The only education that was prioritised was intensive English language courses. For many, upgrading of qualifications was delayed, with some of the participants in fact never returning to studies.

Most participants expressed dissatisfaction or frustration with the service received from job network agencies.

Job network agencies do not specialise in particular areas of employment, this work is the domain of private recruitment agencies. Newly arrived skilled migrants are not immediately clued into the private recruitment sector and from preliminary investigations private recruitment agencies are generally not responsive to the needs of newly arrived skilled migrants and refugees

From the anecdotal evidence provided the job network agencies seem to prioritise the needs of the employers they service, rather than the job seekers needs. Participants expressed concern at this prioritization believing their employment needs were not valued. One participant commented that he felt like, "fodder for the factories".

Participants thought that most staff at job network agencies do not seem to possess broad knowledge of the Australian labour market generally and are unwilling to assist the job seeker obtain work in a particular field, one in which they may be qualified for. None of the participants who had utilised job network services had been referred to another agency that may have been better able to assist. This unwillingness to refer to other agencies results in limited options for job seekers.

Participants also expressed concern that job network employees had little regard for migrants with overseas qualifications. Some participants reported that they were treated with hostility and were often spoken to condescendingly. Other participants reported that they felt they had been covertly discriminated against because they were from a non-English speaking background. The refugee participants believed that their refugee status in particular attracted prejudicial behaviour.

- 1.3 *Temporary residents who need skills assessment/ recognition; and
(Not addressed in this submission)*
- 1.4 *Australian citizens returning after significant time overseas, with overseas qualifications.
(Not addressed in this submission)*

2. Consider how Australia's arrangements compare with those of other major immigration countries.
(Not addressed in this submission)

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

- 3.1 *Communication of processes to users
(Not addressed in this submission)*

3.2 Efficiency of processes and elimination of barriers

The following have been identified as enablers, enhancing job opportunities for skilled migrants and refugees.

English language skills

Proficiency in English language skills, both written and oral, was identified by all three groups as important to enhancing employment opportunities in the Australian labour market. The migrant and refugee groups acknowledged the value of possessing proficient English language skills, with most prioritising the attendance of English language classes soon after arrival. Both the SMPO and the recruiters group, agreed upon the importance of good English language skills, reiterating the value employers place on clear verbal and written communication.

Networking and work experience

The ability to develop networks was seen to enhance the individual's opportunities to obtain employment in a chosen labour market sector. The development of networks and professional contacts was vital to achieving employment in a profession successful participation in the Australian labour market. Networking could lead to mentoring relationships, where the mentor advised and assisted in the further development of networks and professional support.

Networking often led directly to employment with employment opportunities being offered within the network. This was a common practice for short-term, casual or contract position, where the job did not have to be advertised to adhere to Equal Employment Opportunity legislation. Often networking was advantageous even where the job is advertised formally, providing the individual with 'insider' knowledge and a contextual framework that could be used to their advantage in an interview situation.

Similarly work experience placement provided job seekers with opportunities to develop networks and acquire familiarity with a workplace environment. It also informed the job seeker of the kinds of skills and experience required to perform a particular job. Work experience gave job seekers local experience, which was highly valued by local employers. Work experience placements could also lead directly to employment, with placement employers offering work as a result of the skills and experienced demonstrate throughout the placement.

Access to information

The provision of information was vital to the job seekers ability to be able to make informed decisions about employment opportunities. From pre-embarkation to post settlement, information and access to it played a pivotal role in the successful participation of newly arrived migrants and refugees in the Australian community.

Access to pertinent, up-to-date information about a range of things including how to write a public sector job application, including criteria expectations, where to locate jobs, who to speak to about an advertised job etc. enhances the job seekers ability to be fully informed about the position.

Recruiter and employment agency attitudes

Satisfying employment outcomes for newly arrived refugees and skilled migrants depended largely on the attitudes and commitment of employment support services and employers generally. It was reported by all groups that positive employment outcomes were often generated by the cooperative and facilitative approach adopted by employers and employment support services.

*3.3 Early identification and response to persons needing skills upgrading (e.g. bridging courses)
(Not addressed in this submission)*

3.4 Awareness and acceptance of recognised overseas qualifications by Australian employers

SMRs reported that degrees obtained from Australian universities were more valued over degrees and other educational qualifications obtained from overseas universities. There was also a notion that university degrees obtained in countries where English is not the first language, were not only of lesser value, but were often considered irrelevant. This can be especially so for refugees who were more often than not from developing countries or war-torn and whose "qualifications are often judged as inferior to Australian qualifications". (Iredale, 1994)

*"A law degree from Pakistan is not the same as a law degree from here."
(Recruiter, focus group, 1 July 2002)*

So how do we know that someone with an Australian qualification is more qualified than someone with an overseas qualification? When this question was put to the recruiters, some participants suggested that Australian degrees were indeed valued over overseas-obtained degrees. One recruiter revealed that university degrees from non-English speaking countries, especially developing countries were certainly deemed to be lesser value. Some of the participants suggested that bias is based on the relevant local knowledge a person acquires through undertaking a degree in the country he or she wished to eventually work in. A person with a law degree from an Australian university is better able to understand the Australia legal landscape.

The concern of cultural difference extended not only to university degrees and professional qualifications but was also applied to trades and other types of work not necessarily requiring university degrees. One of the recruiters discussed the problems associated with employing people from overseas with trade experience, only to discover that often there were inconsistencies with the kinds of tools and equipment used in their home countries. The recruiters claimed that people from developing nations often did not have access to sophisticated equipment especially certain kinds of specialist machinery, and this posed possible serious health and safety concerns.

The focus group participants also discussed how local work experience was valued over overseas work experience. If a person had relevant work experience in the Australian workforce then it was highly probable that he or she would be favoured over someone that had no local work experience. This extended to those who had paid work experience in Australia over those that had had only unpaid work experience. Recruiters in the workshop did say it really depended however on the kind of work experience the applicant had and the kind of job being applied for, but generally they believed employers would prefer someone with local experience.

3.5 *Achieving greater consistency in recognition of qualifications for occupational licensing by state and territory regulators
(Not addressed in this submission)*

3.6 Alternative approaches to skills assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications

The Centre for Learning and Social Transformation (CLAST) at the University of Western Sydney is currently engaged in a pilot project – looking into the feasibility of setting-up a Skills & Experience Assessment & Development Unit - with overseas CALD qualified engineers, who have been unable to gain related employment, industry partners and government departments. More information on this pilot is available online at www.uws.edu.au/sead. This pilot project continues the work of the CLAST on skills and experience recognition and is based on:

Skills and experience assessment, contextualisation and portfolio development

In practical terms, what is required here is a learning and development process that brings together participants with a suitably qualified professional who develop with the participants individual portfolios of evidence representative of all their skills, experiences and qualifications. As part of this learning process, the context of the Australian labour market and requirements of the various employment sectors and cultural peculiarities of the Australian work environment are to be considered.

Professional development

Generic professional development programs, including formal communication training, information technology and professional principles of practice are useful to orient SMRs to the Australian professional workplace. In addition, specific professional development programs in relation to their area of expertise (engineering) are provided.

Upgrading and updating of qualifications and access to scholarly and professional peer groups.

Many qualifications that are downgraded in formal assessment processes could be upgraded and updated by way of 'bridging' programs or 'fast tracking'. In practical terms, the pilot project provides Recognition of Prior Learning advocacy and develops contacts within the university to promote a general preparedness to support 'productive diversity' policies. The university's intellectual capital, as it resides in its staff can be made accessible to SMRs by way of participation in scholarly and professional peer groups. Inevitably, this can lead to an enrichment of local intellectual capital by way of shared knowledge and experience.

Network development

Access to the labour market is determined by many factors, including knowledge of and access to professional networks. Linking SMRs to university staff, engaged in research and teaching in their field of practice provides access to work placements in conjunction with students or other practitioners.

Attachment:

Wagner, R. (ed.) (2003) Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education and the Australian Labour Market - the case of skilled migrants & refugees. UWS, ISBN 186341 824 5