

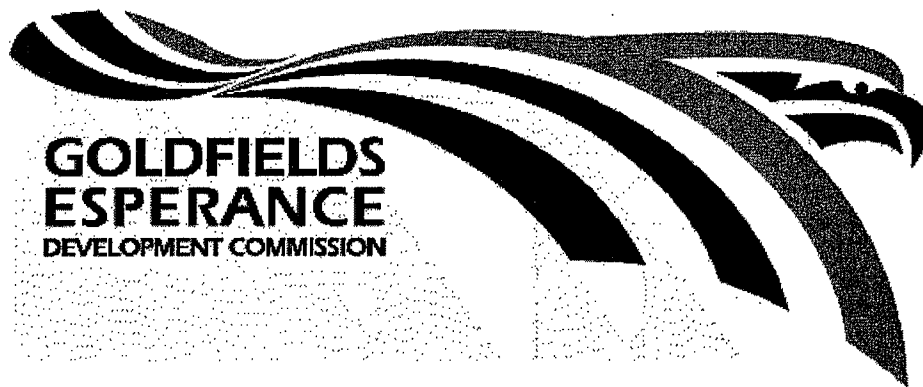
27 JUN 2005

RCD/A

BY: miq

Submission No.	38
Date Received	28/6/05

# SUBMISSION TO INQUIRY INTO SKILLS RECOGNITION, UPGRADING AND LICENSING



## GOLDFIELDS ESPERANCE DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

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23 June 2005

## INTRODUCTION

The Goldfields-Esperance region is located in the South Eastern corner of Western Australia and incorporates nine local government areas – the City of Kalgoorlie-Boulder and the Shires of Coolgardie, Dundas, Esperance, Laverton, Leonora, Menzies, Ngaanyatjaraku and Ravensthorpe.

The Goldfields-Esperance region is characterised by a number of paradoxes. A land area of 771,276 km<sup>2</sup> makes the region over three times the size of the State of Victoria, and just under a third of Western Australia's total land mass. It is the largest region in Western Australia and yet has a population base of just 55,255.

Despite this relatively small population, it is considered the 'engine room' of the Western Australian economy. The region's GRP for 2003-04 was \$4.31 billion. This figure shown per capita is a massive \$78,551, significantly higher than other regions, with the average for Western Australia being \$45,555. In 2003-04, mining was responsible for almost 59% of the region's GRP. While the Region's mineral production in 2003 was \$4 billion, 69.5% of the value of Gold and 65.2% of nickel products, of the States total.

The Goldfields-Esperance region has shown over the decades how vital the Region is to the state and national economies. A population of less than 60,000 contributes \$525m in taxes (\$9,000 per taxpayer) and royalties of \$50m plus the gold tax.

The Esperance Port has undergone major expansions that allow Cape size vessels (180,000 tonnes) to be fully loaded with additional expansions planned to cater for the Ravensthorpe Nickel Project, which is currently under construction.

In terms of infrastructure provision, including transportation, the paradox is that whilst the Region is economically significant in State and national terms; its large, mostly remote, geographic expanse and low population base makes the traditional business case for the provision of infrastructure services difficult to justify.

The general perception of the Goldfields-Esperance region as a remote/regional location is compounded with low unemployment rates. The current job opportunities across Australia and the perceived lack of facilities and services in regional areas are impacting on the Region's ability to attract and retain skilled people.

## BACKGROUND TO SUBMISSION

The Goldfields Esperance Development Commission (GEDC) has been a Regional Certifying Body (RCB) for the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) since the introduction of the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme in 1996. During this time GEDC's role with migration initiatives and skills recognition issues has expanded due to the introduction and expansion of migration programs that focus on the regional areas and skills shortages.

GEDC has been proactive in promoting the migration initiatives as an avenue to employers having difficulty attracting and retaining staff. The current skills shortages are set to continue, and in many cases worsen, as industry expands and continues to develop in the Region. Many employers in the Region are unable to fill their positions and are considering options to address this issue including recruiting from overseas or utilising the Regional Migration initiatives available to them.

The Goldfields-Esperance region faces a number of challenges when attracting and retaining suitably qualified staff. The barriers faced by regions can vary greatly, for example each region of Western Australia has their unique benefits and challenges when attracting staff and filling existing vacancies. It is important that skills assessment processes are considered in terms of the impact on the sponsoring employers as these barriers can deter employers and applicants from using the immigration programs. GEDC would support the adoption of any changes that can result in a streamlined, fast and efficient skills assessment process to overcome this issue.

GEDC recognises that some organisations tasked with the responsibility of assessing qualifications are very efficient and respond within a reasonable timeframe with reasonable requests. However, there are other areas that require attention to enable Australia to attract suitably skilled employees, as the existing processes deter people from trying. With skills shortages set to worsen as the ageing population exits the existing workforce the time to address this issue is now.

This increased demand for skills migration can clearly be demonstrated in GEDC's application processing figures as detailed in table one.

**Table One: Regional Migration Applications Certified by GEDC**

YEAR	APPLICATIONS RECEIVED	% INCREASE FROM PREVIOUS YEAR	% INCREASE FROM 2002/03
2002/03	24		--
2003/04	42	75%	75%
2004/05	78	86%	325%

*Source: GEDC Migration Application Recording Table*

This is a significant increase in itself, however 2004/05 has also been a year that GEDC have helped companies become 'Pre-qualified Business Sponsors' via the temporary 457 Business Scheme. GEDC is aware that 15 companies have been approved for 185 positions via this Scheme; these positions are likely to be filled during the next two years. These figures do not include companies that have not required assistance and have completed the process themselves.

GEDC has provided the following comments to the Terms of Reference based on the cases that it has encountered through the Regional Migration Programs.

## TERMS OF REFERENCE

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;***

### *Trades Recognition Australia*

The current processing times, as per the Trades Recognition Australia (TRA) website (<http://www.workplace.gov.au/workplace/Category/SchemesInitiatives/TRA/Pre-MigrationOccupationsAssessment.htm>) for an assessment is 120 working days. This equates to 24 weeks or nearly six months. When all the other items that are required for migration purposes are considered, and especially if this assessment process has been overlooked at the start of the process this process can significantly extend the time between applying for migration and being granted a visa.

Applicants are given the option by TRA to pay additional money to have priority assessments undertaken. These priority assessments are placed at the end of the priority queue and are meant to take approximately 60 working days for processing. However, actual experience has demonstrated that even priority assessments are taking the 120 working days and that the majority of people applying for assessments are paying to have priority assessments completed, as they want the applications approved as soon as possible.

The following items all impact on TRA operations:

- One of the most significant skills shortages in Australia exist in the trade related areas.
- Migration programs have been expanded to provide more opportunities for overseas people to be considered as skilled applicants.
- More companies are utilising migration to fill skills shortages.
- Skills shortages are likely to continue for some time.

The current structure and processes do not adequately cater for the demand.

GEDC would recommend the review of the current process, resourcing and staffing of TRA or the adding of other assessment bodies to undertake this task to address this issue.

### *Doctors, Medical and Allied Health Professionals*

The current systems and assessment processes for the Doctors, Medical and Allied Health professions is very restrictive, drawn out and time consuming and varies from stream to stream. Medical Practitioners, Surgeons, Psychiatrists, Physiotherapists, etc are all being deterred from either coming to Australia or trying to remain here due to the current systems.

For example, for a Psychiatrist that is already practicing on a temporary visa in Australia who wishes to become a permanent resident, the required processes take a minimum of two years utilising the current system. This system involves undertaking an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) for language ability; the reality is that these are not conducted in Regional Western Australian centres, so the applicant must travel to Perth where they are conducted twice yearly.

If the testing date is missed, or the applicant is not available on the set date, or they are fully booked there is a further six months wait or it can be conducted Eastern States. All of this travel and associated costs are at the applicants' expense.

This is a costly and inconvenient scenario, especially when the person concerned has been living and working in Australia for a period of time. This could be resolved by anyone taking the time to have a conversation with the applicant and reviewing the written documentation required to complete the application or perform day-to-day duties in the current position to determine if they require the IELTS in the first place.

The applicant must also submit an application to the Australian Medical Council, Medical Board of Western Australia and/or relevant College for a skills assessment. These applications are not considered concurrently, the applicant needs to submit the first application await a response and then submit the next application to the next body for a slightly more in-depth review of similar paperwork. This methodology is deterring people from becoming residents when they are already onshore. Imagine the impact that it has on the suitably qualified people offshore that are considering Australia as an option, it would not be conducive to attracting them to Australia.

For applicants considering Australia, New Zealand is usually an option that applicants consider. As applicants can migrate to New Zealand quicker and easier and then stay and gain citizenship. The applicant can then migrate to Australia to practice as New Zealand residents. This removes all the other application requirements and processes that are required if they try to come direct to Australia to work. That is, if they don't decide to stay in New Zealand as it has provided an opportunity in an expedited manner and they have settled comfortably in the community.

It should be noted that there are some fields, such as Paediatrics, that have considered the impact of the assessment process and have streamlined the processes to make it more attractive to applicants.

### *Electricians*

The trades' assessment for electricians involves two stages – one offshore that is a initial assessment for immigration purposes, then the TRA for the Australian Recognised Trade Certificate. Under the current system these processes can take a year before an electrician is ready to commence work.

A number of underlying issues also sit under this heading when considering electricians. When considering the process it can be further complicated by the classification system. Under the current system an electrician can be classified in different categories by the Electrical Licensing Board, if the classification isn't what the employer required, then the applicant may be required to submit up to three applications and undergo two tests to receive the correct licence. TRA may also require an additional test if they are not satisfied with the supporting documentation provided by the applicant.

Given the fact that the applicants cannot operate as electricians until the licences are issued the economic impacts need to be considered. The applicant having immigrated to Australia is usually short of funds and is relying on an income to sustain them, as they are ineligible for any Government assistance. The employer is relying on their productivity to generate income, meet work deadlines and allow for the expansion of their business.

If the employer cannot cover the costs of this additional person, as is the instance for most Regional businesses, then the applicant may be left without income for up to six months. In some cases the Electricians are carrying out Trades Assistant work until the TRA processes are complete. However this is not suitable for either the Business or the Applicant.

• ***Temporary residents who need skills assessment/recognition***

*Doctors, Medical and Allied Professionals*

As indicated previously skills recognition for this group of professionals can be cumbersome and deter applications, as the applicants' ultimate goal is usually permanent residency. Applicants will consider the likelihood of accessing permanent residency and the process involved to obtain the skills recognition even when considering the temporary avenue as an initial option.

The Conditional Registration system encourages professionals to take up positions in areas of unmet need. This system provides access by Health Services in desperate need to suitable overseas' qualified staff. The issue of streamlining the processes and having the relevant assessing bodies perform the assessments concurrently to expedite the process needs to be considered.

*Electricians*

The immigration processes for electricians is complicated by the different State licensing requirements. DIMIA have recently changed the requirement to have skills assessments complete where applicants are eligible for Australian licensing and/or registration requirements or membership of an appropriate professional body. (This requirement is applied across all professions, not just electrical trades for temporary and permanent visas.)

DIMIA made this change to try and alleviate some of the processes. It was hoped that this change would allow access to State Licensing for electricians without the need for TRA. However, changes in the Energy Safety assessments in Western Australia have negated this change. In Western Australia currently, even for a temporary visa, a TRA assessment is required for an applicant to be considered.

***2. Consider how Australia's arrangements compare with those of other major immigration countries.***

As indicated early other countries, such as New Zealand, have easier processes in-place to enable them to attract the skills they require. GEDC is aware of several professions including physiotherapists, medical practitioners, dentists and even mechanics that have been advised to go to New Zealand first, as it is easier to get in and get recognised. After they obtain citizenship, they can then move to Australia and join the relevant profession without trouble or delay. Even with this side-step manoeuvre it is expected to be quicker than undertaking the Australian process.

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

- **Communication of processes to users**

The recent development of the 'Doctor Connect' and upgrading of the DIMIA Doctors webpages are good examples of initiatives that have begun to address some of the confusion that exists relating to the skills assessment and immigration processes.

The Trades Recognition Australia page has also undergone an upgrade recently. Providing the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ASCO) descriptions for each of the assessed trades could further enhance the TRA page. These descriptions provide the basic information that is required for the position assessments. The existing application form requires many pieces of information including:

- Details of the content and nature of formal vocational training or apprenticeship that was completed.
- Proof of the successful completion of the formal vocational training or apprenticeship.
- A complete employment history showing ALL employment since leaving school. This is to be supported by statements from employers verifying employment claims that detail tasks undertaken, items made and the types of machines, equipment and tools used.
- Copies of any licences or registrations held.
- The individuals detailed description, in their own words 'not from an occupational descriptor' of the trade work that they have performed including:
  - The actual duties or tasks;
  - Over what period and how frequently you performed each duty or task;
  - The types of machines, equipment, hand tools, measuring instruments and materials used;
  - Diagrams, printed instructions and references used; and
  - Items made or repaired.

In addition to this the applicant needs to provide two current passport photos; include a *non-refundable* application fee; all documents not in English are accompanied by an English translation from a certified translator; all copies of documents must have been certified by an 'appropriate' person; all 3<sup>rd</sup> party evidence provided must be from an independent, verifiable source. Finally the applicant must "understand that if the information is not provided the application may be refused."

With the current backlog at TRA it appears that if any of the components are not attached when lodged they are rejected. To streamline this process a template could be developed that enables the applicants to address TRA's need or an example that is posted on the website that can assist in this process. Not only would this help the applicants, it should also provide the TRA assessors a more consistent format of documentation making it easier to assess.

- ***Efficiency of processes and elimination of barriers***

As previously mentioned the efficiency of process and elimination of barriers is the most important aspect that needs to be addressed by this Inquiry. Australian employers are being impacted on by the skills shortages across all professions. The relevant agencies and authorities should adopt any skills assessment processes that can result in concurrent assessments.

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

The issue of awareness and acceptance of recognised overseas qualifications by Australian employers in the Goldfields-Esperance region is positive. The majority of employers have been delighted by the attributes of their sponsored employees. The attitude is positive. In general, once an employer has found a suitable candidate, regardless of circumstances (ie working holiday visa, advertising overseas, skills matching database, or other method) all they want to know is "How do I get them here as quick as possible and what do I need to do?" The majority of the employers have been employing people for many years and can usually recognise who is going to suit their business and meet their skills requirements.

Employers in the Goldfields-Esperance region in many instances have reported that their sponsored employees have far better skills than many of their Australian employees and that their attitude is also more supportive of the needs of the employer.

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

The achieving of greater consistency in recognition of qualifications for occupational licensing by state and territory regulators would be of major benefit to trades such as electricians and plumbers and to the medical professions.

For example, different Medical Colleges have different requirements depending on the profession. Consistency between similar or aligned professions may simplify the process. Currently Surgeons and Paediatrics seem to have less restrictive guidelines than the Psychiatric or Physiotherapy fields. A comparison between the current requirements may provide an avenue for the adoption of a better system. Consistency between aligned professions would make it easier for the employers in Australia and potential applicants to complete the requirements.

- ***Alternative approaches to skills assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications.***

#### *Doctors, Medical and Allied Professionals*

The Health Industry is currently dealing with an enormous shortage of skilled professionals, especially in Regional areas, a streamlined system that allows for the proper Australian Medical Council and College assessments for Overseas Trained Doctors would greatly benefit the Health services. A linkage needs to be developed between these organisations to ensure the employer does not get caught between these two organisations and DIMIA when trying to staff the health services of Australia, especially regional and remote locations.



A possible avenue for consideration could be for a 'peer-ship' approach. A practitioner employed in an area of unmet need could be allocated an experience person to act as a supervisor to assess their work over a specified period of time (approximately 6 months). During this time their work (both clinical and written) would be assessed and a formal written determination could be provided to the relevant bodies. This assessment could also include an appraisal of the applicants' English language skills. If the supervisor has observed the relevant written and oral communication skills demonstrated through the applicants dealings with patients and administrators then this could be accepted as meeting the requirements.

### *Electricians*

Changes to the current TRA and State licensing in Western Australia need to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Consideration needs to be given to the changing of the ASCO classifications that see all electricians assessed as 4311-11 General Electrician. Currently TRA can only classify electricians in this way; there is no distinction between an electrical mechanic or electrical fitter. If there were to be a distinction between these sub-sets then at least the employer and applicant would be more aware of if they will meet the State licensing categories.

The streamlining of the process also needs to be addressed. Consideration needs to be given to the requirements of TRA and the State licensing; *are these both necessary?* It may be more appropriate to establish or approve State-assessing bodies for electrical trades. Companies and applicants could then submit the required paperwork to a State body that could determine if they meet the requirements.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Goldfields Esperance Development Commission has compiled this response based on information and feedback received from its stakeholders that have accessed migration initiatives to meet their skills shortages and from the comments and actual experience of GEDC during the processes of the past nine years. GEDC is actively involved with Immigration initiatives to address the current skills shortages that the Goldfields-Esperance region is experiencing.

The Goldfields-Esperance region faces some of the biggest challenges when trying to attract and retain suitable staff, especially medical and professional staff. The Region, even with its unique environments, is seen to be very remote. It is approximately 3,000 to 3,500km from the Eastern seaboard and the cosmopolitan image of the East Coast. It is also a Regional area and the difficulties faced when trying to attract staff from metropolitan areas has been documented on many occasions.

Currently the Goldfields South-East Health Region (GSEHR) is in the process of employing a General Surgeon from Germany and four Health Service Medical Practitioners to fill current vacancies. Some of these vacancies have been unfilled for more than 12 months. GSEHR have been trying to cover these shortages to the best of their ability, however until the current skills assessment processes are addressed then these problems will remain.

The GSEHR also currently employs three overseas trained specialists, two that have obtained full Australian Fellowships and one that is currently in progress. Further adding to this problem of staffing the hospital is having difficulties in filling the Registrar position. GSEHR have identified a suitable candidate for the position but the RACP is not flexible with the allowing of a training position. A suggestion was made recommending that they allow this Doctor a joint appointment with a teaching hospital based in Perth. GSEHR undertook to send him to Perth every three weeks for a week to undertake training, however a response to this suggestion has not been received to date.

The Goldfields-Esperance region has been experiencing an increased mining activity across the Region. There are several mines that are currently under consideration, under construction, expanding or reopening. The Ravensthorpe Nickel Project is one example currently under construction this site alone has 350 employees currently on-site engaged in construction activities. This is expected to peak at 1,000, prior to becoming operational. The permanent workforce for this site alone is anticipated to be 300 people and this does not include the flow-on effect to the community and industry.

The majority of the people required for this work are tradesmen and mining workers. The traditional trades of electricians, boilermakers, fitters, machinists and diesel mechanics are already in desperate demand in the Region. GEDC knows that companies are already trying to address this issue by becoming Pre-Qualified Business Sponsors, for example approval has already been given to 45 electrician positions in the next two years.

In closing, GEDC would like to note that the problem is finding those suitably skilled people and once they have been found we need to get them to the Region as soon as possible; without burdening companies and applicants with tiresome application processes. Therefore any improvements to the current systems that can be identified through this Parliamentary Inquiry into the skills recognition, upgrading and licensing should be considered and implemented immediately.