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Tony Windsor

Chair, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia

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Dear Mr. Windsor,

SUBMISSION FROM EDUCATIONAL TESTING SERVICE

Educational Testing Service (ETS) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia inquiry into the use of 'fly-in, fly-out' (FIFO) and 'drive-in, drive-out' (DIDO) workforce.

Our submission looks at the issues faced by overseas workers engaged in FIFO endeavours in regional communities, and policy issues that affect workers, companies and development of key projects in regional Australia.

ETS is the largest global non-profit educational assessment and research organisation that has been operating in Australia since 1964. We are keen to use that experience to help provide the committee with insights on issues affecting overseas workers and their ability to operate effectively in regional Australia, as well as some of the policy barriers that employers face needlessly.

If the Council has any further questions, or would like any aspect of our submission clarified, please do not hesitate to contact me on my e-mail (hcook@etsglobal.org) or phone number 0408 078 052.

Yours sincerely,
Helen Cook
Associate Director, Client Relations (Australasia)
ETS Global

Skills shortages and skilled migration

Australia's ability to attract a highly skilled and motivated workforce from around the globe has long been envied by our international competitors. However, the new structures of the global skilled labour market combined with the dramatic shifts in global economic development and the extreme peaks in labour demand in a narrow skills sector in Australia has created a unique skilled labour migration opportunity for Australia. We must now make a real effort to regain leadership with a broad forward-looking agenda that gives employers access to a reliable and sustainable pipeline of skilled labour so that they can build a competent workforce.

Australia is currently experiencing a serious skills shortage across a number of critical industries, which must be urgently rectified. Without the ability to address these shortages, we are told, a number of nationally significant projects may not go ahead - denying valuable opportunities to future generations of Australians.

Employers have demonstrated their willingness to tackle this problem by creating long-term capacity through training and apprenticeships, while addressing the short-term gaps through skilled migration.

Regrettably, past and present policies on language testing for skilled visas have failed to support Australian industry in efficiently and successfully addressing the short-term skills shortages. While the use of tools like the Skilled Occupation List and National Skills Needs List provided clear direction to skilled migrants and employers, the policies around language proficiency testing created difficulties getting the people and skills needed to help with Australia's key infrastructure projects.

Addressing the current policy inadequacies would create a broader pool of talent available to Australian employers and make Australia a destination of choice for prospective international professionals in a highly competitive global market, while maintaining the necessary security, integrity and rigour.

An example of Government's current skilled migration policy approach is the Enterprise Migration Agreement (EMA) granted to the Roy Hill project in the Pilbara region by the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, the Hon. Chris Bowen.

The Roy Hill EMA will be used to obtain 1700 overseas workers for this resource project, highlighting the need for an efficient process to bring these men and women to Australia in a timely manner without compromising our migration safeguards.

While the new EMA has received the lion's share of recent political and media attention, a majority of skilled migrants will be needed on projects and sites across Australia, which are not connected to an EMA.

While the EMA employers may receive some support to expedite migration processing matters, this will only exacerbate the bottleneck faced by other employers desperate for overseas workers. Streamlining the skilled migration process, including changes to the current English language testing process that allows the use of more testing centres and more frequent testing, could make a considerable difference to numerous projects across Australia.

The Federal Government has already legislated the expansion in the number of accepted English proficiency tests for student visa purposes. We suggest that expansion of this program across key skilled migration visa classifications could bring great benefits, by adding other tests to the current sole option (IELTS) and giving potential soon-to-be Australian workers who are a direct match to the skills requirements in demand a choice in demonstrating their English language proficiency to potential employers and the Government.

Having just one test that is accepted for employment migration purposes, which is not available in certain locations or at certain times, can act as a real disincentive for the prospective skilled migrants being targeted – not to mention the added testing costs faced by employers or the unnecessary processing bottlenecks that are created.

Australia's key sectors, including manufacturing and mining, should have access to the employees that are best suited to the jobs that they are having trouble filling – not just the ones who can access the current examination – ensuring equity of access and availability of talent.

Our experience and anecdotal evidence indicates that experts and professionals in many of the target nations may be choosing to go to nations, such as United States, that accept English language proficiency tests other than just IELTS.

Benefits of English language proficiency in the FIFO context

International workers obtain a great benefit from working in Australia, both in financial terms and through access to our wonderful lifestyle. In return, they make a very important contribution to Australia's infrastructure, productivity and economic progress. They also assist us by enriching the experience of Australians working alongside their international peers.

Access to skilled migrants creates a wider skills base, increases our international profile and grows our standard of living. Upon returning home, these individuals make a long-term impact on our global standing via industry links and international goodwill.

There is no argument about the value of Australia's continued ability to attract and support international migrants, particularly as our current low unemployment makes it more difficult to find the necessary skills locally.

However, ETS believes that the key concern which must underpin all other considerations, is the skilled migrants' ability to make the necessary contribution while ensuring their safety, both personal and from exploitation.

In order to ensure these laudable goals, migrants coming to work in Australia need to possess a suitable level of English language proficiency. This is particularly essential for FIFO workers, who may not have access to the necessary social and support structures in remote communities.

Having the necessary minimum level of English language proficiency will ensure that they are better able to contribute, and will not be easy prey to the organisations and individuals who may seek to exploit them.

English language proficiency is clearly an important criterion for both the Government and employers. This is logical, as having a suitable level of English proficiency will allow foreign FIFO workers to make a better contribution, improve their ability to access relevant information and allow them to cope better with issues that inevitably arise when living in a foreign country.

It could also become an issue of life-and-death importance, as communication and language proficiency become a serious occupational health and safety concern on a remote site. A failure to clearly communicate or understand potential dangers could end in real tragedy.

Improved methods for ensuring suitable language skills on arrival would allow migrants to better engage with the local community, and to seek support when necessary. This is likely to have positive long-term effects on the FIFO workers' ability and desire to establish connections and roots in these communities, and perhaps decide to stay after the end of their skilled migration term and make a further contribution.

Language proficiency

ETS would encourage the Committee to recommend further examination of the current migration policy settings affecting FIFO workers, which are unreasonably preventing them from making a valuable contribution.

There is currently a significant need for the development of a nuanced understanding of the issues around English language proficiency and its impact on skilled migration and the FIFO workforce. To date, there has been a considerable lack of attention paid to the differences between 'everyday' English proficiency, cross-cultural communication skills and technical literacy, as the three skills are conflated into the catch-all 'English proficiency'. Functioning in distinct environments requires the development of different sets of communication skills appropriate to each setting.

We would encourage the Committee to recognise the need for further exploration of the impact that a sophisticated approach to workers' English language proficiency has on their performance and experiences.

Unfortunately, there has been very little research into the impact of language proficiency on the likely outcomes for overseas workers. Supporting the industry in understanding the likely success indicators, as they relate to English language proficiency, would have an immense impact in guiding the early decisions made by both employers and skilled migrants.

Until recently, Australia has relied on just a single English proficiency test to meet all of our migration assessment needs – study and employment. This approach, which has prevailed in Australia over the last decade, probably has not helped to address the complaints of poor English proficiency by employers and communities in which FIFO workers reside.

Having a sole English language test provider created serious problems, as employers unsatisfied with the quality of the testing had no choice but to continue using the single provider allowed by the Government.

The current skilled migration visa requirements, unlike Australian student visa requirements, accept only the IELTS test as a demonstration of English language proficiency. It is essential that this monopolistic approach be revised, as it has hampered Australia's ability to address skills shortages and better utilise graduating international students.

The testing bottlenecks and delays created by the current lack of IELTS test centres in key source nations have also added to the problems faced by employers trying to attain skilled labour from overseas. For example, there are currently around 120 IELTS testing centres in the three key countries targeted by Australian employers – China, India and Korea – compared with more than 700 non-IELTS English language test centres that have already been approved for student visa testing by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship after a rigorous process.

Given the advantages of allowing multiple providers to offer English language testing to international students coming to study in Australia, with students able to take one of four recognised tests, it seems illogical not to extend these advantages to the skilled migration stream.

Though English proficiency tests are not an unconditional test of a migrant's abilities, the option of having the most widely available English test results would act as a quality assurance measure. It is worth noting that many multinational companies based in Asia require a globally recognised English test result for employment purposes.

In a tightening global environment, with competitor nations gaining increasing market share, Australian policies need to be as open and competitive as possible. Australian policy makers need to pursue the development of a level playing field for English language testing in order to enhance the country's opportunities for development.

CONCLUSION

ETS believes that English language proficiency together with industry-determined technical skill requirements provide sound measures of the potential for skilled FIFO migrants to make a lasting and valuable contribution to the remote communities in which they will find themselves.

We strongly encourage the Committee to look at ensuring that a streamlined process for English language testing is made available to skilled migrants coming to work on Australian projects, taking advantage of the available diversity in the testing market.

A streamlined and accurate assessment of applicants' language proficiency will not only improve the skilled migrants' experience, but will also extend the depth and breadth of global reach for FIFO employers.

The current single supplier approach in this area has not served Australia well in the past, and would encourage the Committee to recommend that expertise of the broader industry be used to inform government policy formation when identifying and assessing English language requirements and competence.

We would further encourage the Council to consider the impact of inclusion and use of multiple English language tests for the purposes of skilled visas, as a means of supporting international applicants in demonstrating their language proficiency in the post-qualification period.

ABOUT US

The TOEFL test, created and administered by ETS, has been available in Australia since 1964 and is the most widely available and accepted English proficiency test globally. It is recognised by more than 8,500 colleges, universities and government agencies in more than 130 countries, available from more than 4,500 test sites around the world and has been taken more than 27 million times.

As a not-for-profit organisation, ETS is held responsible by stakeholders and any of the revenue raised through the administration of tests go back into the testing administration, research and development. This focus on funding excellence in research, has resulted in a best practice and sophisticated approach to testing of English language proficiency.