

**RESPONSE FROM VETASSESS
JULY 2005**

**INQUIRY INTO SKILLS RECOGNITION,
UPGRADING AND LICENSING**

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON MIGRATION



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ABOUT VETASSESS

VETASSESS is contracted by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs as the national assessing authority for a broad range of 'generalist' occupations (management, administration, professional and associate professional occupations) within the General Skilled Migration Program.

In addition to this work, VETASSESS has considerable experience and expertise in providing a range of assessment services within the vocational education and training (VET) sector and in providing advice regarding qualifications in both the VET and higher education sectors.

Other assessment services provided by VETASSESS include:

- the verification of Chinese higher education qualifications
- design and development of electronic assessment and qualification management systems
- skills recognition as part of the competency assessment service
- the issuing of Certificates of Completion that state the equivalence of 'trade' occupations to the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and Training Package qualifications
- the administration of a test and examination service, used for licensing and entry selection purposes.

Qualifications assessment service

VETASSESS provides educational assessments of Australian and overseas qualifications for people intending to apply to migrate to Australia under the General Skilled Migration Program and the Employer Nomination Scheme.

All people with qualifications relevant to one of the nominated occupations who intend to migrate to Australia under skilled independent, skilled Australian sponsored, skilled regional sponsored or skill matching visa categories must

complete a qualification assessment through VETASSESS before lodging a migration application.

VETASSESS assesses applicants applying for over 200 occupations on the skilled occupations list (SOL) for skilled migration and for the employer nomination scheme..

VETASSESS has the capacity to receive and process approximately 10,000 educational assessments per annum.

Verification of Chinese higher education qualifications

VETASSESS is the first agent outside China that has been authorised to verify Chinese higher education qualifications by two Chinese higher education authorities, namely the:

- Higher Education Student Information Consultancy and Employment Center (CHSI)
- China Academic Degrees and Graduation Education Development Center (CDGDC).

CHSI is the only authority in China authorised directly by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in China to recognise, verify and collect records of all tertiary level non-degree qualifications. CDGDC is an institution that operates directly under the MOE China, appointed by both the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council and MOE China. It is the only authority in China able to verify the authenticity of all Chinese higher education degrees.

Both of these organisations have authorised VETASSESS to issue their verification certificates on their behalf. The qualifications and documents that VETASSESS is able to verify, include:

- Higher Education Degrees awarded in China, eg, Bachelor degrees, Master degrees and Doctor degree.
- Higher Education Certificates of Graduation awarded in China.
- Academic Transcripts of Higher Education programs studied in China.

Competency assessment service

VETASSESS is a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) of assessment only services and operates a Competency Assessment Service, which allows individuals to have their skills recognised by undertaking an assessment against the relevant qualification in the appropriate national Training Package or accredited course within the VET sector. Candidates who successfully complete these assessments are issued with a nationally recognised qualification or Statement of Attainment under the AQF.

Due to its extensive knowledge of the Australian education system and qualifications, VETASSESS has also worked with Trades Recognition Australia (TRA) to assist with validating a range of qualifications received by TRA in migration applications. Assistance was provided to validate qualifications and to address quality assurance issues, particularly relating to hospitality qualifications awarded by some RTOs.

Certificates of Completion

In collaboration with the Victorian Office of Training and Tertiary Education, VETASSESS has recently established a service that allows individuals who have completed an apprenticeship to apply for a Certificate of Completion. This certificate details the relevant qualification and occupational title and assists employers in understanding the nature of the qualification and the relevance to particular occupational groups.

Test and examination service

VETASSESS also administers a Test and Examination Service which provides test and examination services for the following organisations throughout Australia

- TAFE Institutes and private providers of vocational education and training
- State Regulatory Organisations, e.g. Plumbing Industry Commission, Consumer Affairs Victoria

- Government Agencies, e.g. Victoria Police, Metropolitan Ambulance Service

Through the range of assessment services it provides, VETASSESS has established strong links with organisations involved in the recognition of overseas skills both within Australia and internationally. These organisations include NOOSR, TRA, the Migration Agents Registration Authority (MARA), Immigration Review Tribunal, Overseas Qualifications Units, Migrant Resource Centres, migration agents and the Chinese organisations - CHSI and CDGDC and the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) in the Philippines.

VETASSESS' RESPONSE TO THE INQUIRY INTO SKILLS RECOGNITION, UPGRADING AND LICENSING

It is our understanding from the Terms of Reference that the inquiry into skills recognition, upgrading and licensing will focus on three key areas, namely:

1. Current arrangements for overseas skills recognition and associated issues of licensing and registration.
2. Comparison of Australia's arrangements with those of other major immigration countries.
3. Identification of areas where Australia's procedures can be improved.

VETASSESS provides the following response to the inquiry based on our experience in conducting assessments within the General Skilled Migration Program and from our broader knowledge and experience with skills recognition, upgrading and licensing.

1. Current arrangements for overseas skills recognition

VETASSESS has been conducting educational assessments of qualifications for migration purposes since 1999. Over this time VETASSESS has streamlined the assessment process to provide a timely and reliable verification service. Our fees are competitive and have been reduced over the past 18 months due to improved efficiencies in processes.

The assessment of qualifications involves providing a written statement on whether an applicant's post-secondary qualifications meet the educational requirements of their nominated 'generalist' occupation selected from the Skilled Occupations List (SOL). This statement is then submitted as part of the documentation accompanying the application for a permanent residence visa and is used by DIMIA as the basis for the allocation of points for skills

The assessment process involves:

- Publishing information and application forms for prospective applicants on our website and in print format
- Enabling applicants to apply and pay online via a secure website where an individual may track the progress of their application or apply through completion of a paper-based form
- Acknowledging receipt of applications electronically and in hard copy within 1-2 days
- Assessing the applicant's qualification according to guidelines published by the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (NOOSR) in the Country Education Profiles (CEPs) to ensure consistency – the focus of the assessment is on the qualification for which recognition is being sought and only considers previous levels of education where they have a bearing on the outcomes of the assessment. Where there is limited information regarding a qualification the assessment involves undertaking comprehensive research into the awarding institution, and the duration and content of the qualification.
- Verifying the assessment outcome in a process that checks each application at three points in the process. In some cases, where there is limited information or the qualification being assessed lacks precedent and falls outside the guidelines, the assessment is forwarded to NOOSR for verification.
- Issuing written assessment advice that indicates whether the applicant's qualification meets the requirements of their nominated occupation. Advice on outcomes of the assessment to applicants is provided within 4 weeks in 95% of cases.
- Providing a reassessment and appeals process.

The assessment process is subject to internal quality assurance checks and external audits conducted by NOOSR to ensure consistency of assessments.

Through this work we have identified a number of potential improvements to processes relevant to this inquiry. These are provided in the ensuing section.

Improvements to procedures

1. Communication of processes to users

From the perspective of applicants, information about migration needs to be easily accessible both electronically via the Internet (especially for offshore applicants) and in hard copy format.

Information provided on websites and in print material needs to be clearly structured, easy to navigate, use consistent terminology and be written in Plain English suitable for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Poor access to and overly complex information is a barrier for individuals intending to migrate. The Internet could also be used more actively to assist users/potential migrants to access assessing authorities and, registration and licensing bodies via hyperlinks.

The establishment of a national web portal on Australia's skills assessment and recognition processes that provides potential migrants and other stakeholders with current information and links to relevant organisations and resources would greatly enhance communication and efficiencies within the current system.

2. Efficiency of processes and elimination of barriers

The current process for applying for migration can be complex and time consuming for some applicants. Improving access to clear and straight forward information would help to improve the efficiency and eliminate some of the obvious barriers within the process.

Other general improvements include

- The increased use of the Internet by assessing authorities for online applications, the communication of information and providing links to other relevant organisations.

- Targeted training for migration agents within Australia and overseas to ensure that up to date information is provided to potential migrants and that correct procedures are followed – this also could be available online.
- Assessment outcomes that allow for the partial recognition of skills and qualifications and the provision of advice on how to upgrade skills to meet the requirements of the nominated occupation.

The following suggestions are more detailed refinements that could be made to current processes to improve efficiencies and eliminate barriers.

Greater recognition of industry/work based awards/qualifications

Education systems and qualification frameworks vary between countries. Countries such as the United Kingdom and South Africa (which are a source of relatively large numbers of skilled migrants) have well established competency based qualifications systems similar to Australia within their vocational education and training sector. Many highly skilled technicians / paraprofessionals are awarded qualifications equivalent to Australian Diploma and Advanced Diploma level within these systems based on industry/work based pathways.

To encourage more applicants with high level skills it may be worth exploring the possibility of broadening the guidelines to cater for work / competency based qualifications in relevant skilled occupations.

Recognition of work experience when assessing qualifications

Unlike some of the other assessing authorities VETASSESS is not required to assess the work experience of applicants in the nominated skilled occupations that it assesses. Procedures could be modified to assess work experience at the same time as the qualification assessment to eliminate another step in the overall process.

Existing guidelines would be applied to ensure the integrity of any work experience documentation. The following principles would

be applied to work experience documentation submitted for assessment with qualifications:

- The experience must be related to the qualification.
- The experience must reflect a level beyond entry level.
- The experience must be within two years of the commencement or conclusion of the qualification.
- The experience must be attested by a manager or supervisor of a registered employer.
- All documentary evidence must be on employer letterhead and verifiable.

Assessments that meet the above criteria could then be reflected in the assessment result under the category of 'Experience'.

e.g. Experience: 2 years as a design engineer in ***** Metal Foundry, Chennai, India.

3. Early identification and response to persons needing skills upgrading

In conducting skills and educational assessments, assessing authorities could acknowledge partial recognition of a qualification. This assessment then could be used to identify skills gaps that could be upgraded through additional training to meet the requirements of the nominated occupation.

The provision of advice on appropriate bridging courses and programs would then need to be provided for applicants both within Australia and off-shore.

4. Awareness and acceptance of recognised overseas qualifications by Australian employers

Most qualifications assessed by VETASSESS fall into the category of 'generalist occupations' most of which do not have a national or state registration or licensing authority to validate the qualifications and experience held for the purposes of employment within Australia. With unregulated occupations the recognition of

qualifications is usually at the discretion of the employer.

One way to assist the applicant post migration and to assist employers and other parties to accept and recognise overseas qualifications is to provide more information to the applicant on the written statement of assessment outcome. The statement could include more detailed advice about the nature, status and content of the qualification and awarding institution, and the equivalence to the AQF.

This would provide employers with more detailed and relevant information on which to make a judgement on the applicant's qualification for employment purposes.

In order to provide more detailed information, the assessment outcome could include a statement as to the equivalent AQF qualification plus an indication of the content of the studies undertaken. An assessment outcome therefore might look more like:

Qualification held: Diploma of Arts from Whitworth Academy, Leicester, United Kingdom.
Nominated Occupation: Office Manager. (ASCO Code: 3291-11)
Skill Requirement: AQF Diploma.
Qualification Content:
Major study: Business Management.
Minor study: Book-keeping principles.
Experience: 5 years as an office manager in ***** Accounting Firm, Manchester, UK
Outcome: POSITIVE.

The purpose of the additional category of 'qualification content' is to better inform the applicant, DIMIA and prospective employers of the content of the approved qualification. This would enable a better choice to be made as to the likely acceptability of the content of the qualification in matching the future employment prospects of the prospective skilled migrant.

The outcome in relation to the level of the qualification held and the skill requirement would still be based upon the actual level of qualification held by the applicant. The qualification content would be of additional assistance but not act in a contrary way to the skill requirement of the qualification level.

On a larger scale the establishment of a qualifications verification service similar to that offered by VETASSESS for the verification of Chinese higher education authorities would greatly assist with the more widespread recognition of overseas qualifications. VETASSESS is currently working with the national agency TESDA in the Philippines to assist this organisation establish an online register of qualified individuals across the vocational education and training sector in the Philippines. The system will also provide detailed information about the structure and content of national qualifications and will be available to international agencies to check the authenticity of Filipino qualifications.

These types of services would also help to address some key integrity issues.

5. Alternative approaches to skills assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications

VETASSESS does not have any comment to make in relation to this issue.