Refugee Council of Australia

SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON MIGRATION

INQUIRY INTO THE VALUE OF SKILLED MIGRATION TO AUSTRALIA

23 December 2025

The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) is the national peak body for people from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds and the organisations and individuals who work with and support them. RCOA promotes the adoption of humane, lawful and constructive policies by governments and communities in Australia and internationally. RCOA consults regularly with its members, community leaders and people from refugee backgrounds, and this submission is informed by their views.

This submission focuses on the relationship between skilled and humanitarian migration, and the importance of seeing the alignment and overlaps when it comes to the value and potential of skilled migration (question (a) in the terms of reference). We also focus our input and recommendations on (c) the scope to more effectively target skills gaps and shortages in critical sectors to improve services that benefit Australian communities.

1 The value of skilled, family and humanitarian migration

Refugees have been an asset to the growing diversity of the global and Australian workforce. Australia's experience over the past 75 years demonstrates that refugees offered protection go on to make substantial contributions to the nation, including addressing skills shortages, expanding consumer markets, and strengthening entrepreneurship and human capital. While the ongoing economic, social and cultural value of skilled migration to Australia is not a key focus of the Refugee Council and our constituents, the implications of how the Australian Government and the wider public understands skilled migration has important implications for refugees and humanitarian entrants, whose skills, experience and potential economic pathways are often overlooked.

Australia's migration streams serve different objectives, yet they share significant overlaps with regards to the economic, social and cultural value that newcomers bring, regardless of whether they are granted skilled, family or humanitarian visas. It is our view that the diverse perspectives, backgrounds and contributions that are engendered by maintaining robust and multiple migration pathways and programs needs to be emphasised as a strength of Australia's approach to migration, and that creating unhelpful dichotomies (whether intended or not) of "skilled" and "unskilled" should be actively challenged in the framing of Australia's Migration Program.

To illustrate, refugee populations include people with the characteristics, qualifications and expertise that fit within the objectives of the skilled program, although system barriers have traditionally prevented refugees from accessing skills-related migration pathways. For instance, many are prevented at the very first step of applying for a skilled visa when the online portal requests passport information to be able to move to the next step. The Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot (SRLAP) is a practical demonstration of both the talent within displaced populations as well as what is needed to overcome the barriers to skilled migration that refugees face (see Box 1).

But compelling evidence drawn from decades of experience shows that refugee and humanitarian entrants who find long-term safety in Australia also arrive with education, skills and work experience

Suite 4A6, 410 Elizabeth Street
Surry Hills NSW 2010 Australia
Phone: +61 (02) 9211-9333 • admin@refugeecouncil.org.au
Web: www.refugeecouncil.org.au • Twitter: @OzRefugeeCounc
Incorporated in ACT • ABN 87 956 673 083

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who support them • Founded 1981

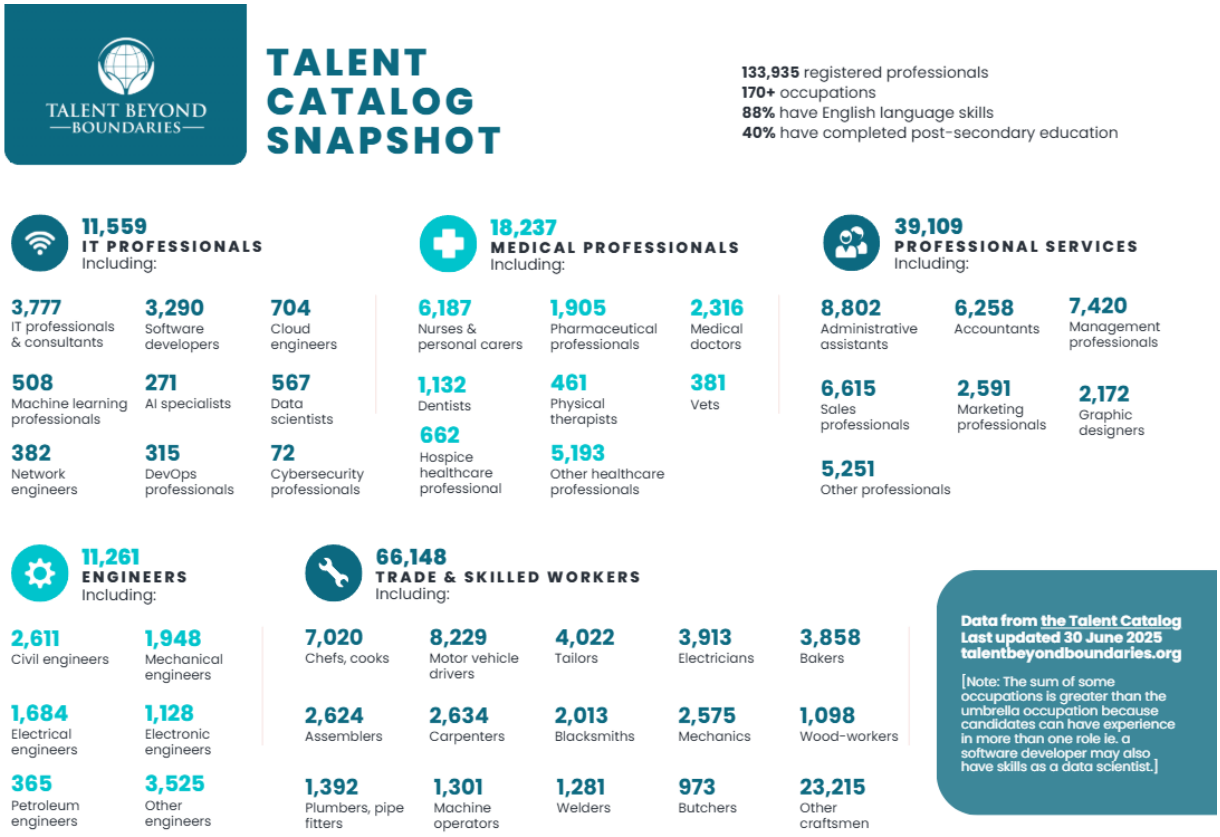
relevant to our labour market.[1] While they are not and should not be selected on the basis of their qualifications and skills - and many arrive with less English proficiency and more career disruption than migrants arriving on other visas that results in a slower integration into the labour market -- there is still an under-realised pool of human capital in Australia as a result of our long-standing refugee and humanitarian program.[2]

Box 1. Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot

The Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot (the pilot) gives businesses access to a skilled talent pool to fill workplace vacancies. The Pilot, which commenced on 1 July 2021, has been extended under existing arrangements until 30 June 2026.

Refugees are doctors, engineers, skilled trade workers, software developers, and more. Many have marketable skills but can face challenges meeting skilled visa requirements. The pilot removes barriers that refugees and displaced people face when trying to access employer-sponsored skilled migration pathways to Australia.

Through the pilot, Talent Beyond Boundaries can help businesses recruit the skilled workers they need by accessing thousands of skilled refugees registered on their Talent Catalog.



Sources:
Department of Home Affairs (2025). About the Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot. https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/employing-and-sponsoring-someone/labour-agreements/types-of-labour-agreements/skilled-refugee-labour-agreement-pilot
Talent Beyond Boundaries. (2025) Talent Catalog snapshot https://www.talentbeyondboundaries.org/talent-snapshot?

Refugees contribute to Australia's economic, social and cultural story in ways that are distinct to those that are selected through skilled migration, i.e., to those primarily selected because of their skill set,

[1] For case studies, see Billion Dollar Benefit. For detailed data on pre-arrival education, qualifications and employment experience of refugee and humanitarian entrants, see Building a New Life in Australia data.
[2] Guo &Tani (2025). Migrants, Refugees and Employer Discrimination, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/bjir.70016

English language proficiency, age and (potential) contributions to Australia's labour market and economy. This is because refugees often bring with them:

- **Diverse and niche skill sets and knowledge** – including of languages, expertise in traditional crafts, trades and agriculture, and businesses that are emergent in Australia but are vibrant in other parts of the world. An example includes teff, a nutritionally dense cereal crop suitable for drought-prone countries like Australia, and an industry that is being pioneered with the input of farmers and former refugees from the Horn of Africa who have brought this knowledge with them.[3]
- **Transnational connections** to countries that differ from those skilled migrants have traditionally been drawn from. These connections offer businesses in Australia the potential to better source and trade with diverse and growing markets. This can be illustrated through the example of the resettlement of refugees from Vietnam in the 1980s and the resultant trade relationships between Australia and Vietnam.[4] While trade between Australia and Vietnam was minimal in 1980, by 2024 it was valued at $28.8 billion;[5] and
- **Entrepreneurship and innovation** – refugee journeys are characterised by hardship and resilience in the face of adversity. Given the chance to build a long-term future in Australia, humanitarian entrants have been shown to have a higher propensity than both Australian-born and other migrants to start their own business, applying the determination, skills, hard-work and appetite for calculated risks that have seen families through incredibly difficult situations, to entrepreneurial endeavours.[6] There are countless examples of successful entrepreneurs and innovators – both local and global – whose lives have been shaped by their refugee journey.[7] The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that, in 2022-23, 16% of humanitarian entrants who have been in Australia for 10 years or more earned income from their own unincorporated businesses, compared to 13% for skilled migrants and 11% for the total Australian population.[8]

In considering the value of skilled migration to Australia, the Australian Government should keep in mind that diversity itself is a strength and should avoid describing the contributions of the skilled migration program as separate from migration more broadly and setting up false dichotomies and narratives.

Recommendation 1 Avoid false narratives that imply skilled/unskilled migration

In considering the value of skilled migration to Australia, the Australian Government should emphasise the contribution of all migrants and that the diversity of our Migration Program – whether humanitarian, family- or labour-focused – brings significant economic, social and cultural value to Australia.

2 How to more effectively target skills gaps and shortages in critical sectors

2.1 Skills and qualification recognition reform

On the question of "the scope to more effectively target skills gaps and shortages in critical sectors to improve services that benefit Australian communities" (Inquiry terms of reference (c)), RCOA joins the chorus of others who have pointed to the need for significant reform of skills and qualification recognition and industry accreditation processes in Australia.[9] RCOA has raised this issue in previous submissions,[10] particularly as we hear so often from refugee and humanitarian entrants who have skills that are needed in critical sectors – including in healthcare, construction and agriculture – but have been forced to give

[3] See: AgriFutures Australia (2023). An overview of the Australian teff industry: A feasibility report; The Australian Teff Company, https://teffaustraliacompany.com/

[4] Connors, E. (2017). Australia, Vietnam, the diaspora and generational change, *The Interpreter*, The Lowy Institute https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/australia-vietnam-diaspora-generational-change

[5] Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Vietnam country brief", https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/vietnam/vietnam-country-brief

[6] The Centre for Policy Development (2019) reports that "Despite the huge challenges they face, refugees are the most entrepreneurial migrants in Australia – and nearly twice as likely to be entrepreneurs as Australian taxpayers as a whole", see: https://cpd.org.au/work/seven-steps-to-success-refugee-entrepreneurs/ See also: *Refugee Entrepreneurship in Australia*, https://www.uts.edu.au/case-studies/refugee-entrepreneurship-australia

[7] For example, tech entrepreneur Balendran Thavarajah, business leader Frank Lowy, medical researcher Gustav Nossal, and entrepreneur Tan Le.

[8] Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Migration Settlement Outcomes," June 2025, https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/migrant-settlement-outcomes/latest-release

[9] Billion Dollar Benefit: Fix the skills and qualification recognition system: https://www.billiondollarbenefit.org.au/about/#fix-the-recognition-system

[10] RCOA Submission to the 'Migration, Pathway to Nation Building' Inquiry (2023); Submission to the 'Review of the Workforce Australia employment services system' (2023); RCOA Submission on the 'Employment White Paper' (2022).

up their careers or re-train because the cost, complexity and time taken to have overseas qualifications or skills recognised and accredited is simply not worth it.[11] The *Billion Dollar Benefit* report (2024) asserts that Australia could generate an extra $9 billion annually by better unlocking the skills potential of migrants and refugees already in the country.[12]

Two case studies of overseas-trained dentists can be found in Box 2 to illustrate this point; with dentistry being an identified skills gap area in a critical sector at the same time as there are a significant number of overseas-trained dentists living in Australia who cannot work in this field because the pathway to qualification recognition and/or industry accreditation is too narrow, costly, time-consuming and the success rate alarmingly low. Alternative pathways to accreditation which many say they would be willing to pursue as an alternative to the industry-governed accreditation process – such as supervised practice and bridging programs – are simply not available. The same frustrations are felt to varying degrees in other sectors, professions and industries, and call for system-level intervention.

Box 2. Overseas-trained dentists and the case for accreditation and skill recognition reform

'Carmen'

Carmen arrived on a permanent (Refugee) visa in 2018. Carmen obtained her general dentistry qualification from Damascus University, a top university in Syria, and worked professionally as a dentist in Saudi Arabia for over 20 years.

In order to practice in Australia, Carmen is required to pass written and practical dentistry exams administered by the Australian Dental Council (ADC) and an occupational English test. Carmen enrolled in a (pilot) career pathways program shortly after arriving in Australia and was supported to prepare for the accreditation process for one year. In this time, she studied for and passed the written exam. Since then, Carmen has sat the two-day practical exam on three occasions without success. As accreditation exams are expensive (~$10,000 per try), infrequent and success rates low, Carmen is not sure how to proceed and is frustrated after four years.

Despite extensive overseas work experience, qualifications, professional-level English and a strong motivation and willingness to work in a recognised skills shortage area, Carmen does not know if she will be able to work as a dentist in Australia. Carmen does not understand why peers who studied and worked alongside her in Syria and Saudi Arabia and then moved to Germany, Austria or France are all working as dentists within a year of arrival. Carmen is currently working in a hardware store and is struggling to save enough money to re-engage with the accreditation process as well as support her family.

'Mohammed'

Mohammed is a dental specialist who settled in Australia ten years ago. Prior to arrival, Mohammed qualified in general dentistry in Syria and attained four post-graduate certificates with top marks from the University of Paris. Mohammed has attempted the practical dental examination in Australia on four occasions without success. He first passed the written examination in 2015 but has had to re-sit this after it expired.

Mohammed has explored alternative pathways to accreditation and utilising his skills. He applied for provisional accreditation through the 'Limited Registration in an Area of Need' initiative, successfully applying for a job as a dentist in a regional town under the supervision of a dental practitioner who was desperate to attract someone with his skills. The request was refused when it became known that Mohammed was scheduled to re-sit his practical exam with ADC (which he subsequently failed). Mohammed volunteered in the Northern Territory with the Closing the Gap initiative, happy to use his dental skills to improve access to dental care. Neither of these attempts brought him closer to accreditation, although Mohammed is happy to work in a regional area or for a community program if it means he can be accredited to practice.

Mohammed feels like he has lost a decade of his life trying to navigate accreditation processes to practice as a general dentist in Australia. He said: 'Even if I got accreditation, I wouldn't be able to work as a specialist because I would not feel confident to do so. I have missed out on ten years of conferences; of maintaining my skill level. I have gone backwards.'

Mohammed is currently working for Woolworths.

Source: RCOA (2023). Industry accreditation as a barrier to employment: A case study - Dentistry

[11] Cheng, Wang and Taksa (2019), in analysing the Building a New Life in Australia (BNLA) data, found that: "humanitarian migrants who completed secondary and tertiary education prior to immigration are less likely to be employed. Those who had pre-immigration job experience are more likely to participate in the labour force, but pre-immigration job experience has no significant effect on getting a job. The reason may be that highly educated refugees were unable to fully utilise their overseas qualifications in the Australian labour market (Bloch 2006; Hugo 2011), and that overseas educational and professional attainments cannot transfer over to a more comprehensive measure of a migrant's human capital (Borjas 2014)." (p.712-713). Cheng, Z., Wang, B.Z., & Taksa, L. (2019). Labour Force Participation and Employment of Humanitarian Migrants: Evidence from the Building a New Life in Australia Longitudinal Data, *Journal of Business Ethics (2021)* 168: 697–720.

[12] SSI, Billion Dollar Benefit, 2024, https://www.ssi.org.au/causes-and-campaigns/billion-dollar-benefit/

Recommendation 2 Progress recommendations outlined in the Billion Dollar Benefit (2024) report regarding skills and qualification recognition for refugees and migrants in Australia

The Australian Government should significantly reform the skills and qualifications recognition system, including:

1. *Establish a national skills recognition oversight body;*
2. *Harmonise recognition processes;*
3. *Restore assessment subsidies for overseas trained professionals; and*
4. *Set up a national online portal for all information on skills recognition processes.*

2.2 Bridging skills gaps and migrant and refugee workers in Australia

In addressing skills gaps and shortages in critical sectors, it is imperative that the Australian Government take into consideration how refugees and migrants already in the country can be better integrated into the labour market not only through skills and qualification recognition reform, but also targeted investment in bridging initiatives, career guidance and access to (re)training. For refugee and humanitarian entrants who are not granted visas based on their skills, interventions that are designed to bridge industry needs and the skills and aspirations of newcomers may need to take into consideration additional barriers – such as the inability for some humanitarian entrants to access documentation of overseas qualifications, academic transcripts and work experience in the context of pre-arrival displacement experiences.

There is substantial evidence of effective approaches to supporting refugee employment transitions and economic participation, built over time through services working across both employment and settlement pathways (see Box 3).[13] Social enterprises and specialist refugee employment services have demonstrated innovation and effectiveness in securing professional employment outcomes by bridging skills gaps, partnering with industries and translating refugee skills into labour-market-ready profiles. These programs facilitate meaningful employment and fill vital skills shortages across numerous sectors, including health, engineering, construction, manufacturing, IT, logistics, trades, retail, hospitality and social services.

Box 3. Models that work: CareerSeekers and CommUnity Construction

CareerSeekers and CommUnity Construction are examples of social enterprise models that have translated refugees' professional and trade skills into employment through partnerships with corporate employers. CareerSeekers connects refugees with paid internships in major Australian companies, with consistently high rates of transition into ongoing professional roles (93% of participants move into ongoing work). CommUnity Construction has trained and employed more than 90 refugees, with some participants progressing to establish their own construction businesses.

CareerSeekers and CommUnity Construction demonstrate how targeted, industry-linked pathways can deliver meaningful employment outcomes, address skill shortages and bring valuable overseas experience and perspectives to Australian workplaces.

Sources: CareerSeekers, *Impact Statement*, https://careerseekers.org.au/impact-statement; UNHCR, Refugee Council of Australia and Department of Home Affairs, *Consultations on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways Working Group: Final Report* https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/2024-WGR-Report_Final.pdf

The Australian Government-funded Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) pilot has achieved strong outcomes in supporting the social and economic integration of refugees and humanitarian entrants.[14] Delivered by social enterprises, the program provides tailored support including training, volunteering, paid placements, job search assistance, CV development and interview preparation. EPRI

[13] For example: Thrive Refugee Enterprise (https://www.thriverefugeeenterprise.org.au/); CareerSeekers (https://careerseekers.org.au/); Community Corporate (https://communitycorporate.com.au/); SSI Ignite (https://www.ssi.org.au/our-services/employment/ignite-self-employment-support/); MercyCare Intensive Employment Support (https://www.mercycare.com.au/community-services/multicultural-services/intensive-employment-support)

[14] Assistant Minister for Citizenship, Customs and Multicultural Affairs, and Assistant Minister for International Education, "Supporting refugees to start a business or get a job sooner" March 2025, https://minister.homeaffairs.gov.au/JulianHill/Pages/supporting-refugees-to-start-business-or-get-job-20032025.aspx.

demonstrates how targeted initiatives can unlock the economic potential of refugees. In the first two years of the EPRI grant, one EPRI provider, Thrive Refugee Enterprise, provided small business information to over 4,000 refugees, delivered consultations to 920 participants and supported the creation of 215 small businesses.[15] In recognition of its success, EPRI funding has been extended to 2025–26. However, to maximise long-term benefits for participants and employers, programs like EPRI should be embedded as permanent features of Australia's workforce and migration support system.

RCOA strongly recommends greater investment in support for migrants and refugees already in Australia to be able to contribute to skills shortages in critical sectors through:

- Prioritising reform of skills recognition processes in critical sectors requiring attention.
- Bridging initiatives that incorporate paid work experience, qualifications and skills recognition, industry accreditation and mentorship (see: Engineering Pathway Industry Cadetship (EPIC) Program as an excellent model with funding through procurement).[16]
- Investment in career guidance and support for refugee and humanitarian entrants (see EPRI, social enterprises and refugee-led employment programs).
- Supervised practice and ensuring multiple pathways to industry accreditation; and
- Targeted train-to-hire initiatives.

To fully implement these initiatives and enhance skilled migration, the Australian Government should ensure all people, including refugees and people seeking asylum, have equitable access to programs and services. This includes applying equal opportunity principles, implementing inclusive recruitment practices and incorporating findings from the National Anti-Racism Framework to remove systemic barriers to participation in Australian workplaces.

Recommendation 3 Invest in targeted initiatives to bridge industry needs and refugee and migrant skills

The Australian Government should:

1. *develop targeted investment for refugee specialist providers to support refugees and people seeking asylum to navigate employment transitions;*
2. *invest in support programs to help refugees to set up businesses earlier on in their settlement journey;*
3. *trial tax incentives for businesses or introduce social impact clauses in major infrastructure procurement processes to incentivise the hiring of skilled refugees and migrants.*

Recommendation 4 Champion inclusive recruitment practices and implementation of the National Anti-Racism Framework

The Australian Government should ensure all people, including refugees and people seeking asylum, have equitable access to employment programs and services. This includes applying equal opportunity principles, promoting inclusive recruitment practices and incorporating findings from the National Anti-Racism Framework to remove systemic barriers to participation in Australian workplaces.

2.3 Investment in train-to-hire

In addition to creating bridges to meaningful work for those already in the country, RCOA considers there is significant opportunity for the Australian Government to attract skilled workers for critical sectors through initiatives such as train-to-hire (see Box 4). To this end, we strongly encourage the Australian Government to make the Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot (SRLAP) a permanent pathway to attract skilled and motivated workers. In addition, we can see the value of combining this labour pathway with train-to-hire initiatives, building on the Train-to-Hire Framework in the Asia Pacific Region that is currently being developed by IOM and UNHCR with the support of the Australian Government.[17]

Train-to-hire initiatives involving refugee populations offer the potential for multiple wins – for refugees in need of a safe future and access to orderly and dignified migration pathways, for countries in our region

[15] Ibid.
[16] https://bigbuild.vic.gov.au/jobs/training-programs/epic-program
[17] https://australia.iom.int/train-hire-framework-asia-pacific-region

struggling with hosting large refugee populations and where they may also benefit from investment in skills training for local workers, and for communities and businesses in Australia who want to find workers with the training and skills that meet their specific requirements and with a good return on investment (i.e., retention and stabilisation of workforces being key issues).

Box 4. Aged care: A train-to-hire model ready to address skills shortages in a critical sector

There are currently 12,000 refugees in Indonesia, most in a situation of protracted displacement where there is no safe way forward or back. Indonesia, as a non-signatory to the Refugee Convention, does not provide refugees with a status where they can legally work or access secondary or higher education. The chance of resettlement to a country like Australia, Canada or New Zealand is almost negligible for most refugees in Indonesia in the context of the chasm between resettlement needs and places available globally. As such, train-to-hire and refugee labour mobility initiatives offer a glimmer of hope of a safe and dignified future.

For many years, refugee-led initiatives in Indonesia have focused on education – with refugee learning centres teaching English and basic education from primary up to secondary levels. A growing number of refugees in Indonesia have attained internationally recognised qualifications (mostly GED, but some with US college certificates). There is now a significant refugee population in Indonesia with high levels of English proficiency and a strong desire to improve their skills, to contribute, and to find a safe and dignified pathway to a country where they can enjoy their rights. There is also a strong network of civil society, UN and NGOs willing to work with the Australian Government and businesses to open up complementary migration pathways for refugees stuck in Indonesia.

Several refugee learning centres have now collaborated with educational institutions to open access to accredited training. This includes in sectors such as IT and aged care. If aged care employers in Australia that are facing significant worker shortages were to collaborate with civil society initiatives in Indonesia to identify training needs specific to their workplace and to offer jobs to those who fulfil their training and hiring requirements, it is likely that a pool of skilled and highly motivated workers could be sourced from refugee communities in Indonesia.

The Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot has already demonstrated that employer-nominated visa pathways are possible for refugees to move to Australia based on their skills, to arrive with a job and support, and with extremely high staff retention[18] for employers who invest in displaced talent. What is needed now is a modest investment in training that meets employer needs, and for the Australian Government to ensure policy settings for an ongoing refugee labour mobility pathway meet business needs in terms of risk/benefit investment and cost-sharing.

Recommendation 5 Make the Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot an ongoing program and invest in train-to-hire models in critical sectors

The Australian Government should make the Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot an ongoing program from June 2026, incorporating lessons learned through the pilot to make this a world-leading complementary pathway for refugees. Building from the opportunity that the SRLAP provides in removing the barriers that refugees face in accessing skilled visas, targeted train-to-hire initiatives for refugees in the Asia Pacific should be developed in consultation with employers and in industries facing significant skills gaps.

[18] Talent Beyond Boundaries reports that, 93% of workers hired through refugee labour mobility pathways globally are still with their employer after 12 months. https://www.talentbeyondboundaries.org/blog/why-businesses-are-at-the-forefront-of-refugee-labour-mobility