

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration Inquiry Migration, Pathway to Nation Building

February 2023

Summary of recommendations

Recommendation 1: The Australian Government should ensure that migration policy settings, including legislation and regulations, take account of the potential impacts on the future integration of newcomers, with a focus on strengthening labour market mobility and quicker, more certain pathways to permanent residence.

Recommendation 2: The Federal Government should establish a Federal Office for Multicultural Australia, ideally elevated within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, to ensure a renewed whole-of-government focus on multiculturalism: The Office would strengthen the Multicultural Access and Equity Policy and ensure mandatory implementation and reporting across all departments and agencies. This should include development of consistent and accurate measures of cultural diversity.

Recommendation 3: The Australian Government should invest in building the evidence-base for the migration program. Ideally, this investment would establish a stand-alone agency, such as the Bureau of Immigration and Population Research which existed until the mid-1990s.

Recommendation 4: In line with the recommendation of the Productivity Commission, the Australian Government should establish an evidence-based population policy. The annual immigration intake should be calibrated to this goal to facilitate better, longer-term, sustainable planning for infrastructure and services.

Recommendation 5: Regional settlement should involve multi-year forward planning to ensure that social and physical infrastructure capacities and constraints are managed. The Australian Government should lead collaborative planning with all tiers of government, settlement providers and other local stakeholders to manage gaps in social and physical infrastructure proactively.

Recommendation 6: There should be clear, fair and timely pathways to permanent residency and citizenship to maximise the dividend of migration to Australia. Citizenship policy should maintain the high rates of citizenship uptake among newcomers, which signifies their commitment to fulfil responsibilities and participate to the fullest extent in Australia's economic, social, civil and cultural life.

Recommendation 7: The Australian Government and State/Territory Governments should invest in tailored and holistic support for newcomers who migrate or relocate to regional areas by scaling up programs that successfully facilitate access to the labour market and place-based community engagement initiatives in regional locations

where there is a high demand for newcomers (in partnership with local governments). This would recognise the central role of social connections and belonging in the retention of newcomers in regional areas.

Recommendation 8: The Australian Government should increase the quota or expand the pilot for skilled migration pathways for humanitarian entrants and waive or reduce visa processing fees for skilled migration pathways for humanitarian entrants.

Recommendation 9: The Australian Government should develop more tailored and targeted employment support response for newcomers, especially newcomers in the family and humanitarian streams and secondary applicants in the skilled stream – and pay particular attention to migrant and refugee women which sees them as new entrants to the workforce.

Recommendation 10: The Australian Government's suite of employment services, including the newly established Workforce Australia, should provide targeted support, and ensure adequate coverage by culturally responsive providers in geographic areas of indicative high demand, to people from CALD backgrounds and refugees. This would address barriers they face and support them across their employment journey spanning job-readiness, pre-employment training, paid work experience, effective job-matching and post-employment support.

Recommendation 11: The Australian and State/Territory governments should work with industry and accreditation authorities to streamline processes for assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications and skills. This should include making it easier for newcomers to navigate the steps required to have their skills and qualifications (academic and trade qualifications) and prior learning recognised.

Recommendation 12: The Australian Government should establish an external body that provides oversight and ensures that recognition requirements for foreign credentials are fair and reasonable, similar to the Office of the Fairness Commissioner in Canada.

Recommendation 13: The Australian Government should broaden eligibility to settlement support and ensure adequate resourcing to meet future demand. This will ensure that a greater breadth of newcomers have the support they need to integrate and fully contribute to the community. Access to settlement support should be based on need rather than length of residency in Australia.

Recommendation 14: Funding for settlement services should more effectively reflect service needs with levels of funding commensurate with individually assessed needs based.

Recommendation 15: The Australian Government should ensure a more targeted focus in the Adult Migrant English Program to engage women in the family migration stream and humanitarian program including more flexible options that allow for caring responsibilities and address barriers to participation.

Recommendation 16: To strengthen its position as a destination of choice, and its reputation as a fair country, waiting period for new permanent residents to access income support payments should be waived or permanently reduced. If there is any wait time, it should commence on arrival in Australia rather than once permanent residency is attained. This will give newcomers a better chance to find the right job that is commensurate with their skills and qualifications.

Recommendation 17: The Australian Government should implement the recommendations of the Migrant Workers Taskforce as a first step to prevent and redress exploitation, mistreatment and harassment in the

workplace. Further, the Government should examine ways to increase visa portability for people on employer-sponsored visas to prevent the risk of exploitation.

Recommendation 18: This Inquiry should consider the interaction between temporary visas and women's safety and review the policy actions in the *Blueprint for Reform* to strengthen the safety and security of women on temporary visas experiencing domestic violence.

Background

Settlement Services International (SSI) welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration on the role of migration in nation building.

SSI was founded in NSW in 2000 with the aim of helping newly arrived refugees settle in Australia. Over time, our expertise in working with people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds served as the foundation for a gradual expansion into other human services and geographical areas including regional NSW, Queensland and Victoria. Today, the SSI Group supports more than 50,000 clients in almost 40 programs and delivers a range of community-based initiatives across settlement, disability, employment and complementary social enterprises.

In the area of settlement, SSI is the major provider in NSW of the Humanitarian Settlement Program, funded by the Department of Home Affairs, to refugees and other humanitarian entrants. SSI is also the lead organisation in a consortium, the NSW Settlement Partnership, of 21 partner agencies which deliver the Settlement Engagement and Transition Support program, also funded by the Department of Home Affairs, to refugees and eligible family stream migrants across NSW.

SSI also delivers the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) program to people seeking asylum in NSW and Queensland and will expand our delivery of this program, funded by the Department of Home Affairs, to encompass the ACT, Victoria, Tasmania, the NT and Christmas Island under a new contract to 2027.

TOR 1. The role of permanent migration in nation building, cultural diversity, and social cohesion

Immigration has been a central feature of Australia's social, cultural and civic life and a defining element of our economic, social and cultural development. As we emerge from the pandemic which reduced immigration to a trickle, migration is once again front-of-mind as one of the levers to help recover from the pandemic and address labour and skills gaps.

There is now a key opportunity for the Australian Government to go back to basic principles and reset the way that Australia approaches migration, which has changed radically over the past 50 years (addressed further under TOR 7). The number of migrants arriving with a permanent right to reside in Australia is now dwarfed each year by people who are internationally mobile coming for temporary stays for work or education who may then, at a later stage, apply to settle permanently in Australia. The future migration system, and the Migration Act, needs to find a better balance between permanent migration and temporary mobility and pay greater attention to the needs of temporary residents in Australia.

A key challenge is that by international standards there are indications that Australia is losing ground in our approach to the integration of newcomers. In 2019, under the international MIPEX benchmark, Australia ranked

six out of 56 participating countries for integration policies¹. However, Australia is one of the few countries to go backward on the MIPEX and newcomers in Australia have lost ground with greater restrictions on access to permanent residence and ongoing barriers in terms of labour market mobility, access to income support and essential services¹. Notably, in 2019 Australia had slipped to the bottom 10 countries on indicators relating to permanent residency. In contrast, over the same period, Canada improved policies on access to basic rights and equal opportunities and maintains a straightforward path to citizenship with high levels of naturalisation, political participation and belonging².

The lack of a clear pathway or timeframe to permanent residency can inhibit temporary residents from developing a sense of belonging to Australia as they feel permanently ‘temporary’³. This has potential negative impacts on long-term social cohesion in Australia (issues relating to temporary migration are addressed in more detail under TOR 3).

Mapping Social Cohesion (MSC) is an annual survey conducted by the Scanlon Foundation/Monash University charting Australian public opinion on social cohesion, immigration and population issues. The surveys have been completed since 2007 making it a definitive source of information on trends in public opinion in this area. The 2022 survey is the largest in the Mapping Social Cohesion series and was administered to almost 5,800 respondents. A key finding is that while social cohesion increased during the pandemic it is now declining. As we readjust to life after the pandemic, “we are at a crucial tipping point where we can solidify and strengthen social cohesion or allow it to further weaken”⁴.

Experiences of racism have the potential to undermine social cohesion and inclusion. Reported experiences of racial discrimination have progressively risen from 9 per cent in 2007 to 16 per cent in 2022. A ‘hierarchy of preference’ in the Australian community continues with higher levels of negative sentiment towards Muslims and people immigrating from non-European countries⁵. The COVID-19 pandemic has also been accompanied by increased reports of racism towards temporary migrants⁶. This indicates a lingering distrust of diversity and difference and highlights the critical importance of the work being led by the Australian Human Rights Commission to develop a national anti-racism strategy.

Dedicated research funded by the Commonwealth could generate evidence to better guide all aspects of migration policy by undertaking its own research, supporting greater consistency across immigration and census datasets and making them accessible to researchers. This should include providing research outputs that document migration policy outcomes for different cohorts (e.g., temporary migrants, women) and jurisdictions (e.g., national, State/Territory and LGAs).

Recommendation 1: The Australian Government should ensure that migration policy settings, including legislation and regulations, take account of the potential impacts on the future integration of newcomers, with a focus on strengthening labour market mobility and quicker, more certain pathways to permanent residence.

¹ Migrant Integration Policy Index. (2020a). *Migrant integration policy index 2020: Australia*. <https://www.mipex.eu/australia>.

² Migrant Integration Policy Index. (2020b). *Migrant integration policy index 2020: Canada*. <https://www.mipex.eu/canada>

³ Mares, P. (2016). *How temporary migration is changing Australia - and the world*. <https://theconversation.com/how-temporary-migration-is-changing-australia-and-the-world-63035>

⁴ O’Donnell, J. (2022). *Mapping social cohesion*. Scanlon Foundation Institute. https://scanloninstitute.org.au/sites/default/files/2022-11/MSC%202022_Report_V2.pdf

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Berg, L. & Farbenblum, B. (2020). *As if we weren’t humans: The abandonment of temporary migrants in Australia during Temporary migrants in Australia during COVID-19*.

Recommendation 2: The Federal Government should establish a Federal Office for Multicultural Australia, ideally elevated within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, to ensure a renewed whole-of-government focus on multiculturalism: The Office would strengthen the Multicultural Access and Equity Policy and ensure mandatory implementation and reporting across all departments and agencies. This should include development of consistent and accurate measures of cultural diversity.

Recommendation 3: The Australian Government should invest in building the evidence-base for the migration program. Ideally, this investment would establish a stand-alone agency, such as the Bureau of Immigration and Population Research which existed until the mid-1990s.

TOR 2. Immigration as a strategic enabler of vibrant economies and socially sustainable communities in our cities and regional hubs

Australia benefits from a growing population and newcomers deliver an economic dividend as they are more likely to be of working age, possess skills in demand, and contribute to tax revenues⁷. This is particularly important in light of Australia's ageing population and declining birth rate. However, this demands corresponding investment in infrastructure, housing supply and the environment to maintain community support for migration and population growth⁸. Infrastructure Australia has been critical of existing approaches to areas such as transport, education and environment as they were not adequate (pre-COVID-19) to keep up with our growing population⁹.

The previous Government established a Treasurer's Forum on Population to discuss a collaborative and holistic approach to population. It also established the Centre for Population to provide evidence-based advice on population growth and facilitate collaboration on population planning across levels of government. This early work provides a good starting point to develop a robust population policy that seeks to maximise the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the Australian community in our cities and regional areas.

Regional and rural areas often miss out on the social and economic benefits of migration as newcomers are more likely to live in a capital city where there are more employment opportunities, more infrastructure and established social connections. Yet, new research from the OECD has shown that regional areas with higher proportions of migrants tend to have higher productivity levels finding that: *"On average, a one percentage point higher share of migrants in the local [regional] population is associated with higher labour productivity of roughly A\$1,490."*¹⁰

However, regional migration policy at all levels is constrained by a poor understanding of local settlement capacity and capability. Rural and regional areas often lack the social and physical infrastructure needed by newcomers for primary or secondary migration. Newcomers to regional areas, especially outside of the skilled stream, may need support to integrate into the local labour market¹¹. Place-based assessments that include industry and workforce data analysis, and industry stakeholder consultations can identify local skills shortages

⁷ The Treasury and Department of Home Affairs. (2018). *Shaping a nation: Population growth and immigration over time*

⁸ Infrastructure Australia. (2019). *An assessment of Australia's future infrastructure needs: The Australian Infrastructure Audit 2019*.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ OECD. (2023). *Regional Productivity, local labour markets and migration in Australia*. OECD Regional Development Papers No. 39

¹¹ Musoni, E. (2019a). *Understanding regional settlement in Australia: Key learnings from past experiences*. Canberra: RAI.

and longer-term workforce issues¹². For example, there is a shortage of medical practitioners in many regional areas including the new regional settlement location of Armidale.

Recommendation 4: In line with the recommendation of the Productivity Commission, the Australian Government should establish an evidence-based population policy. The annual immigration intake should be calibrated to this goal to facilitate better, longer-term, sustainable planning for infrastructure and services.

Recommendation 5: Regional settlement should involve multi-year forward planning to ensure that social and physical infrastructure capacities and constraints are managed. The Australian Government should lead collaborative planning with all tiers of government, settlement providers and other local stakeholders to manage gaps in social and physical infrastructure proactively.

TOR 3. Attraction and retention strategies for working migrants to Australia

The Australian Government establishes the policy settings and criteria for entry to Australia, but employers and business groups, the education sector, the agriculture sector, trade unions and professional bodies are heavily involved in influencing these criteria. This can result in short-term interests taking precedence over the national, long-term interest, especially in relation to temporary migration as it is largely an industry-informed approach influenced by lobbying.

For Australia to remain a preferred destination for temporary migrants, as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, there needs to be clear and transparent pathways to permanent residency and citizenship.

In the past, and on arrival in Australia, a newcomer typically already had permanent residency, was often eligible for income and settlement support in times of need and was encouraged to take out Australian citizenship. Today, a typical newcomer is temporary and after many years, if all criteria are met, can become a permanent resident. That path to support and citizenship is littered with hurdles, red tape and inefficient processes.

Data on the average length of time from arrival in Australia for temporary newcomers to securing permanent status is scarce. However, analysis by Treasury and the Department of Home Affairs found that of the 946,000 people who were employed on a temporary skilled visa between 2000-01 and 2013-14, 55 per cent eventually transitioned to permanent residence and of those who transition to permanent residence, 25 per cent do so within two and a half years, and 75 per cent within just under five and a half years¹³.

Maintaining our high rates of citizenship uptake among newcomers is important, as citizenship signifies newcomers' full and active participation in their adopted country, involving legal and other responsibilities as well as rights. For many newcomers, granting of citizenship is symbolic of acceptance by the Australian community.

Currently, newcomers need to wait for four years before they can apply for citizenship – despite having already met the stringent requirements for permanent residency. However, about half of all people gaining permanent residency each year have been temporarily resident in Australia for some years (for example, as skilled workers or students)¹⁴.

¹² Kooy, J. v., Wickes, R., & Ali, A. (2019). *Welcoming Regions*. Monash University/Welcoming Cities.

¹³ The Treasury and Department of Home Affairs. (2018). Op Cit.

¹⁴ The Treasury and Department of Home Affairs. (2018). Op cit.

In contrast to Australia, New Zealand and Canada both benefit from a clear and timely path to citizenship. Notably, New Zealand is a world leader in granting equal opportunity for political participation to newcomers with citizens and permanent residents granted the right to vote in all elections after one year's residence. New Zealand's policies are one of the main factors driving its traditionally high levels of political participation, naturalisation, belonging and public acceptance¹⁵. Civic engagement and a political voice are essential for newcomers to thrive¹⁶.

In relation to regional areas, while successive governments have sought to promote regional migration, there has been overreliance on visa conditions to drive this agenda with insufficient attention on ways to retain newcomers and to promote and sustain secondary migration to regional areas. Analysis by the Grattan Institute shows that when migrants and refugees settle in regional areas (usually to meet regional visa requirements) they are more likely to move to major cities over time than people born in Australia¹⁷. This highlights the need for a greater focus on retention and supporting lasting connections for newcomers in regional areas that benefit them and the regional communities where they settle.

International and Australian experience indicates that local community attitudes and involvement, and strong social networks within and between communities, is an important prerequisite for regional settlement¹⁸. Coordinated, place-based community engagement initiatives provide a platform to recognise the shared aspirations of the local host community and newcomers while also creating a welcoming and socially inclusive environment¹⁹. For example, SSI's *Work+Stay* initiative, which facilitates secondary migration for employment to address regional workforce shortages, uses a holistic approach that includes "settling-in support" to help newcomers feel welcome and build connections in their new communities²⁰.

Recommendation 6: There should be clear, fair and timely pathways to permanent residency and citizenship to maximise the dividend of migration to Australia. Citizenship policy should maintain the high rates of citizenship uptake among newcomers, which signifies their commitment to fulfil responsibilities and participate to the fullest extent in Australia's economic, social, civil and cultural life.

Recommendation 7: The Australian Government and State/Territory Governments should invest in tailored and holistic support for newcomers who migrate or relocate to regional areas by scaling up programs that successfully facilitate access to the labour market and place-based community engagement initiatives in regional locations where there is a high demand for newcomers (in partnership with local governments). This would recognise the central role of social connections and belonging in the retention of newcomers in regional areas.

TOR 4. Policy settings to strengthen skilled migrant pathways to permanent residency

Skilled migration is rarely thought of as a potential pathway for refugees even while there is a critical global need for more durable solutions for refugees. For 2023, UNHCR has identified over two million refugees in need of

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ McKinsey & Company. (2016). *People on the move: global migration's impact and opportunity*.

<https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/employment-and-growth/global-migrations-impact-and-opportunity>.

¹⁷ Mackey, W, Coates, B. & Sherrell, H. (2022). *Migrants in the Australian Workforce*, Grattan Institute,

¹⁸ Musoni, E. (2019b). *Steps to settlement success: A toolkit for rural and regional communities*. RAI/Scanlon Foundation/Welcoming Cities

¹⁹ Watt, S., McMahon, T., & Soulos, T. (2019). *Monitoring community attitudes toward refugee settlement in Armidale, NSW*. UNE/SSI.

²⁰ [Work+Stay — Find work. Find community. Find the right fit for you. \(workandstay.com.au\)](https://www.workandstay.com.au)

resettlement. In addition to long-standing resettlement programs, the UNHCR is working to find additional, complementary pathways to provide long-term safety to refugees to meet increasing global demand.

While complementary pathways can increase the availability of durable solutions to skilled refugees and humanitarian entrants, they also offer benefits to receiving countries. Expanding skilled migration pathways for humanitarian entrants would help address Australia's critical skills shortages, improve social outcomes for refugees and the community, and promote greater public awareness of, and support for, complementary humanitarian pathways.

SSI proposes that the intake quota for skilled migration and other complementary pathways for refugees be increased given the limited numbers in the Humanitarian Program. The Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot (SRLAP) has provided proof of concept that complementary pathways are viable and that existing systemic barriers can be addressed. Lessons from this pilot can be taken into consideration to design and unlock increased access to complementary pathways for refugees in addition to the Humanitarian Program intake. Waiving or reducing the visa processing fees for skilled migration pathways for humanitarian entrants is also important to support and reduce barriers to accessing these complementary pathways.

Recommendation 8: The Australian Government should increase the quota or expand the pilot for skilled migration pathways for humanitarian entrants and waive or reduce visa processing fees for skilled migration pathways for humanitarian entrants.

TOR 5. Strengthening labour market participation and the economic and social contribution of migrants, including family and humanitarian migrants and the partners of working migrants

Most discussion of migration as a response to labour and skills shortages has focussed on policies to increase the number of people coming into the country. This is a lost opportunity as newcomers who are already here are often unemployed, underemployed or working in positions well below their skill and qualification level.

Migrant and Refugee Women

New research from the OECD of regional migration labour market outcomes in Australia has found that, despite Australia having one of the highest educated migrant populations in the OECD, migrants and refugees have lower employment rates relative to the Australian-born in regional areas, driven in large part by the low labour market participation of migrant and refugee women in regional areas.²¹

The barriers faced by migrant and refugee women provide a case-in-point of the labour market barriers faced by people already resident in Australia who have entered under the family and humanitarian streams or as partners in the skilled stream (typically women, who have not been selected on the basis of skills criteria).

Recent released research commissioned by SSI and conducted by NATSEM at the University of Canberra found that refugee women and migrant women from low- and middle-income countries (i.e., non-OECD countries) are lagging behind other women in the Australian labour market, despite their relatively high level of skills, qualifications and motivation to work. Analysis of Census data of labour market indicators shows that the proportion of overseas-born women in employment is lower, and unemployment generally higher, than for

²¹ OECD. (2023). *Regional Productivity, local labour markets and migration in Australia*. Op Cit.

Australian-born women and the participation rate (i.e., the proportion of working-age people in the labour force) is lower for women born overseas²².

The research found that women born in low- and middle-income countries have much higher levels of graduate and post-graduate degrees compared to Australian-born women. Yet these women, especially those from low- and middle-income countries and refugee women, are more likely to be employed in low- skill and low-paid jobs that are not commensurate with their skills and qualifications²³.

Similarly, there is critical untapped potential in the labour market with refugee women and women from low- and middle-income countries who work part time more likely to want to work full time compared to all other women. For refugee women the results are very striking, with almost all part-time workers (95%) wanting to work full time²⁴.

These findings highlight the need for a more targeted policy response to unlock the economic potential of migrant and refugee women, which sees them as new entrants to the workforce. This should include, for example: subsidised entry into vocational and tertiary courses to bridge skills and qualifications gaps; careers advice; and opportunities for paid internships and structured mentorship pathways.²⁵ [SSI has included *Unlocking Potential: Addressing the Economic Participation of migrant and refugee women in Australia*. Policy Brief as an Appendix to this submission].

Gaps in Targeted Employment Services

There has been a long-standing concern about the effectiveness of Federally-funded employment services to deliver outcomes for refugees and migrants, with evidence that job seekers from migrant and refugee backgrounds are overrepresented in long-term unemployment trends²⁶. In the past, this has resulted in the Joint Standing Committee on Migration recommending an evaluation of the effectiveness of Federally-funded employment services to achieve outcomes for migrants and refugees²⁷.

The previous Australian Government funded *jobactive* program did not offer different cohorts of job seekers access to specialised employment service providers. The design principles which underpinned the development of the New Employment Services Model (NESM) (now called Workforce Australia since July 2022) explicitly moved from generalist providers focussed on all cohorts of job seekers to “*providers focus[ing] on job seekers who need it most with capacity to specialise in assisting a particular cohort based on local job seeker needs*”²⁸. This recognised that culturally responsive services delivered by providers experienced in delivering programs to Indigenous communities, people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, refugees and ex-offenders are a key pillar to providing improved outcomes for these cohorts; consequently, the NESM Request for Proposal (RFP) included specialist licenses for these cohorts of job seekers across Australia linked to areas of high indicative demand.

²² Batainah, H.S., Hawkins, J. & Miranti., R. (2022). *Untapped Potential - Trends and disparities in the economic participation of migrant and refugee women in Australia*. SSI/NATSEM.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ SSI. (2022). *Unlocking Potential: Addressing the Economic Participation of migrant and refugee women in Australia*. Policy Brief.

²⁶ ACOSS/UNSW. (2020) *Poverty in Australia Part 2: Who is Affected?*. Poverty and Inequality Partnership.

²⁷ Joint Standing Committee on Migration. (2013) *Inquiry into Migration and Multiculturalism in Australia*.

²⁸ Department of Small Business and Employment. Employment Services. (2020). *I Want to Work*. 2018. p.29

However, the allocation of CALD and Refugee specialist licenses across South Australia, Victoria, NSW and Queensland following the NESM RFP process seems to have resulted in inconsistencies in areas of high-demand for these cohorts of job seekers. This runs counter to the policy intent to deliver personalised and specialised support to job seekers. For example, in the employment region of Sydney South-West, no CALD or Refugee specialist licenses were allocated in one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse areas of Australia.

Skills and Qualifications Recognition

Research conducted by CEDA has found that nearly one in four permanent skilled migrants are working in a job beneath their skill level²⁹. In part, this is due to challenges relating to recognition of overseas skills and qualifications. This, and the untapped skills of other newcomers, is a lost opportunity for Australia. In 2016, the Productivity Commission regarded Australia's skills assessment and recognition scheme as complex, time-consuming and bureaucratic and little has changed since that time³⁰.

In Australia, there is limited information for newcomers on the process and criteria used to assess qualifications and skills. In contrast, Germany has established an online portal which provides a one-stop shop for all information on skills recognition. The site provides a step-by-step guide to the qualification recognition procedure in 11 languages³¹. In addition, there is no external body in Australia that provides oversight of skills and qualifications recognition. This means that if an applicant is denied recognition and wishes to appeal, they must appeal to the same body which refused them in the first place³².

Recommendation 9: The Australian Government should develop more tailored and targeted employment support response for newcomers, especially newcomers in the family and humanitarian streams and secondary applicants in the skilled stream – and pay particular attention to migrant and refugee women which sees them as new entrants to the workforce.

Recommendation 10: The Australian Government's suite of employment services, including the newly established Workforce Australia, should provide targeted support, and ensure adequate coverage by culturally responsive providers in geographic areas of indicative high demand, to people from CALD backgrounds and refugees. This would address barriers they face and support them across their employment journey spanning job-readiness, pre-employment training, paid work experience, effective job-matching and post-employment support.

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Recommendation 12: The Australian Government should establish an external body that provides oversight and ensures that recognition requirements for foreign credentials are fair and reasonable, similar to the Office of the Fairness Commissioner in Canada.

²⁹ CEDA. *A Good Match: Optimising Australia's permanent skilled migration*. 2021.

³⁰ Productivity Commission. (2006). *Economic Impacts of Migration and Population Growth*, Research report, Canberra.

³¹ Settlement Council of Australia. (2019). *Recognising overseas skills and qualifications, maximizing human capital in newly arrived migrants*

³² Ibid.

TOR 6. The role of settlement services and vocational training in utilising migrant experiences, knowledge, and opportunities

Successful settlement and integration is a goal shared by newcomers, the communities they settle in and government at all levels. In the Australian context, integration is usually defined as the capacity to participate fully in economic, social, cultural and civic life and is a multi-dimensional, two-way process of mutual adaptation between newcomers and host communities³³. However, the public discourse around integration tends to focus on a narrow band of markers – employment, education, English proficiency and health – and often ignores the important and under-researched dimensions of newcomers’ social connections, and their access to rights and fulfilment of responsibilities³⁴.

Refugee settlement and integration is enhanced by sustainably funded services with specialised expertise, which deliver integrated support and are embedded in, and trusted by, the communities they serve. The three phases of SSI’s *Foundations for Belonging* research with newly arrived refugees conducted annually in 2019, 2020 and 2021 provide timely insights into refugee settlement. Despite the significant upheaval and uncertainty of the pandemic, the findings across the dimensions of social connections and rights and responsibilities were largely stable compared across all phases of the research. While refugees reported significant COVID-19 related difficulties and hardships, the research does not signal any fracturing of refugees’ sense of welcome and belonging in Australia due to the pandemic³⁵.

Australia is a world leader in terms of providing a comprehensive suite of settlement support for migrants and refugees. However, there are many migrants who would benefit from this support but are unable to access it because they do not meet the eligibility criteria. The main sources of settlement support to newcomers are the Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) program and the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) which are both funded by the Department of Home Affairs. SETS provides settlement support to eligible permanent residents (mostly refugees) who have arrived in Australia and some temporary residents and their dependents³⁶. Similarly, the AMEP provides access to government-funded English language learning and eligibility is mostly restricted to refugees.

Settlement Support

The vast majority of migrants are not eligible for settlement support irrespective of their level of need. This is in contrast to other migrant-receiving countries. In Canada for example, settlement services are referred to as ‘newcomer services’ and are often available to refugees, permanent residents, temporary residents and even naturalised citizens on an ongoing basis³⁷. This approach recognises that successful settlement and integration of newcomers is critical to ensuring public support for immigration.

In addition, eligibility for SETS is restricted to a period of five years after arrival in Australia. During the pandemic, many migrants and refugees found themselves “going backwards” in their settlement journey due to losing work

³³ Fozdar, F., & Hartley, L. (2013). ‘Refugee resettlement in Australia: What we know and need to know’. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 32(3), 23-51.

³⁴ Culos, I., McMahon, T., Khorana, S., Robertson, S., Baganz, E., Magee, L., Agha, Y. (2022). *Foundations for Belonging 2022 Insights on Newly Arrived Refugees: Family separation and reunion during the pandemic*. Settlement Services International/Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ See: <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/settling-in-australia/sets-program/sets-client-services>

³⁷ Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA). (2022a). [Submission: A migration system for Australia’s future](#).

or becoming socially isolated³⁸. Even if they had originally been eligible for settlement support, many of them were no longer eligible for settlement support because they had been in Australia for more than five years. In supporting Australia to recover from the pandemic, it is critical that newcomers are provided with settlement support to bolster their social, economic and civic participation. Access to settlement support for migrants and refugees should be based on need rather than length of residency in Australia.

Similarly, temporary migrants who are granted permanent residency are not eligible for settlement support. However, about half of all people gaining permanent residency each year are already temporarily resident in Australia³⁹. Consequently, we are not preparing many of our new permanent residents to integrate and fully contribute to the Australian community. New permanent residents, including those transitioning from temporary residency, should be able to access settlement support based on need. This is likely to improve overall community outcomes in terms of social participation and integration, employment and health.

The most effective approach to delivering desired settlement outcomes should start with understanding the individual need and aspirations of refugees and migrants and their families and shaping program responses to these. The level of service provision should be commensurate with the assessment of need. SSI proposes that provision of settlement support should be based on a stepped or incremental model of support based on individual needs.

English language learning

English language skills help people to navigate Australian life, including transport, housing, employment and education, and the health systems. Conversely, lack of English language skills is a barrier to successful settlement, particularly in accessing the labour market, finding adequate skilled employment and accessing government services.

The former Government implemented a series of reforms, which progressively took effect up until early 2021, designed to improve the reach and flexibility of the AMEP. These reforms included removing the cap on the number of English tuition hours and enabling people to continue taking classes until they reach vocational level English. SSI would welcome further reforms to diversify options and methods of learning so that clients have genuine choice about their learning journey.

English language proficiency is strongly linked to positive labour market outcomes, though evidence suggests it is not the sole driver of better labour market outcomes (other factors include, for example, social connections, mental health issues and access to childcare). SSI's recent research commissioned from NATSEM found that women who have come to Australia for humanitarian or family reasons are more likely to have poorer English language proficiency than other women. This highlights the need for a more targeted focus in the AMEP to engage women in the family migration stream and humanitarian program⁴⁰.

Greater flexibility is also needed in relation to the timing of English language learning so that people have choice to sequence their settlement journey in the way that best fits them. For example, some newcomers may plan to

³⁸ Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA). (2022b). *Maximising the economic contribution of Australia's Migrants and Refugees: 2021-2022 Pre-Budget submission*. <https://scoa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/SCoA-2021-22-Pre-Budget-Submission-Maximising-the-economic-contribution-of-migrants-and-refugees-1.pdf>

³⁹ The Treasury and Department of Home Affairs. (2018). Op cit.

⁴⁰ Batainah, H., Hawkins, J. & Miranti, R. (2022). Op cit.

delay English language learning until after they have secured employment, while for others, language learning might be an early goal.

Recommendation 13: The Australian Government should broaden eligibility to settlement support and ensure adequate resourcing to meet future demand. This will ensure that a greater breadth of newcomers have the support they need to integrate and fully contribute to the community. Access to settlement support should be based on need rather than length of residency in Australia.

Recommendation 14: Funding for settlement services should more effectively reflect service needs with levels of funding commensurate with individually assessed needs based.

Recommendation 15: The Australian Government should ensure a more targeted focus in the Adult Migrant English Program to engage women in the family migration stream and humanitarian program including more flexible options that allow for caring responsibilities and address barriers to participation.

TOR 7: Other related matters that may assist the inquiry

SSI endorses the six core principles proposed by FECCA for reform of the Australian migration system: fair and affordable; timely; transparent and accountable; simple; informed; and safe and supportive⁴¹.

Taking fairness as an example, the concept of a waiting period for income support payments for newcomers who gain permanent residency was established in the early 1990s and has been progressively expanded by successive governments⁴². However, research by CEDA shows that increases to the waiting period have exacerbated the skills mismatch, while delivering only modest annual savings to the federal budget¹². Permanent skilled migrants are channelled to take jobs outside of, and below, their skill set as they attempt to establish a career in Australia. In SSI's experience the waiting period is also driving people to work before they have a sufficient level of English, which in turn, may intensify the issue of skills mismatch

The fundamental purpose of Australia's social security system and targeted safety nets are to provide support to residents and citizens during times when they are not able to adequately support themselves. These benefits are funded through taxation paid by all residents, temporary and permanent, who are earning a liveable income.

A safe and supportive migration system would include robust measures to address exploitation, mistreatment and harassment of newcomers. There is ongoing evidence of temporary residents being exploited in the labour market based on the complaints lodged with the Fair Work Ombudsman and numerous government or parliamentary inquiries. The types of exploitation that migrant workers face range from manipulative contractual practices that result in workers being underpaid — "wage theft" — through to serious modern slavery offences⁴³. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated economic insecurity across Australia and with it the risk of increasing exploitation.

⁴¹ FECCA. (2022) Federation of Ethnic Communities Council Submission: *A migration system for Australia's Future*. <https://fecca.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/FECCA-Submission-A-Migration-System-for-Australias-Future.pdf>

⁴² Boucher, A. & Carney, T. 2013. Social Security for Migrant Workers and Their Families in Australia. In R. Blanpain, P. Arellano Ortiz, M. Olivier & G. Vonk (Eds.), *Social Security and Migrant Workers: Selected Studies of Cross-Border Social Security Mechanisms* (pp. 187-214): Kluwer.

⁴³ Chaudhuri, U. & Boucher, A. (2021). *The future of enforcement for migrant workers in Australia: Lessons from overseas*, Sydney Policy Lab, University of Sydney. <https://www.sydney.edu.au/sydney-policy-lab/news-and-analysis/news-commentary/the-future-of-enforcement-for-migrant-workers-in-australia.html>

In 2019, a whole-of-government Migrant Worker Taskforce made recommendations, endorsed by the former Government, to strengthen protections for temporary migrants⁴⁴. Since then, reports from numerous parliamentary inquiries have echoed the recommendations of the Migrant Workers Taskforce, though little progress has been made in terms of implementation.

The Government should also examine ways to increase visa portability for people on employer-sponsored visas (e.g., allowing sponsored workers to switch jobs without losing their visa) to reduce the risk of exploitation. As temporary workers may face dire consequences for reporting an employer's misconduct – such as being removed from their position, which could lead to deportation – they must be provided with robust protections that safeguard against this form of retribution.

Similarly, women on temporary visas experiencing family violence in Australia face barriers in accessing safety, support, and justice due, in part, to migration system processes that can result in women remaining in situations that are harmful and dangerous. The National Advocacy Group on Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence has just published a revised *Blueprint for Reform* with policy recommendations to facilitate women on temporary visas accessing protection, services and justice including through expanding eligibility and access to social security (including Medicare and Commonwealth Rental Assistance)⁴⁵. SSI endorses the recommendations outlined in the Blueprint.

Recommendation 16: To strengthen its position as a destination of choice, and its reputation as a fair country, waiting period for new permanent residents to access income support payments should be waived or permanently reduced. If there is any wait time, it should commence on arrival in Australia rather than once permanent residency is attained. This will give newcomers a better chance to find the right job that is commensurate with their skills and qualifications.

Recommendation 17: The Australian Government should implement the recommendations of the Migrant Workers Taskforce as a first step to prevent and redress exploitation, mistreatment and harassment in the workplace. Further, the Government should examine ways to increase visa portability for people on employer-sponsored visas to prevent the risk of exploitation.

Recommendation 18: This Inquiry should consider the interaction between temporary visas and women's safety and review the policy actions in the *Blueprint for Reform* to strengthen the safety and security of women on temporary visas experiencing domestic violence.

Authorised by: Sonia Vignjevic, A/CEO
Date: 13 Feb 2023
Prepared by: Toni Beauchamp and Tadgh McMahon
Web: www.ssi.org.au

⁴⁴ Australian Government. (2019). *Report of the Migrant Workers' Taskforce*.

⁴⁵ Australian Women Against Violence Alliance (AWAVA). (2022). *Blueprint for Reform: Removing Barriers to Safety for Victims/Survivors of Domestic and Family Violence Who Are on Temporary Visas*.
<https://awava.org.au/2022/12/06/research-and-reports/the-blueprint-for-reform-2022>