

Submission to the Productivity Commission
Review of
Mutual Recognition
Schemes
By the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union
(Plumbing Division)
(CEPU PD)

INTRODUCTION

This submission is made on behalf of the 25,000 members of the CEPU PD, in response to issues raised in the Issues Paper distributed by the Productivity Commission relating to mutual recognition schemes.

The protection of the integrity of the plumbing profession is of paramount importance to the CEPU PD. The union also recognises that the portability of qualifications is important to both our members and the Australian economy as a whole. We oppose any dilution of the quality assurances mechanisms which see the profession continue to be held in high regards within the community.

I would be happy to discuss any of the content herein, and thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

Yours sincerely

Earl Setches
National Secretary, CEPU PD

PORTABILITY OF THE PROFESSION

As has been well documented, Australia has faced an ongoing skills shortage which has caused inflationary pressures, significant delays in project delivery and stress in the housing sector. In particular, the Queensland and Western Australian jurisdictions have been experiencing acute shortages in skilled trades in recent times. In contrast, other Australian jurisdictions, such as New South Wales have encountered slowing growth.

The distributions of skilled tradespeople has not been appropriate to deal with the skills shortage, and some jurisdictions and many employers have been offering incentives to tradespeople to move and take up employment locally. Such is the extent of the skill shortages faced.

In these circumstances, it is important that tradespeople do not face unnecessary hurdles to recognition of their qualification between jurisdictions. Such is the case at present with the plumbing qualification.

The problems posed by skills shortages and the need for portability of the profession have been recognised by COAG, and they are working towards a more effective mutual recognition framework. The CEPU PD will be an active participant in these discussions.

Mutual recognition is complex, and the differing licensing and testing regimes which exist across all Australian jurisdictions means that finding equivalence and demonstrating it is difficult for the tradesperson and Australian Government more broadly. In striving for greater consistency and streamlining of the licensing regime, it is of vital importance that the integrity of the plumbing profession is protected.

Plumbers are at the forefront of sanitation and the improvements to Australian infrastructure which combat not only climate change but chronic water shortages and changes in water use across Australia. The CEPU PD commends the Rudd Government for their renewed focus on these issues, and has been at the forefront of arguing for increased supply and improved training of plumbers in grey water re-use,

as demonstrated by our commitment to the Plumbing Industry Climate Change Action Centre in Victoria.

However, these issues of national – and international – importance cannot be addressed by persons who are not appropriately qualified and have not passed a rigorous and appropriate licensing regime. Skilled tradespeople occupy difficult and important occupations, and as such any measures aimed at streamlining recognition of qualifications must protect the integrity of the profession.

The key to easing skills shortages, as has been recognised by the Rudd Government – and late in their term of office – by the Howard Government, is an adequately resourced and responsive education and training system which targets areas of impending shortage with incentives, re-training, marketing and the identification of demographics with low take-up of training in skilled trades. The solution is at the supply end of the equation and not with a simple dilution of the requirements to enter a skilled trade. These issues have been dealt with in previous submissions to both the Victorian State Government and the Commonwealth Government.

In summary, the CEPU PD supports the mutual recognition concept, however holds real concerns that the integrity of the plumbing profession is protected at all costs.

CHANGES TO THE QUALIFICATION

The CEPU PD has embraced and assisted with changes to the apprenticeship to shift it to a competency-based model rather than a time-based apprenticeship. Further, we have accepted the advent of school-based apprenticeships. As such, we accept the changing nature of the Australian economy and competition between qualifications in a high-wage, low-unemployment economy calls for greater flexibility.

However, in some jurisdictions there have been moves towards lessening the amount of on-the-job training required in an apprenticeship, as well as lower-skill streams within the plumbing qualification. This is a worrying trend, because it could dilute the proficiency of the qualification, as well as causing tradespeople to lose their ease of movement – or portability between jobs. A slow-down in housing construction for

example, is more likely to affect the under-qualified than those who are fully qualified and licensed. It also makes the process of mutual recognition more difficult, with there being qualifications potentially existing in isolation in some jurisdictions.

A NATIONAL SCHEME

The current system of Ministerial declaration appears to be cumbersome. In many cases no equivalency can be found for qualifications between jurisdictions. Further, the changing nature of qualifications and the resourcing of the process means that it is complex, unwieldy and difficult to navigate for our members.

A national licensing process could provide a solution, with a number of provisos.

The CEPU-PD would see the implementation of the Victorian model of apprenticeships, registration and licensing as best attaining a full training qualification, addressing skill shortages as defined by COAG as well as giving protection to the community and consumers.

Victoria has developed an apprenticeship stream with real integrity and protections for the consumer. Any national licensing regime should build on and incorporate the testing which is conducted in Victoria.

The costs of implementing such a system would be mitigated through savings achieved through the Commonwealth-State funding agreements in relation to training. It would form a direct cost transfer from one jurisdiction to the other, with resultant savings for the other.

JURISDICTION SHOPPING

As stated earlier, under-qualified and sub-standard labour in the plumbing profession serves to undermine faith in the profession and in mutual recognition. Persons wishing to be employed as a plumber in Australia or New Zealand may effectively shop for the jurisdiction which is most likely to give a license or register at the lowest possible standard, and then move from that jurisdiction to others within Australia. For persons wishing to work as plumbers in Australia – other than those from Australia or New Zealand, we would propose that the mandatory licensing process outlined earlier be implemented as a matter of priority.

Plumbing is a profession with considerably responsibility and considerable esteem in the wider community. As such, protection from under-qualified labour is of paramount importance for the CEPU PD.