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TASMANIAN GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA, HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON MIGRATION INQUIRY INTO SKILLS RECOGNITION, UPGRADING AND LICENSING.

SUMMARY

The Tasmanian Government submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration Inquiry into Skills Recognition, Upgrading and Licensing raises the following issues:

- That as we compete internationally for people to fill skills shortages, Australia must be a welcoming and supportive destination for skilled migrants.
- The need for complete access to all employment opportunities, including those available through programs such as the job network, particularly for Skilled Independent Regional (SIR) visa holders.
- Tasmania supports the current impetus to ensure consistency and mutual recognition of arrangements for overseas skills recognition and associated issues of licensing and registration across all jurisdictions.
- Certain principles relating to skills recognition need to be reviewed such as competency based vs. time served approaches to assessment.
- The complex nature of skills assessment for humanitarian entrants, including hidden costs of service to entrants, their capacity to pay for the fees of assessment, their need for bridging courses so that skills in shortage areas can be utilised and their potential need for alternative non-paper based methods of assessment such as demonstration.
- That Australia should compare its arrangements for skills recognition, upgrading and licensing and offshore promotion strategies for attracting skilled migrants with countries such as Canada, New Zealand and the UK.
- Tasmania supports the improvement of communication processes surrounding skills recognition, upgrading and licensing not only to clients but all stakeholders in the process including professions, trades, and government departments.
- That close examination of the processes of Trades Recognition Australia (TRA) is needed to address issues such as:
 - the limited information about TRA's requirements and assessment process available to applicants for skills recognition;
 - the gap between a positive migration skills assessment and unrestricted work rights in Australia for many occupations;
 - the requirement for employers to provide duplicate documentation; and
 - the policy to approve or reject applications, rather than afford applicants an opportunity to supply further information.
- Tasmania supports the promotion of awareness and acceptance of recognised overseas qualifications by Australian employers and furthermore outlines the need for understanding of productive diversity and the value of overseas skills and culturally diverse workers to Australian workplaces.

- That humanitarian jobseekers would benefit from access to employment services, Job Network Agencies and tailored labour market programs.
- Achieving greater consistency in recognition of qualifications for occupational licensing by state and territory regulators is an important issue. Where recognition is dependant on individual State and Territory law societies, uniform criteria would be helpful for skilled migration applicants.
- Alternative modes of skills assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications would be beneficial for some clients, particularly humanitarian entrants without documentation and that the assessment processes adopted by Vocational Education and Training Vetassess (Vetassess is an assessment organisation <http://www.vetassess.com.au/> that assesses a range of qualifications and occupations) be examined as a potential model.

INTRODUCTION

Tasmania welcomes the Australian Government's moves to address skills shortages in regional areas and the recent announcement of increases of 20,000 new places for Australia's 2005-06 skilled migration intake.

Internationally, Australia must be competitive and present as an attractive and supportive destination for skilled migrants. Nationally, the same competitive context applies as all jurisdictions compete for their share of the skilled migration intake. There are benefits and challenges that come from being a small regional state in this environment and any steps taken to simplify and streamline the skills assessment process would be welcomed.

The following submission documents the Tasmanian Government's response to the issues raised specifically in the terms of reference for the Joint Standing Committee on Migration Inquiry into Skills Recognition, Upgrading and Licensing.

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;**
 - **Families of skill stream migrants, family stream migrants and humanitarian entrants who seek assessment/registration/upgrading after arrival;**
 - **Australian citizens returning after significant time overseas, with overseas qualifications.**

Currently AEI-NOOSR's Country Education Profiles are used as an educational benchmark. They provide national consistency, quality and validity for educational assessments. This appears to be unique to Australia and is to be commended.

Tasmania supports reforms to ensure consistency and mutual recognition of arrangements for overseas skills recognition and associated issues of licensing and registration across all jurisdictions, not just for overseas trained and experienced people. At a broad level, this approach to standardising skills recognition processes is gaining support from States and Territories including Tasmania.

Competing notions that someone is skilled and competent, based on qualifications or based on a 'time served' arrangement, needs to be examined. Trades and vocational education qualifications are based on competency-based principles and it is argued that this approach needs to be accepted by traditional trades industry bodies, unions and registering bodies. Trade classification of skilled migrants is based on ASCO descriptors, which do not align with Australian trade qualifications based on the national training qualifications framework. This inconsistency impacts on recognition and licensing for this group of people. Another issue is the work and titles given to overseas trades often do not match trade classifications or licensing requirements in Australia, but could still be valid if assessed in a more flexible manner.

At present, this dichotomy presents a barrier for overseas skilled, qualified and experienced personnel and it is suggested that the philosophy behind Trades Recognition Australia (TRA) processes are reviewed accordingly. TRA does not assess against national training package qualifications. It appears that TRA needs to review the 1946 legislation that restricts the scope of its trade assessment process and develop more flexible occupational tools to maintain its national and international reputation as a valid and reliable recognition organisation.

In relation to skill stream migrants that obtain assessment prior to migrating, Tasmania appreciates that pre migration assessment is an improvement on previous models of skills assessment. However, it is worth noting that this approach has not reflected a corresponding increase in employment outcomes for skilled migrants. Many clients are forced to work in areas marginally related or unrelated to their skills or qualifications and are therefore being employed at levels significantly below their capacity.

When examining current arrangements for families of skill stream migrants, family stream migrants and humanitarian entrants who seek assessment/registration/upgrading after arrival it would be prudent to be aware of the hidden costs relating to the more resource intensive nature of skills assessment for this group. For example, many humanitarian entrants have spent years in refugee camps or have fled their homelands and may not have papers to verify their qualifications.

Such people may have skills that will fill areas of skill shortages and are therefore being underutilised. In the Tasmanian context this is particularly true for a number of humanitarian entrants from the Horn of Africa with teaching and nursing experience. This observation is also linked to term of reference number three, dot point three and the need for early identification and response to persons needing skills upgrading (e.g. bridging courses) but also the need for the creation of bridging courses for specific areas of skills shortages.

Bridging courses are not currently available in the trades area. Providing funding to deliver bridging course or gap training in the initial stages to overseas trained trades people to meet registration or licensing requirements would allow this group of people to be available for employment in skill gap areas more quickly than at present.

In addition to the complex circumstances that may exist in relation to the skill recognition process for humanitarian entrants, many may present for skill recognition and need mainstreaming to English as Second Language (ESL), financial and emotional support. In addition to these needs, the humanitarian client may need alternative methods of assessment that are not paper based. This could mean that the assessment could be based on demonstration and is a point that is also relevant to term of reference number three, dot point six regarding the examination of alternative approaches to skills assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications.

The final issue for consideration in relation to skills recognition for humanitarian entrants concerns the costs of skills assessment. For a humanitarian entrant that is a recipient of Centrelink benefits, the costs for skills recognition may be considered excessive and the client may not follow through with the process. Humanitarian entrants may encounter financial difficulties in order to support family left behind, save money to pay for airfares for family reunification, or struggle to pay high phone accounts from countless phone calls to family left behind. In this context, the costs of skill recognition, while an important step in the process of financial independence and securing employment, may not be on the immediate short-term agenda for a typical humanitarian entrant or indeed migrant of low socio economic status.

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

As Australia competes internationally with other countries to attract skilled migrants, it is important to be aware of comparative advantage and disadvantage as relating to arrangements for skills recognition, upgrading and licensing and offshore promotional strategies. In particular, competitor analysis and benchmarking in comparison to countries such as Canada, New Zealand and the UK would be most useful.

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

- **Communication of processes to users;**
- **Efficiency of processes and elimination of barriers;**
- **Early identification and response to persons needing skills upgrading (e.g. bridging courses);**
- **Awareness and acceptance of recognised overseas qualifications by Australian employers;**
- **Achieving greater consistency in recognition of qualifications for occupational licensing by state and territory regulators; and**
- **Alternative approaches to skills assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications.**

This submission supports the improvement of communication processes surrounding skills recognition, upgrading and licensing not only to users or clients but all users or stakeholders in the process. This means improved communication processes across professions, trades, and government departments. Often processes are lengthy and costly and information needs to be consistent and continually updated. Frequent staff changes and poorly communicated policy changes also exacerbate the problem.

In relation to the efficacy of processes and elimination of barriers, this submission makes a number of points in relation to Trades Recognition Australia (TRA):

- Firstly, more information about TRA's requirements and assessment process must be made available to applicants for skills recognition;
- The second area of concern is the gap between a positive migration skills assessment and unrestricted work rights in Australia for many occupations. For example, electricians and plumbers (both high demand occupations in Tasmania), who receive positive skills assessment from TRA prior to the granting of a visa, are required to undergo further skills assessment by TRA and/or State-based licensing authorities after they arrive in Australia. The "post arrival assessment" can be arranged only after arrival and usually involves practical examination (and possibly additional training and/or partial apprenticeship). While practical assessment will often be necessary and cannot be conducted while applicants are offshore, any efforts to establish a more uniform, nationwide and streamlined assessment process that confers full licensing upon successful applicants and eliminates further hurdles at State level, would make skilled migration easier for potential arrivals.
- Thirdly, significant delays in processing pre-migration applications at TRA in particular require employment documentation to be reproduced in updated form for the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) in order to demonstrate work experience and comply with the "three month" rule. This poses considerable difficulties for applicants whose employers do not wish to be inconvenienced with providing essentially duplicate documentation.
- Finally, the policy of assessing organisations such as TRA to simply approve or reject applications, rather than afford applicants an opportunity to supply further

or better information, may also be hindering or reducing the flow of skilled tradespeople to Australia.

This submission supports attempts to educate employers regarding overseas qualifications and promote diversity and understanding in relation to the value of overseas skills to Australian workplaces. Arguably, this promotional role could also be expanded to include the broader productive diversity that general migrants bring to Australian workplaces.

There needs to be education of the private sector regarding the fact that many humanitarian entrants may have spent prolonged periods of their life in refugee camps before coming to Tasmania and a lack of formal qualifications or work experience may not necessarily equate to a lack of job skills. Many humanitarian entrants occupy voluntary work positions in camps and bring much sought dedication and enthusiasm to work tasks. Some employers in Tasmania have recognised these qualities and have recruited humanitarian entrants to their businesses. Similarly, job network agencies are also becoming advocates for humanitarian jobseekers.

In addition to promotion of diversity to employers and increased awareness and acceptance of recognised overseas qualifications by Australian employers, both humanitarian and skilled migrant jobseekers would benefit from access to employment services, Job Network Agencies and tailored labour market programs.

As noted at the beginning of this submission, Tasmania supports the current impetus to ensure consistency and mutual recognition of arrangements for overseas skills recognition and associated issues of licensing and registration across all jurisdictions. Achieving greater consistency in recognition of qualifications for occupational licensing by state and territory regulators is an important issue. Where recognition is dependant on individual State and Territory law societies, uniform criteria would be helpful for skilled migration applicants, particularly now that the Skilled Independent Regional (SIR) visa may restrict the areas in which a person settles.

In response to the committee's first term of reference and examining processes for humanitarian entrants who seek assessment/registration/upgrading after arrival, it was noted that alternative modes of assessment and approaches to skills assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications might be desirable. This is especially true for clients who are unable to produce documents or have insufficient English skills but their skills are adequate to perform in a particular position. It is suggested that the assessment processes adopted by Vetassess be examined as a potential model. More acceptance is needed of demonstration and observation as methods of assessment, recognised prior learning and the ability to gain professional registration from working under supervision.