

Filipino Migration Made Easier

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Under Australia's strict immigration laws only applicants for skilled migration who have recognised qualifications are eligible to apply for migration. All professionals and associate professionals are assessed by various authorities. In all cases assessing bodies make their assessments on the basis of information contained in what are known as the Country Education Profiles (CEP) published by Australian Education International-NOOSR.

A revised CEP issued in August 2006 has opened up new opportunities for Filipinos interested in obtaining skilled migrant visas for Australia.

- Manuel completed a Bachelor of Science in Commerce, majoring in Accountancy from Saint Louis University in Baguio. He was not a cum laude student, but he has been working for some years as an internal auditor for one of the major multinationals with operations in the Philippines.

He is aged 32 and has a sister in Sydney who has been trying to sponsor him as a skilled migrant to Australia for some years. Each time she has come up against the brick wall that her brother's qualifications have not been recognised by the relevant assessing authority in Australia (Vetassess).

- Luz completed a specialist IT degree from AMA Computer University in Quezon City. She is 29 and has 4 1/2 years work experience as a computer programmer for one of the major Philippines Banks. She has no family in Australia.

She has come up with a brick wall in her attempt to apply to migrate to Australia because she has been told her degree is not recognised. If her qualifications were recognised by the ACS - provided she applies before she turns 30 - she would score enough points under the points test to be eligible to migrate as an independent applicant.

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The specialist professions are assessed by specific regulatory bodies like Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia (ICAA), CPA Australia or National Institute of Accountants (NIA) for accountants, or the Australian Computer Society (ACS) for IT professionals and Engineers Australia for engineers. Other generalist professionals, like scientists and business professionals, and all Associate professionals are assessed by Vetassess.

In all cases assessing bodies make their assessments on the basis of information contained in what are known as the Country Education Profiles published by Australian Education International-NOOSR.

The Country Education Profiles (CEP) are also used by Australian educational institutions for the purposes of assessing comparability of status of qualifications for student visas. Thus a student who has a fully recognised degree will be admitted into a post graduate course without further question, whilst students whose qualifications are not at all recognised in Australia, notwithstanding the status of the university in the home country, may find themselves having to pursue extended studies before being able to obtain access to higher level studies in Australia.

A third area of important use for the CEP is in facilitating the employment prospects of the newly arrived migrant. Clearly it looks better on a person's CV to have public recognition of academic qualifications obtained overseas. The CEP guidelines have been developed for most countries over the years. They are advisory and have no status in law as such. They also do not cover trades recognition which are assessed on a competency basis by Trades Recognition Australia.

The introduction to the CEP stresses the difficulties associated with comparing educational qualifications from countries with very different education systems. Some of the factors used to assist the assessment process are the nature, educational status and local recognition of the awarding institution, and the level, length and structure of the course undertaken.

- One difficulty comes when attempting to match courses overseas with Australian courses which may be of differing lengths. Thus typically an Australian bachelors degree may be of 3 years duration whereas in the Philippines it may be 4 years in duration.
- It is also important to understand that recognition in the CEP does not guarantee recognition by all professional assessing authorities in Australia. Different authorities have different approaches.
 - Some, like the ACS, will accept the NOOSR-CEP classification.

- Others, like the various health care profession assessing authorities or Engineers Australia, will use the classification only as a starting point for their further assessment processes.

Rather the assessment provides the status of the comparability of the degree to Australian standards.

In the Philippines there are approximately 1600 higher education institutions, of which about 1400 are private, approved by the Philippine Commission on Higher Education. Not all are the subject of assessment under the Country Education Profiles.

The new CEP for the Philippines notes that there is a significant variation in quality of education in the private sector universities, and many have inadequate facilities and are overcrowded with students. There is also a variation in curricula, resources, and teaching standards which can affect quality of graduates.

In the Philippines the most widely used indicator of quality of an academic program are the results from the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC) licensing exams. Currently 43 professions are the subject to the PRC jurisdiction and the average passing rate is 37% (1999 to 2004 figures). The exams are highly demanding and there is no comparable professional examination system in Australia.

Amongst other points noted by the CEP Guide are the following:

- ❖ Filipinos place a high value on education with high literacy rates in the country, especially in urban areas.
- ❖ The education system is based on the American system and the influence continues in many areas.
- ❖ Access to the higher education system is reasonably widely available.
- ❖ English is the medium of instruction at tertiary levels.
- ❖ Entry to tertiary studies is dependent on a student applicant passing the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE).
- ❖ Different institutions use different grading systems: most commonly the 1 to 5 scale (where below 3 is a fail), though some adopt an alphabetical grading system from A to F (with a pass at C) or a percentile system (with a pass score at 75%).
- ❖ Determining the average grade of the degree is complex and is arrived at by multiplying the grades for each subject by the credits for each subject as noted on the Academic Transcript and dividing the total by the total number of credits for the course. This ensures subjects are given their correct weighting.

The new CEP for the Philippines was issued by AEI-NOOSR on 18 August 2006. It does not list all the 1600 colleges but it does refer to a significant proportion of them.

Previous issues of the CEP divided the colleges into essentially 4 classifications:

- Category 1 institutions were the top ones in the country where essentially degrees are fully recognised as comparable for general academic purposes to Australian degrees. In the last CEP published in 1995, there were very few such institutions listed, notably, UP, UST De La Salle University and Ateneo University.
- Section 2 institutions essentially had 4 year undergraduate degrees recognised as equal to Australian bachelor degrees, but only if the applicants completed with top grades (average grades of above 2, between A and B, or over 85% depending on the institution), and all 5 year degrees were recognised. Those 4 year degrees completed with lower grades were only assessed as equal to an Australian advanced Diploma.
- Section 3 institutions did not award degrees which were recognised as equal to degrees at all. Higher grade 4 year bachelor degrees and 5 year degrees were assessed as equal to Australian advanced diplomas and lower grade 4 year degrees as Australian diplomas.
- Section 4 institutions, the rest, were subject to individual assessment but for practical purposes qualifications from these institutions were not recognized at all.

The new classification divides colleges into 3 groups:

- Section 1 institutions have the same educational comparability status as before. These universities most of which are public were identified on the basis of the results in the PRC examinations and the reputation they enjoy in graduate studies given the quality of their teaching standards.
 - There has been a significant number of universities now added to this list. Now there are 41 institutions in this list, including many well known provincial universities like Saint Louis University in Baguio, Holy Angel University in Angeles City, University of San Carlos in Cebu and Xavier University in Cagayan de Oro City (to name just a few).
 - This means that graduates from any of these 41 universities now have a real chance of meeting the skills assessment component of the Australian migration rules, and essentially opens up the opportunity to a significantly larger pool of potential applicants than was previously the case.
- Section 2 institutions, of which there are now 242 listed, have a similar assessment regime to previously, but with a significant addition:
 - For those degrees not previously recognised, applicants with degrees in a professional discipline who have also passed the Philippines Professional Regulation Commission (PRC) Licensure Examination in the relevant professional field will be recognised regardless of the average grade, where it is a 4 year degree which is the subject of the assessment.

- The CEP notes that although graduates from these institutions may be lacking in some skills due to a lack of suitable library resources and laboratory equipment, in many cases the students have a sound knowledge of basic principles and theoretical concepts.
- All other listed universities are now classified under section 3. The CEP notes here that Institutions in this section tend to have larger student numbers, poorer facilities and some of these are operated purely for profit.
 - There is a more simplified process for assessment of degrees from section 3 institutions. All 4 year bachelor degrees are assessed as equal to Australian diplomas and all 5 year degrees are assessed as comparable to Advanced Diplomas.
 - However there is the very significant addition that all degrees are now recognised where the applicant has also passed the PRC licensing exam as is the situation for Section 2 institutions.

A further note on section 2 and 3 universities:

- Postgraduate bachelor of Law degree and degrees in Medicine, Dental Medicine and Veterinary Medicine, all also essentially postgraduate, from section 2 and 3 universities are now all recognised as comparable to the educational level of an Australia bachelor degree.

Finally, Masters degrees from all universities are (with a few exceptions for some degrees from Section 1 institutions) are assessed as comparable to the educational level of an Australian bachelor degree.

The changes to sections 2 and 3 essentially open the field for recognition now to all Filipino applicants for several reasons:

- A much larger number of students will be automatically recognised given the large increase in the number of section 1 and 2 institutions.
- Those who are not automatically recognised may be able to secure recognition by passing if appropriate a PRC licensing exam, which was an option not previously open.

The significance of these changes for potential applicants for skilled migration from the Philippines is accordingly extraordinary.

Our friends Manuel and Luz will now be able to proceed and will have a good chance of achieving their dreams of obtaining that skilled migration visa to Australia.

However it must always be remembered that obtaining recognition of the degree is only one step in what is otherwise a complex process. As anyone with experience in the area will know, obtaining that migration visa involves many steps and there are many pitfalls for the uninitiated.

Interested applicants should always be encouraged to obtain professional advice from a qualified lawyer or migration agent whose advice is given in accordance with the MARA Code of Conduct applying to anyone giving immigration assistance in Australia.

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