AUSTRALIA-CANADA ROUNDTABLE ON FOREIGN QUALIFICATION RECOGNITION

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INTRODUCTION

With the combined effects of demographic change, economic shifts, and the global competition for talent, labour market pressures are growing in many developed countries. In Canada, the expected growth rate of the workforce is less than 0.5 percent after 2015. Some projections have also predicted that, by 2011, all net growth to the Canadian labour force will consist of immigrants. Australia faces a similar situation as a decline in the proportion of working age people has been projected, resulting in a ratio of only 2.7 people of working age to each person over 65 years of age. In 2009, Australia’s population stood at 21,875,000 people, following the largest growth in 20 years (a net annual gain of 443,100 people) due largely to immigration despite domestic fertility rates rising to 2 percent.

As part of a broader strategy for addressing skill shortages, Canada and Australia are working to enhance the internal and international recognition of qualifications through mutual recognition agreements (MRAs) and improvements to foreign qualification recognition processes. With both countries functioning as federal systems, qualification recognition involves a number of jurisdictions and a range of approaches, creating an often confusing and lengthy process for many foreign trained professionals. Recent developments in Canada and Australia, however, demonstrate an increasing awareness that efficiency and consistency in qualification recognition is an important factor in economic growth.

Given that Australia and Canada face a number of common issues and share similar policy approaches, there is an opportunity for mutual learning and the potential for collaboration. As new developments continue to emerge in both contexts, comparing some of the challenges and successes in the area of qualification recognition would be valuable for key stakeholders, such as regulatory bodies and professional associations. Recent efforts to develop consistent approaches to qualification assessment and recognition in Australia and Canada point to a promising trend toward improving qualification recognition processes, which will help to promote economic development.

In collaboration with Professor Lesleyanne Hawthorne, Associate Dean International at the University of Melbourne, the Public Policy Forum (PPF) is organizing the Australia-Canada Roundtable on Foreign Qualification Recognition, which aims bring together key stakeholders to build on promising practices and explore the possibility of further collaboration between Australia and Canada. This backgrounder is intended to provide an overview of skilled migration and foreign qualification recognition in both contexts while the accompanying Annex 1 includes current information on specific occupations that will be featured at the roundtable. With significant advancements to improve qualification recognition in Australia, Annex 2 provides additional details on best practices to complement this backgrounder.

SKILLED MIGRATION

Trends in Skilled Migration to Australia

The scale of skilled migration to Australia has grown rapidly in recent years under successive governments, typically constituting 60 percent of permanent intakes. Between 2004-05 and 2008-09, 358,151 permanent arrivals were selected through the General Skilled Migration (GSM) category, including 72,172 people in 2008-09 (with dependents). Few were derived from the major English speaking background countries, defined as the UK, Ireland, the USA, Canada, South Africa and New Zealand. Eight of Australia’s top 10 GSM source countries were in Asia – in rank order India (21%), China (18%), UK (14%), Malaysia (6%), Indonesia (4%), Sri Lanka (3%), Republic of Korea (3%), South Africa (3%), Hong Kong SAR (3%) and Singapore (3%). ESB migrants constituted just 17 percent of the top 10 at this time, while 63 percent of all primary applicants (PA’s) remained male. In 2009-10 Australia’s
permanent migration target was 182,450 people. Fifty-nine percent of places were allocated to skilled intakes (108,100), 33 percent to the family category (60,300) and 8 percent to humanitarian entrants (13,750). A target of 113,850 skilled migrants has been set for 2010-11. (See Table 1)

Table 1: Permanent Immigration Intakes to Australia by Major Category

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>44,580</td>
<td>32,040</td>
<td>38,090</td>
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<td>49,870</td>
<td>56,500</td>
<td>60,300</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skilled</td>
<td>27,550</td>
<td>35,000</td>
<td>53,520</td>
<td>97,920</td>
<td>108,500</td>
<td>115,000</td>
<td>108,100</td>
<td>113,850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Eligibility</td>
<td>1,730</td>
<td>890</td>
<td>1,480</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanitarian</td>
<td>11,900</td>
<td>11,356</td>
<td>12,349</td>
<td>13,017</td>
<td>13,000</td>
<td>13,500</td>
<td>13,750</td>
<td>TBA</td>
</tr>
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Source: Adapted from data in Department of Immigration and Citizenship, “Reform of Australia’s skilled Migration Program and Key Inflows: We’ve Checked Our Policy Settings – Now What?”, May-June 2010, Canberra.

While Labor affirmed skilled migration to remain a national priority, in line with its 2007 election platform, long-term workforce demand was planned to be met through greatly expanded domestic training within a decade (most notably through 40 percent of the youth cohort becoming Bachelor degree qualified, in what the government termed Australia’s ‘education revolution’). Medium-term demand will be addressed through the GSM. Short-term demand will be addressed through employer and state/territory sponsored labour migration programs – most notably the uncapped 457 long-stay business visa (allowing employment for up to 4 years). According to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Australia’s policy is currently driven by the ‘three P’s - Population – the number of people in the economy. Participation – the average number of hours these people work. Productivity – the average output produced by these people for every hour worked.’ Immigration is deemed to contribute to all three by increasing the working age population by bringing more people into Australia aged 15 to 64 years; raising workforce participation by bringing in people who have a higher propensity to work and are concentrated in the prime working ages of 25 to 44 years; and improving productivity by having a strong emphasis on permanent and temporary skilled migration.

Foreign credential recognition remains a key policy challenge within this context. Between 2004-05 and 2008-09, two-thirds of skilled PA’s selected by Australia were qualified as professionals, with many others previously working in trades:

- Professionals: 66%
- Trades: 16%
- Associate professionals: 5%
- Managers/administrators: 3%
- Clerical workers: 2%

The top 5 professions of arrivals these 5 years were accounting (32% of GSM PA’s), computing (23%), architecture/building (9%), engineering (9%) and nursing (5%), with the scale of medical migration also important. The top 5 trades were chefs/bakers (30% of all trade PA’s), engineering technology (14%), building (14% excluding plumbing), electrical trades (12%) and hairdressing (12%).
In addition GSM family members significantly boosted the scale of skilled arrivals. For example from 2004-05 to 2008-09, 1,489 medical practitioners migrated to Australia as GSM PA’s – a number rising to 2,593 once their spouses are factored in. Teacher/ lecturer skilled arrivals similarly rose from 4,938 to 8,697, as did the scale of manager/ administrator, associate professional and clerical worker intakes. Large numbers of these partners would seek work, arriving largely unscreened in terms of English or credential assessment. The impact of spouses on other fields was modest from 2004-05 to 2008-09, including in many associated with student migration:

- Accounting - 40,054 skilled PA’s (compared to the 42,975 GSM total)
- Computing - 28,858 (compared to 31,237)
- Architecture/building - 11,339 (compared to 14,600)
- Engineering - 11,167 (compared to 11,541)
- Nursing - 6,400 (compared to 7,676)
- Chefs/bakers - 9,907 (compared to 9,267)
- Engineering trades - 4,329 (compared to 4,690)
- Building (excluding plumbing) - 4,205 (compared to 5,014)
- Electrical trades - 3,682 (compared to 4,114)
- Hairdressers - 3,658 (compared to 4,203)

It is important to note that substantial numbers of accompanying family members were categorized as ‘not in the labour force’ at point of arrival, constituting 100,875 GSM migrants, unfiltered for human capital attributes. Many however would seek work.

Immigration pathways to Australia profoundly influence the process of qualifications assessment. The majority of skilled migration fields are characterized by large-scale temporary as well as permanent resident intakes, with the ‘privatization’ of Australia’s skilled migration program well advanced. By 2009, according to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 70 percent of Australia’s labour migrants were employer-sponsored, entering via both the temporary and permanent migration streams. From 2004-05 to 2008-09, 418,940 temporary arrivals (including dependents) were employer-sponsored, entering through the 457 long-stay business visa at the height of the mining and economic booms. Annual arrivals surged from 48,610 in 2004-05 to 110,570 in 2007-08, dropping to 101,280 in 2008-09 in the context of the global financial crisis. Additional temporary labour arrived, most notably through the short-term youth oriented Working Holiday Makers Scheme (with 197,984 visas issued by Australia in 2008-09). These trends are directly comparable to recent developments in Canada, including rapidly growing policy input and sponsorship by state/ territory governments associated with lower points requirements.

In line with permanent GSM flows, from 2004-05 to 2008-09, 58 percent of Australia’s 457 visa arrivals were qualified to work in professional fields, 17 percent in the trades, 13 percent as associate professionals, and 10 percent as managers/ administrators. Interestingly, Australian employers’ preferred occupations varied significantly from those selected by government. Registered nurses were the primary GSM group imported (25%), followed by computing (13%), business professionals (10%), engineers (10%), and sales and marketing professionals (8%). Few accountants were sought, at a time when the Australian market was seriously oversupplied through GSM migration. Mechanical/ fabrication engineering trades ranked sixth overall (34% of trade entrants), followed by doctors, science professionals, teachers and lecturers, and human resource professionals.
A key point to note is employers’ preferred source countries for sponsored workers. As in Canada, these contrasted markedly with the top 10 countries selected through the GSM. Five of the major English speaking background countries featured in Australia’s top 10, in addition to 2 in West Europe (Germany and France), and one Commonwealth-Asian country (India). Recent temporary worker selection demonstrates the strength of Australian employer preference for high-level English ability (including native speakers), directly comparable education systems, and perceived worker capacity to integrate at speed. Given the pace of temporary labour entry (21 days required for approval of professionals) many temporary migrants in the first instance are approved to work with conditional registration – even in highly regulated fields such as medicine.

As demonstrated in the past decade, migration pathways have significantly influenced credential assessment requirements, in a context where skilled workers can enter Australia as GSM primary applicants (permanent arrivals whose credentials are fully screened); temporary employer-sponsored workers (often in the first instance arriving with conditional registration); and GSM dependents, family category migrants and refugee/humanitarian entrants (arriving unfiltered in terms of employment attributes). Regardless of pathway, most would seek work – making the availability of onshore as well as offshore foreign credential recognition (FCR) strategies a policy imperative.

Changes to Skilled Migration Policies in Australia

From 1999, Australia used the research evidence to transform its selection of permanent skilled migrants. The pre-migration screening of qualifications in regulated fields (undertaken on a fee for service basis by national or state/territory regulatory bodies) was introduced, with the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition playing a major advisory role. Former international students with Australian qualifications became immediately eligible to migrate (by 2004 constituting around 52 per cent of the GSM intake and by definition not requiring credential assessment). Bonus points were allocated to migrants in high demand fields, with additional points for recent Australian or international experience in a professional field, for a genuine job offer in an occupation in demand, for applicants with a spouse satisfying economic application criteria, and for people sponsored by close Australia-based relatives (etc).

Externally validated pre-migration English language assessment was required – a key eligibility hurdle, in a context where English ability was the primary determinant of employment outcomes:

....in most dimensions of labour market success, the key is to have a level of English language competence that enables the respondents to report that they speak English at least ‘very well’.... (Those who do not) were much more likely to be unemployed; about half as likely as those with better English to be employed in a job commensurate with their skills; and about twice as likely to be employed in a relatively low skilled job.

These measures by 2006 had demonstrably positive impacts on migrants’ labour market integration. Australia’s independent skilled migration review (the most extensive in 20 years) found that 83 percent of onshore compared to 82 percent of offshore GSM primary applicants were employed within 6 months of migration, along with 99 percent of employer-sponsored GSM migrants. (Australia’s rates a decade earlier, as in Canada, were around 60 percent). Disadvantaged groups (for example from non-Commonwealth Asia or Eastern Europe, and older or female workers) had greatly improved their early employment rates. Many former students had greatly benefited from the study-migration pathway. For example, just 55 percent of offshore economic PA’s selected from China secured work within 6 months, compared to 75 percent of Chinese students who had qualified in Australia.
Of concern, however, was that the review found migrants’ English fell far short of the level required by employers. (From 2007 in consequence IELTS 6 became the threshold ‘competence’ score across all 4 skills, increased from IELTS 5.) Further, PA’s recruited offshore enjoyed superior employment outcomes to former students qualified in Australia - salaries around $A20,000 higher, greater job satisfaction, and more frequent use of formal qualifications in current work (63 per cent compared to 46 per cent). Age and lack of experience were not the sole issues. Australia’s expansion of two-step migration for international students had coincided with the development of perverse study-migration incentives with a capacity to compromise outcomes (in particular the quality of private sector technical training and English language standards).

Following Australia’s election of the Labor government (in late 2007), these and other skilled migration issues were decisively addressed by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship and the Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations initiatives.

- First, the 457 temporary visa category was reviewed, to correct emerging wage and condition abuses relative to domestic workers.
- In 2009 a major review of the former Migration Occupations in Demand List was initiated (the MODL, which had delivered up to 25 GSM points). This followed 3 years associated with serious ‘imbalances’, when a MODL qualification could assure selection, international students tailored course choice to MODL occupations, and just 5 accounted for almost half the visas granted to primary applicants.
- Rank order for GSM processing became the new paradigm at this time – a process bypassing points-based assessment. Employer and state/territory sponsorship offered the best and fastest options for selection, ranked 1 to 3 for priority processing, the view being these stakeholders are best placed to define niche economy needs. (The government thus confirmed its progressive shift to a demand-driven program, in contrast to Australia’s historic reliance on the supply-driven model.)
- For unsponsored GSM applicants the critical determinant of selection became possession of a qualification on the newly devised Critical Skills List, which favoured degree level courses. In May 2010 a new Skilled Occupation List (SOL) was announced. Virtually all health professions were featured, along with the engineering, IT and accounting fields (despite the problem of accountancy over-supply in recent years). Multiple trades were reinstated to the list - the majority, it is important to note, favouring offshore migrants qualified through classic apprenticeship training.
- The student-migration pathway and Australia’s export education industry were reviewed by DEEWR – the Department of Immigration and Citizenship explicitly decoupling enrolment in Australian courses from expectations of skilled migration. Federal quality assurance oversight of the education and training sector was significantly tightened (see below). From January 2010 skilled onshore applicants were also required to sit a ‘jobs ready’ test to check they had the skills being claimed.
- The skilled migration program was trimmed in response to the global financial crisis. While a target of 133,500 had been set for 2009-2010, this was cut to 108,100 in May 2009, with arrivals increasingly admitted through employer or state/territory sponsorship rather than ‘Independent’ selection.
Following this DIAC undertook a thorough review of the GSM Points Test (late 2010), with marked additional policy consequences. From July 2011 65 points (rather than 120) will be required for selection. Key changes include:

- **Occupation:** In marked contrast to recent practice, no points will be allocated to applicants with an occupation in demand (a qualification on the Skilled Occupation List introduced in July 2010 representing a hurdle rather than a points-rewarded requirement).
- **English:** No points will be allocated for meeting Australia’s threshold English language requirement of IELTS 6 or equivalent. By contrast 20 points will be allocated to applicants with IELTS 8 (near native speaker level) and 10 points to PA’s with IELTS 7 – English reinforced as a key determinant of selection.
- **Place and level of qualification:** Minimal advantage will now flow from possession of Australian qualifications (just 5 bonus points). Instead, level of qualification will be rewarded - 20 points for a PhD, 15 for a Bachelor or Masters degree, and 10 for a vocational qualification (regardless of study location).
- **Age:** Eligibility for skilled migration will be extended to PA’s aged up to 49 years, with the greatest points now allocated to young and experienced workers (25-32 years) rather than new graduates (as previously the case) or older applicants.
- **Experience:** Bonus points will be provided for both Australian and overseas experience, with only a slight premium for recent Australian employment.

These points test changes have profound significance for the permanent skilled migration program, and reflect employer preference. In future the GSM will markedly favour the selection of older native English speakers, qualified with Bachelor or higher tertiary degrees. Current and recent international students will be disadvantaged – in particular those from China and India who tailored course choice to the defunct Migration Occupations in Demand List (e.g. securing certificate level qualifications through the private vocational sector). The government’s aims in this policy transition are clear – to ‘deliver the best and brightest skilled migrants by emphasizing high level qualifications, better English language levels and extensive skilled work experience’\(^\text{20}\). The second goal is to maximize employment outcomes.

**Trends in Skilled Migration to Canada**

In 2010, Canada admitted 280,636 permanent residents, which is the highest intake of legal immigrants in over 50 years.\(^\text{21}\) The significant increase aligns with the federal government’s plan to meet the growing need for economic immigration. While Canada is an immigrant-receiving country, addressing some of the emerging labour market challenges requires an even stronger emphasis on attracting skilled workers to ensure that the Canadian workforce can continue to compete globally.

Introduced with the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* in 2002, the Federal Skilled Worker Program (FSWP) is a points-based system of immigration selection that prioritizes human capital over specific labour market demands. By focusing on such broad criteria as language skills, age, and education, the program favours those who can demonstrate long-term economic adaptability. Other economic immigration programs include the Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) and the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP). The PNP enables provinces to nominate immigrants based on the particular economic and labour market needs of the province while the TFWP facilitates the temporary entry of foreign workers to meet the short-term needs of employers facing shortages that cannot be met by the domestic labour market.
Demonstrating the current focus on skilled migration, over 60 percent of the permanent residents in 2010 consisted of economic immigrants and their dependants.\textsuperscript{22} Compared to the previous year, there was also a 20 percent increase in the number of immigrants entering through the PNP, which has expanded from about 8,047 people in 2005 to over 36,419 in 2011.\textsuperscript{23} The main source countries for permanent residents have been China, the Philippines, India, the US, and the UK.\textsuperscript{24}

Canada also continues to bring in a significant number of temporary migrants, admitting 182,322 temporary foreign workers and 96,147 foreign students in 2010.\textsuperscript{25} Unlike the dominance of Asian countries in permanent migration, the top source countries for temporary foreign workers include the US, Mexico, France, the Philippines, and the UK.\textsuperscript{26} In terms of skill profiles, 24 percent of temporary workers fall under the intermediate or clerical category, 18 percent are professionals, and 14 percent are in the skilled or technical category.\textsuperscript{27}

**Changes to Skilled Migration Policies in Canada**

A number of policy changes have been made in the past few years to ensure that skilled migration continues to meet economic needs and that Canada remains an attractive destination for global talent. As part of the Action Plan for Faster Immigration, eligibility for the FSWP is now based on arranged employment, prior experience studying or working in Canada, or professional practice in one of the in-demand occupations, which was decreased from 38 to 29 occupations in June 2010. Developed in consultation with various stakeholders and economic experts, the change in criteria is a response to the backlog of applications, extensive wait times, and the need to adapt to changing labour market demands.

Introduced in 2008, the Canadian Experience Class is a relatively new immigration stream for permanent residency. Targeting certain temporary foreign workers and international graduates with Canadian work experience, applicants must also have managerial, professional, or technical/trade work experience, and depending on their occupational skill level, they may be required to demonstrate at least basic language skills. As the lack of Canadian experience is a common barrier to employment among new immigrants, this category serves to not only address that gap, but also retain global talent in Canada.

Based on a recent evaluation of the Federal Skilled Worker Program, academic research, and comparison with international best practices, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) is proposing changes to the current selection system that involve a redistribution of points and a revised approach to assessing existing criteria.\textsuperscript{28} CIC is holding stakeholder consultations across the country on requiring basic language proficiency, enhancing accessibility to skilled tradespeople, placing greater emphasis on youth, reallocating points from work experience to other criteria, and addressing the issue of fraudulent employment. Considering proven success factors and current labour market challenges, the proposed changes are intended to enhance the economic outcomes of skilled immigrants by ensuring a more accurate assessment of their potential to participate fully in the Canadian economy.

**AN OVERVIEW OF FOREIGN QUALIFICATION RECOGNITION**

**Key Roles and Responsibilities in Australia**

Judgment of the quality of foreign qualifications requires sustained investment of resources, in a context where credential assessment can involve the analysis of any course, studied at any institution, at any recent historical point in time over the past 30 years – a highly resource-intensive process. Key variables include the extent to which quality assurance mechanisms exist; their governance and operational
mode; their voluntary versus mandatory nature; their application to private compared to public sector institutions, and their focus (whether on institutional quality or actual course).

It is important to briefly note in relation to this that global ranking systems confirm there to be marked differences between the quality of training systems in ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ nations, correlated with length of academic tradition as well as the availability of resources. In 2010 the Shanghai Jiao Tong University ranking system (viewed as relatively unbiased) categorized the top 500 world universities as follows:

- 204 in Europe (overwhelmingly located in North West Europe, including 41 in the UK/Ireland, 39 in Germany and 22 in France, with 7/8 of Switzerland’s universities also rated);
- 187 in the Americas (154 in the US, 23 in Canada, and just 10 in all Central or South America);
- 106 in the Asia-Pacific region (34 in China, 25 in Japan, 17 in Australia, 10 in South Korea, 7 in Israel, 5 in New Zealand, 2 in Singapore, and just 2 in India; and
- 3 in Africa (all in South Africa); and
- 2 in Saudi Arabia (no other Middle Eastern university listed).

Changes between 2006 and 2010 highlight a second relevant issue – the inappropriateness of institutional stereotyping based on past patterns, given the potential rapidity of education sector change. China, for example, has recently completed a decade of extraordinary tertiary institute expansion - lifting gross enrolment ratios from 9 percent in 1998 to 23 percent in 2007, and participation rates from 6.23 to 27 million students (31 million in 2010). Prosperity and national leadership have driven this change, in a context where China is now investing $US4 billion into select research institutes, and is predicted to rank number two in global engineering R&D within a few decades. In consequence by 2010 34 Chinese universities were listed in the Shanghai Jiaotong top 500 rankings, compared to 14 several years back. By contrast there has no recent rise in rankings from India (just 2 universities listed).

By 2008, the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) was outsourcing GSM pre-migration assessment to 27 approved regulatory and professional bodies (subject to government oversight), many operating at the sub national level. High levels of immediate recognition prevail in select professions (for example an estimated 73 per cent of engineering and 60-70 per cent of trade applicants granted this by 2006 – higher in engineering since). By contrast lower recognition rates persist in many fields, reflecting migrants’ differential training levels, limits to the Australian research base, and/or serious barriers to securing adequate data.

The Department of Education, Employment and Workforce Relations (DEEWR) exercises critical functions in relation to credential recognition and skilled migration. In 2002 Australian became a signatory to the Lisbon Recognition Convention in 2002. As an obligation under this convention Australian Education International–NOOSR, a section within the International Cooperation Branch, became the official National Information Centre for Australia. In this capacity it provides information about the Australian higher education system to promote the recognition of Australian qualifications in other countries, and information and advice about international education systems to facilitate the recognition of overseas qualifications in Australia. The International Cooperation Branch also coordinates bilateral and multilateral agreements. DEEWR’s Population and Migration Policy Branch is responsible for expert labour market, training and workplace relation policy advice to inform the policy settings and criteria for temporary and permanent migration programs, based on interrogation of national data sources and stakeholder consultation. Trades Recognition Australia (TRA) spans onshore as well as offshore assessment for experienced migrants applying through the GSM stream qualified in 180
vocational-sector fields, and (since July 2009) the 457 temporary visa class. Skills Australia (established in 2010) is also located in DEEWR, the Department which oversights development of Australia’s Skilled Occupation List, supported by inputs from a wide range of other departments and key stakeholders (such as Industry Skills Councils).

Recent Developments in the Australia Context
Australia’s strategies to expand recognition are federally driven, with government activity intensifying in the past 3 years, supported by a strong quality assurance focus. The functions of four new national bodies are briefly defined below (with detail provided in the Appendix): Skills Australia, the Australian Qualifications Framework Council, the Tertiary Education Qualifications and Standards Agency, and the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency. It should be noted that Australia’s regulatory bodies are also key innovators – examples given in relation to medical qualifications assessment in Annex 2, with other occupation-specific developments described in Annex 1.

Established in 2010 within the DEEWR portfolio, Skills Australia is an independent Board composed of industry, economics and education experts, charged with advising the Minister on ‘current, emerging and future workforce skills needs’. A key function is development of Australia’s new Skilled Occupation List (SOL), solely for use in relation to GSM migration. In May 2010 the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship released the first SOL, ‘for migration purposes, identifying (71) occupations which are of high value and will assist in meeting the medium and long term needs of the Australian economy’.

As early as in 1995 Australia’s State, Territory and Commonwealth Education and Training Ministers established the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) – phasing it in by 2000 to provide ‘a quality assured national framework of qualifications in the school, vocational education and training (VET), and higher education sectors in Australia’ by agreement with the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs. The framework’s aim was to link all qualifications in ‘a highly visible, quality-assured national system of educational recognition which promotes lifelong learning and a seamless and diverse education and training system.’ While the AQF is not responsible for pre- or post- migration qualification assessments for skilled migrants, it is critically relevant to the determinations that are made, given its definition in 2011 of a revised 10 level framework structure, ranging from Certificate 1 (1) to Doctoral degrees (10). In line with this AQF Framework, AEI-NOOSR facilitates assessment of equivalence to Australian qualifications – the key being nation-wide buy-in to this federally driven process.

The Australian Government is developing a new national regulatory and quality agency for higher education, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), with key legislation presented to Parliament late March 2011. Established as a Commonwealth statutory authority, TEQSA will be an independent body with powers to register university and non-university higher education providers, monitor quality and ensure standards, following the historic transfer of regulatory powers long vested in states. New national regulatory arrangements are also being introduced in the vocational education and training (VET) sector, with TEQSA and Australia’s new National VET Regulator likely to merge in 2013, ‘to achieve a more interconnected tertiary sector’. There will be a strong international focus, with TEQSA engaging to ‘share best practice with international counterparts and... build on the network of agreements and collaborations (previously established) to enhance links with international quality and accreditation agencies wherever possible and appropriate’. These developments represent radical national reforms, and a momentous historic shift in terms of regulatory power. They are the subject of lively current debate across the education and regulatory sectors.
To secure uniform registration and practice standards, in 2010 the Council of Australian Governments established the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) based on 10 national boards (medicine, nursing and midwifery, dentistry, pharmacy, physiotherapy, optometry, podiatry, psychology, chiropractice and osteopathy). Four additional boards will be introduced from 2012. This represents an historic attempt at national uniformity, involving strong state buy-in. Assessment and registration are now provided by once autonomous state boards based on agreed national standards. As demonstrated by the field-specific case studies to follow, Australia has recently admitted around 20,000 foreign health professionals per year to work on a temporary or permanent resident basis (primarily nurses and doctors). Registration anomalies have evolved in relation to medicine, with marked variations in the rigour of assessment requirements by state.

Key Roles and Responsibilities in Canada
As Canada is a federal system, jurisdictional divisions often overlap and the federal government must work with provinces and territories to effectively address issues of national relevance. In terms of skilled migration and foreign qualification recognition, the involvement of the federal government is based on its concurrent jurisdiction over immigration, as well as the need to address increasing barriers to the labour market integration of recent immigrants. Whereas education is an exclusive jurisdiction of the provinces and territories, the responsibility over labour and employment is shared with the federal government, which oversees matters that are national, international, or intergovernmental in scope.

In Canada, provinces and territories are responsible for the internal functioning of their labour market and regulate the practice of certain occupations by delegating this responsibility to regulatory bodies to ensure public protection. While the federal government is largely responsible for overseeing the immigration system, qualification recognition issues not only affect immigrant integration, but also have an impact on economic growth when there are barriers preventing foreign workers from applying their skills in Canada and domestic workers from practicing their profession wherever there is demand. The cross-cutting issues of foreign qualification recognition involve multiple stakeholders, from governments and regulatory bodies, to assessment agencies, educational institutions, immigrant serving organizations, and employers.

Considering the importance of qualification recognition to economic development, the Government of Canada has made foreign qualification recognition a priority across several departments. CIC established the Foreign Credential Referral Office (FCRO) to serve as an information hub while Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) developed the Foreign Credential Recognition Program (FCRP), which funds projects aimed at building capacity to address foreign qualification recognition issues and enhance labour market integration among immigrants. The Internationally Educated Health Professionals Initiative (IEHPI) of Health Canada and the Government of Canada’s Going to Canada Immigration Portal are other examples of federal programs and tools that support the process of qualification recognition in Canada.

Recent Developments in the Canadian Context
Although foreign qualification recognition has been noted as one of the top challenges facing new immigrants to Canada, recent improvements to internal labour mobility are part and parcel of the ongoing efforts to harmonize and standardize processes to not only streamline foreign qualification recognition practices, but also expand the range of opportunities for skilled workers. Achieving full compliance with Chapter 7 of the Agreement on Internal Trade (AIT), the federal government and the 13 provincial and territorial leaders agreed to extend full labour mobility for all Canadian workers by April
2009, which means that any worker qualified to work in an occupation in one part of Canada is eligible for employment in the same occupation in any other province or territory.

Previous developments are also worth mentioning as they have contributed to the progress made thus far. In April 2006, the Trade, Investment and Labour Mobility Agreement (TILMA) between the governments of British Columbia and Alberta committed both provinces to the mutual recognition of occupational certifications by April 2009. TILMA is recognized as the most comprehensive of such agreements in Canadian history. While the Interprovincial Standards Red Seal Program has provided national endorsements to certified trades people, the Ontario-Quebec Construction Labour Mobility Agreement was signed in June 2006 to enhance the ability for construction contractors and workers to work in either province.

As part of the Economic Action Plan, the Government of Canada allocated $50M over two years (2009-2010) to support a common approach to foreign qualification recognition that will help to better integrate immigrants into the Canadian labour market. On November 30, 2009, First Ministers in Canada launched the Pan-Canadian Framework for the Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Qualifications, which establishes a national vision, guiding principles, and desired outcomes to facilitate the integration of internationally educated and trained professionals. The Framework also emphasizes government leadership in creating and facilitating collaboration between and across stakeholder groups.

Although the Framework principles apply to all regulated professions in Canada, the initial phase of implementation for December 31, 2010 has focused on the following target occupations: architects, engineers, financial auditors and accountants, medical laboratory technologists, occupational therapists, pharmacists, physiotherapists, and registered nurses. From January 2011 to December 2012, work will be underway with the next tranche of regulated occupations, including dentists, engineering technicians, licensed practical nurses, medical radiation technologists, physicians and teachers (K-12), with the possibility of additional regulated occupations and some trades.

One of the intended outcomes of the Framework is to improve preparation and pre-arrival supports by enhancing access to reliable and accurate information and assessment services as early as possible in the immigration process. Demonstrating current progress in this area, the Canadian Immigration Integration Project (CIIP), managed by the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC), launched orientation services in the Philippines, China and India on a pilot basis in early 2007. The free sessions provide labour market information, individual advice and planning, and referrals to a wide range of services available in Canada. The Government of Canada announced in February 2010 that the CIIP will receive additional funding of $15 million over the next three years to expand existing services and open a new overseas office in the UK, which will also provide services to Nordic and Arab states. To enhance the orientation sessions, additional tools and services, including occupation and sector-specific fact sheets, as well as online tools and resources to initiate the foreign qualification recognition process and support workplace integration. An example of one such tool is the FCRO’s Essential Workbook for Newcomers, which is also available online.

The recent trend toward harmonizing qualification recognition processes in Canada creates an optimistic outlook for expanding MRAs between regulated occupations in Canada and other countries. Indeed, advances have been made by some regulated professions in Canada and Australia; the engineering profession and the three accounting designations in Canada have already signed MRAs with their Australian counterparts. As a result of the Canberra Accord, which came into effect in January 2010,
architectural education accreditation systems in a number of countries, including Australia, are now recognized by the Canadian Architectural Certification Board.

The Québec-France Understanding on the Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications is another promising development that demonstrates a growing understanding of the economic benefits of eliminating barriers to qualification recognition. Since the agreement was signed in 2008, about a hundred professional orders and trades have adopted common procedures for recognizing professional competence, thereby facilitating the signing of MRAs between regulatory authorities. While this agreement is within the jurisdiction of Quebec, the federal government and other provinces and territories have the opportunity to build on this agreement by working with regulatory authorities to move forward with international MRAs.

AREAS FOR CONSIDERATION

Common Challenges facing Australia and Canada

Despite the range of new initiatives and structures introduced to facilitate skilled migration and the recognition of foreign qualifications, a number of specific challenges and common issues are worth noting. In the context of the ‘looming war for skills’, it may be increasingly difficult for countries to recruit and retain highly skilled workers; outcomes will matter. While skilled migration selection has been modified through policy levers in Australia and Canada, dependents plus workers accepted through the family and humanitarian streams largely arrive unscreened. Many take years to secure recognition while their occupational skills atrophy. They are highly dependent within this period on the availability of English language and pre-registration bridging programs. In the context of large-scale uncapped temporary migration flows, sponsorship is now of unprecedented importance in Australia, with ‘privatization’ well advanced. Large numbers of temporary entrants arrive only partially screened, with many not obliged to satisfy full GSM credential requirements (a major challenge to regulatory bodies).

Foreign credential recognition also remains a major issue, with gulfs existing between source and host country training systems, as well as international disparities in professional practice and definitions. Regulatory bodies, therefore, continue to face challenges in determining the appropriate measures for credential evaluation, assessing substantial equivalency of international programs, and identifying differences in the scope and regulation of practice abroad. A major obstacle is the difficulty of obtaining and verifying official documents from abroad and the potential for fraudulent documentation. Difference in the scope of practice also lead to more extensive training requirements, increasing costs associated with the licensure process, and further delays in qualification recognition. As there are currently limited options in pre-arrival assessment and recognition across occupations in Canada, many foreign skilled workers must rely on post-migration options as they also adapt to a whole new environment and face other integration issues.

Language proficiency for professional practice remains a key barrier, especially as many skilled immigrants are coming from countries where English, or French in the case of Canada, is not the official language. As IELTS/ OET requirements have been progressively raised in recent years (reflecting the research evidence), large numbers of skilled migrants to Australia have struggled to meet pre-migration and professional registration requirements. Access to comprehensive and clear information regarding assessment and recognition processes in Canada is also frequently mentioned as an area requiring further improvement. Despite the availability of online resources, the sheer number and the inconsistencies across different sites can create confusion for international applicants.
As demonstrated by country of origin data in relation to the 457 category in Australia, employers demonstrate a marked preference for migrants with advanced English ability trained in directly comparable education systems. Within the knowledge economy this seems unlikely to change. Such migrants invariably fare best in pre and post-migration qualifications assessment. GSM migration, by contrast, attracts skilled workers from very different sources – exacerbating the risk of national skills wastage and personal frustration where skills cannot be used. As many recognition pathways have a practical experience component, barriers to training and employment, such as business culture and competition, can not only slow the process for foreign professionals, but also discourage them from pursuing recognition all together. Furthermore, a number of health professions in Canada must also contend with shortages in practice facilities, qualified instructors, and funding to address demand, as well as providing upgrading opportunities when demand is limited.

Although much progress has been achieved in harmonizing assessment and recognition practices across jurisdictions, some professions continue to struggle with balancing such trends with the regulatory mandate of public safety and protection. For instance, inconsistencies in approaches within particular professions in Canada still exist despite Chapter 7 of the AIT and ongoing efforts to implement the Pan-Canadian Framework. To ensure fairness and efficiency, more collaboration within and across professions will be needed to reduce barriers and share innovations.

Promising Practices in Foreign Qualification Recognition
Australia has developed a wide range of best practice initiatives to facilitate foreign credential recognition in the past 30 years (described in detail in Annex 2). Key strategies include the AEI-NOOSR’s Country Education Profiles, the work of VETASSESS, investing in global medical assessment partnerships, and bilateral/ multilateral agreements.

Country Education Profiles provide a highly informative series incorporating 119 profiles valued and used globally to cover the education systems of key migration source countries for Australia. Located within the DEEWR portfolio, the aim is to provide information concerning qualification systems, rather than assess individual credentials, with a strong focus on national training (preparing around 600 credential assessment officers per year).

A highly innovative body is VETASSESS, ‘Australia’s leading assessment and workforce skills developments organization’ with representation now in over 20 countries. An assessing authority gazetted by the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, VETASSESS has the capacity to assess trade qualifications (like the Trades Recognition Australia), as well as general professional occupations (e.g. economists). Most notably, it can deliver recognized Australian credentials through onshore and offshore short course training – in the case of trade-qualified migrants, for instance, to assure migrants have full recognition for employment purposes at point of entry to Australia. Based on needs assessment in English, VETASSESS tailors its services to meet ‘industry requirements, national standards and client needs’ in a wide range of countries (including Canada, Chile, China, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Africa, Sri Lanka, the UK and the USA).

In a recent best practice initiative, the Australian Medical Council (AMC) and the Medical Council of Canada (MCC) pooled 7,000 fully calibrated and upgraded Multiple Choice Question items for global pre- and post-migration administration. Cross-national teams of clinicians collaborated to devise item material and the exam format, with 6 examinations run to July 2008 to filter prospective medical migrants to either country. From first administration in November 2006, around 1,000 candidates took
the test, with the two Councils reviewing, refreshing, and close to doubling their test items at a modest cost. The MCQ’s integrity was improved, through minimal recycling of items. In 2009 the Councils used the same framework to pilot different delivery systems – their next step being to compare data to determine how these developments can be taken further, in a context where different jurisdictions’ legal requirements can reduce the flexibility to develop combined systems.

By 2006, when the Australian Parliament conducted the Review of Arrangements for Overseas Skills Recognition, Upgrading and Licensing, a wide range of multiple bilateral and multilateral agreements were in place, most notably:

- **The Trans-Tasman Mutual Recognition Agreement** - a non-treaty arrangement between the Commonwealth, state and territory governments of Australia and the government of New Zealand, signed in 1996 and allowing full qualification recognition for citizens qualified in registered occupations.
- **The Asia-Pacific Regional Convention** - ratified by Australia in 1985, to facilitate the recognition of regional qualifications from contracting states for access to further education.
- **The Lisbon Recognition Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region** - ratified by Australia in 2002, focused on the recognition of qualifications to facilitate the global mobility of students and professionals.
- **ASEAN-Australian Development Cooperation Program** - developed in 1998 to ‘establish a network of professional accreditation bodies to promote regional mobility and mutual recognition of technical professional credentials and skills standards’.

Occupational specific developments (such as the APEC Architect project and Canada-Australia mutual recognition in dentistry) are dealt with in the field-specific sections to follow.

The range of new developments in overseas services and pre-arrival assessment across Canadian professions include enhancing information through portals and webinars, developing online self-assessment tools, providing exam study guides and readiness tests, building information databases to facilitate assessment, exploring options for offshore examinations, and establishing overseas assessment centres.

National Association of Pharmacy Regulatory Authorities (NAPRA) is working on the **International Pharmacy Graduates’ Gateway to Canada** project, which will provide a single point of entry online for all foreign licensure applications, comprehensive information on the requirements and process for licensure, online self-assessment tools, and a national repository of licensing information and documentation accessible by Canadian pharmacy licensing and accreditation bodies. Both the Broadly Experienced Foreign Architect (BEFA) process and the National Dental Examining Board (NDEB) Equivalency Process involve streamlined pathways for foreign trained candidates that also include the use of online self-assessment tools.

To expedite the assessment process, the Canadian Council of Technicians and Technologists (CCTT) developed the International Qualifications Database (IQDB), which provides information on engineering technology programs that have been assessed at either the technician or technologist level. In addition to the IQDB, the CCTT has also created the Canadian Technology Immigration Network (CTIN) portal that provides comprehensive information on technology professions in Canada, labour market information, as well as a self-assessment tool that can initiate the certification process before arrival. The site also
includes an employment matching function that facilitates pre-arrival contact between an employer and a potential employee.

Many regulatory authorities are clearly experimenting with various tools, resources, and services to improve options for pre-arrival assessment and recognition; however, a few professions are well ahead in this area. The Canadian Alliance of Physiotherapy Regulators already conducts credential reviews, prior learning assessments, and language testing overseas while the Medical Council of Canada has established online self-assessment programs and over 500 overseas assessment centres in 73 countries.

**Opportunities for Mutual Learning and Further Collaboration**

Australia is engaged in an historic process of reform, with potential to enhance recognition outcomes. Key federal bodies have been established to define the national education framework (10 tiers), introduce agreed standards for credential recognition and portability, to enhance quality assurance, secure uniform registration and practice standards across the medical and allied health fields, and expand onshore as well as offshore trades recognition (including through delivery of Australian trade qualifications offshore). Collaborative approaches to pre-migration screening of applicants are also being explored in such fields as medicine, accounting, architecture and engineering. Bilateral and multilateral agreements aligned with regional capacity building are being resourced, including those to support the evolution of high quality regulatory bodies across the APEC region, with Canada and Australia playing key roles. New profession-specific initiatives are underway, exploring the potential for greater mutual recognition between Canada and Australia based on years of research, with dentistry, physiotherapy and medicine being important current examples.

In conclusion, two compelling factors influence this process. First, Canada and Australia operate the major pro-active economic migration programs in the OECD – selecting landed immigrants from similar sites, and facing directly comparable integration challenges. Second, the case for mutual recognition is now driven by spontaneous population flows. Between 2004 and 2009, 1,241 Canadians were admitted by Australia in the General Skilled Migration category (including 505 in 2008-09). In 2007 and 2008, Australia was the 6th top source of temporary foreign workers to Canada, with an extraordinary 11,559 selected in 2008 compared to 8,305 in 2007. Canada was also Australia’s third largest source of international medical students in 2007, following a decade of sustained growth. These two-way flows create a case for the liberalization of mutual recognition, based on Australia and Canada’s highly comparable education systems, and shared skilled migration flows. In recent decades Canada and Australia have developed what might be termed ‘skewed reciprocity’. Canadian trained professionals are given immediate or near immediate scope to practice in Australia in a range of fields, while significant pre-registration hurdles confront Australian-qualified workers (including returning Canadian students). It may be timely to review this asymmetry, in an age where globalization is fuelling mobility aligned with demand for equitable and efficient human resource outcomes.

Moving ahead, policymakers, regulatory authorities, and other key stakeholders in Australia and Canada need to continue to work together to address key issues and build on promising approaches. While there are clearly similarities between the two contexts, each country has also taken different measures to adapt to changing economic circumstances. In Canada, Chapter 7 of the AIT and the Pan-Canadian Framework demonstrate progress on ensuring greater consistency and efficiency in qualification recognition. Australia has also made significant strides in streamlining registration and accreditation processes, as well as pre-arrival assessment and recognition practices. Recent developments indicate an opportunity to not only share some of the key lessons and emerging best practices, but also engage in a dialogue on advancing international collaboration in specific sectors.


4 This summary of recent skilled migration flows is based on detailed analysis provided in Hawthorne, L (2011 forthcoming), Competitors and Collaborators: Skilled Migration to New Zealand and Australia – Policy Trends and Outcomes 2004-2010, Government of New Zealand, Wellington. This was based on statistical data provided to the author by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Canberra.


9 Cully, M (2009), ‘The Effectiveness of Australia’s Skilled Entry System’, Presentation to the Migration Advisory Council Skilled Migration International Conference, 7 September, London.

10 The 457 visa allows temporary migrants to work for up to 4 years, with one to two employers, and to apply for transition to permanent resident status while onshore.


18 According to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (February 2010), first priority in processing would be given to employer sponsored GSM applicants (including under the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme). Second priority would be given to applicants ‘nominated by a state/territory government agency under a state migration plan agreed to by the minister’, while third priority would be for ‘applications from people who are nominated by a state/territory government agency and whose nominated occupation is on the Critical Skills List’ – since July 2010 the Skilled Occupations List. See Department of Immigration and Citizenship (2010), ‘Changes to Priority Processing’, 8 February, http://www.immi.gov.au/skilled/general-skilled-migration/pdf/faq-gsmchanges.pdf.


25. Citizenship and Immigration Canada, News Releases 2011, Canada welcomes highest number of legal immigrants in 50 years