

Billion Dollar Benefit

A roadmap for unleashing the economic
potential of refugees and migrants

50 EXPERTS ACROSS **5** SECTORS RECOMMEND **5** BARRIER-BREAKING
SOLUTIONS TO IMPLEMENT BY **2025**



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Acknowledgement of country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the Land. We pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge the continuation of cultural, spiritual and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Ancestors have walked this country, and we acknowledge their special and unique place in our nation's historical, cultural and linguistic identity.

About this report

This report is based on the insights and views of more than 50 experts who attended the Refugee and Migrant Skills and Jobs Summit held at Parliament House on 22 March 2023. The cross-sector experts included representatives from employers, community organisations, unions, government officials and, most importantly, people with lived experience as skilled refugees and migrants seeking meaningful employment in Australia. The Summit was co-hosted by Settlement Services International (SSI), the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA), Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA), and Community Corporate.

For more information regarding this report and to join the movement in support of refugee and migrant employment, please contact Dane Moores, Head of Strategic Relations at SSI, at dmoores@ssi.org.au.

Foreword

Australia is grappling with an unprecedented skills shortage. The challenge before us is to “skill up or sink”, as Home Affairs Minister Clare O’Neil recently put it. Multiple reforms are already underway.

Many, however, are quick to look for talent overseas to “skill up”, but there is untapped solution much closer to home: harnessing the underutilised skills of people seeking asylum, refugees and migrants already in Australia. Unlike most OECD countries, where migrants tend to be less qualified than the native population, the opposite is true in Australia. Yet one in four permanent skilled migrants work in jobs beneath their skill level in this country.¹ Intersectionality with age, disability, gender and sexual orientation can exacerbate employment barriers facing refugees and migrants.

How can Australia enhance its economic productivity as a nation without addressing the chronic underutilisation of skilled refugees and migrants already onshore? The short answer is, we can’t.

From the Employment White Paper to the Migration Review, major reform is underway, showing an appetite to tackle this challenge head-on. As the Parkinson Review into Australia’s future migration system noted, “migrants are strong contributors to our economy and this should be celebrated”, but many have “unrealised potential”.² This report provides some practical insights on what can be done to maximise skills and talent already on our shores.

Our shared aspiration is for all newcomers to reach their full economic potential in Australia. Our vision is for refugees and migrants to be given a fair go to use their professional skills, experience and qualifications to build lives and livelihoods in Australia that are productive and fulfilling.

Breaking down barriers to refugee and migrant employment isn’t a job for government alone; it is a responsibility and opportunity shared by employers, non-government organisations, unions, refugee-led organisations, and all levels of government alike. We consulted 50 experts across these five sectors and agreed five priority solutions to implement by 2025:

- 1 Fix the broken skills and qualifications recognition system, including through a national body
- 2 Strengthen protections for migrant workers
- 3 Review the right to work for people on temporary visas
- 4 Scale innovative ‘tripartite’ partnerships between the public, private and NGO sectors
- 5 Reform English language requirements so they are fit-for-purpose

More than 50 organisations endorse this roadmap for reform. The bottom line is that we all agree that embracing the expertise, background and lived experience of refugees and migrants isn’t just the right thing to do, it is the smart thing to do.

By tapping into the proven technical expertise and experience of refugees and migrants already residing in Australia, we can add billions to the Australian economy and plug critical skills gaps, while also providing sustainable employment pathways for newcomers to Australia. It’s a winning triple dividend.



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Consensus for action

The following organisations endorse this roadmap and its five barrier-breaking solutions to support refugees and migrants to achieve their full economic potential. These organisations commit to working together with the government to fully realise the Billion Dollar Benefit.



Consensus for action

The breadth of this cross-sector coalition is testament to the importance of the issue and the many benefits that would flow from breaking down employment barriers facing skilled refugees and migrants.

IKEA Australia



Roadblocks to rebuilding: Stories of starting again

A dental dilemma: Sadia navigates barriers to reclaim her career

Sadia had almost completed her Master of Dental Science in Malaysia when the Taliban gained control of her home country Afghanistan. After returning home to protect her children, Sadia and her family were forced to flee to Australia for safety in November 2021.

With more than six years practising dentistry in a clinic, and seven years lecturing at a dental faculty, Sadia was determined to continue her career in Australia. But she has faced a maze of barriers to achieving her goal.

Sadia undertook the complex and expensive process of having her overseas qualifications recognised. Her efforts came to a standstill after she was unable to attain one of the government documents from her country of origin that is

required to sit the Australian Dental Association (ADA) exam.

“I applied for dental assistant jobs in the meantime but was declined because I did not have Australian experience,” Sadia said.

To resolve this, Sadia asked to sit in on a local clinic two days a week as an ‘observer’ while she completed her English language courses at TAFE.

After several months of hard work and frustration, Sadia’s situation took a positive turn. In December 2022, she was offered a part-time role at Auburn Road Dental Surgery, and she was able to track down alternative documentation to sit her dental exam.

Sadia is now working at the clinic two days a week while working towards refining her professional English language skills. She plans to sit her ADA exam in early 2024.

“I have dedicated almost 20 years of my life to my profession – I cannot leave it behind. I dream of working again as a dentist, but it’s incredibly difficult,” Sadia said.



Mohammad's journey from medicine to public servant

Dr. Mohammad Zubair Harooni, a former United Nations HIV Program Specialist, arrived in Australia with his family in January 2022 after fleeing Taliban rule.

Despite having a 15-year medical career in Afghanistan and a Master's degree in Public Health, Mohammad faces an upward battle to find employment in the Australian medical sector.

While embarking on the long process of getting overseas qualifications recognised, Mohammad collaborated with SSI to shift gears and find a new career path.

In July 2022, Mohammad gained a Humanitarian Cadet position in Transport NSW's Infrastructure and Place division. He has excelled in his role

and has since gained both a promotion and permanent position in the team.

"At the beginning it was a bit challenging but each day I learn new things and skills, so I just go with it. I am definitely enjoying the role because I always enjoy challenges. Easy jobs can be done any time, but the good thing is I really enjoy challenging work like this."

While Mohammad is making meaningful contributions to Transport NSW and enjoying his work, he remains determined to utilise his medical skills and experience to positively impact people's lives in Australia.

"I have aspirations to get back into the medical field but first I have to get some background in Australia and working with government, so if I am in a job and then I can apply for another job in my field of experience in a related area, it will be much easier for me. That is my long-term plan," Mohammad said.



REPORT SNAPSHOT: From barriers to boundless potential

Australia faces a crippling national skills shortage

350,000
job vacancies



for skilled jobs across Australia³, including 80,000 in regional Australia⁴



286 occupations
face shortages

including more than half of the
20 largest employing occupations⁵

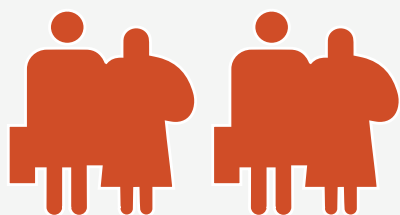
30,000
engineers needed

while half of
migrant engineers
are unemployed
or work in other
sectors⁶

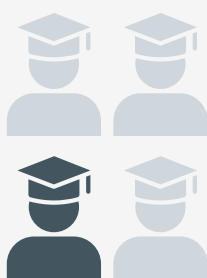


Refugees and migrants have tremendous unrealised potential

7.6+ million
migrants
in Australia⁷



including **60,000** refugees and
80,000 people seeking asylum⁸

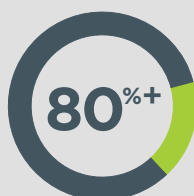


1 in 4

permanent
skilled migrants
work beneath
their skill level⁹



Refugees are twice
as likely to start a
business than the
wider Australian
population¹⁰



80%+ migrants are of working
age, compared with 65% of the
broader population¹¹

Harnessing their untapped skills could add billions to the Australian economy

\$1.25
billion
in lost wages
over five years from
the underutilisation of
skilled migrants¹²



\$1
billion



generated a year
within 10 years by supporting
refugees in Australia to launch
new businesses¹³

\$5 billion



added to the economy
each year by easing
occupational licensing¹⁴

REPORT SNAPSHOT: From barriers to boundless potential

After arriving in a new country, gaining work is one of the most effective ways newcomers can rebuild their lives



3rd highest aspiration

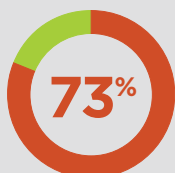
for newcomers is to find financial stability with a good job¹⁵

95%

of refugee women who work part time want to work full time¹⁶



73% of US employers report higher retention rates for refugees than for other employees, indicating their loyalty and keenness to work¹⁷



But refugees and migrants face barriers to finding meaningful employment

Recognition roadblocks



Only 33% of permanent arrivals have their post-school qualifications recognised in Australia¹⁸

RIGHT TO WORK

57% of people seeking asylum in Australia are not allowed to work¹⁹



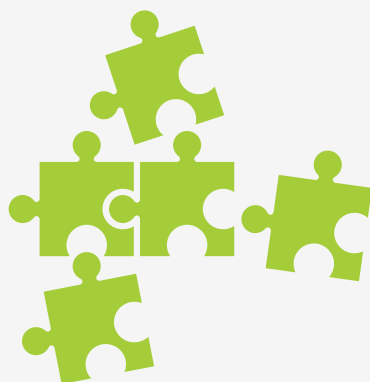
Discrimination: Applicants from ethnic backgrounds are 57% less likely to be considered for leadership roles in Australia, despite identical resumes²¹

EXPLOITATION

Almost two thirds of workers on temporary visas are paid less than the minimum standard²⁰



We consulted 50 experts who backed five barrier-breaking solutions



Top 5 actions to implement by 2025:

- 1 Fix the broken skills and qualifications recognition system
- 2 Strengthen protections for migrant workers
- 3 Review the right to work for people on temporary visas
- 4 Scale innovative 'tripartite' partnerships
- 5 Reform English language requirements

Unleashing refugee and migrant talent is **good for newcomers, good for business, and good for Australia. It's a win-win-win.**

Refugee and migrant voices: Stories of starting again

"I had experience as an engineer overseas and then I did my masters here in Australia. But it was still difficult to get a job in my field. I ended up driving Uber to make ends meet. At times I wondered if I would ever get a job as an engineer. I am very happy now working as a flood damage recovery engineer in Horsham. It is a great relief to get work in my field and use my skills."

Mohammad Hassaan Masood: an engineer from Pakistan who has found a dream job working in his field in regional Australia

"I thought it would be easy to find a job in Australia, but it wasn't. I had degrees in computer science from Iran and Japan, but I had to apply for more than 1,000 jobs in Australia before I eventually got an IT role. I worked as a labourer while I tried to find work in my field."

Ali Akbar Mohammadi: an IT Specialist from Afghanistan who now works for Accenture in Adelaide as an Application Development Analyst

"Although I already knew how to express myself and engage with new people in English, my first months were difficult. In job interviews, I would struggle to understand the interviewer as they would speak quickly, and I'd have to ask them to speak slower or repeat their questions. But day by day I got better."

Salwa Afif Razzouk: SSI employee with bachelor's degree in law and master's in public management from Syria

"People from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds have the skills and talent, we just need the opportunity. Please give us a chance."

Mohsen Shahsavarzadeh: an entrepreneur from Iran who now leads his own mortgage brokerage in north-west Sydney

"In one of my first job interviews in Australia, the interviewer said straight to my face: 'I don't know if we can hire your kind.' It turns out he was referring to my dreadlocks at the time, but employers need to look beyond things like that to the skills we can bring to their business."

Joshua Alexander: a community services team leader from Sudan who now helps newcomers settle in Australia

"Asylum seekers are denied study rights, working rights and the right to access Medicare. We want to work and contribute in this country, but we aren't allowed to until the government makes a decision about our long-term status, which can take a long time."

Betia Shakiba: an office worker from Iran who sought asylum in Australia after arriving by boat

ACTION 1: Fix the skills and qualifications recognition system

What we recommend

In 2006, the Productivity Commission described Australia's skills assessment and recognition scheme as complex, time-consuming and bureaucratic. Little has changed since then.²² This means both Australia and migrants lose out. It must be fixed.

National legislation is the starting point. Denmark has put in place a comprehensive legal framework that establishes a central recognition agency with oversight of assessment of skill recognition of all holders of overseas qualifications.²³ In Ontario, Canada, the Office of the Fairness Commissioner (OFC) ensures that recognition requirements for overseas credentials are fair and reasonable. Within a decade, the OFC achieved a 59 per cent increase in the licensing of overseas trained professionals.

Why it's important

For too many skilled migrants, their excitement to live and work in Australia is quickly replaced by the stress of navigating a fragmented recognition system of more than 34 authorities spanning 450 occupations.²⁴ This complexity puts off many migrants from applying for recognition altogether. Between 2006 and 2016, only 39 per cent of migrants with post-school qualifications applied to go through the recognition process.²⁵

The difficulty in having qualifications and skills recognised in Australia means many skilled refugees and migrants are resorting to jobs well below their skill level. This is a loss to the individual and the economy. Skilled migrants face a severe risk of de-skilling due to slow recognition

processes. This isn't just holding back refugees and migrants; it is holding back our economy. If licensing guidelines were eased, Australia could add up to \$5 billion to the economy each year.²⁶

How it can be implemented

We know what works from international and domestic experience. Up until 2015, Australia's Assessment Subsidy for Overseas Trained Professionals (ASDOT) played an important role in funding overseas professionals through the costly recognition process. This subsidy should be restored.

A one-stop-shop for recognition information like the 'Recognition in Germany' portal would be another step in the right direction. Germany's multilingual portal includes an innovative 'recognition finder' tool where applicants enter their profession and city to automatically receive tailored, step-by-step information on how to get their skills recognised. Within four years of the portal being launched, the number of applications for foreign skills recognition in Germany more than doubled.²⁷

Having employment support that is culturally responsive can play a critical role in helping newcomers navigate the job market and recognition system. Workforce Australia should grant more 'Refugee' and 'CALD' licenses to experienced settlement service providers.

Further, an oversight body like Ontario's (Canada) Office of the Fairness Commissioner would help ensure recognition procedures are fair, transparent, consistent and accessible.

What the Australian government should do	What employers should do	What NGOs should do
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Harmonise recognition processes across state governments + Establish a national skills recognition oversight body + Restore assessment subsidies for overseas trained professionals + Set up a national online portal for all information on skills recognition processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Pilot 'learn while you earn' arrangements + Value overseas experience, not just local experience + Reduce fees for skills recognition + Review recruitment processes for cultural inclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Support newcomers to navigate the system + Provide a platform for refugees and migrants to advocate for change + Help gather and support necessary documents to be translated to be assessment ready

ACTION 2: Protect migrant workers

What we recommend

No single person should control both your passport and your paycheck – it's a recipe for exploitation. Employer-sponsored visas should be replaced with industry-sponsored visas to allow greater flexibility for migrants to move between employers within an industry, thereby reducing the risk of exploitation. Whistleblower protections must also be guaranteed for migrants who wish to file a complaint against their employer. Importantly, these and other protections and rights should be clearly communicated to migrant workers and employers alike.

Why it's important

The types of exploitation that migrant workers face range from manipulative contractual practices that result in workers being underpaid – ‘wage theft’ – through to forced labour or withholding a visa holder's passport. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated economic insecurity across Australia and, with it, the risk of increasing exploitation.²⁸

According to a Migrant Workers Centre survey of more than 700 temporary visa holders, almost two thirds of respondents reported being paid less than the minimum standards, and a quarter reported other forms of workplace exploitation like forced or unpaid overtime.²⁹

Ending migrant worker exploitation is important, first and foremost, to prevent the suffering of those workers and to uphold their rights. Protecting migrant workers is also critical to maintain the integrity of the labour market and to protect Australia's reputation as a destination of choice.

How it can be implemented

There is increasing momentum and political will to address exploitation. As part of this, all 22 recommendations made by the 2019 Migrant Worker Taskforce³⁰ should be implemented, including amending legislation to clarify that temporary migrants working in Australia are always entitled to workplace protections under the Fair Work Act.

Currently, migrant workers who have breached their visa conditions rarely report workplace issues for fear of losing their migration status. When a migrant worker reports labour exploitation, any breaches of visa-specific work conditions must not provide grounds for visa cancellation.

Refugee and migrant service organisations must be supported to offer education in Australian workplace rights for newcomers, many of whom may come from countries with weaker protections.

What the Australian government should do	What employers should do	What NGOs should do
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Implement the recommendations of the Migrant Workers Taskforce + Explore industry-sponsored solutions rather than employer-sponsored solutions + Enhance whistleblower protections for migrant workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Be role model, culturally-safe employers + Review business models and supply chains for any signs of migrant worker exploitation + Build capability to call out modern slavery with relevant policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Be role model, culturally-safe employers + Educate newcomers on their work rights + Build workforce capability and clearer referral mechanisms for frontline workers to provide support to protect worker's rights

ACTION 3: Review the right to work

What we recommend

People who seek asylum in Australia should be able to work while they wait for their refugee status to be processed.

There are thousands of people in Australia who are denied the right to work because of their visa status. As many as 20 per cent of people seeking asylum and refugees on bridging visas at any given time are not allowed to work, despite being eager to work and often highly educated.³¹ For example, of the 7,000 people seeking asylum who contacted the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre in 2021-22, 57 per cent did not have work rights.³²

People seeking asylum are discriminated against based on how they arrive in Australia. The subsequent inconsistency in work rights creates confusion, for employers and temporary visa holders alike, and limits the ability of people seeking asylum to contribute to and benefit from economic activity.

Why it's important

Employment is one of the cornerstones that helps individuals and communities feel productive, engaged, motivated and connected. This is doubly true for newly-arrived refugees and migrants who often see employment as a signifier of success in a new country.

Denying work rights can lead to a loss of skills, increase reliance on the social welfare system, prevent newcomers feeling included, and make it harder to break into the job market at a later stage.

Confusion about the eligibility of temporary visa holders to work often leads businesses to exclude anyone who isn't a permanent resident or citizen. Automatically granting work rights to every person of working age seeking asylum would eliminate this confusion and enable businesses to utilise the skills and experience of people seeking asylum.

How it can be implemented

The Australian government should conduct a review into the right to work for people on temporary visas, with a view to ensuring work rights for all people seeking asylum for the duration of their application process. People with lived experience seeking asylum and employment in Australia should be consulted and guide the review process. Once the review is completed, an awareness campaign should be launched to inform employers that all people seeking asylum and refugees on bridging visas can work, giving them certainty to make informed recruitment decisions.

What the Australian government should do	What employers should do	What NGOs should do
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Review and rectify the denial of work rights for people on temporary visas + Develop and promote factual tools on navigating visas for employers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Not assume that everyone on a temporary visa is unable to work + Hire newcomers and accommodate for their unique situation and perspective + Review recruitment processes for cultural inclusion + Engage experts to deliver cultural confidence training at all levels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Support newcomers to understand their work rights + Support newcomers to navigate the Australian job market and secure suitable employment + Play an active role in changing the narrative and raising awareness on hiring asylum seekers

ACTION 4: Scale ‘tripartite’ partnerships

What we recommend

Innovative tripartite partnerships among the public, private and NGO sectors should be piloted and scaled to provide wrap-around employment solutions for newcomers to Australia. This could be facilitated through the rollout of place-based refugee and migrant employment hubs. Innovation occurs at the interface of sectors, ideas, and cultures. That is what these hubs are about: aligning diverse stakeholders around a shared agenda to unleash refugee and migrant talent in the local community.

Why it's important

Employing refugees and migrants enables businesses to tap into a diverse, motivated group of talented people to create connections with customers, who themselves come from all walks of life. After all, Australia is now a migrant majority nation.

Breaking down barriers to refugee and migrant employment is a shared responsibility. There is a role for government in scaling-up targeted employment services for refugees and migrants and providing the right incentives and protections. There is a role for employers in reducing recruitment-related barriers and providing welcoming and inclusive workplaces. There is a role for the community sector in supporting newcomers to settle in a new culture and society.

How it can be implemented

A handful of place-based ‘refugee and migrant employment hubs’ could be piloted, bringing together local employers, refugee and migrant service organisations, multicultural communities, and the various levels of government to trial local employment initiatives. This could include trialling government incentives for businesses to hire refugees and migrants, rolling out ‘learn while you earn’ paid placements for newcomers to develop and prove their skills on the job.

Hubs in regional Australia could be a good place to start given the importance of skilled refugees and migrants to addressing growing workforce shortages. With more than 80,000 unfilled jobs across regional Australia, the Regional Australia Institute says “migration will be critical to the growth and sustainability of regional Australia over the next decade.”³³

Whatever form the employment hubs take, they should be co-designed with skilled refugees and migrants, so they are informed and shaped by lived experience from the outset.

What the Australian government should do	What employers should do	What NGOs should do
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Pilot 3–4 refugee and migrant employment hubs in regional and metropolitan centres + Scale-up targeted specialist employment service programs and pre-employment training for refugees and migrants + Trial tax incentives for businesses to hire skilled refugees and migrants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Embed culturally inclusive recruitment pathways to cater specifically for refugees and migrants + Champion refugee and migrant employees + Trial ‘learn while you earn’ paid placements + Promote career progression pathways for refugees and migrants, matching their skills and aspirations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Support businesses to become inclusive and welcoming + Run pilots and trial innovative models + Connect refugees/ migrants with employers linked to their skills + Provide high-quality settlement services to support work readiness and retention + Scale specialist employment service programs and career mentoring programs for refugees and migrants

ACTION 5: Reform English language requirements

What we recommend

English language requirements should be fit-for-purpose. In many industries, English requirements are higher than they need to be. This arbitrarily locks out skilled refugee and migrant talent from regulated professions and trades, including those with critical shortages. English language requirements should be reformed, based on the minimum viable level required to competently perform a given role. This isn't about reducing standards; it is about ensuring standards are fit-for-purpose.

Why it's important

Onerous English language requirements are a major barrier for many refugees and migrants seeking to work in their field. When English requirements are higher than necessary, they arbitrarily limit access to talent and, in the process, hold back critical sectors of the economy. For example, many overseas trained clinical staff struggle to pass the English language criteria, which are set at a medical doctor standard by the health practitioner regulator. This has a cascading impact for migrant patients, who miss out on access to clinicians who speak their language.

To pass the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam, many refugees and migrants need to take it multiple times. The cost of the exam is prohibitive at \$395 per test. There is currently no form of financial assistance for refugees and humanitarian entrants with skills on the Priority Migration Skilled Occupation List to study for and sit the IELTS test.

While a certain level of English is required for certain roles, it is important to ensure English language requirements don't arbitrarily create more barriers for people already dealing with the hurdles of limited local work experience, skills recognition and subconscious bias, among other barriers.

How it can be implemented

Currently, a minimum score of 7.0 on the IELTS is required in each of the four components (listening, reading, writing, and speaking) for many occupations. The approach should be more tailored and flexible. For example, the Nursing and Midwifery Council in the UK lowered the threshold for the writing component for skills recognition and professional registration of nurses, from 7.0 to 6.5, and saw an increase in labour productivity in the health sector. Further, overseas trained nurses and midwives can meet the required scores over two test sittings.³⁴

Newcomers should also be supported to develop their English proficiency where needed. The Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) is a government-funded initiative to provide English language tuition to eligible newcomers. Future AMEP reforms should include provision for on-site language learning in the workplace to enable targeted training during work hours. Flexible options should be provided for women to allow for caring responsibilities.

What the Australian government should do	What employers should do	What NGOs should do
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Subsidise IELTS exams for humanitarian entrants + Continually improve the Adult Migrant English Program, including through on-site, subsidised language learning in the workplace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Implement fit for purpose language assessments that meet the requirements of the role + Implement inclusive recruitment practices + Provide on-the-job English learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Support newcomers with English training, conversational English, and employment support + Support employers to reassess English requirements

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