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Mr Don Randall MP
Chairman
Joint Standing Committee on Migration
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

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Dear Mr Randall

INQUIRY INTO SKILLS RECOGNITION UPGRADING AND LICENSING

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the issues raised in your terms of reference.

The Western Australian Government is very concerned about the current skills shortage and recognises that there needs to be improved communication and cooperation between State and Federal Governments.

Skills Recognition

The recent meeting of the Council of Australian Governments noted that a more responsive and flexible skills recognition system is vital to meeting both current and future skills needs. Effective implementation of full mutual recognition of skills qualifications across Australia and an appropriate system for recognition of overseas qualifications were identified as priorities.

Skills Demand

There is clearly a need for better projection of skills demands to inform training and migration decisions. The linkages between government, training providers, industry and project proponents need to become more sophisticated to provide quality information regarding demands for individual skills. There is a poor understanding of the potential to upgrade skills that already exist within Australia and also limited knowledge as to why skilled workers abandon their trade or profession.

Skills Assessment

The recent announcement by Senator Vanstone about accepting a skills assessment from State Departments for the Employer Nomination Scheme has caused widespread confusion and has not been effectively implemented. The changes have been published on the Skilled Occupation List (Form 1121i) without consultation with the relevant State Departments as to how the concession will operate.

Trades Recognition Australia processes

The performance of Trades Recognition Australia (TRA) has received widespread criticism for their inflexible approach to skills assessments and appeals processes. I understand that as part of the assessment process they will only attempt to contact nominated phone numbers three times within working hours. If there is no response then the application fails. Also, no additional information can be introduced during the appeals process. The performance of TRA, in both assessments and appeals, should be specifically assessed.

Currently, newly arrived migrants and refugees with trade skills must apply for skills assessment through the Brisbane office of the TRA. The cost of a standard application for TRA assessment is \$300 plus an additional \$270 if a Trade Test is required.

The assessment process is largely facilitated by mail, except in cases where a face-to-face assessment is required. In these instances, the applicant is required to pay up to \$1,000 to fly an assessor from Queensland to WA. This further compounds the already lengthy and expensive trade recognition process for skilled migrants in Western Australia.

Another issue is that Trades Recognition Australia have a 6 and 7 year "time served" rule in the metal and electrical trades, whereby an individual cannot be assessed unless they have a combination of 6 years training and 7 years trade experience. Clients of the Western Australian Overseas Qualifications Unit (OQU) have expressed dissatisfaction and disadvantage because of the lack of a State based representative and the "time served" rule.

Trades Recognition Australia representation in Western Australia

For at least five years, Western Australia has not had representation from TRA. This is because previous plans for centralising the services of the TRA coincided with the retirement of the Western Australian based representative. Since that time, the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) has decided not to centralise the operations of the TRA and have maintained operational offices in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra. However, the replacement of the Western Australian based representative has not been forthcoming. This situation seems inconsistent with the skills shortage in Western Australia and the level of skilled migration.

Consistency of information regarding skill assessments

The TRA provides pre-migration skills assessments in most trades for people applying to migrate to Australia. These pre-migration assessments are for migration purposes only and do not preclude skilled migrants from undertaking further assessments on-shore for national recognition in the metal and electrical trades.

Overseas assessment processes for immigration purposes fail to inform applicants that further recognition of their trade skills may be required onshore and fail to provide information about the length or cost of this process. Consequently, many skilled migrants are unprepared for the financial cost of undertaking skills recognition through the TRA. There is a need for better coordination of information pre and post embarkation for skills stream migrants so that they are fully aware of the skills recognition process required in Australia.

Alternative pathways to Skills Assessment

An applicant migrant who holds a license or permit to operate within a skilled occupation in Western Australia should not require any further skills assessment for a visa. For agreed occupations, a letter from the Western Australian Department of Education and Training advising that the applicant possesses qualifications, skills and or experience that would enable them to operate in Western Australia should also preclude the need for another skills assessment for a visa.

Commonwealth fee-free translations for new arrivals

Translation services are now provided from Victoria through VITS Language Link under new arrangements whereby the "fee-free" service has been drastically scaled down to include only one document for translation in each category (identity, relationship, facilitation, education and employment). It seems that the new policy aims primarily at facilitating new-arrivals' initial settlement. These new arrangements have adverse impact on skills recognition and employment prospects for the newly arrived migrants who often need several documents in one category e.g. references from employers, and other training and educational documents. This also creates a barrier for accessing TAFE, University, other educational institutions and for State registration for trades.

Conflicting Government Policy

Australian Education International National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (NOOSR) is the peak Commonwealth Government funded assessment authority and clearly states a requirement in their application material that translations of both awards and transcripts must be provided. The Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs' (DIMIA) current one document per category translation policy is inconsistent with the requirements of NOOSR as a peak Commonwealth body, and complicates an already difficult and costly process.

Settlement Impediments

Access to skills assessment and training and employment is a key settlement issue. Failure to rapidly assess and support migrant entry into the labour market has previously been estimated by the Federal Government to cost Australia some \$450 million per annum. The costs involved in additional translations would be significantly outweighed by the proven social and economic benefits. As DIMIA says in its publication, *Refugee and Humanitarian Issues - Australia's Response (2003)*, "*The Government views successful settlement as a key objective of Australia's Humanitarian Program.... Successful settlement in Australia is determined initially by experiences on arrival and early access to essential services...*".

There is a considerable time lapse in obtaining a letter from OQU when more than one translated document is required. OQU has to discuss the need with Central TAFE staff and the client, write the letter and wait for DIMIA to process again. If further queries and problems arise, the delays can be costly. Limiting this service, which is vital to settlement, may in effect be detrimental.

Issues for Families of skill stream migrants, family stream migrants and humanitarian entrants who seek assessment/ registration/ upgrading after arrival

There is significant evidence, both anecdotal and documented, that asserts that the skills, knowledge and expertise of migrants are not being maximised, resulting in high unemployment and wasted resources.

The quality and level of Australia's post migration settlement services play a crucial role in ensuring that Australia remains an attractive option for skilled migrants. Settlement support services for families of skilled stream migrants, and particularly humanitarian arrivals, need to ensure that the needs of new arrivals are met. Currently, there are a number of issues for settlement services particularly to humanitarian entrants from Africa. These migrants have high and complex needs and may require a more intensive level of settlement services, particularly in the areas of health, education and training.

Barriers to employment and training for families of skill stream migrants, family stream migrants and humanitarian entrants include attitudes of potential employers, particularly for migrants who are visibly or religiously different and/or who come from countries where English is not the main language.

Another settlement issue is the need for clearer information on occupational pathways and registration requirements, particularly where assessments do not necessarily allow for immediate or direct entry into employment such as the electrical and engineering trades.

While the Commonwealth Government provides access to up to 510 hours of English language tuition through the Adult Migrant English Program, many migrants and humanitarian entrants, including holders of temporary protection visas and migrants or refugees who have a level of English deemed functional by DIMIA, do not qualify for this program. For those who do qualify, the limit of 510 hours is often not enough to achieve a level of English proficiency that would facilitate entry into employment or further training and education. This is of particular concern for humanitarian entrants from African countries and from South-East Asia who may have limited or no English skills and educational background.

Temporary residents who need skills assessment/ recognition

Holders of Temporary Protection Visas (TPV) are precluded from accessing many essential services provided by the Commonwealth. The Western Australian Government has developed some initiatives to improve access to services for holders of TPV, including amendments to the Vocational Education and Training Regulation allowing TPV holders to access TAFE courses at local student rates.

TPV holders still do not have access to many Commonwealth funded services essential to the skills assessment and recognition process. Most notably in the area of skills recognition, they do not have access to the fee-free translating services provided to new arrivals.

Operation of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS)

The IELTS is the most widely used English language testing system in Australia for both skills recognition and entry into further education.

There appear to be some issues with the use of the IELTS as it relates to skilled migrants. The first is the suitability of the IELTS to apply to vocational English and the requirements of working in an English speaking workplace. Candidates for IELTS must undertake an examination in four skills areas - reading, writing, listening and speaking. Although the IELTS test is available in two streams, Academic and General Training, the General Training stream emphasises basic survival skills in a broad social and educational context. There is no capacity to apply the IELTS for specific occupations where familiarity with the occupational terminology is an important factor in assessing the ability of an employee to undertake the work required.

The second is that, while there are a number of IELTS preparation courses available, they are often quite costly, as is the \$220 test fee. Where a particular rating is required for entry into a profession, candidates may have to sit the exam more than once to obtain the required minimum rating.

Further, there is no consistency in the IELTS scores (between 1- non user and 9 - expert user) required by different professions. For example, the Nurses Board requires an IELTS test score of 6.5 in reading and listening (competent user) and 7 in speaking and writing (good user). For University entry, an overall score of 6.5 with individual scores of 6 or 5.5 are generally accepted. For overseas trained doctors, the Medical Board of Western Australia requires a minimum score of 6.5 for speaking and listening and an overall score of 7.

Introduction of the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) structure for skills classification

The classification of occupations is currently under review and will result in a combined Australian-New Zealand approach. The draft ANZSCO structure is an improvement on the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ASCO) structure that it will replace, but it still does not adequately address the new skills in the resources sector. In particular, skills in the oil and gas sector are not detailed enough. The Inquiry should assess the proposed structure and its impact on the Skilled Occupation List (SOL) and the Migration Occupation in Demand List.

There is also concern that the skill sets within the ASCO/ANZSCO structures do not reflect the Training Packages developed with industry by ANTA. There should be direct correlation with these nationally endorsed Training Packages and skills classification.

Broadening State Territory Nominated Independent (STNI) to deal with occupations not on the SOL

There are circumstances where the State Government is a significant employer of a specific skill. Police, nurses and linesmen are examples of these skills. The STNI scheme was established in 1997 for State and Territory Governments to influence the number and profile of skilled migrants settling in their areas in line with their skill needs and development objectives. The STNI has a parallel visa class, the Skills Matching Scheme, which is similar to STNI, but is not points tested. A complication arises where skills are in demand in a particular State but are not on the SOL. Police Officers fall into this category.

The Inquiry should consider removing the requirement for skills assessment, points assessment and for the occupation to be on the SOL for skilled occupations where the State Government is a significant employer and where the applicant will be employed by the State Government. The applicant would need to meet vocational English, be less than 45 years of age and the occupation be included on the State Skills in Demand List.

The STNI could also include the provision of a temporary visa where a skill is in demand within a particular State or Territory but was not on the SOL. This circumstance can arise very quickly with major resource development projects or with the adoption of new technology. A temporary visa would be granted for the specific project. The visa holder could apply for a permanent visa after meeting occupancy and employment milestones.

Detailed submissions will follow from the Western Australian Skills Advisory Board and Western Australian Government Departments.

I note that you plan to conduct public hearings from July 2005. Given the scale of the skills shortage in Western Australia and the potential impact on major investment projects, I strongly recommend that at least two days of hearings are held here. The hearings should include the opportunity for input at least one regional centre as well as Perth.

Yours sincerely

DR GEOFF GALLOP MLA
PREMIER

23 June 2005