



Policy brief

# Building pathways to belonging:

## Advancing integration for newcomers in Australia

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# Key messages

- **Successful settlement and integration is a goal shared by newcomers, the communities they settle in and government at all levels and is critical to maintaining public support for immigration.** Yet, in recent years, much of the discussion of Australia's migration policy has focused on the number of migrants and refugees granted permission to enter the country each year. There has been limited attention to how we create pathways for newcomers to become more fully integrated into their new homeland.
  - **The economic, social, and civic dimensions of integration need to be addressed holistically.** However, in Australia, government policy and public discourse on integration tends to focus on a narrow band of markers — employment, education, English proficiency and health — and often ignores the important dimensions of newcomers' social connections, cultural and civic participation.
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- Australia's approach to integration also matters because the way that countries treat newcomers underpins social cohesion and inclusion**
- Successful integration matters because it helps newcomers to realise their full potential, makes it easier for them to access services, and reduces educational, health and economic inequalities. Australia's approach to integration also matters because the way that countries treat newcomers underpins social cohesion and inclusion. **Inclusive policies provide the foundation for positive attitudes and interactions between newcomers and the broader community, and nurture an overall sense of belonging, wellbeing and trust.**<sup>1</sup>
  - Compared with similar migrant-receiving countries, Australia is going backward in terms of policies to support the integration of migrants and refugees. Under an international benchmark, in 2019, Australia ranked relatively high — six out of 56 participating countries — for its integration policies.<sup>2</sup> However, compared to 2014, migrants in Australia faced greater insecurity and more barriers to basic rights and opportunities. Notably, in 2019, Australia ranked in the bottom 10 countries on indicators relating to permanent residency.
  - Integration matters to all newcomers, whether they come to Australia as part of a skilled, family or humanitarian pathway. Government policies and support should be targeted to newcomer's needs and responsive to gender, age and place.



- Social connections can provide a foundation for two-way intercultural dialogue to address community concerns, allay prejudice and discrimination and build understanding around shared aspirations.
- It follows that integration and settlement policy should include dedicated **community engagement initiatives that foster social bridges and exchange between newcomers and the broader community.** They can also nurture opportunities for newcomers to contribute to the fabric of a community through artistic and cultural expression.
- Newcomers to Australia continue to face a range of barriers in accessing universal services such as health, education, employment, housing and justice services. **Provision of culturally responsive training, such as SSI's Culture-Ready training, is vital to enhance the cultural capability of government agencies and service providers to meet the needs of newcomers.** It is also essential to strengthen the evidence base, including research and nationally consistent data, to inform policy development and drive improvements in the design and delivery of services.
- The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift to digital transformation of services that we all rely on. This has **exacerbated digital exclusion migrants and refugees**, creating a barrier to accessing reliable information, health and government services. The three phases of SSI's Foundations for Belonging research found that, among newly arrived refugees, difficulties in using technology is one of the most common barriers, alongside language difficulties, to accessing government services.<sup>3</sup> **This highlights the need to ensure that the digital transformation of government services is anchored by policy that promotes equitable access, including for newcomers.**
- In recent years, the number of temporary visa holders in Australia has increased exponentially without any real policy rationale. For Australia to remain a preferred destination for temporary migrants, there needs to be clear, fair and transparent pathways to permanent residency. **Having secure residency status is vital in supporting integration of newcomers.** The lack of a clear pathway or timeframe to permanent residency can inhibit temporary residents from putting down roots and developing a sense of belonging to Australia as they feel permanently 'temporary'.<sup>4</sup>

# Recommendations

1. The Australian government should ensure that migration policy settings take account of the potential impacts on the future integration of newcomers by providing clear, fair and transparent pathways to permanent residency.

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2. The Australian and state/territory governments should value and resource community engagement initiatives, such as SSI's Welcome Project, that strengthen social, cultural and civic participation as a critical part of successful integration of newcomers.

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3. The Australian government should establish a Federal Office for Multicultural Australia, ideally elevated within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, to drive 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 including services that are outsourced. This should include development of consistent and accurate measures of cultural diversity.

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4. The Australian and state/territory governments should work with multicultural organisations and community leaders to address barriers experienced by newcomers in accessing universal services. This should include investment in provision of culturally responsive training for government agencies and service providers to enhance their capability to meet the needs of newcomers.

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5. The Australian and state/territory governments should improve data collection and research on newcomer access to universal services to drive improvements in planning and design of universal services. This should include disaggregated data for different cohorts, for example by gender, to support targeted interventions, where required.

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6. The Australian and state/territory governments should ensure that the digital transformation of government services is anchored in policy that promotes equitable access by newcomers. This should include building digital gateways (i.e. websites, apps) that are more intuitive — with less need for digital skills — and that minimise language barriers (i.e. in-language, plain English). Increased investment is also needed in initiatives that support newcomers to build skills and confidence in using digital technology.

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## About SSI

SSI is a national not-for-profit organisation providing life-changing human and social services.

With community at the heart of everything we do, our purpose is to help create a more inclusive society in which everyone can meaningfully contribute to social, cultural, civic and economic life. SSI was founded in Sydney in 2000 with the aim of helping newly arrived refugees settle in Australia.

In 2018, SSI merged with Queensland-based Access Community Services, and in 2019 opened in Victoria providing an extensive footprint across the eastern coast of Australia. Our network of 40 offices is based in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, regional NSW and Queensland and our operations extend internationally. Today, SSI supports close to 50,000 clients across about 50 programs and initiatives.

This policy paper is informed by SSI's broad experience in delivering services to migrants and refugees. In our day-to-day work, our staff — many of whom are migrants and refugees themselves — witness the strength and challenges experienced by newcomers as they seek to establish a new chapter of their lives and the foundations for belonging in Australia.

# Why focus on integration of newcomers?

The Australian government has established a series of significant reviews in the area of migration policy and has signalled its intention to undertake fundamental reforms to the migration system. SSI welcomes the government's willingness to examine overarching issues relating to migration and the direction of these reforms. There is now a key opportunity to go back to basic principles and reset the way that Australia approaches migration and integration. We have developed this paper as a contribution to policy development across government, sector stakeholders and migrant and refugee communities.

Successful settlement and integration is a goal shared by newcomers, the communities they settle in, and government at all levels, and is critical to ensuring public support for immigration. Yet, in recent years, much of the discussion on Australia's migration policy has focused on the number of migrants and refugees granted permission to enter the country each year. There has been limited attention to how we create pathways to integration for newcomers — whether they come to Australia for skilled, family or humanitarian reasons — to maximise the dividend of migration to Australia.

Under the International Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), in 2019, Australia ranked six out of 56 participating countries for its policies to integrate migrants. However, Australia is one of the few countries to significantly backslide on its commitments to integration. Compared to 2014, in 2019, migrants in Australia faced greater insecurity and more barriers to basic rights and equal opportunities. Notably, in 2019, Australia ranked in the bottom 10 countries on indicators relating to permanent residency. Australia also went backwards on measures of labour market and economic integration.<sup>5</sup>

Successful integration matters because it helps newcomers to realise their full potential, makes it easier for them to access services and reduces educational, health and economic inequalities.<sup>6</sup> A country's approach to integration also shapes how newcomers feel about their new country — integration policies are one of the strongest factors shaping migrants' sense of belonging and civic participation.<sup>7</sup>

Australia's approach to integration also matters because the way that countries treat newcomers underpins social cohesion and inclusion. Inclusive policies create a 'virtuous circle' of integration that promotes openness and interaction. Newcomers and the public are more likely to interact with and think of each other as equals in countries where inclusive policies treat immigrants as equals

and invest in integration as an opportunity for society. Inclusive policies set the tone for positive attitudes and interactions between newcomers and the broader community, and nurture an overall sense of belonging, wellbeing and trust. Conversely, restrictive policies create a ‘vicious circle’ of exclusion that reinforce fear and division within the community.<sup>8</sup>

Evidence indicates the importance of starting integration efforts early and sustaining momentum over the longer term.<sup>9</sup> It can take several years for newcomers, especially refugees, to adjust to a new context, with social, civic and economic participation likely to fluctuate during early years of settlement.<sup>10</sup> Focusing on integration over the longer term is key to yielding the long-term dividends of migration.

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## Overarching policy principles

- Settlement and integration require mutual adaptation and shared responsibility by everyone, including newcomers, receiving communities, and government at all levels.
- The economic, social, cultural and civic dimensions of migrant integration need to be addressed holistically.
- Government leaders and policymakers should nurture a positive social climate towards cultural diversity and multiculturalism in Australia. Debates about migration and multiculturalism should be conducted in a respectful way that seeks to deescalate, rather than inflame, cultural differences and nurtures a positive climate towards migrants and refugees.
- Providing accessible and responsive services to newcomers is critical to enable them to settle effectively into a new country, rebuild their lives and maximise their social, economic, civic and cultural contribution.
- Governments should ensure proactive engagement and consultation with diverse multicultural organisations and community leaders in the development of policies and initiatives that impact on settlement and integration of migrants and refugees.
- The ongoing digital transformation of government services should be anchored by policy that promotes equitable access by newcomers.



# The economic, social, cultural, and civic dimensions of integration need to be addressed holistically

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 adaption between newcomers and receiving communities.<sup>11</sup>

The Indicators of Integration Framework, is a widely cited and recognised resource, based on extensive consultations with communities, policy makers and researchers, developed by the UK Home Office. As set out in diagram 1, the Framework identifies 14 domains as the basis for understanding integration.<sup>12</sup>

The economic, social and civic dimensions of integration intersect and need to be addressed holistically. For example, social networks help to expand opportunities for newcomers in employment, education, English language learning, health and wellbeing.<sup>13</sup> Civic participation, such as volunteering or membership of clubs or other organisations, is also a key indicator of integration since it can offer a valuable forum for community and network building for newcomers and facilitates the development of broader social ties with the local population.<sup>14</sup>

However, in Australia, government policy and public discourse on integration tends

to focus on a narrow band of markers — employment, education, English proficiency, and health — and often ignores the important dimensions of newcomers' social connections, cultural and civic participation.<sup>15</sup>

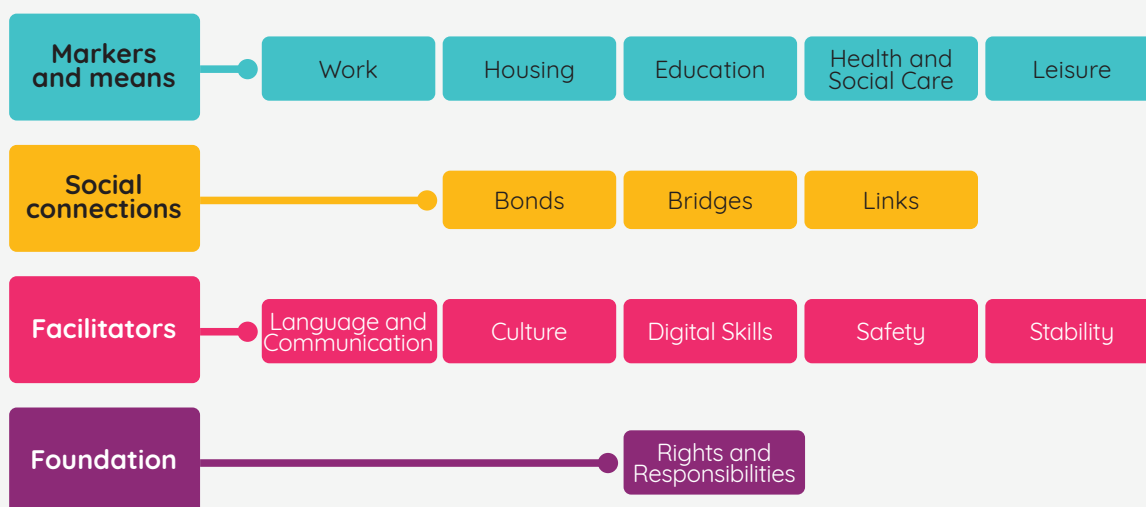
In recognition of this, SSI has invested in community engagement initiatives to foster the inclusion of newcomers in social, economic and community life. For example, SSI's Welcome Project, supports new arrivals from refugee backgrounds by connecting them with volunteer Welcome Ambassadors based on common interests. This initiative, which operates in Sydney and regional areas like Coffs Harbour, NSW, helps refugees to feel safe and welcome in their new home and build a sense of belonging and connection in a new, unfamiliar place.<sup>16</sup>

Over three years, SSI's Foundations For Belonging research has investigated social connections among newly arrived refugees. The study provides strong evidence for the value of community engagement initiatives to foster opportunities for informal meeting and exchange, both within and between communities. The most recent phase of research found that despite language barriers, refugees who had been resident for an average of four years, had established mixed friendship networks and



### Diagram 1: Indicators of Integration Framework

Source: Home Office (2019) Home Office Indicators of Integration Framework



a positive sense of welcome, belonging and trust in neighbours and their community.<sup>17</sup> Importantly, these findings were not evenly spread, with women more likely than men to report difficulties making friends in Australia and talking to their Australian neighbours and, consequently, had fewer mixed friendship networks.<sup>18</sup>

Foundations for Belonging has also found a high commitment by refugees to fulfil civic responsibilities in Australia, including through high rates of volunteering. The first phase of the research, conducted in 2019-2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, found that just under two-thirds of refugees reported volunteering in the month prior to the survey.<sup>19</sup>

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# Strong action to foster a positive social climate and address racism supports and maintains social cohesion

As a socially cohesive country made up largely of migrants, multiculturalism is part of Australia's internationally recognised 'brand'. It is a key point of advantage and difference, which helps attract newcomers, tourism and investment. For example, multiculturalism was a significant feature of Australia's successful bid for the upcoming Brisbane Olympic Games.

Conversely, experiences of racism have the potential to undermine integration of newcomers and social cohesion. The Mapping Social Cohesion survey, conducted annually by the Scanlon Foundation, has found wide support for multiculturalism. However, discrimination and prejudice towards people from different backgrounds

persist — the percentage of people reporting experiences of racial discrimination has risen from 9 per cent in 2007 to 16 per cent in 2022. The survey has found a 'hierarchy of preference' in the Australian community continues with higher levels of negative sentiment towards Muslims and people immigrating from non-European countries.<sup>20</sup>

This indicates a lingering distrust of diversity and difference and highlights the crucial importance of the work being led by the Australian Human Rights Commission to develop a national anti-racism strategy.

It is also crucial to ensure that the voices of migrants and refugees are heard and visible through, for example, more diverse representation in the media, the arts and



popular culture, politics and business leadership. For example, a recent report by the University of Canberra and SBS has found that the more audiences feel represented in the news, the more likely they are to trust the news. Multicultural audiences who feel represented in the news are more likely to feel a sense of belonging; and those who feel they belong, in turn, are more willing to participate and engage in Australian society.<sup>21</sup>

Integration and settlement frameworks should include targeted initiatives that foster social connections between newcomers and the broader community at the local level. Social connections can provide a foundation for two-way intercultural dialogue to address community concerns, allay prejudice and discrimination and build understanding around shared aspirations.<sup>22</sup>

For example, in Armidale, NSW, joint research by the University of New England and SSI found growing positive sentiment toward refugee settlement in the town, likely due to strong investment by SSI in community engagement initiatives.<sup>23</sup> SSI's approach to community engagement is underpinned by five key pillars: consulting with and harnessing the voice of newcomers; strong engagement with key stakeholders such as civic leaders and local government; fostering inclusion and belonging; encouraging involvement of volunteers; and fostering participation in arts and culture. As part of our community engagement initiatives, SSI facilitates cultural activities and events that provide newcomers with opportunities to contribute to the cultural fabric of the local community through artistic expression.<sup>24</sup>

Governments have a central role in nurturing a positive social climate towards cultural diversity and multiculturalism in Australia. This positive climate can stress common ground between communities of different backgrounds, and between city and country, to ensure that no segment of the population feels left behind.<sup>25</sup> Debates about migration and multiculturalism are important and should be conducted in a respectful way that seeks to deescalate, rather than inflame, cultural differences and nurture a positive climate towards migrants and refugees.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sydney, there was a widespread feeling that people living in 12 local government areas of Western Sydney — dubbed by the NSW Government as 'LGAs of Concern' — were targeted for stricter and more punitive policing measures than those living in wealthier and less culturally diverse parts of the city. Newcomer communities felt that they were not trusted to follow health directives and there was a widespread feeling of 'two cities' emerging. A similar situation arose in Melbourne, when a number of public housing towers, with a significant proportion of residents from newcomer backgrounds, were locked down by the authorities. The Victorian Ombudsman's report into the detention and treatment of these public housing residents during this hard lockdown found the detention was contrary to law and residents' human rights.<sup>26</sup> For refugees in particular, these punitive policing approaches can retrigger trauma experienced in their homelands where government authorities perpetrated persecution.<sup>27</sup>

# Strengthening access to universal services is vital to promote social inclusion

In the context of Australia's increasing diversity, equitable access to services and information is more important than ever to ensure all people can actively participate in their community and fully engage in a fair and inclusive society.

One of the most significant strategies for improving newcomers' long-term prospects is providing access to universal services and rights. However, newcomers to Australia continue to face a range of barriers in accessing universal services such as health, education, employment, housing, disability and justice services. These include cultural barriers, such as fear of engagement with authorities; structural barriers, such as lack of interpreter services; and service-related barriers, such as a workforce lacking the relevant cultural knowledge or language skills. Improving access to universal services, therefore, requires change at multiple levels including government policies, organisational policies and practice, and staff training and development.<sup>28</sup>

Currently, there is also limited research and data on service accessibility and the effectiveness of interventions for different cultural groups in Australia. This highlights the importance of building the evidence base to inform policy development and drive improvements in the design and delivery of services. This should include appropriate

standardised measures of cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity, while also paying attention to gender, age, location and other demographic measures known to influence intervention outcomes.

While many services seek to respond to diversity, they often need support with skill development to ensure that they are culturally responsive to the needs and preferences of diverse communities.<sup>29</sup> Settlement providers such as SSI have deep knowledge and experience in working with diverse communities and are well placed to provide culturally responsive training. For example, SSI's Culture-Ready training was developed and delivered to build the skills and cultural responsiveness of the NDIS workforce. During 2021, the program delivered 240 workshops across all states and territories. The evaluation found that workers reported increased understanding of issues to consider when supporting people with disability from diverse backgrounds. In the three-month follow up surveys, they reported changes to their practice, including providing access to translated documents, increased use of the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) and adapting other processes and policies.<sup>30</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift to digital transformation and services and highlighted the crucial importance of



digital access and literacy in all aspects of people's lives.<sup>31</sup> This has exacerbated digital exclusion for some groups, including migrants and refugees, creating a barrier to accessing reliable — and often critical — information, health and government services.<sup>32</sup> Among newly arrived refugees, the three phases of SSI's Foundations for Belonging research found that difficulties in using technology is one of the most common barriers to accessing government services, alongside language difficulties. The research revealed a gap in skills and confidence in using digital technology, particularly for refugee women and older age groups.

This highlights the need to ensure that the digital transformation of government services is anchored by policy that promotes equitable access by newcomers. Essential services, including digital and blended modes of service delivery, should be culturally responsive to the needs of newcomers to minimise the twin challenges of language barriers and weaker digital skills. Government agencies and service providers should pay particular attention to building digital gateways (i.e. websites, apps) that are more intuitive — with less need for digital skills — and that also minimise language barriers (i.e. in-language, plain English).<sup>33</sup>

Governments should also invest in initiatives to strengthen the digital skills of newcomers. For example, SSI, along with local providers of settlement support and NSW public libraries, provided a comprehensive 10-week digital literacy course for mature-aged refugees over 35, based in Sydney and regional NSW. Those students who excelled in the program were supported to share their new digital skills

to help upskill others community members. Feedback from participants indicated that the course helped them to improve their digital literacy, access to digital content and participation in education and training.

Given the critical nature of universal services to all of us, it should be recognised that some people are unable to access digital services and other options are required. This is vital to ensure that information and services reach older people and more recently arrived migrants and refugees.

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# Having secure residency is critical to enable newcomers to develop a sense of belonging that is at the heart of integration

Australia's future migration system needs to find a better balance between permanent migration and temporary mobility and pay greater attention to the needs of temporary residents in Australia. For Australia to remain a preferred destination for temporary migrants, there needs to be clear, fair and transparent pathways to permanent residency. Similar countries around the world are also experiencing skill shortages and competing for talent. Australia must rebuild its reputation as a country that is welcoming and inclusive of newcomers to position itself as a destination of choice for migrants, students and temporary workers.

In recent years, temporary migration in Australia has increased exponentially, and in an ad-hoc way, without any real policy rationale with the creation of multiple new visas along with regular changes to the conditions of existing visas. SSI supports the view of the Productivity Commission that the Australian government should take a stronger stewardship role in determining temporary migration policy and align it to Australia's long-term social, economic and environmental interests.<sup>34</sup>

Recent announcements by the Australian government indicate a shift in the direction

of policies relating to temporary migration. In early 2023, the government announced that it would provide a pathway to permanency for people who hold temporary protection visas.<sup>35</sup> In response to the Review of the Migration System (the 'Parkinson Review'), the government has also announced that by the end of 2023, all temporary skilled migrants will be able to apply for permanent residency.<sup>36</sup>

SSI welcomes these measures as an important starting point in addressing this issue. However, the government has not increased the number of places in the capped permanent migration program.<sup>37</sup>

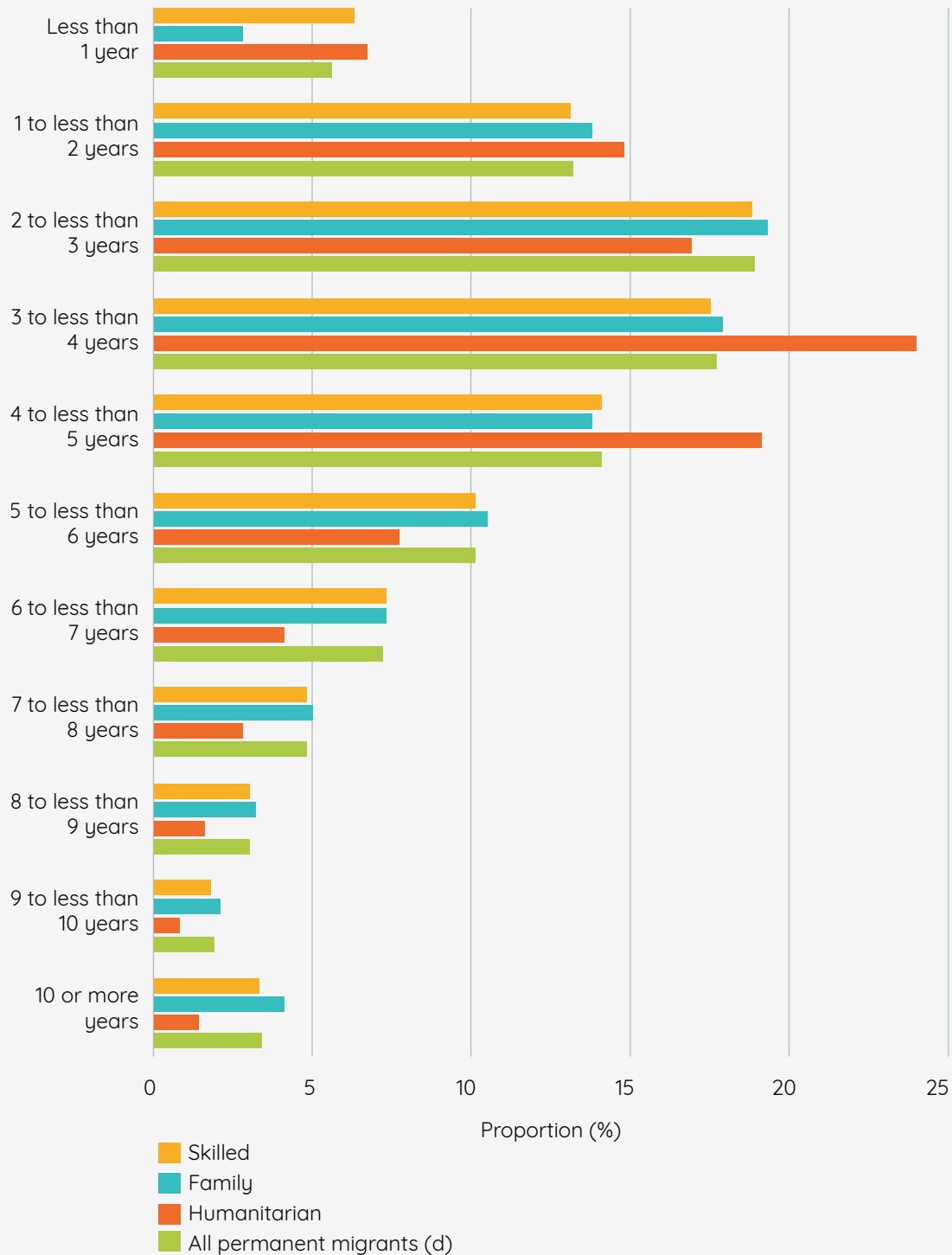
SSI would like to see Australia's future migration system rebalanced towards permanency and away from temporary visas.

In the past, and on arrival in Australia, a newcomer typically already had permanent residency, had more timely opportunity for family reunion and was often eligible for income and settlement support in times of need. Today, a typical newcomer is temporary and after many years, if all criteria are met, can become a permanent resident.

**Chart 1.**

**Time taken from first temporary visa to permanent visa**

Source: ABS (2023) Permanent Migrants in Australia.



In August 2021, there were more than 1.6 million people on temporary visas in Australia.<sup>38</sup> Often these temporary residents have been living in a state of limbo for many years, unable to really feel at home or have any sense of belonging. Recent analysis by the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that of the 1.3 million permanent migrants who arrived in Australia between January 2000 and August 2021 whose first visa was temporary, 30 per cent moved to a permanent visa after five or more years. This proportion was higher for migrants in the skilled and family streams (see chart 1).<sup>39</sup>

Yet, the effectiveness of integration efforts is influenced by experiences from the moment of arrival in a new country.<sup>40</sup> Having secure residency status is vital in supporting integration across multiple domains.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the precarious situation of temporary migrants who faced economic hardship for reasons outside their control. In Australia, temporary migrants were effectively abandoned during the pandemic and denied access to both JobKeeper and JobSeeker.<sup>41</sup> This had a devastating financial impact on temporary migrants and their families, with many forced to rely on assistance from charities and emergency relief.

Secure residency is critical in enabling newcomers to develop a sense of belonging in their newly adopted country.<sup>42</sup> The lack of a clear pathway or timeframe to permanent residency can inhibit temporary residents from developing a strong sense of belonging to Australia as they feel permanently 'temporary'.<sup>43</sup> This has potential negative impacts on long-term social cohesion in Australia.

In addition, people on temporary visas are not eligible to propose family members to settle in Australia. When family members are separated, they are deprived of important social and emotional support that is key to integration and belonging. Conversely, the presence of a supportive family enhances the capacity to negotiate services, access education, enter the labour force and establish strong social networks.<sup>44</sup>

The challenges experienced by people on temporary visas are also compounded for women experiencing domestic and family violence (DFV) and their children, due, in part, to migration-related controlling behaviours by perpetrators (an issue discussed in more depth in [Jumping Through Hoops: Barriers to Basic Rights and Opportunities for Newcomers to Australia](#)).





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We stand for a world in which everyone  
has access to equal opportunity.  
We are driven by equality, empathy,  
and celebration of every individual.  
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