



SUBMISSION TO TRADE AND INVESTMENT QUEENSLAND

▼ CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY QUEENSLAND SUBMISSION
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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Chamber of Commerce and Industry Queensland (CCIQ) appreciates the opportunity to provide input to the review of eligibility criteria for state-sponsored skilled and business migration visa categories. As the state's peak business organisation, CCIQ recognises the importance of skilled migration to both Queensland and Australia's productivity and population agenda. Our comments will relate predominantly to state-sponsored *skilled* migration, as we consider that this is an area of great importance for our member employers.
- 1.2 CCIQ supports targeted migration policies and frameworks that generate employment, increase productivity and improve the ability of businesses to meet their skills and labour needs as well as addressing ongoing shortages. Accordingly, while we are eager to ease the eligibility criteria for both skilled and business migration to make it easier for businesses to access skilled migrant labour and to encourage overseas business investment, we also wish to ensure that they can be tailored to the specific requirements and exigencies Queensland is experiencing.
- 1.3 CCIQ anticipates that skills and labour shortages will continue to be prevalent throughout Australia over the coming decades as our population continues to age and as competition for skilled labour intensifies in both domestic and international markets. Queensland, in particular, has been particularly affected by skills shortages: this is largely the result of non-mining sector businesses competing for staff with mining companies offering extremely high wages, and labour mobility problems that derive from the reluctance of workers to move to regional areas of Queensland.
- 1.4 The problem of skills shortages is not one that can be solved by migration alone, and CCIQ has been vocal in promoting a skills agenda within Queensland designed at producing better education and training outcomes to ensure that the skills and labour needs of employers are met, stressing the need for policies designed to improve labour mobility, and placing the onus on the mining sector to provide in-house education and training. However, as the natural population growth rate declines and new entrants to the workforce stagnates (and even declines), overseas migration is likely to play an increasingly important role in expanding the nation's workforce.
- 1.5 This submission therefore addresses those aspects of the eligibility criteria that are either a) preventing skilled workers from entering Australia, or b) limiting the capacity of Queensland businesses to harness the benefits of skilled workers where they do enter Australia.

2.0 Suggested objectives for the review

2.1 A review of the eligibility criteria for state-sponsored visas should take into account the following:

- whether the programs are meeting the skills needs of Queensland employers in an effective and efficient manner;
- whether people migrating to Australia through state sponsored schemes have the skills and experience that employers need;
- whether businesses in regional, remote and low population growth areas in Queensland are aware of and able to recruit the skilled workers they need to manage and grow their operations; and
- whether these programs meet the government's commitment to simplify the visa structure and create a robust visa program that will reduce bureaucratic red-tape for employers, as well as make the visa process easier to understand for employers and visa applicants.

3.0 How can the government ensure that employer sponsored migrants can perform well in the labour market, meet employer needs and are not exploited? What is the role for English language requirements and skills assessments?

3.1 English language requirements

3.1.1 CCIQ has consistently expressed concerned over the formal English language requirements for visa applicants, as we consider that the high standard imposed operates to partially compromise the flexibility and capacity of the skilled visa program to attract skilled migrants. We also consider that these requirements impose unnecessary red tape on both businesses and workers, given that the requirements can exclude otherwise excellent visa candidates or delay their entry into Australia.

3.1.2 Queensland businesses recognise the need for English language capabilities in the workplace, particularly for workplace health and safety reasons. However, we note that many businesses encourage and/or offer assistance for intensive English language classes for their workers as a matter of course. The requirement that visa applicants need to have proficiency in English to at least a score of at least 6.0 in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test is not only excessive, but it slows down the application process significantly as prospective employees often have to wait considerable lengths of time before being able to take the test. We also consider that the content of the test is not properly geared to the needs of business, that is, the practical language requirements that applicants should possess to work in Australia.

3.2 Skills Assessments

3.2.1 CCIQ has previously expressed significant concerns in relation to the methodology applied in determining occupations for inclusion on the Skilled Occupation List (SOL). We have also questioned whether the SOL adequately reflects the skills needs of Queensland's small to medium sized businesses and the needs of regional and remote areas. Current methodologies are hinged on a judgement of the relative value of particular occupations and skills to the Australian economy, which is a highly subjective process that is made even more complex by the diverse and regional nature characterising Australian industry. In particular, CCIQ does not wish to see an outcome where SMEs are disadvantaged because the skill shortages they are faced with are not classified as being of "high economic value to Australia". This is particularly relevant in Queensland, where, while fulfilling the skills and labour needs of the resources industry is key, an overly myopic focus on the needs of a given industry has meant that the skills and labour needs of other industries that compete with the mining sector for staff have been largely ignored.

3.2.2 Niche occupations and small industries, which are largely overlooked in Australia's migration programs, are also unlikely to be included in the SOL: these include occupations within creative or emerging industries, as well as occupations that are more specialised, such as computer programmers or irrigation technicians. Although these occupations or industries may not be seen as providing high economic value to Australia, many are providing a significant contribution to Australia's competitive edge

by enhancing Australia's productivity growth and innovative capacity. Moreover, they are essential to the economic development of regional areas, which is crucial to encouraging better labour mobility.

4.0 Is there a role for provisional visas that require migrants to stay in the region for a set period of time?

- 4.1 CCIQ strongly believes that unless an overseas worker's employment relationship with their employer ends, there should be an expectation that the migrant stay in the region for the period of that agreement – that is, the worker's stay in Australia should be dependent on their commitment to work in a particular region of Queensland. We consider that state-sponsored migration, designed to attract skilled migrants to a given state to address that state's specific skills needs, should be limited to seeking work in a particular area (unless they are unable to find a work placement).
- 4.2 This approach will operate to ensure that regional areas of Queensland that do not have access to local skilled workers have an opportunity to access skilled migrant labour to meet their skills and labour needs.

5.0 Role of certifying bodies in assessing individual applications

- 5.1 CCIQ maintains that Regional Certifying Bodies (RCBs) must have a local presence and a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the local labour market in the region for which they are certifying. CCIQ feels that RCBs can perform an important role in raising awareness of the visa options available to employers and provide a valuable link to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship in regional and rural areas.
- 5.2 Chambers of Commerce have proven over time that they can constructively perform these duties, delivering valuable services to the business community. CCIQ strongly supports the departmental monitoring of RCB approvals, (which already occurs), to ensure arrangements being approved are in line with local workforce availability. Furthermore there should be continued feedback on this monitoring with the opportunity for continuous constant improvement.

6.0 Conclusion

- 6.1 We consider that this review constitutes an excellent opportunity for determining how state sponsored skilled and business migration can become more appropriately attuned to their main end users – Queensland businesses.
- 6.2 We reiterate that this review process, in considering the eligibility criteria for state-sponsored visas, should remain cognisant of the need to make the process as accessible as possible for business: this includes consulting with business to determine their skills needs and ensuring that the right occupations are on the SOL.
- 6.3 CCIQ believes that skilled and semi-skilled migration is an important component of the skills shortages agenda as it can deliver workers for immediate or emerging shortages in relatively short timeframes. However, CCIQ recognise that skilled and semi-skilled migration is only part of a wider population and workforce policy approach.