

Qualifications recognition for skilled NESB women

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The problem of qualifications recognition is particularly acute for NESB women - those least likely to be Principal Applicants, most likely (along with refugees) to be out of the labour force at the time of migration, and therefore least likely to get their qualifications assessed in advance. The consequences can be profound, given that women's intermittent participation in the labour force means there is a shorter time period anyway in which to recoup the returns from their training. Such factors enhance the likelihood of preference in families being given to males' requalification and career progression in Australia - a choice which compounds women's initial career disadvantage.

Current issues to watch

In a period characterised by non-discriminatory immigration policy, and the increasing globalisation of skilled migration, Australian professional bodies are having to confront the need to assess qualifications from an ever-increasing array of source countries - potentially extending to more than 140 countries. In relation to each there is a need to assess not merely the calibre of the education system, but specific courses at individual institutions at particular points in time. This diversity is compounded by the issue of numbers. The past decade has been characterised by unprecedented levels of skilled migration, peaking in 1990-91, and currently rising again. Qualifications

recognition remains an ongoing issue.

In consequence of the above, there is clearly a major problem related to resources. Where registering bodies lack detailed information, they have typically decided to proceed with caution - relying on reference to precedent in their decisions. The way this has worked in the past is that courses similar to those in Australia have had greatest likelihood of recognition - at times with justice, but at times regardless of actual quality.

Information provision is clearly critical for skilled migrant women at two points: before migration and within Australia. Primary migration years typically coincide with prime child-bearing years for women. Interviews conducted this year at a range of overseas posts confirm that in general husbands continue to be nominated as Principal Applicants within the skilled migration process, given the strong emphasis placed in the points system on recent continuity of professional employment. Since women are generally not Principal Applicants, they are under no compulsion to get their professional qualifications assessed in advance - despite the fact that the majority will ultimately wish to use them. The reasons are simple. Qualifications assessment takes money and time. Few women elect to pay an additional pre-migration fee, since minimal guidance is typically provided at overseas posts, and most have no notion of the likelihood of non-recognition.

The consequences of this lack of advance screening can be devastating for skilled NESB women, who typically discover their qualifications are not recognised at the point in Australia where they try to resume their careers. In an extreme case, this may result in significant family separation.

Within Australia, the accuracy and breadth of the information available is also vital. A Chinese lawyer was initially told by the Victorian law authorities that she would be required to complete three full years of study in Australia, at a price of around \$2000 per subject, despite having completed an Australian masters degree. It was only by checking Law Board procedures Australia-wide that she learned that each subject could be taken by distance learning through the University of Sydney - at a fraction of the cost and within a vastly reduced timeframe.

A fourth critical issue for skilled NESB women relates to language testing. By 1992, with Australia in deep recession and pressure mounting for ongoing reduction of immigration intakes, consistent evidence was emerging of the disproportionate labour market disadvantage faced by NESB workers. Many critics justifiably argued a link between English as a Second Language ability and competence within ultimate professional employment. The result has been the progressive introduction of mandatory language testing, both at overseas posts and within Australia, including a move to make language testing an essential prerequisite of professional registration.

In relation to teaching, for instance, by the early 1990s NESB teachers in New South Wales were being required to pass 'an employment-specific test of English competence'. According to a recent study by Inglis and Philips, over a two year period from 1991-93 an average of just 33 per cent of candidates who sat for this test passed. A whole raft of criticisms have been made of the test, ranging from the lack of published validation procedures to the question of 'what constitutes an "appropriate" level of English competence' and the means of its assessment. This issue needs careful monitoring, given the likely spread of mandatory English language testing and the fact that subsequent qualifications testing also takes place in English.

A major initiative of the National Office of Overseas Skill Recognition (NOOSR) over the past six years has been the introduction of competency-based assessment of skills - typically

applied to migrants who have not secured qualifications recognition before migration. Competency-based assessment was in fact fought for by reformists throughout the 1980s, since they believed assessment of the skills migrants actually possess would be far more just than a comparison of paper-based qualifications. By 1993, NOOSR was funding twenty professional bodies to develop sets of competencies. Notable successes have been achieved in the field of nursing, with the provision of bridging courses and competency-based assessment reportedly leading to full registration for 90 per cent or more of New South Wales and Victorian candidates.

Despite this success, serious issues have been raised in relation to competency-based assessment. Concern is mounting on the issue of *culturally specific knowledge*, with people potentially 'denied recognition because they do not possess the level of culturally specific knowledge that is deemed to be required for operation in the occupation'.

Whether preparing for competency-based assessment or pre-registration examinations, qualifications bridging courses have become an increasingly important means of steering NESB professionals through the maze of language testing and qualifications recognition procedures in Australia. Such courses lack the provision of child-care, however - a fact with substantial impact on the participation of women. Moreover, there is the ongoing question of distribution of courses as well as supply, particularly given the recent signalling of major budget cuts in relation to training programs. Bridging course places were in severe under-supply in Australia in the early 1990s, resulting in wait lists of 1-3 years. With increased funding through the Special Intervention Program they have since been in reasonable supply, but only in Sydney and Melbourne, and only within key professions. The cost of running such courses can be prohibitive in other capital cities - as much as \$10,000 per person where numbers are low, and typically occurring after very long waits for sufficient candidates.

The availability of bridging courses clearly has a major impact on NESB women's access to professional registration, particularly where such courses have become a mandatory part of the pre-registration process, as within nursing and teaching. An additional issue of concern is the increasing pressure in some States for such courses to be offered on a user-pays basis.

A seventh issue, linked to all the above, is the attitude to NESB migrants of the Australian professional bodies which legally control the registration process. A number have an impressive history of openness in relation to NESB skills - for example the Institution of Engineers Australia, which by the late 1980s was recognising 70-80 per cent of overseas qualifications, and by 1996 was increasingly moving to regional mutual recognition.

Finally, it is essential to recognise that not all government departments necessarily share the reform agenda. The implications of this can also be explored in relation to medicine. While NOOSR has been an ongoing advocate of improved recognition procedures for over-seas-qualified doctors, the federal health department shares the concern of the Australian Medical Association at their rising migration, attributing to their presence a major increase in national health outlays. In such a context, NOOSR's push to reform has the potential to be defeated by the interests of more powerful federal departments - despite the Coalition's pre-election commitment to improve opportunities for overseas doctors.