



Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration

Inquiry into the value of skilled migration to Australia
From: Department of Social Work, Monash University
Date: 5th December 2025

1. Introduction

We write as educators and researchers in social work at Monash University with the aim of contributing a profession-specific perspective to the value of skilled migration to Australia. Skilled migration is critical to our field, with 'Social Worker' (ANZSCO 272511) being listed on both the Medium and Long-Term Strategic Skills List (MLTSSL) and the Core Skills Occupation List (CSOL). These lists underpin multiple visa programs, including Skilled Independent (subclass 189), Skilled Nominated (subclass 190), Employer Nomination Scheme (subclass 186), Skills in Demand (subclass 482), Skilled Work Regional (subclass 491), and Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional (subclass 494). The accrediting authority for our course, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is concurrently the assessing authority for social workers seeking skilled migration in Australia.

We welcome the Committee's inquiry, which seeks to assess the economic, social and cultural value of skilled migration and program effectiveness, and provide a submission outlining the benefits, challenges, international models and recommendations from the perspective of the social work profession.

2. Benefits of Skilled Migration in Social Work

Australia's commitment to cultural and linguistic diversity also brings a social responsibility to ensure full access to essential services, including mental health, aged care, justice and family violence, for members of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. The need for the workforce to significantly improve capacity to provide culturally safe support to people from CALD communities was highlighted in a recent review of disability workforce and NDIS planning processes in regional, rural and remote regions of Australia. This underscores the critical role skilled migration plays in sustaining community and social welfare systems that serve Australia's multicultural population. It is our observation that international students and migrant social workers bring multilingual skills and intercultural knowledge, which are often critical to improving engagement with diverse communities. The demand for multilingual and multicultural practitioners is evident, with our industry partners providing social and welfare support to the CALD communities actively seeking and offering field education or employment opportunities to international students and graduates who possess multilingual language repertoires and cultural knowledges.

3. Challenges in Australia's Current Settings

An effective skilled migration program can help alleviate critical social work shortages, particularly in contexts where service providers face persistent recruitment challenges compounded by high staff turnover, which undermine workforce stability and the sector's capacity to support vulnerable communities³⁹. Additionally, our own analysis has identified multiple systemic issues within the current frameworks that impact both social work practice and skilled migration in Australia.

3.1 Growth in education providers and implications

Social work's inclusion on the MLTSSL and CSOL, essential for addressing workforce shortages, has coincided with the sustained growth in international student enrolments and education providers, heightening competition for quality placements. Educators and researchers have long noted pressures on supervision capacity and practice education quality, particularly for international students⁴⁰. These barriers to quality education can directly affect graduates' sense of practice readiness⁴¹ and should not be overlooked.

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3.2 Barriers encountered by international students during education

Recent research found that international students studying social work in Australia often encounter racism and discrimination from multiple sources, including peers and educators, across diverse contexts such as classrooms, placements, and workplace settings¹². Additional stressors, such as housing insecurity and financial pressures, further compound the challenges faced during their studies¹². Although many international students seek employment to ease financial pressures, their ability to take paid work is restricted by visa limits on working hours and further constrained by mandatory unpaid placements for their social work degree. They are also ineligible for the Commonwealth Prac Payment available to domestic students in social work¹³.

3.3 Barriers for transition to employment

Our research with international graduates' transition into practice as qualified social workers in Australia indicates visa-related time pressures and reduced employability due to their temporary visa status impeding timely entry to professional employment^{11,14}. This comprises the potential benefits of skilled migration via international students for the social work profession and the broader Australian population.

Additional barriers arise from the AASW's current approach to skills assessment. International graduates of AASW-accredited degrees are required to pay for and undergo additional skills assessment, despite having successfully completed their degrees and having automatic eligibility for AASW membership upon completion. The AASW's current English language policy accepts only one option – the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) Academic. This approach does not align with the *Guiding Principles and Standards for Skilled Migration Assessing Authorities*¹⁵, which allow five recognised tests under the *Migration (Evidence of Functional English Language Proficiency) Instrument 2025*¹⁶. The AASW policy also requires most international graduates from non-English-speaking backgrounds to sit an English language test, which differs from the practices of other Australian and international professional and regulatory bodies. The AASW's current approach fails to align with the legislative framework and creates unnecessary financial and procedural barriers, delaying skilled graduates from entering the Australian workforce as qualified social workers¹⁷.

3.4 Transparency and data gaps

Our research with international students and graduates notes significant data access gaps that hinder understanding of skilled migration's impact on workforce shortages. Despite growth in AASW-accredited programs, there is no public data on how many international graduates seek skills assessment annually. Further gaps in information provision include the number of applications from overseas-qualified social workers, their countries of qualification, assessment outcomes, and reasons for unsuccessful or adverse decisions. This lack of transparency limits evaluation of the skills assessment process and the effectiveness of the current skilled migration scheme.

4. International Models

Social workers are in high demand globally, and scholars in high migrant-receiving countries such as Canada, New Zealand, and the UK have examined how skilled migration processes interact with international social work mobility and skilled practitioners' engagement with professional practice¹⁸. For example, in Canada, where social work is also self-regulated, qualification assessments for non-Canadian degrees are usually conducted by the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW)¹⁹. Each province has its own registration body and requirements, creating bureaucracy that can delay migrant social workers' entry into practice²⁰.

Internationally, structured models have been developed to guide new graduates and overseas qualified social workers during their initial transition into practice in the host country. Examples include Canadian Nova Scotia's requirement for 2,500 hours of practice before new graduates attain Registered Social Worker status, supported by the Candidacy Mentorship Program²¹, and Ontario's planned entry-to-practice exam in 2027²². New Zealand, where social work is a registered profession, requires all graduates with New Zealand qualification to be provided 2000 hours of supervised practice before they can apply for full registration. Internationally qualified social workers have up to 12 months after

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receiving their first Practising Certificate to demonstrate they have met the competence level required to practise in New Zealand²³. In the UK, regulation is managed by four bodies: Social Work England, Social Care Wales, Northern Ireland Social Care Council, and the Scottish Social Services Council. The British Association of Social Workers provides national guidance and resources, including orientation programs, practice handbooks, and CPD frameworks to support internationally trained social workers in adapting to UK practice standards²⁴. In Ireland, individuals who hold international qualifications which fail to meet the standards of proficiency are required to complete a Compensation Measure, either through a Period of Adaptation, a period of supervised practice in Ireland, or an Aptitude Test before they can apply for registration as a social worker²⁵.

5. Recommendations

Drawing on evidence and international practice, we propose the following practical and implementable steps that align with the Joint Standing Committee on Migration's Inquiry into the value of skilled migration to Australia, its terms of reference, and Australia's current professional context. While these recommendations focus on social work, they may also be relevant to other human services professions:

Recommendation 1: Improve transparency in skills assessment data

In response to the identified challenge of data transparency (3.4), mandate the AASW to publish regular data on migrant skills assessments, including application volumes, processing times, outcomes, and countries of qualification. This will enable better evaluation of the effectiveness of the current skilled migration scheme.

Recommendation 2: Streamline the assessment process for international graduates

To mitigate the identified challenge in assessment processes (3.3), simplify the skills assessment for graduates of AASW-accredited programs to support timely workforce entry and contribution.

Recommendation 3: Pilot structured programs for skilled migrants to enhance employability and practice readiness

As Australia lacks national social work registration, adopting identical frameworks to other international models is not feasible. However, as a step toward addressing the identified challenges of rapid growth and educational barriers (3.1, 3.3), elements such as supervised transition and collaborative adaptation could be explored with governmental bodies, assessing authorities, and employers, especially in priority sectors where a need for a CALD workforce has been identified, such as disability, aged care, mental health, justice and family violence. For example, instigating a 12-month supervised transition program combining supervised practice and mentoring to improve employment outcomes and practice readiness for internationally qualified social workers.

Recommendation 4: Financial support for students completing mandatory placement

To help alleviate the identified financial challenges (3.2), it is recommended that international students enrolled in social work qualifying programs have access to the Commonwealth Prac Payment while completing the mandatory placement as part of their Bachelor's or Master's degree.

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute and would welcome participation in hearings or roundtables focused on workforce needs and professional adaptation pathways.

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