

Qualified but not Recognised

Discussion Paper



eccv

The Voice of Multicultural Victoria

Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria Inc. (ECCV) is the voice of multicultural Victoria. As the peak body for ethnic and multicultural organisations in Victoria, we are proud to have been the key advocate for culturally diverse communities in Victoria since 1974. For 40 years we have been the link between multicultural communities, government and the wider community.

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Forward

Multiculturalism has been good for the people of Victoria. Finding a job is a priority for most new migrants. As part of making a new life in Australia, skilled migrants, refugees and international students often experience difficulties in finding the right job.

The development of an equitable and fair system for the recognition of overseas qualifications has been a significant component of our multicultural policy and practices. Obtaining the appropriate recognition of overseas qualifications and skills has become increasingly difficult for people from culturally diverse backgrounds. As a result some skilled migrants are left with no choice but to take on jobs that are below their professional skill level.

Whilst there is an increasing range of bridging courses in Victoria, the lack of coordination has left the accreditation system quite fragmented. There are several levels of accreditation processes that skilled migrants need to go through including local professional association accreditation boards to reach the entry point for employment. This results in increasing frustration for overseas professionals with years of experience. Many people feel overwhelmed by the complexity of the processes required in obtaining recognition of their overseas qualifications and are confused about how to up-grade them where required.

This discussion paper *Qualified but not Recognised* drills down in to the policy and practical aspects of those accreditation processes. It provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by skilled migrants trying to find employment in the field relevant to their professional qualifications and experience.

I thank the ECCV Employment Education and Training Policy Sub-committee of our Board for taking the initiative to move forward on these issues through a community consultation forum to shed light on the nuances of overseas qualifications recognition processes. I also take this opportunity to thank Philip Makarios, our RMIT Intern for his diligent work and commitment in setting up the forum, collating the community input and putting together this paper. It contains a list of practical recommendations that would significantly improve our system of skills and qualifications to benefit our economy and the wellbeing of our multicultural community.

It is with pleasure that I commend these recommendations in this paper to all three levels of government.



Eddie Micallef
Chairperson

Executive Summary

This discussion paper highlights the need for a fair and equitable procedure for the recognition of overseas qualifications. It is based on the ECCV community consultation forum *Qualified but not Recognised* and highlights the participants' contributions. An overview of the policy context is given, with consideration to international, federal, Victorian state and professional associations. A summary of the discussions during the forum is also provided, with recommendations to address the various issues considered. The recommendations focus on affordable and accessible bridging courses, a centralised advisory service and an appeals mechanism for migrants seeking recognition.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1

ECCV recommends that the Victorian Government establishes 'one-stop shop' information hubs in several locations in metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria to provide face-to-face information and advice on overseas qualifications recognition for new migrants and refugees and accreditation pathways that lead to further training and employment.

Recommendation 2

ECCV recommends that the Victorian Overseas Qualifications Unit (OQU) is adequately resourced to provide better face-to-face community level advice, assistance and networking opportunities in line with its original role.

Recommendation 3

ECCV recommends that a public review be conducted of the current arrangement for the recognition of overseas skills and qualifications through Parliamentary Inquires, and Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission, Productivity Commission or Australian Competition and Consumer Commission inquiries.

Recommendation 4

ECCV recommends that adequate resources be provided, in the form of seeding funds, for Victorian professional associations to conduct reviews of their accreditation processes in consultation with multicultural communities.

Recommendation 5

ECCV recommends that a list of currently available bridging courses to up-skill migrants be compiled and made available to migrant and refugee job seekers. The list should also remain relevant and up to date.

Recommendation 6

ECCV recommends that the Victorian Government implements affordable and accessible bridging programs and short courses to support migrants and refugees seeking the recognition of their overseas qualifications and employment in their nominated field.

Recommendation 7

ECCV recommends that the Australian Government establishes an independent Office of the Fairness Commissioner similar to that in Canada to facilitate a fair and transparent appeals process that serves migrant skills and qualification recognition.

Recommendation 8

ECCV recommends that a multicultural community-based organisation be resourced to take on the role of a coordinator body to work in partnership with service providers. The coordinator body would be expected to produce a list of all currently available bridging courses, advocate to all three tiers of government and develop an advisory board of professional associations and relevant stakeholders.

Recommendation 9

ECCV recommends that the Victorian Government allocates resources to research and review the current state of the recognition of overseas skills and qualifications and to map the relevant organisations, pathway and courses.

Recommendation 10

ECCV recommends the development of a combination of online and face-to-face affordable bridging programs and courses to support migrants and refugees seeking the recognition of their overseas qualifications and employment in their nominated field.

Recommendation 11

ECCV recommends resources to be directed towards the development of a community based online forum, to monitor and assess the range of professional accreditation support programs. The service should allow users to make recommendations and produce ratings of various courses and programs.

Recommendation 12

ECCV recommends that a Melbourne metropolitan based pilot program be funded to support migrants and refugees towards effective pathways for employment in their nominated field. The program should be characterised by a short training course and advocacy to employers, to ensure appropriate and long term employment.

Recommendation 13

That ECCV consider forming an alliance for employment purchasing arrangements with other employment placements agencies to address the social and economic disadvantage of culturally diverse job-seekers.

Background

The ECCV *Work Solutions* forum identified the recognition of overseas skills and qualifications as a significant barrier to migrants and refugee job seekers in Victoria¹. As evident from the 1990 *Enriching Futures* report², this issue has been assessed recurrently over the past several decades and recently has been considered on a global platform by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM)³. Areas commonly highlighted by these various reports consider the problems to include a lack of ethnicity data collection, fragmentation and inaccessibility of the system and the lack of an appeals process.

This section aims to give a general overview of the state of migrants and refugees in Australia, with particular emphasis on the employment challenges associated with the recognition of overseas qualifications.

Australia is a global example of a nation developed through migration, particularly regarding skilled migration to resolve domestic shortages. The 2011 Census indicated that 47 per cent of Victorians were born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas⁴. Skilled migration has increased rapidly over recent years, constituting 68 per cent of all places available in Australia's migration programme in 2014⁵. The 2013-2014 Migration Programme's 190 000 places comprises of 128 550 places for employer sponsored migrants, general skilled migrants and business migrants⁶.

It should be acknowledged that the IOM highlights Australia as an example of good practices in the recognition of overseas qualifications. The Victorian Department of State Development, Business and Innovation reported that 70 per cent of skilled migrants found employment in their nominated field⁷. However, the recognition of overseas skills and qualifications remains a significant barrier to employment for skilled migrants and refugees. The Australian Bureau of Statistics' 2011 report *Perspectives on Migrants* demonstrates the migrant rate of unemployment at 8.5 per cent to be almost double that of the Australian born population (4.6 per cent). Approximately 64 per cent considered the lack of Australian work experiences or references to be a challenge to finding employment. Other challenges include language difficulties (33 per cent), lack of local contacts or networks (23 per cent) and recognition of skills and qualification (15 per cent). Almost 65 per cent of all recent migrants had a non-school qualification before arrival in Australia; however, only one third of these had their overseas qualification recognised⁸.

¹ ECCV (2014). *Work Solutions: Improving Cultural Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace*.

² Victorian Taskforce on Overseas Qualifications. (1990) *The Challenge of Change: Enriching Futures*.

³ International Organisation for Migration (2013). *Recognition of Qualifications and Competences of Migrants*.

⁴ Victorian Multicultural Commission (2014) <http://www.multicultural.vic.gov.au/population-and-migration/victorias-diversity/2011-census-a-snapshot-of-our-diversity>. Accessed on 28/07/2014

⁵ Department of Immigration and Border Protection (2014). <https://www.immi.gov.au/media/statistics/statistical-info/visa-grants/index.htm>. Accessed on 18/07/2014.

⁶ Department of Immigration and Border Protection (2014). <https://www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/20planning.htm>. Accessed on 18/07/2014

⁷ Victorian Budget 2012-2013 Service Delivery: Budget Paper No. 3. P. 90.

⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Perspectives on Migrants 2011*, Cat. No. 3416.0, Canberra, 2011, <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/3416.0Main+Features22011?OpenDocument#> accessed 24/07/2014

Economic Benefits

The prevalence of over-qualification and underemployment of migrants is well documented in Australia and many other EU countries⁹; despite migrants and refugees with overseas skills and qualifications being a valuable resource for the labour market. An analysis by Upwardly Global considered the benefits of supporting migrants in the recognising overseas skills and qualifications: additional direct and indirect jobs are created, average salaries significantly increase, consumer spending increases, annual tax revenue increases and there is a decrease in skilled worker shortages in key industries¹⁰. Beyond positive economic impacts, there is also an improvement to the migrant's quality of life and that of dependant family members.

Skilled Migration

From 2012 to 2013, the number of temporary migrants who entered Australia on the skilled migrant category was 128,973¹¹; a sharp increase from approximately 38,500 a decade before¹². The top source countries in 2014 are India, China, United Kingdom and the Philippines respectively¹³. Sponsored selection indicates that Australian employers prefer migrants with advanced English language ability, comparable training and recognised qualifications. Australia has adopted a new online *SkillSelect* protocol based on the New Zealand model, which has demonstrated excellent global employment outcomes¹⁴. *SkillSelect* aims to streamline the application process, migrants seeking a visa will need to submit an online Expression of Interest (EOI) and then be issued an invitation in order to lodge a visa application. A person making an online EOI would be ranked in accordance to a points test that measures a migrant's level of 'human capital' by their age, level of qualifications, English language ability and work experience¹⁵. The online *SkillSelect* system facilitates faster visa procession and aims to ensure that migrants meet the specific needs of the economy and fill gaps in the labour market where and when they exist.

Data Collection

It is not mandatory to collect data on cultural diversity on public sector employees in Victoria¹⁶ and a lack of data on the cultural diversity of the Australian workforce is evident. This poses some difficulties to managers and policy makers in fully comprehending the extent of diversity within their workforce and how well it is utilising the diversity in the wider labour force. Lack of mandatory data collection by professional associations or employers also produces some difficulty for documenting skill shortages in Australia. The Department of Employment brings together secondary data such as from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and the results of surveys to employers in order to

⁹ Op cit p. 216 International Organisation for Migration (2013).

¹⁰ Upwardly Global (2013). A Look at Skilled Immigrant Workers in the U.S.

¹¹ Department of Immigration and Border Protection (2014). *Migration Programme Statistics*. Retrieved from <https://www.immi.gov.au/media/statistics/statistical-info/visa-grants/migrant.htm>. Accessed on 29/07/2014.

¹² Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005). *Year Book Australia*. Retrieved from <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/0BD75000987B71A0CA256F7200832F19?opendocument>. Accessed on 13/08/2014

¹³ Op cit Department of Immigration and Border Protection (2014)

¹⁴ Op cit International Organisation for Migration (2013)

¹⁵ Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (2011). *ECCV submission on the Migration Program for 2012-2013 and beyond to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship*.

¹⁶ Bertone, S., Leuner, B., Nair, L. & Qin, J. (2011). *Employment barriers and success factors for skilled immigrants in the public sector in Melbourne*. Ian Potter Foundation.

identify areas of skill shortage¹⁷. The Department of Employment often cannot produce data on skill shortages that is up to date with the rapidly shifting economic environment. As skilled migration programs depend on skill shortage data, it is crucial that the data accurately reflects the needs of the labour force.

English Language Training

Competence in English language ability is a strong predictor of securing registration and employment. In a study by Lesleyanne Hawthorn (2011) language testing was demonstrated to be one of the most challenging barriers to becoming accredited. The Occupational English Test, designed to be a field specific English Language test of allied health professionals, was shown to have an average pass rate of 34 per cent in 2010¹⁸. Acquiring a sufficient level of English may take some migrants several years. The Australian Government has made a significant investment in developing the English language ability of migrants through the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). Permanent visa holders are entitled to 510 hours of English tuition through the program, at no extra cost to the user¹⁹. In the years 2010 to 2011, English tuition services were provided by AMEP to “more than 55, 000 clients from 191 countries, studying in 250 locations”²⁰.

Employment guides for job seekers

Australian Government resources for new migrants seeking employment include the *Guide to Employment for Migrants* (DEEWR, 2013) and the publication *Beginning a life in Australia - Welcome Guide* (DIAC, 2012). These resources set out and describe the steps involved in finding work in Australia, for example arranging for qualification documents to be translated, getting skills and qualifications recognised and obtaining Australian work experience.

When compared with the Canadian guide *Welcome to Canada – What you should know* (see International section below) the Australian *Beginning a life guide* is less reader friendly due to being dense with a large amount of information. However to its credit, the Australian guide is available in 37 different languages whereas the Canadian Guide is available in just two²¹.

The *Guide for Employment for Migrants* (DEEWR 2013) is a comprehensive and precise resource that covers every aspect of finding work in Australia. The guide’s limitations are that the amount of information is overwhelming if presented solely in its written form. There is also an assimilatory tone in the *Getting Help* section, when discussing the importance of language, literacy and numeracy skills, as “a heavy accent that is difficult to understand can actually be a liability and may hold you

¹⁷ Department of Employment (2013). *Skill Shortages in Australia*. Australian Government. Retrieved from <http://docs.employment.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/skillshortagesaustralia2013.pdf>. Accessed on 29/07/2014

¹⁸ Hawthorne, L. (2011). *Health Workforce Migration to Australia – Policy Trends and Outcomes 2004-2010*. Health Workforce Australia. Adelaide

¹⁹ AMES (2014). *About AMEP*. <http://www.ames.net.au/learn-english/about-the-amep.html>. Accessed on 30/07/2014

²⁰ Op cit p. 216 International Organisation for Migration (2013).

²¹ Op cit ECCV (2014)

back.”²² That may have a discouraging, possibly unintended effect, of tempering the aspirations of the migrant or refugee job seekers.

Engineers Australia’s (2013) guide *How to increase your chances of getting your first Engineering job in Australia* provides specific employment advice for migrant engineer job seekers²³. The 15 page document provides advice on various topics including communication skills, local experience and preparing a job application. The guide finishes with three success stories of migrants engineer who found employment in the field. It should be noted that the guide makes no mention of the process towards recognition of overseas qualifications. *Migration Skills Assessment* is another guide produced by Engineers Australia in 2012, for migrants seeking recognition of engineering skills and qualifications²⁴. This document is 50 pages long, with an amount of information that may be overwhelming if presented in its written form alone. However, it is comprehensive and provides detailed information for the process to gain recognition of overseas engineering skills and qualifications.

Policy Context

This section provides an overview of the policies relevant to the recognition of overseas skills and qualifications on an international, federal and state level. Some consideration is also given to Australian professional associations

International

Mutual Recognition

Australia is moving towards mutual recognition of skills and qualifications with overseas countries. This involves agreements by two or more international bodies to validate each other’s degrees and programmes or to affirm that the methodologies of accreditation agencies are sound and functional. The Washington Accord is one such agreement, to which Engineers Australia has been a signatory since 1989²⁵. Signatories to the accord hold substantial recognition to the accredited or recognised qualifications of other signatories. Although no formal obligation exists to recognise the qualifications of fellow signatories, The Washington Accord is an agreement to make every reasonable effort to recognise the substantial equivalence of engineering programs accredited by other signatories.

Australia has sought to improve the recognition of overseas qualifications through signing bilateral memorandum of understanding with Germany, France, Italy, Malaysia and Thailand.²⁶ The local

²² Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Hills-Holroyd Paramatta Migrant Resource Centre, *Guide to Employment for Migrants*. (Canberra: Australian Government, February 2013),

http://www.training.nsw.gov.au/skills_trade_recognition/employment/index.html, 26. Accessed on 15/08/2014.

²³ Engineers Australia (2013). *How to increase your chances of getting your first Engineering job in Australia*.

https://www.engineersaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/shado/education/PDP/migrant_engineers.pdf. Accessed on 15/08/2014.

²⁴ Engineers Australia (2012). *Migration Skills Assessment*. http://www.engineersaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/shado/About_per_cent20Us/Migration_per_cent20skills_per_cent20Assessment/migration_skills_assessment_booklet.pdf. Accessed on 15/08/2014.

²⁵ ABET. *Engineering: Washington Accord*. <http://www.abet.org/engineering-mra-washington-accord/>. Accessed on 08/07/2014

²⁶ The Recognition and Quality Unit. *Australia’s Higher Education System*.

http://www.unesco.org/education/studyingabroad/highlights/global_forum/presentations/australia.doc. Accessed on 8/07/2014

Australian professional accreditation bodies, however, make the final decision on the recognition of any individual's overseas qualifications.

Fairness Commission, Canada

Like Australia, Canada has experienced an increase in skilled migrants who have studied abroad and are seeking registration to practice in their new country. In Australia there is no direct appeal or complaints process for individuals to question decisions made by the diverse and fragmented range of professional and trades bodies regarding the assessment of overseas qualifications and skills. As the Australian recognition system is complex, fragmented and lacks accountability, and there is an anecdotal history of unfairness, much can be learned from fairness approaches in Canada.²⁷

In 2006 the Government of Ontario introduced legislation to mandate transparency, objectivity, impartiality and fairness in the policies and procedures that regulators use to license applicants in their professions. The Office of the Fairness Commissioner was established to hold regulators accountable for meeting requirements set out in the legislation. Significantly, the Office recognises that internationally trained professionals bring “new ideas and innovation, global experience and networks, and linguistic and cultural competencies that enhance their ability to serve the increasingly diverse population of Ontario.”²⁸

Welcome to Canada Guide

Welcome to Canada – What you should know is considered to be the official handbook for new migrants to the country. A revamped version of the publication, first published in 1997, was launched in 2013.²⁹ That Canadian resource succeeds in being a friendly, comprehensive and practical source of advice. As well as detailing government employment services, *Welcome to Canada* highlights the important role that taking part in volunteering, internships and mentoring programs play in finding work. A page is dedicated to describing “Nine Essential Soft Skills for Immigrants”; there are words of advice from a recent migrant; and the importance of *Workplace language skills* is recognised.³⁰ The Guide is available in English and French.³¹

Federal

AEI-NOOSR

In Australia, The National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (AEI-NOOSR) provides online assessments to the educational level of an overseas qualification as guided by the Country Education Profiles (CEP). CEPs compiled by AEI-NOOSR describe the education system of over 90 countries to guide their assessment of overseas qualifications. This assessment does not qualify applicants for

²⁷ ECCV (2014). *Work Solutions: Improving Cultural Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace*.

²⁸ Office of the Fairness Commissioner, *A Fair Way to Go: Access to Ontario's Regulated Professions and the Need to Embrace Newcomers in the Global Economy. Executive Summary*, (Ontario: Office of the Fairness Commissioner, 2013), <http://www.fairnesscommissioner.ca/>

²⁹ “Minister Kenney Unveils Revamped *Welcome to Canada* Guide and *New Living in Canada* Online Tool”, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2 April 2013. <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/department/media/releases/2013/2013-04-02.asp>

³⁰ Citizenship and Immigration Canada, *Welcome to Canada: What you should know*. (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, April 2013), 64-65. <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/publications/index.asp>

³¹ Op cit ECCV (2014)

migration, admission to study, membership of a professional body or for employment in the relevant profession³²; however may be used for general employment purposes.

In addition to this assessment, AEI-NOOSR's role includes "promotion of transparent and equitable procedures and criteria for the assessment of qualifications, for both educational and professional purposes"³³ and "providing information, advice and assistance... to individuals and organisations"³⁴. However, the manner in which AEI-NOOSR acknowledges and addresses these responsibilities is unclear.

Trades Recognition

Trades Recognition Australia (TRA), as enabled by the Department of Industry, provides skills assessments for people with overseas trade skill for the purpose of migration and recognition. Various assessment programs exist depending on the applicant's visa and whether assessment is onshore or offshore. International students with an Australian trade qualification seeking permanent residence are eligible for the TRA's Job Ready Program. Successful completion of the program is a requirement for individuals seeking a visa for independent skills migration³⁵.

VETASSESS is a private body under auspices of the Australian government, which has the capacity to screen and recognise certain skills and qualifications. With representation in over 20 countries, VETASSESS contributes significantly to the recognition of overseas skills and qualifications. Most notably, VETASSESS delivers training courses for trades both onshore and offshore, and can ensure migrants arrive in Australia with full recognition³⁶.

State

The Victorian Overseas Qualifications Unit

The Overseas Qualifications Unit (OQU) was founded as a pilot program in 1989 to address "the lack of a central, specialised agency in Victoria responsible for assisting migrants in the recognition of their skills and overseas qualifications"³⁷. Since its establishment, the role and capacity of the OQU has varied significantly. Currently, the OQU lacks the staffing and resources to address the original need for a central, specialised agency assisting skilled migrants in Victoria.

The OQU assesses the general education level of overseas qualifications in their relevant state or territory, except for NSW where there is no OQU and applications can be made to AEI-NOOSR directly³⁸. Assessments are completed online in accordance with CEPs, are free for Australian

³² Australian Education International (2014) <https://www.aei.gov.au/services-and-resources/pages/aeinoosr.aspx>, Accessed on 08/07/2014

³³ p. 9. The Recognition and Quality Unit. *Australia's Higher Education System*.

http://www.unesco.org/education/studyingabroad/highlights/global_forum/presentations/australia.doc. Accessed on 8/07/2014.

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Trades Recognition Australia. <http://www.tradesrecognitionaustralia.gov.au/>, accessed on 14/07/14

³⁶ VETASSESS (2014). <http://www.vetassess.com.au/>. Accessed on 30/07/2014

³⁷ p.16. Victorian Taskforce on Overseas Qualifications. (1990) *The Challenge of Change: Enriching Futures*.

³⁸ Australian Education International (2014). <https://aei.gov.au/services-and-resources/services/assessment-of-overseas-qualifications/who-can-assess-my-overseas-qualifications/pages/default.aspx>, accessed on 14/07/2014

permanent residents and may take up to 12 weeks to complete³⁹. The OQU does not provide a face-to-face information service.

AMES Skilled Professional Migrants Program (SPMP)

The Victorian Skilled Professional Migrants Program (SPMP) is a four week intensive workshop that aims to equip skilled professional migrants to overcome the barriers to employment. The program includes a mentoring service, where industry professionals may offer support and advice to participants of the program. Following participation in the program, 89 per cent of participants had found work, with 72 per cent of those being in the field relevant to their overseas skills and qualifications.

Professional Assessing Authorities

The process of recognising overseas skills and qualifications in Australia is fragmented and complex. Migrants and refugees seeking to work with their overseas qualification in a specific area are required to have their skills and qualifications assessed by a registration, licensing or professional body. Overseas trade skills and qualifications are assessed by Trades Recognition Australia. A list of the professional assessing authorities relevant to each occupation are listed on the Australian Skills Recognition Information website (ASRI), provided by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP)⁴⁰. The process for recognition of overseas qualifications varies between different assessing authorities. The professional assessing authorities are not accountable to any centralised body, nor does an independent appeals process exist.

Community Consultation Insights

This section represents a broad based community consultation regarding the recognition of overseas qualifications. The ECCV forum *Qualified but not Recognised* held on 10 July 2014 at the Statewide Resource Centre in Carlton considered solutions for overcoming barriers to the recognition of overseas qualifications. Almost 30 people attended the forum, representing local government, professional bodies, multicultural organisations, migrant community services and ethnic communities. The key note and expert panel also included presentations from universities, professional associations, multicultural organisations and ethnic communities.

The following is a summary of the issues discussed and various solutions proposed by participants of the forum.

Moving Towards a Global Labour Market

The forum key note speaker suggested that technological improvements have globalised the labour market. Skilled workers from around the world are seeking employment in Australia. Likewise, employment opportunities in Australia are being marketed overseas. Growth in areas such as health,

³⁹ Live in Victoria (2014). <http://www.liveinvictoria.vic.gov.au/employing-overseas-talent/settle-and-retain-new-workers> accessed on 14/07/2014

⁴⁰ Australian Education International (2014). <https://aei.gov.au/services-and-resources/services/assessment-of-overseas-qualifications/who-can-assess-my-overseas-qualifications/pages/default.aspx>, accessed on 16/07/2014

infrastructure and aged care, is expected to continue and increase. The state of Victoria needs to utilise the untapped resource of qualified and skilled migrants to keep up with the growth in relevant areas of government and society. There is evidence of the prevalence of over-qualification and under-employment of migrants and the negative consequences this has on both individuals and the wider economy. Despite this, there have been no attempts to better utilise the knowledge and skills of over-qualified migrants in Victoria in recent years. The Victorian workforce is currently ageing; this is likely to result in a skills shortage in the near future. Considering this, Victoria can utilise skilled and experienced migrants to fill the gaps that an ageing population will produce.⁴¹

Categories of Job Seekers

We can understand job seekers in Australia to be categorised as follows:

1. International students, who after receiving Australian qualifications, found overseas employment but now seek employment in Australia
2. International students, who after receiving Australian qualifications, become permanent residents in Australia
3. People with overseas qualifications who are seeking employment in Australia
4. Local Australian born individuals, with Australian qualifications

The first three categories of job seekers face some barrier in the recognition of overseas skills and qualifications.⁴²

An Independent, Centralised Advisory Service for Skilled Migrants

Participants at the forum considered the current process for the recognition of overseas qualifications in Victoria to be fragmented and complex; and recommended the formation of an independent, face-to-face advisory service for skilled migrants. The forum expressed disappointment at the depleted resources of the Victorian Overseas Qualifications Unit (OQU). Participants also expressed concern in the lack of a centralised body that acts as a face to face, one-stop-shop information provider for skilled migrants; suggesting that migrants often arrive in Australia with the expectation that the Australian employment system is the same as that of their source country. Following migration, the process to have skills and qualifications recognised varies significantly based on factors such as country of origin and the relevant assessing body. Therefore, it was considered important that an advisory service should be able to provide individualised case plans for migrants and refugees. Moreover, this service should be able to advise employers as well as job seekers. A suggestion was to also utilise the Migrant Resource Centres (MRC) to facilitate information sessions for migrants and refugees.

⁴¹ Bertone, S. *Presentation: Key Issues Around the Recognition of Overseas Qualifications in Australia* at Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria forum 'Qualified but not Recognised' on 10 July 2014.

⁴² Ibid

Recommendation 1

ECCV recommends that the Victorian Government establishes 'one-stop shop' information hubs in several locations in metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria to provide face-to-face information and advice on overseas qualifications recognition for new migrants and refugees and accreditation pathways that lead to further training and employment.

Recommendation 2

ECCV recommends that the Victorian Overseas Qualifications Unit (OQU) is adequately resourced to provide better face-to-face community level advice, assistance and networking opportunities in line with its original role.

Overseas Qualifications Assessment Review

Participants commented on the need to engage and influence professional associations that assess overseas qualifications. There has been no public review of the processes in the accreditation of overseas qualifications and skills by professional association for over 20 years. Community feedback emphasised the important role of government in influencing professional associations to adopt less onerous accreditation processes. Participants expressed the need for a review to assess the fairness and productiveness of accreditation and to develop policy reforms and ways to improve the current system for recognition of overseas skills and qualifications. In addition they expressed concern about the burden of excessive demands for English language proficiency and they felt that the English language rating should not be an integral part of that overseas qualifications assessment.

Recommendation 3

ECCV recommends that a public review be conducted of the current arrangement for the recognition of overseas skills and qualifications through Parliamentary Inquires, Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission, Productivity Commission or Australian Competition and Consumer Commission inquiries.

Recommendation 4

ECCV recommends that adequate resources be provided, in the form of seeding funds, for Victorian professional associations to conduct reviews of their accreditation processes in consultation with multicultural communities.

Independent and Free Bridging Courses

A distinction was made between hard skills, which are those acquired from studying and working in a relevant profession or trade, and soft skills, which include skills in speaking, writing and interacting with others. The forum participants suggested that migrants will often be lacking the latter and proposed that professional associations generally have little trouble recognising hard skills, however

soft skills are more difficult to assess. Bridging courses are necessary to develop these soft skills through training and work experience. However the bridging courses currently available are mostly facilitated by universities, private providers and some professional associations, such as Swinburne University, Holmesglen College and Engineers Australia. These programs operate on a user pays system and can be expensive for migrants who may already be financially disadvantaged. Furthermore, the participants criticised the fragmented nature of these programs as migrants often come across them serendipitously late after their migration; many are already demoralised by their long periods of underemployment or unemployment.

A project for compiling a list of all currently available bridging programs and making them accessible to migrants and refugees was suggested by forum participants. Following the compilation of such a list, it would be possible for community organisations to advise migrants and refugees of the available bridging courses best suited to their needs. It would also allow community organisations to produce new programs to fill any apparent service gaps to up skill migrant job seekers.

Recommendation 5

ECCV recommends that a list of currently available bridging courses to up-skill migrants be compiled and made available to migrant and refugee job seekers. The list should also remain relevant and up to date.

Bridging programs are integral to providing the training migrants need to fulfil the requirements for qualification recognition. Participants noted that such programs must be free and independent to any particular professional association to provide equitable support for migrants and refugees. Currently, most bridging programs or training programs available adopt a user-pays market system. Many migrants are already experiencing financial hardships, thereby government funding is needed. Participants acknowledged that some publically funded services currently exist such as those provided by AMES; however, they are not sufficient to meet the demand for this service. People at the forum felt strongly that the deregulation of universities would push the prices of fees up, placing many individuals within this system on increased debt. Mentoring programs, such as that available through AMES, were praised as effective methods of linking migrants with overseas qualifications to employers.

The forum proposed that there should also be an implementation of short courses, which are essential for migrants and refugees to become familiar with the Australian job market and developing the necessary skills for employment. Several forum participants suggested that short courses would be designed to educate migrants about the range of services related to recognition of overseas qualifications and about working in Australia. These courses should exist within a larger pathway for the recognition of overseas skills and qualification. The proposed pathway would include an assessment of qualifications and an advice plan of what is further required to achieve competency.

Recommendation 6

ECCV recommends that the Victorian Government implements affordable and accessible bridging programs and short courses to support migrants and refugees seeking the recognition of their overseas qualifications and employment in their nominated field.

A Regulator Body and Appeals Mechanism

The lack of an accessible regulatory body or appeals mechanism, to oversee the recognition of overseas skill and qualifications of migrants and refugees in Australia, was highlighted as a point for concern during the forum. Without an appeals mechanism, there is no available procedure to contest decisions made by professional associations. It was suggested that a designated ombudsman would promote a fair and equitable procedure and ensure migrants are not being exploited by employers. Some participants proposed that state government departments, similar to the former Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations, should monitor and oversee service delivery organisations relevant to the recognition of overseas qualifications.

Recommendation 7

ECCV recommends that the Australian Government establishes an independent Office of the Fairness Commissioner similar to that in Canada to facilitate a fair and transparent appeals process that serves migrant skills and qualification recognition.

Research, Coordination and Advocacy

Research, coordination and advocacy were highlighted by the forum as essential to promote the needs of skilled migrants and refugees. The key note speaker suggested that there is a need for a coordinating body to work in partnership with service providers to promote the development of courses, programs and services for skilled migrant and refugee job seekers. The coordinator body would also be expected to produce a list of all currently available bridging courses and to advocate to all three tiers of government for their collaboration. Such a coordinator body should also seek to form a board of professional associations and relevant stakeholders to advise service providers of best practice models. It was further mentioned that ECCV is well placed to fulfil that role.

Recommendation 8

ECCV recommends that a multicultural community-based organisation be resourced to take on the role of a coordinator body to work in partnership with service providers. The coordinator body would be expected to produce a list of all currently available bridging courses, advocate to all three tiers of government and develop an advisory board of professional associations and relevant stakeholders.

Participants recognised that some research is necessary to ‘map’ the various relevant organisations, pathways and courses prior to improving the process for recognition of overseas skills and qualifications. Several participants criticised currently available skill shortage data as out dated; a system needs to be put in place where data can be consistently updated. A few participants commented that skill audits performed by professional associations are biased to the interests of the profession association.

Recommendation 9

ECCV recommends that the Victorian Government allocates resources to research and review the current state of the recognition of overseas skills and qualifications and to map the relevant organisations, pathway and courses.

International Harmonisation

The forum participants felt that more effort should be put into international harmonisation through the forming of bilateral and multilateral international agreements.

Online Resources

There are increasingly more private education providers offering innovative support programs that lead to the assessment of overseas qualifications. Participants proposed online resources as a cost effective measure to inform and educate migrants seeking accreditation and employment. Some of the above mentioned courses and bridging programs may be available online, similar to what many universities currently offer. In addition, an e-moderator service could also be set up which will allow migrants to communicate with each other, to provide support and advice through their own experiences with a range of education providers. The service could also be used to allow for recommendations and ratings of experiences with particular courses or programs.

Recommendation 10

ECCV recommends the development of a combination of online and face-to-face affordable bridging programs and courses to support migrants and refugees seeking the recognition of their overseas qualifications and employment in their nominated field.

Recommendation 11

ECCV recommends resources to be directed towards the development of a community based online forum, to monitor and assess the range of professional accreditation support programs. The service should allow users to make recommendations and produce ratings of various courses and programs.

Universities

There is a perception among forum participants that universities have become expensive and inaccessible to migrants and refugees; however, it was acknowledged that this is due to the large and complex nature of the higher education system. Dismay was expressed regarding the possible deregulation of universities as it will likely increase the cost of study to migrants and refugees that require training.

Best Practice Models

Engineers Australia (EA)

The forum identified Engineers Australia's (EA) model for the recognition of overseas qualifications as progressive and a good model for professional associations and accreditation bodies to consider. EA is a signatory of the Washington Accord, along with 15 other countries, which allows for the automatic recognition of the qualification of other countries. The panel speaker noted that although the qualifications are recognised; migrants' skills and experience must also be assessed and recognised prior to being able to work in Australia. EA provides paid services to support individuals having their qualifications assessed and seeking employment. EA also sponsors research and development for engineers in Australia.

The Skill Fill Program

The forum participants recognised the Skill Fill Program as a best practice model for bridging courses aiming to overcome the requirement by employers for local experience. The program consisted of a three week training course targeting migrants with recognised skills and qualifications that aims to support them to find employment. The program was funded to place 40 skilled migrants in 2010 to 2011 who struggled to find employment due to the lack of local experience. The program eventually placed 65 skilled migrants in employment, 25 more than the original goal, salaries of the employed migrants ranged from \$50,000 to \$170,000 per year. Advocacy to employers was considered a key contributor to the success of the program. A panel member recognised that migrants who find employment through such support programs pay higher taxes for many years and therefore to the benefit of the wider economy.

Recommendation 12

ECCV recommends that a Melbourne metropolitan based pilot program be funded to support migrants and refugees towards effective pathways for employment in their nominated field. The program should be characterised by a short training course and advocacy to employers, to ensure appropriate and long term employment.

Social Disadvantage

Some participants pointed out that the issues raised in relation to unemployed people from culturally diverse backgrounds also apply to other disadvantaged unemployed non-migrant

Australians. They suggested that there are benefits in collaborating with other organisations working to reduce social disadvantage to build broader community support.

Recommendation 13

That ECCV consider forming an alliance for employment purchasing arrangements with other employment placements agencies to address the social and economic disadvantage of culturally diverse job-seekers.

Conclusion

The recognition of overseas skills and qualifications is an issue significant to Victoria's large multicultural population and migrant communities. Migrants employed at a level suitable to their experience and qualifications provide a benefit, not only to themselves, but to the wider society also. Australia's system for the recognition of overseas qualifications is one that is well regarded internationally, but the areas requiring improvement are significant. Unlike Canada, there is no regulatory body or appeals mechanism accessible to migrants seeking recognition of their overseas qualifications. Furthermore, bridging programs and courses currently available are fragmented and can be expensive for migrants.

Informed by community consultations, the recommendations aim to address some of the most significant employment barriers to migrants and refugees. The recommendations highlight the importance of research and advocacy, support services and a coordinated approach. All three tiers of government, professional associations, community organisations and education providers need to work collaboratively to develop and maintain a fair and equitable process for the recognition of overseas skills and qualifications. This would ensure that jobseekers from migrant and refugee backgrounds would achieve their full potential in the workforce.

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