

JOB READY

Migrants wanting their skills recognised in Australia often face a number of hurdles. Dr Bob Birrell examines the complexities involved.



The recognition of credentials is crucial to the migrant settlement experience. If migrants with trade or professional credentials gained overseas cannot translate them into appropriate employment, the economic wellbeing of their families is likely to be threatened. It can also be a demoralising experience for a migrant, who has previously enjoyed a professional status before coming to Australia, to be forced into a routine and low status job.

Sadly, the latter experience has been a common one. The root of the problem is that since the 1980s most of Australia's professional migrants have been drawn from Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Asia (rather than the UK, as was the case prior to the 1980s). Australian employers have had to make judgements about the value of prospective employees with credentials they know little about. There is uncertainty about the standards of the training and its relevance to the Australian job market.

For their part, migrants have been understandably embittered by the apparent denigration of their credentials and experience by employers. As a result, there have been periodic protests and consequent official inquiries into skills recognition issues. The Joint Standing Committee on Migration has recently embarked on another such investigation, and has called for public submissions.

It may help in understanding the contemporary issues if the outcomes of earlier debates on skills recognition are reviewed first. In the late 1980s the topic was white hot. This was an era when the migrant communities achieved their greatest political influence. The Hawke government had encouraged the flowering of multiculturalism, thus legitimating the voice of migrant groups. At the same time, it had embarked upon an expanded migration program, which included a much enlarged skilled component. Most of the migrants in this component were professionals from non-English-speaking-background (NESB) countries. Few of these professionals succeeded in gaining professional employment on arrival.

The fate of the engineers, who were the largest occupational category at the time, is instructive. Part of the problem was the scale of the intake. At the time of the 1991 Census, there

were 15,226 degree-qualified (and 5,049 diploma-qualified) overseas-born engineers who had arrived in Australia between the years 1986 and 1991. Yet, in 1991, there were only 82,047 persons (whether Australia- or overseas-born) employed as professional engineers in Australia. With the onset of recession in 1990, most of these migrant engineers went to the end of the employment queue.

Apart from the sheer numbers, there were also deficiencies in the selection system. There was no preliminary evaluation of whether the engineering (or any other professional qualifications) migrants brought to Australia were acceptable to employers, nor was there any preliminary formal test of their English capacity.

Migrants were assessed on the level of their educational credentials rather than whether these were relevant to employers. An arts degree was given the same weight as an engineering degree in a renowned technical

college. Many migrants thus suffered the double handicap of possessing credentials deemed to have little value to employers and deficiencies in their English communication skills.

The Hawke government did begin to take action to rectify the situation at the end of the 1980s. It set up bridging courses to assist migrants to meet local professional standards. But the main initiative was the incorporation of an evaluation of migrant credentials into the selection system. In other words, the government sought to cut the problem off at the bud. From mid-1989 most skilled migrants had to first prove that their qualifications were applicable to an occupation in Australia before their applications could proceed. In 1992 the Labor government required migrants in some professions to first undergo a formal English language test. Prior to this time, to the extent that English skills were evaluated, it was largely via self-assessment (ticking a box indicating level of English competence).

Since the Coalition came to power in early 1996, there have been further reforms designed to ensure that skilled migrants are job ready when they hit Australian shores. In mid-1999 the Coalition introduced a new skill selection system which classified occupations according to the rigour of the training required. The top tier—designated as '60 point' occupations— included engineering, computing, teaching,

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nursing, accounting and several of the traditional trades. Other occupations with less rigorous academic or skill training were classified as 50 point and 40 point occupations. The pass mark for the selection system was set at a level that largely eliminated persons without 60 point occupations.

Applicants had to first pass a professionally administered English test set at the level of 'vocational English' and apply to the relevant skill-assessment authority in their field for an assessment of their qualifications. Their applications were not permitted to proceed until these two hurdles had been crossed. In most cases the assessment authority was the professional body representing the particular profession, for example, Engineers Australia in the case of engineering, the Australian Computing Society for computing and CPA Australia for accounting.

So, with these reforms in place, what is left for the Migration Committee to discuss? Quite a bit. Migrants with professional and other occupational credentials continue to enter Australia without having first undergone an assessment of whether their qualifications are acceptable in Australia. These include persons coming under the family reunion and humanitarian programs, and foreign-born New Zealand citizens entering Australia under the Trans-Tasman arrangements. Many of these migrants are experiencing the same frustrations as their counterparts in the 1980s—that is difficulties meeting the standards imposed by Australian credentialing authorities.

The extent of these problems varies according to whether the profession or trade is a registrable one. Registrable occupations are those where a successful formal assessment of credentials is a precondition of employment, as is the case with medicine, nursing and teaching. In other fields, employers can take on a migrant (or local) if they believe he or she can do the job without requiring evidence of any formal recognition of qualifications by the relevant authority. Of the persons employed as computing professionals in Australia in 2001, for example, only 53 per cent held a degree-level qualification of any kind, and only 26 per cent held a degree in computing as their highest qualification. As long as persons with computing skills can prove their competence in an international programming language or computing



system, they stand a good chance of gaining employment at the professional level.

Credential recognition problems are far more serious with registrable professions. Debate on this issue usually proceeds on the assumption that Australian authorities are too tough, perhaps because of concern to limit numbers within the profession or perhaps because of local prejudice towards those with foreign credentials. The medical field is a minefield of such contention. In some fields, however, there are grounds to question whether the accreditation process is tough enough. Some examples are considered after a review of the medical case.

Until 2004 the Australian government debarred doctors from selection under the main skilled visa subclasses. This was because of a longstanding policy stance that there were too many doctors in Australia. This stance has crumbled in the face of mounting shortages of GPs and specialists in regional areas and of medical officers in metropolitan and regional public hospitals. Under its Strengthening Medicare program introduced in 2004, the Commonwealth government has accelerated the recruitment of overseas-trained doctors (OTDs) by opening up pathways to permanent residence for OTDs here on a temporary basis, by permitting doctors to apply under the permanent resident skilled visa categories and by subsidising the recruitment expenses of employers wishing to engage temporary resident OTDs.

These initiatives have proved to be contentious on a number of fronts. One issue is that at the same time as the employment of temporary OTDs has accelerated, there remain several thousand permanent resident OTDs already in Australia, who possess medical training from overseas universities but are not permitted to practise here. Their numbers have been growing by about 500 a year, with most entering Australia via the family reunion program, thus without any preceding assessment of their qualifications. In 2003-04 some 566 doctors arrived from overseas as settler arrivals, including 110 from New Zealand. In the case of the New Zealanders, most are former migrants from Asian countries who decide to move to Australia after obtaining New Zealand citizenship. Under the Trans-Tasman arrangements they have the same rights as New Zealand-born citizens to move to and work in Australia.

To gain full registration these permanent residents must first pass the Australian Medical Council (AMC) medical knowledge and clinical examinations and complete the equivalent of an internship in a training hospital. The AMC is a Commonwealth government agency independent of organised medicine, though with representation from the medical colleges and medical schools.

Most of the thousands of permanent resident OTDs seeking accreditation

have been trained in non-western medical schools. Many have tried and failed to pass the AMC examinations. There is a long history of disputes over the legitimacy of these examinations. Are they a genuine and justifiable hurdle or do they represent a form of restrictive practice designed to maintain the scarcity of doctors? Since the AMC is at arms length from organised medicine, this explanation seems implausible. Nonetheless, there are issues about the difficulty of the AMC tests which have vexed OTD advocates. The medical knowledge test is in a multiple-choice format requiring speed reading in technically complex English which would stretch any doctor years out of medical school, let alone those not fluent in English.



The Commonwealth government has accelerated the recruitment of overseas-trained doctors.

Another provocation for permanent-resident OTDs struggling to pass the AMC test is that the Australian government is currently permitting employers to recruit OTDs, including those who have trained in non-western medical schools, on a temporary-entry basis. These doctors currently do not have to undergo any preliminary assessment of their medical knowledge or clinical skills before practising in Australia.

The case of Dr Jayant Patel illustrates the dilemmas. He was appointed to the Bundaberg base hospital on a temporary visa as a staff medical officer in 2003. His appointment was arranged by a recruitment firm. There was no preliminary assessment of his medical knowledge or clinical skills. In other words there appears to be one standard for permanent-resident OTDs and another for temporary-resident OTDs. Nonetheless, the outcome of Patel's medical practice justifies the AMC

requirements for permanent-resident OTDs and reaffirms the need for a similar requirement before temporary-resident OTDs are allowed to practise in Australia.

There are further bitter disputes regarding accreditation of specialists. Specialist accreditation is determined by the relevant specialist college, such as the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS) in the case of surgery. RACS has been in dispute with state health departments and with the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) over its monopoly of training and accreditation. RACS has been accused of restrictive practices in regard to its handling of accreditation standards regarding OTD surgeons. RACS has taken a conservative line in accrediting OTD surgeons. The line would appear to be vindicated by the Patel experience and by other surgical problems revealed in the course of the current Morris inquiry in Queensland. After being appointed as a staff medical officer, Patel was permitted to practise surgery without any assessment of his surgical skills. He was subsequently promoted to Director of Surgery at the Bundaberg Hospital, again without any assessment by RACS.

As suggested earlier, there are situations where it may be that the accreditation procedures in place are not tough enough. This is an issue the Migration Committee will have to address. The context here is that, as part of the mid-1999 reforms to the selection system referred to above, the accreditation role was usually delegated to the relevant professional association. At the time, most migrants who needed an assessment were located overseas. The task of the accrediting authority was to make a judgement whether the standard of the training and curriculum content of the overseas course in question could be equated with that required in Australia. Some tricky judgements were involved—though usually the accrediting authorities were generous in their assessment of overseas courses.

More recently, a growing issue has been the accreditation of migrants trained in Australia. Since mid-2001 former overseas students trained in Australia in courses which meet Australian accreditation standards for 60 point professions (or trades) have been eligible for permanent residence. The number of successful applicants under this provision has jumped, from 5,480 in 2001-02 to 11,460 in 2003-04. The majority of those applying have been in two fields, computing and accounting.

The reason for the domination of these professions is that accreditation can be obtained quickly (thus with relatively low investment in their Australian education).

For their part, many of Australia's universities have initiated the required courses, particularly Masters courses of 12 to 18 months duration. (From July 2003 the minimum period of Australian training for eligibility for the onshore student visa subclasses was raised from one to two years). The Australian Computing Society has been prepared to accredit such courses as meeting professional-level computing standards, despite the fact that most of the students have not completed undergraduate courses in computing and that the Masters courses in question do not fit graduates for entry-level jobs as professional IT personnel (since they do not usually have to achieve professional-level competence in key programming languages during their courses). In the case of accountants, the Masters courses provide the required accounting courses specified for Australian students completing undergraduate courses in accounting.

These courses can be completed in 18 months and, as long as the overseas student has completed an undergraduate degree overseas, all other requirements are waived. For students changing their status onshore, there is no assessment of their English-language communication skills—unlike those assessed offshore. This is an issue because of the short duration of Masters courses and the limited opportunities such students have to mix within Australian circles. As a consequence, they often lack the communication skills employers expect of professional workers.

The unresolved issue here is whether there should be some oversight of the professional bodies conducting the qualification assessment process. To whom are they accountable? As the examples cited indicate, they may be too tough (for professional gate-keeping reasons) or not tough enough, perhaps because of conflicts of interest over the funds they receive for conducting the assessment and an interest in expanding their membership base. ■

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For more information on the skills recognition inquiry by the Joint Standing Committee on Migration visit www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/mig or email jscm@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 4560