

REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

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RECEIVED
27 JUN 2005

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Submission No. 35
Date Received 28/6/05

RCOA Submission to the Parliamentary Committee Inquiry into Overseas Skill Recognition, Upgrading and Licensing.

June 2005.

The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Inquiry into Overseas Skill Recognition, Upgrading and Licensing. RCOA is a peak advocacy, research and policy body with over 80 organisational members and a similar number of individual members. It aims to represent the views of these members on issues pertaining to refugees, humanitarian entrants, asylum and human rights.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RCOA works to address the issues faced by refugee and humanitarian entrants both during the resettlement process and during their establishment in Australia. Employment is a key issue for humanitarian entrants on arrival, with many identifying the attainment of relevant employment in a position appropriate to their skills, qualifications and past experience as the key to successful settlement. Many humanitarian entrants, however, experience individual and structural difficulties in having their skills and qualifications recognised upon arrival in Australia.

The Australian Migration Program is made up of two separate components. The first, the Migration Program, takes entrants under Family, Special Eligibility and Skilled visa classes. The second is the Refugee and Special Humanitarian Program. As a peak agency on refugee issues, RCOA does not engage directly on issues pertaining to migrants entering Australia and thus will confine its comments to the issues faced by those entering Australia under the humanitarian program, commenting specifically on the experiences of humanitarian entrants aiming to have overseas skills recognised or upgraded. The Submission will also comment on the need to communicate more clearly information about the assessment, registration and upgrading processes to both humanitarian entrants and those working to assist them have their skills recognised, and will then provide recommendations on strategies to eliminate the barriers they face in doing so.

SPECIFIC DIFFICULTIES FACED BY REFUGEE AND HUMANITARIAN ENTRANTS

Refugee and humanitarian entrants face a range of hurdles and difficulties in having skills recognised, upgraded or licensed. These issues are in some instances similar to those experienced by migrants and in other cases, they are quite different. As RCOA is aware that there will be a number of submissions focusing on broad issues pertaining to the impact of skills recognition of migrants, the Council will therefore confine its remarks to the issues specific to refugees and humanitarian entrants. Unlike those entering Australia through the mainstream migration program, refugee and humanitarian entrants:

- have not played a role in choosing Australia as their country of settlement, as this is determined by UNHCR and the Australian Government. They are likely to have done little research and are therefore to have a limited understanding of Australian culture, society and labour market norms on arrival. This leads to unrealistic expectations on the timeframe and ease of entry into the Australian labour force;
- have often fled home countries as opposed to making an organised and controlled departure. Many leave in haste without any prior planning, meaning they don't have the time or capacity to locate and transport important documents, including copies of qualifications. This means skills recognition, licensing and upgrading is especially difficult for this particular sub-group as the assessment of skills and the ability to become licensed in one's field of expertise is **made almost impossible if the applicant is not in possession of the requisite documentation**. For example, NOOSR cannot perform skills recognition without physical evidence of qualifications received. For particular industries, skills assessment exams can be offered by TAFE and other accredited organisations, however this only applies in a limited number of industries and often requires a prohibitive cost;
- have not fulfilled English language or formal education eligibility requirements on receipt of their visa. As a result, humanitarian entrants are less likely to be employable immediately on arrival and more likely to have negligible English language skills. Those with poor English language skills face difficulties in understanding:
 - and comprehending the complexity of the Australian labour market;
 - the necessity for having qualifications recognised and assessed before employment can be sought;
 - the complex processes through which this can be achieved.

They also face the reality of needing to work primarily on English language skills before any realistic move into the Australian labour market can be made. This can be a demoralising and demeaning realisation for many humanitarian entrants on arrival;
- have often spent extended periods in flight or transit. For some entrants this stage of transit can have lasted up to thirty years and can mean that elements of their formal education or employment have been disrupted.

As a result, humanitarian entrants face difficulties in skills recognition, accreditation and licensing processes that are distinct from the difficulties mainstream migrants face.

PROHIBITIVE COSTS FOR REFUGEE AND HUMANITARIAN ENTRANTS

The costs of having skills and qualifications recognised ranges between professions and industries but can be prohibitively expensive for those from a refugee or humanitarian background. Refugee and humanitarian entrants often arrive in Australia after extended periods in transit, or after residing in refugee camps with no form of employment or income support. They rarely have any kind of significant savings on arrival, and without employment have no means by which to save. The costs of skills recognition are often therefore out of reach. This in turn means that the Australian labour force fails to recognise and benefit from the significant contribution these people stand to make.

These prohibitive costs mean that many refugee and humanitarian entrants simply cannot access skill recognition/licensing/upgrading processes. The costs of seeking to have medical skills recognised with the Australian Medical Council for example, usually amounts to approximately \$10,000. This includes the cost of sitting a series of exams, which require a large amount of preparation and require payment on resitting if resulting in exam failure. The time out of paid employment required to sit these exams and the lump sum required for each exam

ensures most refugee and humanitarian entrants would not be in a position to become accredited in this field.

In terms of skills recognition in the trade industries, the costs are also prohibitive to refugee and humanitarian entrants. An assessment of carpentry skills under the NSW TAFE system costs \$800 upfront. If successful, entrants then face a second cost on becoming accredited with the relevant body. Any kind of initial assessment of qualifications with NOOSR costs a flat fee of \$300, a large sum of money for someone unemployed and from a humanitarian background.

It is worthwhile to note that for a large number of humanitarian entrants, arrival in Australia is unofficially accompanied by significant debts. While Refugee Program entrants (those who arrive on visa subclasses 200, 201, 203 and 204) have the cost of their travel covered by the government, Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) entrants (those on a visa subclass 202) have to cover travel costs. On arrival, many SHP entrants are unofficially expected to repay their proposer the costs of their airfare. For heads of households with many children, this repayment can be substantial, amounting to many thousands of dollars. In this situation, they become desperate to achieve sustainable employment that is equivalent to their needs in order to begin repaying their debts, yet lack the capital funds required to have their skills recognised. Their eagerness to begin work should be utilised by the provision of subsidised access to skill recognition and industry accreditation.

STRUCTURAL DIFFICULTIES FACED BY REFUGEE AND HUMANITARIAN ENTRANTS

An avenue through which humanitarian entrants can gain access to cost subsidy assistance for skill recognition procedures is through Job Network long-term job seeker assistance. Job Network providers, however, are not financially remunerated for placing long-term job seekers in skill recognition procedures, as a client needs to be placed in employment before this remuneration is received from DEWR. This leads to Job Network providers being encouraged to place difficult job seekers in employment that is not necessarily commiserate with their skills and qualifications as the process of assisting them with skills recognition is not financially lucrative.

Many refugee and humanitarian entrants are also eligible for cost subsidy assistance through the AEI-NOOSR Assessment Subsidy for Overseas Trained Professionals (ASDOT) program, as the three requirements for the program are that recipients are registered with Centrelink, have proof of permanent residency and must be able to prove they are suffering financial disadvantage. This program, however, is only available for recognition in twelve specified professions and is not automatically granted to those from refugee or humanitarian backgrounds.

LACK OF UNDERSTANDING ON RECOGNITION PROCESSES BY HUMANITARIAN ENTRANTS AND ASSOCIATED EMPLOYMENT WORKERS

The process of investigating the appropriate Australian skill recognition or trade registration body to refer a client seeking advice to, is confusing, convoluted and disorientating for those aiming to have their skills recognised and become industry accredited.

As an example of this, the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (NOOSR) is the national overseeing referral body for skills recognition inquiries. It is also the assessing body for school teaching skills, but not for any other industry. NOOSR can also assess general qualifications but for the assessment of qualifications *specifically for migration matters*, however, clients need to contact DIMIA for state based skill recognition as NOOSR cannot perform qualification recognition for this group. The role of NOOSR in national skills recognition and industry accreditation is disjointed and confusing for workers aiming to assist humanitarian entrants with skills recognition.

For skill recognition and accreditation in trade industries, it is not NOOSR but Trade Recognition Australia (TRA) which performs skills recognition. There are three arms of TRA; the first can assess the skills of those residing in NSW, NT, SA and the ACT, the second administers queries from Victoria and Tasmania, and the third Queensland and Western Australia. The first two are named the Overseas Qualifications Unit, but the third is named Skills Recognition QLD. As well as these bodies, TAFE campuses provide skill assessment and recognition courses across a range of industries. The specifics of the courses offered, however, again differ between States.

The process of skills recognition is based on the industry entrants are aiming to enter, the Australian State of residence and the particulars of the State based skill recognition procedures and State based TAFE courses available. When clients then go to become industry accredited, they face the challenge of identifying the appropriate accreditation body from a second range of specialised state based accreditation bodies. The process is convoluted and siloed for workers. For refugee and humanitarian entrants, and others from a non-English speaking background endeavouring to navigate the system by themselves, the process is even more difficult.

The two existing sources for information on skills recognition and licensing processes are the General Skilled Migration Booklet (DIMIA) and the AEI-NOOSR Guide to Professional Recognition (DEWR). The AEI-NOOSR Guide to Professional Recognition in particular, is not available in a format that is accessible and comprehensible to workers aiming to assist their clients with skills recognition. This means workers have negligible access to comprehensive information on skills recognition processes.

Workers involved in assisting humanitarian entrants find employment often report to be confused on the extensive range of skill recognition bodies and the processes by which clients become industry accredited. There also exists a large amount of confusion on the difference between skill recognition and industry registration and accreditation. The process needs to be more streamlined, or be more widely publicised and explained in order for easier navigation by both workers and individuals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RCOA believes that the situation could be improved if the following recommendations were to be implemented:

- The skill recognition process be streamlined to be administered by a common Federal body to avoid confusion between workers operating in separate States and Territories on the agencies and organisations dealing with skills recognition.
- The role of the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (NOOSR) as the general referral and information body on skill recognition and assessment be promoted and publicised more widely to those involved with assisting humanitarian entrants with skill recognition across the range of government and non-government employment and training organisations (Job Network Providers, Centrelink Multicultural Service Officers, Community based settlement agencies with employment based workers).
- Humanitarian entrants have automatic access to the AEI-NOOSR Assessment Subsidy for Overseas Trained Professionals (ASDOT) to cover the fee of examinations and assessment of overseas qualifications. This would be in recognition of the economically disadvantaged situation of new humanitarian entrants on arrival and assist them to have their skills recognised.
- DEWR restructures Job Network contracts at the first available opportunity to reward financially those Job Network Providers that place humanitarian entrants in retraining and skills assessment processes. This would ensure humanitarian entrants are given the chance to access employment that is relevant and appropriate to their qualifications, as opposed to

having them placed in any employment at the first available opportunity by Job Network providers.

- The General Skilled Migration Booklet (produced by DIMIA) and a suitable version of the AEI-NOOSR Guide to Professional Recognition (DEWR) be made widely available to those assisting humanitarian entrants seek employment. Employment officers in the community sector are also generally unaware that NOOSR will cover the cost of a translator as accessed by Telstra for any communication on seeking information on employment outcomes and this also needs to be more widely publicised.
- A clearer analysis and explanation of the Australian labour market be provided to refugee and humanitarian entrants under the DIMIA funded Pre-Embarkation Orientation Program in order to ensure that expectations on initial employment opportunities by new arrivals are not unrealistic.

CONCLUSION

Refugee and humanitarian entrants often make very keen and motivated workers. Many have arrived in Australia after extended periods spent either in civil conflict or living in a protracted refugee camp situation and are eager to embrace the opportunity to 'start anew' on resettlement. Workers have reported on clients keen to be referred to Job Network providers during their initial 13-week activity test exemption period at Centrelink, showing their desire to be independent and contributing members of society in the mainstream workforce, as opposed to passive recipients of welfare assistance.

The difficulties inherent in the process of having skills recognised and becoming accredited, essentially discourage and damper this enthusiasm, can lead to depression and despondency, and the waste of a valuable Australian labour force resource. As John Howard has announced, Australia has 'a dramatic shortage of skilled workers and it's one of the bigger challenges that we face...¹'. This labour shortage issue could be alleviated by making skill recognition and accreditation procedures more accessible to the thousands of migrant, refugee and humanitarian entrants with valuable skills who already reside in Australia. Unless changes are made to the system however, any future intakes will face the same barriers to becoming functioning members of the Australian labour workforce.

¹ Speech by the Hon John Howard MP to the Business Council of Australia, 3 March 2005.