



Joint Standing Committee on Migration
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

BY EMAIL: migration@aph.gov.au

27 December 2025

Dear Committee Secretary,

The Andrew & Renata Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law at UNSW Sydney (Kaldor Centre) is pleased to provide a submission to the inquiry into the value of skilled migration to Australia. The Kaldor Centre is the world's leading research centre dedicated to the study of international refugee law. Founded in October 2013, the Kaldor Centre undertakes rigorous research on the most pressing displacement issues in Australia, the Asia-Pacific region and around the world, and contributes to public policy by promoting legal, sustainable and humane solutions to forced migration.

This submission is based on the results of an Australian Research Council-funded project that has been exploring how the Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot (SRLAP) can play a role in addressing skills shortages in regional Australia.

Recommendations

1. The Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot has demonstrated its effectiveness as an initiative addressing skills shortages and providing a safe and dignified pathway for refugees to migrate based on their skills. We recommend that a **refugee labour pathway be made a permanent feature within Australia's skilled migration program**. A sustainable funding model should be considered within this pathway so that an intermediary body can effectively connect and support skilled refugees and employers to navigate migration processes, from recruitment through to settlement.
2. **Investment in Hire-Train-Move or Train-to-Hire models in critical sectors** should be further developed and explored, both as a valuable complementary pathway for refugees and as a way of helping Australian employers to address skilled labour shortages.
3. Greater investment should be made in **settlement support that is accessible to skilled refugee and migrant workers and their families**, particularly in rural and regional areas.
4. Consideration should be given to **reducing the comparatively higher costs that small- and medium-sized enterprises face when hiring workers with skills in demand**, particularly those enterprises in rural and regional areas.

The reasons for these recommendations are set out in the following submission. Please do not hesitate to contact us if we can be of further assistance.

Yours sincerely,

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Senior Research Associate

Dr Claire Higgins
Senior Research Fellow

UNSW Kaldor Centre submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration's Inquiry into the value of skilled migration to Australia

1. Background

Refugee labour mobility

Many of the world's refugees are of working age, highly skilled, and highly educated.¹ Labour mobility schemes can provide a way to connect these individuals with employers in another country (such as Australia), utilising skilled migration visa pathways, with concessions that ease administrative barriers for employers and refugee applicants alike. **Labour mobility can help employers to fill critical skills shortages and provide a safe pathway for refugees** to enter and obtain work in another country – and ideally bring their family with them, with a view to settling permanently.²

Labour mobility is a type of 'complementary pathway' to protection for displaced people, because it provides a way to safely cross international borders that is additional to national asylum procedures and refugee resettlement programs.³ The Australian government has committed to supporting ways to expand safe pathways for people living in situations of displacement, as part of a landmark international agreement known as the Global Compact on Refugees and as part of Australia's role as Chair of the Global Taskforce on Labour Mobility.⁴

The Australian government has piloted labour mobility schemes for refugees since 2018, in partnership with the organisation Talent Beyond Boundaries. The Australian government launched the current labour mobility scheme, the Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot (SRLAP), in mid-2021.⁵ Since then, 227 skilled workers plus their family members have been sponsored by an employer through the existing Employer Nomination Scheme (visa subclass 186).⁶ **SRLAP was extended as a pilot project to June 2026** with a cap of 500 places available. The SRLAP eases barriers that displaced workers face in accessing existing skilled visas because of their refugee displacement experience. This includes barriers related to documentation requirements (for example: where SRLAP candidates do not have a passport, they can access ImmiCards as an alternative travel document).⁷ Concessions that are included in SRLAP include: a lowered English language requirement, and the ability of prospective employers to conduct their own skills assessment.⁸ Over 900 occupations are eligible to be nominated through the SRLAP.

Beyond the benefits within Australia (outlined below), refugee labour mobility **offers value beyond our shores**. In the context of a lack of alternative safe migration pathways globally – including a chasm between resettlement needs and places – opening up skilled migration pathways for refugees to Australia helps to ease the pressure on countries that are hosting large numbers of refugees, and provides flow-on benefits to those refugees who remain in contexts with limited rights and

¹ See further: Talent Beyond Boundaries, *The Promise of Labour Mobility: how skills can be a passport out of displacement for refugees* (December 2019) 14, 27 <https://www.talentbeyondboundaries.org/publications>; Claire Higgins, Sally Baker, Stephanie Cousins, Ben Zhe Wang, Zhiming Cheng, Massimiliano Tani and Victoria Jack, 'Refugees as Skilled Migrants: Insights from Australia's 2018 Employer-Sponsored Refugee Migration Pilot' (2023) 170 *Social Indicators Research* 323; Peter Shergold, Kerrin Benson and Margaret Piper, *Investing in Refugees, Investing in Australia: The Findings of a Review into Integration, Employment and Settlement Outcomes for Refugees and Humanitarian Entrants in Australia* (February 2019) 60 <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/reports-and-pubs/files/review-integration-employment-settlement-outcomes-refugees-humanitarian-entrants.pdf>.

² See further: Kaldor Centre, *Factsheet: Complementary Refugee Pathways: Labour Mobility Schemes* (September 2024) <https://www.unsw.edu.au/content/dam/pdfs/law/kaldor/factsheet/labour-mobility.pdf>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See further: Kaldor Centre, *Factsheet: The Global Compacts on Refugees and Migration* (January 2019) https://www.unsw.edu.au/content/dam/pdfs/unsw-adobe-websites/kaldor-centre/2023-09-factsheet/2023-09-factsheet_Global-Compacts_Jan191.pdf; Global Taskforce on Refugee Labour Mobility (Web Page) <https://refugeelabourmobility.org/about>.

⁵ Department of Home Affairs (Cth), '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>.

⁶ Email from Jemma Bailey (Talent Beyond Boundaries) to Louise Olliff (Kaldor Centre), 11 December 2025.

⁷ Sally Baker, Stephanie Cousins, Claire Higgins and Massimiliano Tani, 'Refugees are a valuable but overlooked economic resource, and it is time to update our approach to migration' (2022) 55(2) *The Australian Economic Review* 273-280.

⁸ Talent Beyond Boundaries, 'Hiring Displaced Talent in Australia' <https://www.talentbeyondboundaries.org/australia>.

opportunities.⁹ For these reasons, refugee labour mobility programs like SRLAP are a valuable complementary pathway for refugees and ‘a critical form of international solidarity and responsibility-sharing among States’.¹⁰

Our research

Our four-year Australian Research Council Linkage project ([LP220100286](#)) aims to generate evidence on whether refugee employment can help to alleviate skill shortages in regional and rural Australia. The project investigates the socio-economic and migration policy settings that inform the ability of small and medium enterprises in regional Australia to fill skill shortages with highly qualified refugees. The project is a collaboration between researchers at UNSW’s Kaldor Centre and partner organisations [Talent Beyond Boundaries](#) and the [Regional Australia Institute](#).

This submission is based on initial findings from the project. This includes data collected through interviews and focus groups involving 32 employers, 44 local community stakeholders, 23 settlement service workers, and 26 employment service workers in 11 regional case study sites across Australia.¹¹ It also draws on findings from 20 in-depth interviews with SRLAP alumni who were nominated by an employer in a regional or rural area.

2. The effectiveness of skilled migration settings in meeting the current and future needs of the states and territories (ToR b)

While the Committee has asked how skilled migration can better meet current and future needs of states and territories, a supplementary question is how can skilled migration better meet the needs of communities and employers in regional and rural areas *within* states and territories?

Employers in regional and rural areas face distinct challenges when trying to fill skills shortages within existing migration settings. Key concerns our project documented relate to (1) complexity and confusion for regional employers about migration settings and how to navigate them, and (2) insufficient incentives and support to attract and retain skilled workers that are needed outside of capital cities.

Regarding **confusion about migration settings**, many employers and community stakeholders spoke about the complexity and inflexibility of migration settings to respond to the skills gaps that they were facing and their frustrations in trying to navigate this. For example, Designated Area Migration Agreements (DAMA) are meant to attract skilled workers to regional areas across Australia, but in Western Australia there are multiple and overlapping DAMAs, including one that covers the entire state including Perth, a city of over 2.3 million people, as well as various other state government incentive schemes.¹² As one stakeholder said: *‘[The] system is confusing. So, to hear about [SRLAP] is just amazing to me [...] Part of me is like, ‘Oh, another system!’ Because... I get businesses on the phone [and] there’s a lot of confusion between southwest WA DAMA [and the WA DAMA] and, you know, sometimes [...] it’s confusion more than options’*.¹³ When a community stakeholder in Burnie (Tas) was asked what the biggest challenges were for attracting workers that they desperately needed to meet major infrastructure projects, his response was simply: *‘Navigating the system’*.¹⁴

The SRLAP was designed to ease some of these administrative burdens, to make it easier for employers to identify candidates with the skills and attributes they need¹⁵, to navigate the international hiring process, to plan relocation, and to support the settlement and integration of a successful candidate and their family. The work of the intermediary organisation (Talent Beyond Boundaries) is

⁹ The UN Refugee Agency estimates that 2.5 million people need resettlement in 2026, with the international community setting a goal of 120,000 places (4.8% of need). Current predictions are that actual resettlement places will fall far short of this. See further: UNHCR, *Projected Global Resettlement Needs* (2025) 1 <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/un-refugee-agency-estimates-25-million-people-need-resettlement/>.

¹⁰ Kaldor Centre, *Principles for Australian Refugee Policy* (March 2022) 18 https://www.unsw.edu.au/content/dam/pdfs/unsw-adobe-websites/kaldor-centre/20023-09-kaldor-principles/2023-09-Kaldor_Centre_Principles_for_Australian_Refugee_Policy_Mar22.pdf.

¹¹ Case study sites: Warrnambool, VIC; Murray Bridge and Adelaide, SA; Newcastle, NSW; Canberra and surrounds, ACT; Launceston, Burnie and Hobart, TAS; Perth, Bunbury and Harvey, WA; Toowoomba and surrounds, QLD.

¹² Department of Training and Workforce Development (WA), ‘Build a Life in WA’, <https://www.jobsandskills.wa.gov.au/build-a-life>.

¹³ Conversation with interviewee (Participant Group 4) (Dr Louise Olliff, Bunbury (WA), 23 May 2025).

¹⁴ Focus group participant (Participant Group 3) (Assoc Prof Sally Baker, Burnie (TAS), 31 March 2025).

¹⁵ Talent Beyond Boundaries, ‘Connecting skilled refugees with jobs internationally’ <https://www.talentbeyondboundaries.org/talentcatalog>.

central to this, and many we interviewed who had either been sponsored or were a sponsor through the SRLAP spoke about the important role TBB played as a trusted intermediary in this process. While **the crucial role of trusted intermediaries in connecting and supporting both skilled refugees and employers was identified** as pivotal to successful outcomes, the capacity of TBB as a small global NGO that receives no government funding to implement this pilot was also acknowledged, suggesting the need to consider future sustainable resourcing of intermediary organisations to facilitate and scale refugee labour mobility as a complementary pathway.

Employers and community stakeholders also spoke about **insufficient incentives to attract and retain skilled workers and their families, particularly in regional and rural areas**. This related to the high costs of sponsorship (visa and legal fees), but also the significant additional costs to employers (and other stakeholders in communities) of sponsoring skilled workers who need much more than a job to get them started and, importantly, to stay and to thrive. For example, employers and other stakeholders spoke about needing to invest their own time and resources to support workers to secure somewhere to live in small and tight housing markets, to get to and from work and to attain a driver's licence where lack of public transportation provides few alternatives, and to help migrant workers and their families practically navigate settlement in the absence of migrant-serving services in many regional and rural areas. This applied to workers and their families sponsored through SRLAP as well as more generally through the skilled migration program.

Through interviews with SRLAP alumni, employers and other key stakeholders in rural and regional areas across Australia, a strong finding from our research was the call for **greater investment in settlement support for migrant workers and their families**. Employers alone are poorly equipped and/or positioned to be providing key settlement support to ensure the retention and/or wellbeing of refugee workers and their families, including those hired to work in critical sectors like healthcare, construction and agriculture. Much more needs to be done to support newcomers in areas where there are labour shortages. Our research highlighted the importance of investment in settlement support in regional areas that is accessible to skilled migrants and their families – such as the regional and/or skilled migrant settlement services funded by state governments in South Australia¹⁶ and Western Australia¹⁷ – and which can be embedded in migration settings to benefit both migrant families and the Australian communities in which they live and work.

3. The scope to more effectively target skills gaps and shortages in critical sectors to improve services that benefit Australian communities (ToR c)

The outcomes of SRLAP and our research has shown that **refugees can effectively fill skills shortages** in regional Australia, unlocking an untapped pool of talent for employers. For example, our research involved interviews with 20 SRLAP alumni who had been nominated by employers in regional towns and cities across Australia. These included: physiotherapists, civil and software engineers, skilled meatworkers, a dairy herd manager, IT analyst, fibrous plasterer, engineering draftsman, quality controller and accountant.

With the right settings, there is evidence that **refugee labour mobility schemes offer the potential for workforce stabilisation** in places and industries with high turnover and significant workforce gaps. In ours and other research, above-industry standard retention rates were reported by both employers and SRLAP alumni.¹⁸ This was attributed by research participants to how displaced workers perceive the opportunity of programs like SRLAP and their resultant loyalty to those who gave them and their families a chance of long-term safety. As one community worker from Perth said: *'Within our own workforce, people who have arrived as refugees... [t]here's such loyalty. They go over and above... I think to me, that's number one in terms of the benefits. So, effectively [businesses] save money, you know, lower staff turnover [...] and maybe I speak like that because I have personal experience. I was a refugee for nine years. When your life stops, you can't do anything. So, you have these highly skilled*

¹⁶ Australian Migrant Resource Centre, 'Regional Services' <https://amrc.org.au/what-we-do/regional-services/>.

¹⁷ Department of Training and Workforce Development (WA), 'Settlement Services' <https://migration.wa.gov.au/living-western-australia/settlement-services>.

¹⁸ Talent Beyond Boundaries reports a retention rate of 90% in the first 12 months from their global programs. See further: Talent Beyond Boundaries, *Annual Report 2024* (March 2025) 12 <https://www.talentbeyondboundaries.org/hiring-displaced-talent>. This is similar to retention rates for refugee-specific hiring programs – see further: Carmen Garcia, 'Why businesses are a refuge for asylum seekers and refugees' Diversity Council of Australia, 16 June 2022 <https://www.dca.org.au/news/blog/businesses-asylum-seekers-refugees>

people sitting in the refugee camp not doing anything. And on the other hand, you have this developed economy that's crying out for workers. It's like a no brainer to connect the two...'.¹⁹

With retention being a key issue and challenge for attracting skilled workers in critical sectors to regional areas, our research suggests that **the SRLAP is an effective initiative that should be made a permanent pathway within the skilled migration program**. There is also potential for SRLAP to more effectively target skills gaps and shortages in critical sectors by working with offshore train-to-hire initiatives targeting refugees, whereby employers facing skills gaps and shortages could be supported to identify training needs through a Hire-Train-Move model²⁰ and that builds from the Train-to-Hire Framework for the Asia-Pacific region that is currently being developed by IOM and UNHCR, with funding from the Australian Government.²¹

4. The scope for skilled migration settings to more effectively support Australian businesses, boost productivity and encourage innovation (ToR d)

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) play a significant role in Australia's economy, and particularly in regional and rural areas – where the majority of workers are employed by an SME.²² While skills gaps are significant for many businesses, **there are distinct barriers faced by small to medium-sized enterprises** in attracting or retaining skilled migrants.

The **risk/benefit calculation of hiring strategies for an SME differs** when compared with larger employers – including what strategies they pursue to address skills gaps. One business owner in regional Victoria working in housing construction estimated he would need 5-10 workers to meet forecast demand in the coming years. Yet, as an SME that had hired skilled migrants previously with good outcomes in terms of retention, he spoke about skilled migration settings being poorly suited to his business and risk calculations, and that he was still weighing up whether to pursue business growth. As he said: *'It's been a risk. Ultimately, it's about at best \$15,000, but probably \$20,000 per person from the time you interview them to when they land here, pay all the visas and so forth, and get them rolling forward. So, for some small businesses, that's too much. For some small businesses, the amount of paperwork and red tape to get to that approved status to take them in is too much.'*²³

When assessing the pros and cons of potentially using SRLAP as a hiring strategy, employers in our research noted that it is at a comparatively greater cost (and risk) for an SME to invest in international hiring even if there are potential medium- to long-term benefits and a boost to productivity for their business. In terms of recommendations, our research suggests that more **consideration needs to be given in migration settings as to how to reduce the relative costs to SME of hiring workers with skills in demand** in ways that incentivizes longer-term investment in these workers and their families and reduces risks for an SME to be able to grow and innovate. Were the costs for SME better taken into consideration in migration settings, the SRLAP was seen as an attractive option because of the high retention rates and potential for workforce stability described earlier. As one stakeholder in Hobart described of the benefits of a program like SRLAP: *'people from humanitarian backgrounds are more likely to stay longer, are more entrepreneurial, more resilient... you are going to get a really good employee who is a global citizen, who ... has incredible skills and will want to stay here, whereas perhaps skilled migrants from some other backgrounds are going to be more transient, and they move around a lot more.'*²⁴

While regional employers of all sizes could see the potential of hiring refugees with skills and aptitude for jobs that needed filling, a challenge that many employers spoke about was their need to invest considerable time in up-skilling or re-training workers for the Australian context or their specific business needs. In other words, it was very difficult in some industries or areas of work to identify someone either

¹⁹ Conversation with interviewee (Participant Group 7) (Dr Louise Olliff, Perth (WA), 21 May 2025).

²⁰ Talent Beyond Boundaries, 'Hire-Train-Move Programmes for Displaced Talent' (October 2024) <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5dc0262432cd095744bfb1bf2/t/67091ae410bbb51c053e15bf/1728649957450/Hire+-+Train+-+Move+-+Bellagio+Briefing.docx+%282%29.pdf>.

²¹ IOM, 'Train to Hire Framework in the Asia-Pacific Region' <https://australia.iom.int/train-hire-framework-asia-pacific-region>.

²² SGS Economics & Planning, *The backbone of regional and rural economies: Small business and community resilience Report for IAG (2021)* 7 <https://www.iag.com.au/content/dam/corporate-iag/iag-aus/au/en/documents/report/iag-report-backbone-of-regional-and-rural-economies-1121.pdf>.

²³ Conversation with interviewee (Participant Group 2) (Dr Louise Olliff, Warrnambool (VIC), 20 September 2024).

²⁴ Conversation with interviewee (Participant Group 3) (Assoc Prof Sally Baker, Hobart (TAS), 4 April 2025).

locally or internationally who could fill a skills gaps without investment in time and training. Many of the regional employers we spoke to felt that **the Employer Nomination Scheme (visa subclass 186) that the SRLAP utilises poorly recognises the additional investments** they had to make to ensure that new employees were ready to meet job requirements. This included overseas-qualified tradespeople and professionals having to complete lengthy and expensive registration or qualification recognition processes after arriving in Australia to be able to fulfil the duties that they were hired for. While the SRLAP includes some incentives to help ease these barriers, our research indicates that improvements are still needed; for example, where current migration settings for employer-nominated visas include a minimum salary (TISMIT) and—even with schemes like SRLAP that offer a 10% reduction in the income threshold when an employer hires a refugee or displaced person for a job with ANZSCO Skill Level 3-5²⁵—many of the employers we interviewed saw this minimum salary and the cost/benefit calculation for businesses in some industries as too high.

In recommending migration settings that *would* allow businesses to hire the workers they needed and invest in training them up or retaining them while they attained professional accreditation and licencing, business-owners spoke about needing targeted incentives, such as **apprenticeship and training-type schemes for employer-sponsored workers (hire-to-train) in critical sectors where skills demand cannot be met locally**. This was envisaged as a subsidy that could be paid to employers who commit to hiring and training a refugee or migrant worker at a full salary rate, with the view to the full salary being covered by the employer once the worker completes the required training or apprenticeship period and can fulfil the role that is commensurate with the higher salary. While there are examples of refugee Hire-Train-Move models from different countries that could be explored in Australia, and we note the Australian Government has invested in the development of a Train-to-Hire Framework in the Asia Pacific,²⁶ employers told our research team that **some sectors require training that cannot be completed offshore** and needs to be done on the job, using (for example) the machines or tools specific to the business or Australian context. From our research, examples of businesses where investment in extensive on-the-job training or post-arrival skills-recognition and licencing was seen as unavoidable included: the dairy industry, bakeries, and healthcare providers.

5. Recommendations

1. The Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot has demonstrated its effectiveness as an initiative addressing skills shortages and providing a safe and dignified pathway for refugees to migrate based on their skills. We recommend that a **refugee labour pathway be made a permanent feature within Australia's skilled migration program**. A sustainable funding model should be considered within this pathway so that an intermediary body can effectively connect and support skilled refugees and employers to navigate migration processes, from recruitment through to settlement.
2. **Investment in Hire-Train-Move or Train-to-Hire models in critical sectors** should be further developed and explored, both as a valuable complementary pathway for refugees and as a way of helping Australian employers to address skilled labour shortages.
3. Greater investment should be made in **settlement support that is accessible to skilled refugee and migrant workers and their families**, particularly in rural and regional areas.
4. Consideration should be given to **reducing the comparatively higher costs that small- and medium-sized enterprises face when hiring workers with skills in demand**, particularly those enterprises in rural and regional areas.

²⁵ Department of Home Affairs (n 5).

²⁶ IOM (n 21).