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BROTHERHOOD
of St LAURENCE
ABN 24 603 467 024

67 Brunswick Street,
Fitzroy 3065 Victoria Australia
Telephone: 03 9483 1183
Facsimile: 03-9417 2691
DX 282 Melbourne

The Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Migration
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

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BY: MUC

Dear Secretary,

Re: Inquiry into skills recognition, upgrading and licensing

The Brotherhood of St Laurence wishes to make a contribution to the Inquiry into skills recognition, upgrading and licensing, based on our service experience and research knowledge. The focus of the submission is on the impact of these processes on family stream migrants and humanitarian entrants who are seeking assessment, registration and/or upgrading after arrival.

We believe that participation in the economic life of a society, as well as in the social and cultural life, is central to reducing poverty and achieving successful settlement. High rates of unemployment and under-employment amongst refugees, however, demonstrate that meaningful employment opportunities for new arrivals are not being adequately created. This is partly due to the barriers to recognition of skills and qualifications gained overseas, which limit the ability of new arrivals to take advantage of employment opportunities in Australia.

A measure of the performance of Australian processes in effectively recognising skills and qualifications is the level and timeliness at which new arrival migrants and refugees are able to be included in their chosen profession or trade.

The Principles

Australia's policies on recognition of a new arrival's skills gained overseas need to be underpinned by a responsive framework built on principles of access and equity in a culturally diverse Australia. It is suggested that the following principles¹ be adopted to enhance existing processes for assessing the skills of migrants and humanitarian entrants.

1. Equal opportunity in the labour market must be assured through strategic actions that prevent or address social and economic barriers.

¹ Based on The Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria's Policy Principles for Employment, Education and Training (1999).

2. Full opportunities for people of different ethnic groups need to be guaranteed so their diverse knowledge and skills, gained in Australia and overseas through education, training and employment, can be utilised for the benefit of Australian society and workplaces.
3. Productive diversity needs to be consistent with equal employment opportunity and needs to emphasise the value of a society's multicultural human resources in all spheres of economic activity, both at the macro level and within workplaces.
4. If necessary, equity of access needs to be ensured through affirmative action.
5. The skills of new arrivals need to be optimised for the benefit of the individual and the nation.
6. Access to affordable training and skills updating on completion of the assessment process needs to be guaranteed.
7. The assessment process needs to be culturally and linguistically sensitive. (The linguistic competence needed to complete the test should not exceed job requirements.)

Key Barriers

We have grouped the following key barriers under the Committee's areas for discussion:

Communication of processes to users

1. The information provided to potential migrants at the overseas posts needs to include the two step process of assessment followed by recognition and the possible costs involved. Currently, consistency of information is lacking.
2. Humanitarian/Refugee applicants require more accurate and consistent information on employment, education and training and recognition and assessment of skills and qualifications to guide their decision about country of destination. A case example is a refugee with engineering qualifications, who learns that Australia will not recognise prior learning and Canada will, may well decide to nominate Canada as their preferred country.
3. Australian embassies are well placed to provide skilled migrants with information regarding employment-training courses available in the different Australian states. This will enable newly arrived skilled migrants to access this training as soon as possible after arrival. Some skilled migrants do not obtain this information for years and survive by doing non-professional jobs.
4. The Brotherhood sees evidence of employers showing increasing awareness and acceptance of overseas qualifications, skills and experience. In the last ten years, Government campaigns carrying the message that diversity is good for business have helped businesses to realise that multiculturalism adds value to business. At Commonwealth and Victorian State levels, the role of the Overseas Qualification Unit has been actively promoted. The OQU provides quality career advice and comprehensive information to clients related to their particular professions, including professional associations, training programs and contact details. However, recognition of trades qualification appears not to be actively promoted and Trade Recognition bodies are not well marketed and under-utilised.

Efficiency of processes and elimination of barriers

1. Records of qualification and employment history are an issue for migrants. This issue needs to be dealt with prior to arrival in Australia. The current experience is that all skilled migrants are assessed at the point of application for migration. Their qualifications and employment history are checked and sent to NOOSR in Canberra for verification and points awarded for eligibility. NOOSR provides a letter to all skilled migrants documenting the assessment and recognition of their qualifications. Clients report that the letter is often general, vague and lengthy and, for the skilled migrant and the potential employer, is difficult to understand.
2. As a consequence, skilled migrants often need the Overseas Qualifications Unit to reassess their qualifications. The OQU provides a very clear and succinct letter, which says, for example, "Your qualification is equivalent to an Australian Bachelors degree." This letter is very helpful to employers and training institutions and should become a model for NOOSR.
3. The cost of qualification recognition is an insurmountable barrier for Humanitarian/Refugee entrants who arrive without financial resources. This leads to skills loss, long term unemployment and loss of self-esteem. The effect can be seen by the reduction in applications for trade assessment. It has become a particular issue for Humanitarian/Refugee entrants since concession rates were abandoned. The loss of skills is an enormous cost to the receiving society.
4. The structure of the assessment process for trade recognition means that an unsuccessful candidate is unable to obtain a statement of those competencies successfully achieved, which would enable employment to be gained on the basis of current skill level. Currently, it is an 'all or nothing' system, which means that pathways cannot be established. The end result is that adults over the age of 21, who wish to get into trade areas that are still operating under the old apprenticeship system, cannot demonstrate to an employer that their additional skill level warrants the additional wage that the employer would have to pay to an adult.
5. The absence of consistent career counselling continues to be a barrier. Career counselling is an important aspect of skills recognition and further training. Career counselling needs to be structured and provided where required, so that people who are new to the country can make informed career / training decisions. By way of demonstration, a young, male client from the Sudan, with low writing skills, received no advice and enrolled in a Social Science degree at a university. He was permitted to enrol and struggled without assistance, becoming despondent and choosing to drop out rather than fail. He was in need of sound career advice before embarking on further training. This advice is critical for refugees and others on humanitarian visas.

Early identification and response to persons needing skills upgrading

1. Skills assessment, registration and upgrading of skills and qualifications for families of skilled migrants, family stream migrants and humanitarian entrants must be timely. The OQU is doing an excellent job in this area, providing a free service. However, in the last few years, demand for the service has increased and the waiting period is now up to 4 weeks. There is a need to increase resources to reduce the waiting period to a week, as this assessment is needed to begin employment and/or further training.

2. One of the particular barriers for newly arrived sponsored migrants is that they are not eligible for university training under HECS for two years. For example, a client, who was the child of a sponsored migrant and had completed two years of an Economics degree overseas, was not eligible for university education in Australia for two years unless he paid full fees. In effect, this financial barrier has prevented this young man from gaining his qualifications, reducing his chances of employment. This, in turn, delays his opportunity to contribute to and participate in Australian society. This example also demonstrates that short bridging courses are not always the solution.

Awareness and acceptance of recognised overseas qualifications by Australian employers

1. Refugee and Humanitarian entrants typically arrive in the country with little or no documentation and therefore face particular barriers in establishing qualification levels. This is sometimes due to their need to flee without time for preparation, but is also often related to how documentation is recorded in their country of origin and where it is housed in that country. For example, the central building where qualifications were held in Bagdad, Iraq, was bombed in the 1991 war.
2. Even when documentation of experience or trade qualification is available, it can be very difficult to draw a comparison with the training that is needed in the Australian work environment.
3. The length of experience is currently not taken into consideration during the assessment of a trade qualification. This particularly disadvantages Humanitarian entrants, who have few networks to assist with gaining employment or providing references.
4. Newly arrived immigrants who face a two year waiting period for social security payments are particularly vulnerable to exploitation given their need to access any employment for survival. Because this group is focused on day to day survival, they may delay seeking assessment and experience subsequent skill loss.

Program responses

1. ***Timely and accurate information about skills recognition procedures and flexibility around trade and qualification assessment is essential if new arrivals are to achieve successful settlement. The skill recognition system needs to be complemented by responsive career counselling and labour market programs that are designed to meet the particular employment and settlement needs of migrants and humanitarian entrants.***
2. ***The Brotherhood of St Laurence's Given the Chance: Employment and Educational Pathways Program is an example of such an initiative. The program is a targeted labour market program that develops social, educational and employment pathways for refugees. Given the Chance rests on flexible case management and has the following interrelated program components:***

Core units:

- Individualised case plan (including career counselling)
- An intensive 12-week labour market program course specific to refugees
- On the job work experience (multiple opportunities dependent on participant need)
- Supported mentoring by a trained and supported volunteer mentor (for up to twelve months)

Elective components may include:

- Coaching and tutoring on a needs basis
- Half day skills workshops
- Individual refugee access to settlement and family support casework

The research investigating the effectiveness of Given the Chance in its pilot stage demonstrates that it is not only a cost effective program but it is also able to flexibly respond to the needs of its participants whilst ensuring superior results.

We believe that an Inquiry into skills recognition, upgrading and licensing in relation to the settlement of migrants and humanitarian arrivals is extremely important and we welcome the opportunity to contribute to this review of the current Australian system.

We would be happy to discuss further the ideas set out in this letter.

Yours sincerely,



Tony Nicholson
Executive Director
Brotherhood of St Laurence