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RESPONSE:

**Inquiry into skills recognition, upgrading and licensing by Joint Standing
Committee on Migration, Parliament of Australia**

Details of Respondent

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Background

AMES vision: Full participation for all in a cohesive and diverse society

For the past fifty-four years, programs delivered by Adult Multicultural Education Services (AMES) have been assisting migrants and refugees from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds establish and build their new lives in Australia. AMES is now Australia's largest provider of English language and literacy education, vocational training and employment services to people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. With its head office in Melbourne, AMES offers services across metropolitan Melbourne and through partnerships in regional and rural Victoria. These services include:

- AMES Education services including the Adult Migrant English Program(DIMIA), Language Literacy and Numeracy Program (DEST) for jobseekers and vocational training
- AMES Employment - specialist employment services (Job Network) in Melbourne and at six locations in western Sydney
- AMES Settlement Services assisting newly arrived migrants and refugees
- AMES Employment Skills Centre - a specialist centre assisting Skilled Migrants
- AMES Community Programs including innovative social enterprise programs and other community development initiatives to assist newly arrived CALD communities.

AMES submission to the inquiry is based on that range of experience. Our comments however refer to Victoria.

Response

Question 1: Current arrangements for overseas skills recognition and associated issues of licensing and registration

AMES considers that there are well-defined and well-developed processes in place for the recognition of overseas qualifications. In Victoria the Overseas Qualifications Unit located within the Department for Victorian Communities plays a critical role in publicising these services and promoting access for migrants and refugees. While AMES considers that the overall framework for skill recognition in Australia generally functions well, there are significant gaps. The opportunity presented by the inquiry to highlight these and propose some solutions is very welcome.

These gaps can be summarised under the following headings:

1. Issues related to costs
2. Issues related to access

i. Costs

a. Costs of recognition of qualifications

Migrants arriving in Australia under the Skilled Stream of the Migration Program have had their qualifications recognized prior to entry as part of the visa application process and are aware of and accept this cost as a necessary part of their migration process. However, this is not the case for those skilled migrants who arrive under

- Australia's humanitarian program,
- the Family Stream of the migration program
- or as partners or spouses of holders of Skilled Migrants visas.

The cost of getting qualifications recognised is a significant impost for all of these groups but for Refugee and Humanitarian Entrants, these costs can constitute a major barrier.

b. Costs associated with licensing

Recognition of qualifications is only the first step for many migrants and refugees with trades' qualifications. The next step for many trades is to satisfy the appropriate licensing and registration to practice their trade in Australia. Meeting licensing and registration requirement also incurs significant costs. For example, the cost of recognition of qualifications and meeting licensing and registration requirements for electricians is over \$1000. Again, it is those who arrive under the Humanitarian Program who are least able to meet these costs. For those who can satisfy the criteria for the highest level of disadvantage within the Job Network framework, financial support is potentially available but this does not account for all applicants.

c. *Insufficient scope of current subsidy schemes*

Currently there are two subsidy schemes in operation. These are:

- Assessment Fee Subsidy for Disadvantaged Overseas Trained Australian Residents (ASDOT), which pays fees for some assessments of overseas qualifications in regulated occupations or fees for required examinations in other professions. Eligibility is restricted.
- Bridging for Overseas Trained Professionals Loan Scheme (BOTPLS) provides loans from the Commonwealth Government to pay all or part of tuition fees incurred in bridging programs for overseas-qualified professionals who do not meet Australian entry requirements for their professions.

Given that the skills of these professionals have been obtained at no cost to Australia, AMES considers that the restrictions of both these scheme are counter-productive to Australia's larger interests, especially in areas defined as skills shortages in Australia. Specifically:

- Under ASDOT, there is only the capacity to provide one-off assistance and eligibility is extremely restricted
- Under BOTPLS, there are some professions for which this scheme will not cover the necessary processes in their entirety.

Recommendation 1

AMES proposes that the Commonwealth Government broaden current loans schemes in terms of eligibility to enable more skilled migrants to benefit. It is suggested that any loan scheme be at low interest rates. This will have the value of enabling Australia to benefit quickly from skills of overseas qualified professionals and tradespersons whose skills were developed at no cost to Australia.

ii. *Access to assessment*

AMES has concerns about access to assessment on behalf of those migrants in Victoria with trades qualifications which are not covered by the *Tradesmen's Rights Regulation Act 1946* (TRR Act) and administered through Trades Recognition Australia (TRA) processes. The State/Territory authorities responsible for the administration of vocational education and training usually perform this function for skills and trades not covered by the *TRR Act*. In Victoria, Vocational Education and Training Assessment Services (VETASSESS) performs this function under contract. VETASSESS advises that it does not have the capacity to assess off-shore experience and offers only assessment of experience while on-the-job in Australia. Unfortunately this pre-supposes that the individual is able to get employment in their trade. Without Trades Recognition, this is not possible. This leaves the individual in somewhat of a Catch 22 situation and leads to unnecessary unemployment and potential wastage of skills for the individual and for Australia.

Recommendation 2

That the Committee draw to the attention of the Victoria government the situation in relation to assessment of off-shore experience for tradespersons whose trades fall outside the *TRR Act 1946*.

Question 3: Improving procedures

- **Communication of processes to users and**
- **Efficiency of processes and elimination of barriers**

Based on AMES own experience and its participation in the Victorian Settlement Planning Committee's Working Party on Employment, AMES considers that there are three critical factors in relation to communication with users: These are:

- Timeliness of advice – preferably before arrival or as soon as possible after arrival
- Quality of advice offered – there is a need to increase the number of organisations able to provide current, valid, specialist advice in this area
- Ease of access to advice – this will become more significant as regional settlement of migrants increases.

Recommendation 3

AMES proposes that the Commonwealth and State governments jointly support training and other initiatives to increase the number and range of organisations able to provide current information, support and advocacy to assist individual skilled migrants who require recognition of overseas qualifications and this support be available during the entire recognition process.

- **Early identification and responses to persons needing skills upgrading (e.g. bridging courses)**

There appears to be something of a mismatch between the descriptors of skills shortage occupations as listed in the Migration Occupations in Demand (MODL) list and employers perception of the skills sets they require in particular occupations. It is possible that there are two solutions to this. The first is to continue work with industry and employers to further refine the process by which the MODL is produced.

The second strategy is to establish more rigorous and systematic processes to identify potential employers and their specific industry needs and to provide more opportunities at the point of arrival in Australia to skilled migrant to gain support to upskill to employers' current and specific requirements. This latter proposal is based on AMES successful experience in establishing its Employment Skills Centre in Melbourne's CBD in 2003. This centre provides individual assessment, career planning and targeted interventions including orientation to employment in Australia and work experience placement to assist skilled migrants.

Recommendation 4

That Australia invests in early intervention strategies, particularly in skills shortage areas, to assist skilled migrants to gain and sustain employment in their professional or trade occupation as soon as possible after arrival.

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

All employers necessarily require of their employees more than can be contained in a narrow definition of technical competence as described by qualifications. AMES considers that elements of what is referred to under the broad heading of "lack of acceptance of overseas qualifications by employers" arises from employers' obligations to ensure that all employees can perform competently in the culturally particular contexts of their workplaces and that they have the necessary competence to satisfy compliance with local legislative requirements and to operate effectively in Australian workplaces.

AMES considers that best antidote to prejudice is exposure. Therefore, AMES supports DIMIA's recent initiatives to provide greater support to employers in seeking overseas qualified staff. AMES also considers based on its experience in the Employment Skills Centre and in other programs, that appropriate training for skilled migrants in orientation to Australian workplaces and opportunity to participate in supported work experience placement produces results for employers – employees who meet their skills sets needs- and produces outcomes for skilled migrants – appropriate jobs in their areas of expertise.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1

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Recommendation 2

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