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Patron: Her Excellency Marjorie Jackson-Nelson, AC, MBE Governor of South Australia



Submission to
Joint Standing Committee on Migration
on the
Inquiry into Temporary Business Visas

The Australian Refugee Association Inc. (ARA), having been at the forefront of refugee settlement in Australia for over 30 years, welcomes the opportunity to make this submission.

ARA is a leading provider of settlement services in South Australia. It is also active on the national level in relation to developing public policy on refugees and migrants in similar circumstances and in implementing effective services. ARA has a broad range of services in the areas of settlement, employment, migration advice and assistance, emergency financial and material assistance, asylum seeker support, youth work, community capacity building and refugee policy development. ARA is regularly represented in national forums and, in recent years, on the international scene in Kenya and Geneva. As well as communicating directly with the Minister's office and the Department, it also works through the Refugee Resettlement Advisory Council, the Refugee Council of Australia, the IOM Community Advisory Group and a range of advisory groups, fora and community bodies. Its regular advocacy on a wide range of issues is grounded in the everyday face-to-face work with refugees, asylum seekers and others in similar circumstances.

The solid working relationships built up with many community services and support groups throughout South Australia add up to a very comprehensive network of support for migrants and refugees.

The Australian Refugee Association now wishes to draw attention to a number of issues related to the operation of Temporary Business (Long Stay) 457 and related visas.

The Issues:

1. Mismatch of skills and opportunities.

Despite good intentions and lots of preparatory work, some people arrive in Australia with skills and qualifications that do not seem to match needs or opportunities here.

Qualifications may not match skill requirements precisely as stated. Often this requires a revision of way in which the information is presented in job applications or resumes. For this, a knowledge of the Australian context, opportunities, skill requirements and certification is required. As new arrivals do not have this, they need assistance. Particularly, a grounded knowledge of local circumstances, regulations, licensing requirements and industrial and commercial environments may be necessary before migrants can really do the work they come here to do or even are sponsored for (457 visa holders).

People also need to know where to go for appropriate bridging course, or how to match the statement of qualifications to requirements. Bridging courses are often held only in the eastern states or are extremely expensive. The government needs to examine this with a view to either subsidising the cost or introducing a HECS-type scheme to encourage people to access bridging courses.

Many entrants arrive in Australia without an appropriate understanding of the nuances of Australian recruitment and hiring practices (including resume writing, responding to job specifications, and interview processes). As a result people with otherwise satisfactory formal qualifications miss out on employment.

2. Local knowledge

Settlement and engagement with the local community, services and institutions are an important part of becoming productive. Poor preparation in this regard is affecting those who came with their young families. Pre-arrival or even post arrival preparation should include local knowledge of the economy, social and community services, health and education systems.

For those who move into work quickly, eg. 457s, isolation of their families, lack of connectivity in the community, access by dependents to English, etc. are significant problems. Many skilled migrants also have difficulty securing long term accommodation.

Lack of knowledge of local services and infrastructure makes people feel inept, marginalised and unwanted, causing unnecessary stress. This feeds into a heightened sense of vulnerability and may also lead to people making bad decisions that impact quite negatively on them at a later date.

3. Social and community networks

The first steps in establishing a community and social network can be very difficult, both for the employed person and the non-employed partner, although for very different reasons

While current meet and greet programs do offer to set up contact with the entrants' ethnic or cultural community, there are many instances where this is not a workable or satisfactory arrangement. A more comprehensive facilitated engagement is required. The receiving communities need to be prepared, both the ethnic/cultural communities and the general community. The introduction of a significant number of migrants, particularly in regional areas can be very challenging for the local community as well as creating a need for new or more developed infrastructure.

4. Qualified partners

A great deal of frustration is experienced by those who have been sponsored by employers with equally qualified partners (mostly women). The partner is usually left to sit idly at home, without access to bridging courses or further education. Their careers are put on hold. Access to further education is conditional on paying full fees (overseas student rates).

5. Sufficient funds

While all applicants for skilled visas are advised to bring with them sufficient funds to make a realistic start in Australia (usually estimated at about \$25,000), some people use up all their resources simply to get here. Others make serious miscalculations regarding Australia's living standard and the costs of daily living. As a result, they are forced by their circumstances to take any work they can get on arrival. ARA has had a number of requests from people on skilled visas for assistance to get basic processing jobs. This results in a great wastage of skills and talents.

6. Industrial relations issues

Prejudices and lack of understanding of various visa types on the part of prospective employers, regularly results in the rejection of applications.

Many prospective employers do not understand and/or are unwilling to take the trouble to get accurate information on temporary visas. Jobseekers are then rejected or fail to get interviewers. This bias requires more attention than just the provision of a hotline to a government office.

Where migrants experience discrimination or unfair treatment by employers (told to undertake inappropriate tasks or are underpaid), they are at a major disadvantage. There is no provision for people on 457 visas to change employer.

Conclusion

The Australian Refugee Association provides this submission in the conviction that concentrated, resourced attention to the issues identified will strengthen the national economy, support industry, ensure appropriate settlement and integration pathways for migrants, especially those on temporary visas, build local community capacity and contribute to the further development of this nation.

2 February 2007