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MIGRANT RESOURCE CENTRE OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

**SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON
MIGRATION**

**INQUIRY INTO SKILLS RECOGNITION, UPGRADING AND
LICENSING**

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1. Introduction

The Migrant Resource Centre of South Australia (MRCSA) welcomes the review currently being conducted by the Joint Standing Committee on Migration of Australia's current system of assessing the skills of people wishing to migrate to Australia under the skilled migration system.

Detailed below are responses to the Committee's third term of reference which the MRCSA felt compelled to exclusively focus on due to time and resource restrictions which prohibited a more detailed and comprehensive response.

As the principal community settlement services agency in South Australia, responsible for the initial and general settlement, acculturation and integration of humanitarian entrants in both metropolitan and country regions, the MRCSA also wishes to emphasise that a significant number of refugees are also overseas qualified and skilled. The MRCSA therefore urges the Committee to also give equal consideration to the assessment of skills of those who enter the country through the humanitarian stream in order to harness the benefits to Australia's productive diversity and dispel the misconceptions that often underpin community attitudes regarding refugees.

2. Identifying areas where Australia's procedures can be improved including in terms of:

- Communication of processes to users:

Given South Australia's demographics and dispersed migrant population, the communication of processes for skills recognition, upgrading and licensing should preferably occur through a centralised and integrated delivery point in order to avoid what have often been fragmented and uncoordinated procedures. For refugees who are overseas qualified, consideration should be given to providing such communication through settlement services that specifically target humanitarian entrants in order to facilitate a more coordinated and seamless service approach and avoid multiple service points.

In addition to responding to presenting user needs, more proactive communication needs to be developed that engages migrant and refugee communities and actively develops their capacity to assist their skilled members.

- Efficiency of processes and elimination of barriers

There are considerable barriers that hinder effective and streamlined pathways to skills recognition, upgrading and licensing for both skilled stream migrants and refugees with overseas qualifications. These include barriers related to information and communication about how to access these pathways, systemic barriers that are underpinned by protectionist attitudes and practices and the

costs associated with upgrading and accreditation - eg further study, bridging course etc.

The MRCSA, through its Employment and Training Initiative which specifically targets refugees (and with additional resourcing could readily be expanded to include skilled migrants), is aimed at negotiating pathways to accreditation and employment across a broad range of industries. This involves working in partnership with employers, training institutions and licensing and accreditation bodies in order to further employment potential through work experience, skills development and skills recognition. Indeed, this program provides a model of good practice which is underpinned by partnership between key stakeholders and processes aimed at ensuring that skills are maintained and developed as opposed to people becoming de-skilled.

- Early identification and response to persons needing skills upgrading (eg bridging courses)

In South Australia, there is a real paucity of bridging courses that enable skilled migrants and humanitarian entrants to upgrade their skills to a level where they can achieve skills recognition/licensing. The cost of such courses is also prohibitive resulting in people gradually becoming de-skilled as they struggle to accommodate the challenges of settling in a new country, finding a job to support their family, and somewhere within that, finding the money to pursue skills recognition, upgrading and/or accreditation and licensing.

Early identification and assistance is essential for both skilled migrants and refugees and should occur through a coordinated and case managed assessment and intervention service which supports clients through the process and facilitates their access to key recognition and accreditation pathways. For humanitarian entrants, such early assessment and support services could be integrated into the suite of settlement services provided through the IHSS and General Settlement programs. Alternatively, specialist assessment and intervention services targeting all groups being considered by the Inquiry (ie skills steam migrants, their family members, humanitarian entrants, temporary citizens, Australian citizens returning with overseas qualifications after significant time overseas), could be provided through Commonwealth/State funded specialist services that provide a holistic approach and support users through the entire process thereby avoided the fragmented, confusing and unnecessarily lengthy processes of the past.

- Awareness and acceptance of recognised overseas qualifications by Australian employers

This constitutes a major barrier to recognition, accreditation and employment with Australian employers continuing to value the qualifications of some countries

above others. Additionally, employers are reluctant to invest in skills upgrading that would enable those with overseas prior learning to achieve recognition.

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

The lack of consistent licensing criteria and standards between states and territories has been a long standing and very problematic issue. There is great merit in an overarching national approach that ensures portability across states/territories and across industries.

Recently, the Overseas Qualifications and Skills Reference Group of the SA Skills Commission conducted a workshop to identify issues, gaps and strategies around this issue. The MRCSA urges the Committee to access this information.

- Alternative approaches to skills assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications

There is no doubt that alternative approaches are required for skills assessment and recognition which actively create opportunities for recognition and accreditation as opposed to 'closing the door' on these – ie due to protectionist systems and attitudes, cost barriers and fragmented processes and support structures. This will involve a rigorous review of all key levels of the process as well as a reassessment of current thinking and practice. For example, any alternative approach to skills assessment and recognition must recognise that these processes have traditionally been underpinned by a western model which is not readily understood and/or negotiated by other cultures.

Alternative approaches should also recognise the importance of work experience and tailored bridging courses as essential to the process of entry into any given industry. However, this must go hand in hand with considerable advocacy targeting employer groups and other key stakeholders in the process of skills recognition, upgrading and licensing. The Commonwealth Government must play a leading role in this process, actively engaging the states and territories as well as employers and training and licensing bodies in the development of fairer, more effective and innovative models for affecting positive change in this area and moving beyond the persistent stalemates of previous approaches.