U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

Non-Precedent Decision of the Administrative Appeals Office

MATTER OF M-L-

DATE: MAY 17, 2017

APPEAL OF NEBRASKA SERVICE CENTER DECISION

PETITION: FORM I-140, IMMIGRANT PETITION FOR ALIEN WORKER

The Petitioner, an IT Services business, seeks to employ the Beneficiary as a technical lead. It requests classification of the Beneficiary as a member of the professions holding an advanced degree under the second preference immigrant classification. *See* Immigration and Nationality Act (the Act) section 203(b)(2), 8 U.S.C. § 1153(b)(2). This employment-based "EB-2" classification allows a U.S. employer to sponsor a professional with an advanced degree for lawful permanent resident status. A bachelor's degree alone does not qualify as an "advanced degree," but a bachelor's degree and an additional five years of post-baccalaureate progressive experience will suffice for EB-2 classification purposes.

The Director of the Nebraska Service Center denied the petition, concluding that, based on the issuance date of the Beneficiary's bachelor's degree diploma, the Beneficiary could not show, as required, a minimum of five years of post-baccalaureate experience to establish that he possesses the equivalent of an advanced degree.

On appeal, the Petitioner asserts that the Beneficiary's post-baccalaureate experience should be measured from the time he received a provisional certificate demonstrating his degree was complete and approved and not from when the diploma itself was later issued.

Upon *de novo* review, we will sustain the appeal.

I. LAW

Employment-based immigration generally follows a three-step process. First, an employer must obtain an approved labor certification from the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL).[1] *See* section 212(a)(5)(A)(i) of the Act, 8 U.S.C. § 1182(a)(5)(A)(i). By approving the labor certification, the DOL certifies that there are insufficient U.S. workers who are able, willing, qualified, and available for the offered position and that employing a foreign national in the position will not adversely affect

[1] The date the labor certification is filed, in cases such as this one, is called the "priority date." A beneficiary must be eligible as of that date, and so in this case the Beneficiary must have had the five years' requisite experience by the date the labor certification was filed.

the wages and working conditions of domestic workers similarly employed. Section 212(a)(5)(A)(i)(I)-(II) of the Act. Second, the employer may file an immigrant visa petition with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). *See* section 204 of the Act, 8 U.S.C. § 1154. Third, if USCIS approves the petition, the foreign national may apply for an immigrant visa abroad or, if eligible, adjustment of status in the United States. *See* section 245 of the Act, 8 U.S.C. § 1255.

For this advanced degree professional position, the labor certification must provide that the job requires an advanced degree or its equivalent. *See* 8 C.F.R. § 204.5(k)(4)(i). In pertinent part, Department of Homeland Security regulations define the term "advanced degree" as: "[A]ny United States academic or professional degree or a foreign equivalent degree above that of baccalaureate. A United States baccalaureate degree or a foreign equivalent degree *followed by at least five years of progressive experience* in the specialty shall be considered the equivalent of a master's degree." 8 C.F.R. § 204.5(k)(2) (emphasis added). To be eligible for this EB-2 classification solely on the basis of a foreign degree equivalent of a U.S. bachelor's degree, a beneficiary must also possess five years of qualifying post-baccalaureate experience. 8 C.F.R. § 204.5(k)(3).

II. ANALYSIS

The Beneficiary possesses a bachelor of technology degree in computer science and engineering from [redacted] in India. There is no question that this degree qualifies him for EB-2 classification and that his post-degree experience qualifies as progressive experience. The only question is *when* the university conferred the "degree" to the Beneficiary. At issue here is whether the Beneficiary's five years of experience is only measured from when he received the formal *diploma* itself, or earlier, when he completed all the requirements for the degree and received what is commonly termed a *provisional certificate* reflecting that his degree was approved. We conclude that, based on the specific circumstances and evidence in this case, the provisional certificate constitutes the official academic record of his "degree" for purposes of calculating the five-year period of post-graduate experience.

Several dates are important to this case. The Beneficiary's priority date (the date the labor certification was filed) is March 4, 2016. The university issued him a provisional certificate on May 23, 2007, but he did not receive his formal degree diploma until November 25, 2007. The record contains evidence of the Beneficiary's employment experience from July 2, 2007, to September 21, 2012, a period of over five years. However, the Director held that only experience gained after the diploma was issued in November 2007 could be considered and accordingly found that the Beneficiary does not have the required five years of post-baccalaureate experience. On appeal, the Petitioner maintains that the Beneficiary did accrue the requisite five years of post-degree experience if we recognize that his degree was conferred on the earlier date of his provisional certificate, or May 23, 2007.

The statute and regulations governing the EB-2 classification speak in terms of "degrees," not diplomas. So, from the outset, it is clear that we cannot simply limit our analysis to the date on which a university confers a formal diploma. Applicable EB-2 regulations reflect this distinction.

For these EB-2 "bachelor plus five" petitions, the "initial evidence" rule requires submission of an "official academic record" showing the beneficiary has a foreign equivalent "degree." 8 C.F.R. § 204.5(k)(3)(i)(B). An "official academic record" is not limited to a formal diploma.[2] In fact, in the very next provision – relating to EB-2 exceptional ability petitions – the initial evidence rule expressly distinguishes between degree and diploma: "[a]n official academic record showing that the alien has a *degree, diploma, certificate, or similar award* from a college [or] university . . . ." 8 C.F.R. § 204.5(k)(3)(ii)(A) (emphasis added).[3]

Accordingly, we must conduct a case-specific analysis to determine whether the Beneficiary has completed all substantive requirements to earn the degree and the university has approved the degree. We must consider the individual nature of each university's or college's requirements for each program of study and each student's completion of those requirements. A petitioner will bear the burden to establish that all of the substantive requirements for the degree were met and that the degree was in fact approved by the responsible university body.[4]

Here, the record demonstrates that, by issuance of the provisional certificate in May 2007, the Beneficiary had completed all substantive requirements of his degree and the university had in fact approved the degree. The record contains the following university documents contemporaneous with the relevant events: (1) a copy of the Beneficiary's statement of marks showing he passed the final exams in each year of study; (2) a copy of the Beneficiary's provisional certificate issued on May 23, 2007, which states that the Beneficiary "has successfully completed in the month of May 2007, all the prescribed requirements under the regulations for the degree of B.Tech in Computer Science & Engineering;" and (3) a copy of the Beneficiary's diploma dated November 25, 2007.

Finally, we have turned to information publicly available from the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) Electronic Database for Global Education (EDGE),[5] and note that it accords with the Petitioner's claim and evidence. On the matter of provisional certificates issued by Indian universities, AACRAO EDGE states:

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[2] *See also* USCIS Adjudicator's Field Manual, Appendix 22-1, Memorandum from Michael D. Cronin, Acting Associate Commissioner, USCIS HQ 70/6.2, *Educational and Experience Requirements for Employment-Based Second Preference (EB-2) Immigrants* (March 20, 2000), https://uscis.gov/ilink/docView/AFM/HTML/AFM/0-0-0-1/0-0-0-26573/0-0-0-31107.html (last visited May 15, 2017), ("Whether the alien beneficiary possesses the advanced degree should be demonstrated by evidence *in the form of a transcript from the institution* that granted the advanced degree. An adjudicator must similarly consider the *baccalaureate transcript* . . . .") (emphasis added).

[3] While this provision helps clarify that the terms degree and diploma are not equivalent, we note generally that, in contrast to the advanced degree category, the EB-2 exceptional ability category is not grounded entirely in an academic award and thus its initial evidence rule is more expansive than that of the advanced degree category.

[4] Along with any other proffered evidence, petitioners must also submit a copy of a beneficiary's statement of marks or transcript to demonstrate years of study and coursework completed. *See* 8 C.F.R § 204.5(k)(3) (requiring the submission of an official academic record as evidence of a beneficiary's possession of an advanced degree or equivalent of an advanced degree).

[5] AACRAO is "a nonprofit, voluntary, professional association of more than 11,000 higher education professionals who represent approximately 2,600 institutions in over 40 countries." http://www4.aacrao.org/centennial/about.htm (last visited May 15, 2017). According to its registration page, EDGE is "a web-based resource for the evaluation of foreign

> The Provisional Degree Certificate is evidence of completion of all requirements for the degree in question, the name of the degree and the date upon which it was approved by the responsible university governing body, and is comparable to an official US academic transcript with a degree statement certifying completion of all requirements for the degree, the name of the degree and the date upon which it was approved by the academic senate at universities in the United States.[6]

In addition, EDGE notes that some students never receive their "final Degree Certificate" but instead rely on a provisional degree certificate as evidence of degree completion. *Id.*

III. CONCLUSION

The provisional certificate, together with the statement of marks, demonstrates that the Beneficiary completed all the substantive requirements and that the university approved his degree. The final diploma here was simply a delayed formality. We find that the issuance of the provisional certificate conferred on the Beneficiary the foreign equivalent of a bachelor's degree. Applying the provisional certificate date, we also find that he obtained at least five years of qualifying post-baccalaureate experience. Accordingly, the Petitioner has established that the Beneficiary meets the minimum education and experience requirements of the labor certification and of EB-2 classification.

ORDER: The appeal is sustained.

Cite as *Matter of M-L-*, ID# 427792 (AAO May 17, 2017)

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educational credentials." http://edge.aacrao.org/info.php (last visited May 15, 2017).

[6] *See India: Provisional Degree Certificate*, AACRAO, http://edge.aacrao.org/country/credential/provisional-degreecertificate (last visited May 15, 2017).