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Submission to Joint Standing Committee on Migration inquiry into skills recognition, upgrading and licensing

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An argument for a more integrative approach to the qualifications recognition in Australia

Our research project titled 'Refugees¹ and employment: the effect of visible difference on discrimination' is funded by the Australia Research Council for three years (2004-2006).

It is a collaborative project based at Murdoch University and conducted by three Chief Investigators – Dr Val Colic-Peisker and Dr Farida Tilbury from Murdoch University, Dr Nonja Peters from Curtin University, and a Graduate Research Assistant, Ms Silvia Torezani.

Our interim project report from August 2005 (available at http://www.cscr.murdoch.edu.au/visible_difference_report.pdf) was taken as an exhibit to this parliamentary inquiry.

We look at the most vulnerable and potentially disadvantaged category of immigrants but some of our insights can be applied beyond humanitarian entrants. In the area of skills recognition it is important to note that, contrary to common perception, there is a considerable proportion of people with post-school education among refugees.

The proportion of people with higher qualifications in refugee communities is shown on page 4 of the report.

Employment outcomes for refugees are relatively poor, and in our sample, which is deliberately skewed towards employable people, the most often stated reasons are the requirement to have Australian work experience, the requirement to have referees in Australia, and the problems in getting qualifications recognised in the third place. Qualifications recognition may be especially problematic for refugees: they sometimes arrive without papers, and it may be hard to check their credentials in their country of origin.

Table 1: Barriers in securing adequate employment* (%; N=150)

	Ex-Yugoslav	African	Middle Eastern	Total
Problems getting qualifications recognised	32.0	42.0	20.0	31.3
Requirement to have Australian work exp	68.0	58.0	60.0	62.0
Requirement to have referees in Australia	54.0	48.0	20.0	40.7
Lack of opportunities for	18.0	4.0	8.0	10.0

¹ 'Refugees' is in our research project used to mean any humanitarian-class immigrants; our respondents are all permanently protected entrants.

work experience in refugee camps				
Breaks in working life	18.0	16.0	8.0	14.0
Difficulties getting promoted	30.0	2.0	8.0	13.3
Necessity of having a car	34.0	26.0	8.0	22.7
Other	10.0	2.0	10.0	7.3

* Respondents could select more than one category.

Our research shows that the qualifications recognition should be thought of in a broader context because in itself it is neither necessary nor sufficient condition for successful labour market integration, which is the ultimate goal not only in the interest of migrants but also of the Australian community as a whole. James Jupp (2002:147)² has argued that the requirement for Australian experience and rigorous restrictions on recognition of qualifications act as forms of systemic discrimination against skilled immigrants from socio-economically and culturally distant countries.

The three reasons that our respondents stated as main barriers to securing adequate employment bring us to the issue of **'formal'** versus **'informal'** or **'de facto'** recognition. The formal recognition may not mean much without finding a way to secure some Australian job experience, and via this experience also being able to provide Australian references. In this respect, people from non-English-speaking countries need and deserve equal opportunity policies / positive discrimination before they are 'released' to the labour market to compete with everyone else. Government should invest more into preventing a waste of skills through more funding for programs to secure work experience — unpaid work in an adequate occupational or professional environment — for the NESB immigrants. It should not be forgotten that among skilled migrants, as well as refugees, Australia receives a large number of elite cadres from non-English speaking countries.

Without Australian work experience and Australian job references, Australian employers tend to see overseas qualifications from NES countries, whether formally recognised or not, as something they cannot rely upon. A lip service is paid to a productive diversity in the workplace, but many Australian employers are too insular to be aware of potential gains. A perception of the 'organisational fit' — some researchers call it 'tea-room mentality' — in the hiring process can severely disadvantage job seekers from CALD backgrounds. Recent Hudson Report reported in *The Weekend Australian* 29-30 Oct 2005 (Career One section, p. 1) confirms our findings that employers often look for the organisational 'culture fit' and may this way either consciously or non-intentionally discriminate against people from diverse backgrounds.

Therefore even highly qualified people fluent in English often have to take jobs much below their qualifications and experience, the experience that many of our respondents have had. Refugees especially tend to gather in certain secondary market niches, in jobs that locals shun. A highly skilled Indian woman, who arrived in 2000 as a skilled

² J. Jupp: *From White Australia to Woomera*, Cambridge University Press, 2002

migrant, described her job as a 'brain-dead job', although her qualifications were formally recognised.

In addition, **a more individualised approach** to migrant skills recognition is needed (formal qualifications are not identical to skills!), beyond the collective approach of looking at the country/educational institution people come from and whether these are among those 'recognised'. Professional organisations and accreditation bodies should be able to offer exams to people whose formal qualifications are not recognised but they feel fit to undergo such professional checks. Such exams exist in some professions and occupations but a more comprehensive system is needed.

Left to the market, certain categories of immigrants are likely to end up in **pockets of disadvantage** in the large cities. Poor integration, economic and social, causes social marginalisation of whole communities — this is a well known phenomenon around the globe — which causes longer-term serious social problems. The second generation of the disadvantaged minorities has a sense of entitlement and may not accept their marginal social position the way the first immigrant generation did. Marginalisation is especially likely to occur when there is also residential concentration of visible minorities. In my recent communication with Perth metropolitan police, I became aware that they fear the creation of marginalised communities ridden with welfare dependency, crime and other social problems in two areas of Perth with high concentration of African refugees. Here, we are not only talking about social justice and fairness but about the common good of preventing such problems. Therefore, qualifications recognition is only a part of the larger issue of labour market and consequent social integration of the diverse immigrant populations that policy makers need to take into account. In isolation from other issues, even the best policies of qualification recognition may not mean much.