

Submission to Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Migration Inquiry into the value of skilled migration to Australia

Submitted by:

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Overview

This submission makes a compelling case for improving the skilled migration pathways for professional qualified Remedial Massage Therapists and Myotherapists nationwide (Professional Massage Therapists) while maintaining high standards of training and education.

Massage & Myotherapy Australia (the Association) is a not-for-profit organisation formed in 2003 and is the sector's leader and driving force towards evidenced-based remedial massage therapy and myotherapy. As the representative body for Professional Massage Therapists, the Association currently serves over 8,500 member therapists.

Massage & Myotherapy Australia thanks the Joint Standing Committee on Migration Inquiry into the value of skilled migration to Australia for the opportunity to provide feedback regarding skilled migration and the requirements of the professional massage sector.

Definitions

Professional Massage Therapists

Remedial Massage Therapist and Myotherapist (Professional Massage Therapist) means those massage practitioners who are members of an accredited association, are AQF5, AQF6 and above, adhere to the National Code of Conduct for Health Care Workers, and who have qualified for Approved Provider status with the individual Private Health Funds.

Professional Massage Therapy

Therapeutic massage therapy and remedial massage therapy and myotherapy can best be described as manual manipulation therapies involving the deep or shallow soft tissues of the body including muscles, tendons and ligaments.

Adjunct services and techniques that extend beyond hands-on direct physical contact and that combine the use of devices or supplementary techniques, such as aromatherapy, or TENS and myofascial dry needling (which are part of the myotherapy qualification), augment massage or soft tissue manipulation therapies, but they are not strictly massage.

Recent changes

During recent years, the Professional Massage Sector successfully canvassed against the inclusion of 'massage therapists' in the skilled migration or temporary visa programs.

The professional massage sector does not want or require a return to the previous system which had recognised any 'massage' qualification attained overseas, or online, and which incorrectly was deemed to be equivalent to the requirements and practice standards of the Australian massage profession.

Previous submissions included:

- 2021 Interim Report of the Inquiry into Australia's Skilled Migration Program
- 2022 Migration system for Australia's Future
- 2024 Draft Core Skills Occupations List (CSOL) consultation.

Consequently, professional qualified massage therapists are not included in Federal or any state skills shortages lists.

Importantly these changes have been very beneficial and have been supported and welcomed by the professional massage sector.

The changes to immigration and VETASSESS requirements were introduced to better align visa applicants with the education, competency, knowledge and skill requirements of Australia's professional massage sector and the wider health sector.

The Professional Massage Therapy sector is also grateful for the work of Operation Ingleenook – Australian Border Force in cooperation with other operations that have been instrumental in better protecting against exploitation and the sex trade of young people under the disguise of massage workers.

We also hope that these operations have supported the process of reducing the high rates of sexual harassment and abuse of Professional Massage Therapists by clients who assume that all massage therapists are sex workers.

However, since the passing of legislation to decriminalise sex work in several States, concerns have been raised through the public media about the limitations imposed on immigration and visa applications for low-skilled massage workers and migrants who have been in breach of their visa conditions, usually employed as sex workers, in quasi massage shops.

While Professional Massage Therapists are not concerned with matters relating to the decriminalisation of sex work, we do not want to see a return to the invidious, confusing and misleading situation that occurred as a result of inappropriate visa and immigration requirements.

Emerging challenges

However, there now appears to be some scope for improvement.

In recent times, like other health care services, members of Massage & Myotherapy Australia have reported difficulty in attracting and employing appropriately qualified Professional Massage Therapists, particularly in regional areas.

It is unlikely that the emerging shortages are the result of massage therapy being removed from the Skill Migration Occupation Lists because previously, migration and visa conditions enabled low skilled massage workers and sex workers to enter Australia; workers who could not be employed in Australia's Professional Massage Therapy sector as they did not meet the required education standards.

Early indications suggest it is more likely that other factors may be contributing to the emerging shortage difficulties including:

- a general decline in the number of new students enrolling and completing the qualifications locally
- hangover of low salary or incomes due to market saturation of low skilled workers
- insecure employment through contract or casual employment
- cost of relocation combined with the lack of permanency
- perceived remoteness and fear of isolation or loneliness
- separation from friends and family.

Additionally, sex work decriminalisation, combined with a lack of legislated recognition or protection of title for Professional Massage Therapists, continues to enable anyone to promote their services as massage, including sex workers.

Consequently, many Professional Massage Therapists leave the sector because of sexual harassment and the cultural association of sex work with massage.

Emerging needs

The professional massage sector requires Professional Massage Therapists to hold equivalent AQF7 Bachelor of Myotherapy/Bachelor of Health Sciences; QF6 Advanced Diploma of Myotherapy; or QF5 Diploma of Remedial Massage qualifications.

As detailed below, as an accurate reference, the following describes the predominant activities as listed in the most recent Occupation Standard Classification for Australia (OSCA)

taxonomy 441233 Remedial Massage Therapist, and 441232 Myotherapist. The OSCA is now the reference used by VETASSESS.

Tasks	Remedial Massage Therapist	Myotherapist
Primary	<p>Performs remedial massage therapy to relieve pain and stress and improve function resulting from acute musculoskeletal injury, repetitive strain, ageing and disability.</p> <p><i>Note: Treatments to address neural tension, improve fitness and strength are also provided by Remedial Massage Therapists who undertake additional units of competency training.</i></p>	<p>Performs remedial massage therapy to relieve pain and stress and improve function resulting from acute musculoskeletal injury, repetitive strain, ageing and disability, neural tension, improve fitness and strength.</p>
Skill Level and Specialisation	<p>Skill Level 2 Specialisation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional Chinese Medicine - Tui-Na Massage Therapist • Sports Massage Therapist • Pre and Post Partum Massage Therapist • Oncology and Palliative Massage Therapist • Trigger Point Therapy • Myofascial Release • Dry needling • Cupping 	<p>Skill Level 2 Specialisation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pain management therapist • Myofascial Release • Dry Needling • TENS - [transcutaneous (through the skin) electrical nerve stimulation] • Cupping
Main tasks	<p>Assess client conditions and needs, prepare treatment plans.</p> <p>Administer manual manipulation therapies, involving massage and stretching of the deep or shallow soft tissues of the body including muscles, tendons, fascia and ligaments.</p> <p>Administer treatments to promote relaxation, relieve muscle tension and pain, and improve circulation, promote recovery and relieve early onset muscle soreness, and facilitate rehabilitation.</p> <p>Utilise an integrated approach drawing on a variety of techniques and adjunct services such as stretching, myofascial release, trigger point therapy, TENS (electro therapy), acupressure, heat therapy and essential oils.</p> <p>Keep detailed patient records, involving treatments, response and referrals to Registered Health Practitioners. This includes employing an integrated approach of massage modalities, and adjunct services to address issues of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress • Relaxation • Tension • Headaches 	<p>Assess client conditions and needs, prepare treatment plans.</p> <p>Administer manual manipulation therapies, involving massage and stretching targeting the deep or shallow soft tissues of the body including muscles, tendons, fascia and ligaments.</p> <p>Administer treatments to promote relaxation, relieve muscle tension and pain, and improve circulation, promote recovery and relieve early onset muscle soreness, and facilitate rehabilitation.</p> <p>Utilise an integrated approach drawing on a variety of techniques and adjunct services such as stretching, myofascial release, trigger point therapy, TENS (electro therapy), acupressure, heat therapy and essential oils.</p> <p>Undertake assessment, planning and application of movement-based therapies.</p> <p>Keep detailed patient records, involving treatments, response and referrals to Registered Health Practitioners. This includes employing an integrated</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Muscular tears • Postural dysfunction • Neck dysfunction and pain • Thoracic dysfunction and pain • Lumbar dysfunction and pain • Sacroiliac dysfunction and pain • Shoulder dysfunction and pain • Hip dysfunction and pain • Tendonitis/Tendinopathy • Muscular strain • Reduced range of motion • Palliative conditions such as cancer 	<p>approach of massage modalities, and adjunct services to address issues of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress • Relaxation • Tension • Headaches • Muscular tears • Postural dysfunction • Neck dysfunction and pain • Thoracic dysfunction and pain • Lumbar dysfunction and pain • Sacroiliac dysfunction and pain • Shoulder dysfunction and pain • Hip dysfunction and pain • Tendonitis/Tendinopathy • Muscular strain • Reduced range of motion • Palliative conditions such as cancer • Neural tension • Reduced fitness • Reduced strength
Additional notes	<p>With postgraduate continuing professional education, Remedial Massage Therapists can undertake ongoing professional development including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>TENS</u> (transcutaneous (through the skin) electrical nerve stimulation) • <u>Dry needling</u> • <u>Assessment, planning and application of movement-based therapies.</u> 	

Pathways to better support

While numerous Private Registered Training Organisations, Tafe Colleges and Universities (RTOs) provide the appropriate qualifications in Australia, there now appears to be some scope for the promotion of a regulated Massage Therapy Study Visa that involves completing additional training with Professional Massage profession approved/accredited RTOs.

Regulated Study Visa

This could involve pathways that encourage those who hold appropriate qualifications and competencies similar to Australia’s requirements (such as those attained in countries that have similar education standards) and additional prerequisites to complete further education and training, or Recognition of Prior Learning in Australia.

This would enable eligibility for membership with an accredited association and legitimate employment as a Professional Massage Therapist in the healthcare sector.

The prerequisites include possessing core skills and knowledge such as English speaking and writing, communication, human anatomy, information technology use, numeracy, and digital literacy.

Additional training to meet Australia's needs would involve health record keeping to HPI-I requirements, understanding Australia's legislative work environment, responsibilities and conditions, and industry regulation, alongside demonstrated proficiency in Professional Massage Therapy.

Other essential capabilities include the ability to rapidly acquire skills necessary to work in Australia's health sector, such as teamwork, problem-solving, planning and organisation, self-management, initiative and enterprise, learning agility.

Addressing Regional Shortages

Incentives to address the difficulty in attracting qualified Professional Massage Therapists to regional areas could involve promoting additional incentives for Professional Massage Therapists to work in these areas of Australia. This might include financial incentives, relocation support, and support for the professional development and educational opportunities previously discussed.

Educational Reform

Attracting more students and addressing the decline in students pursuing accredited massage therapy qualifications is a concern. Initiatives aimed at promoting the value of massage therapy as a health profession in Australia, alongside clearer career pathways and better job security, could help attract more appropriately qualified therapists to Australia who are willing to undertake the additional training needed.

Reducing the Stigma Associated with Massage Therapy

Supporting more robust legislation and industry self-regulation to protect the title of 'Professional Massage Therapist', would help to reduce the stigma associated with the massage profession and further distance it from conflation with the sex work industry, and visa applications.

Conclusion

The proposed changes would assist to address emerging shortages in qualified Professional Massage Therapists, especially in regional areas, and ensure that Australia's Professional Massage Sector remains distinct from low-skilled and potentially exploitative work.

Additionally, the focus on attracting qualified migrants through regulated study visas and further training pathways will contribute to the sector's long-term sustainability, professionalism and integration within the wider health sector.