

NATIONAL OFFICE

Level 6, 50 Clarence Street
Sydney NSW 2000
GPO Box 56
Sydney NSW 2001

T. 02 8252 6700
E. info@consultaaustralia.com.au
W. www.consultaaustralia.com.au
ABN. 25 064 052 615



Driving business success for consulting firms in the built and natural environment

13 December 2022

Dr Martin Parkinson AC PSM; Dr Joanna Howe; Mr John Azarias
c/ Department of Home Affairs

By email to: Michelle.Pearce@homeaffairs.gov.au

Dear Eminent Persons,

RE: A Migration System for Australia's Future

Consult Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the comprehensive review of Australia's migration system and the Federal Government's commitment to a better system for now and the future. Our industry has been suffering from skills shortages before the global pandemic and the pressures have only intensified as a result. Access to local and global talent is constrained impacting the ability for industry to deliver on the record high pipeline of projects. There is work needed to address the barriers for migrant engineers already in Australia who are unable to access employment. Simultaneously, reforms are required to increase the immediate talent pool to enable the current and future delivery of design, advisory and engineering required in Australia.

For background, Consult Australia is the industry association representing consulting businesses in design, advisory and engineering, an industry comprised of over 58,600 businesses across Australia. This includes some of Australia's top 500 companies and many small businesses (97%). Our members provide solutions for individual consumers through to major companies in the private sector and across all tiers of government. Our industry directly employs over 285,000 people in architectural, engineering, and technical services and many more in advisory and business support. It is also a job creator for the Australian economy, the services we provide unlock many more jobs across the construction industry and the broader community.

Our recommendations for reforming Australia's migration system are detailed in our submission to the 2021 Joint Standing Committee on Migration's Inquiry into Australia's Skilled Migration Program (see [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)), our [advocacy that was reflected in the 2021 Commonwealth Senate Select Committee on Temporary Migration Report](#), our most recent thought leadership paper, [Thinking Smarter About Skills](#), and in [our contribution to the Jobs and Skills Summit White Paper](#).

Our recommendations for reform are recapped below:

- Government and industry collaboration to help talent from overseas secure a job in Australia (see case study 1 below).
- Amend thresholds including increase the age threshold for skilled migration applicants and lower the salary threshold for certain visa types.
- Streamline the process, improving industry support to assist businesses navigate the skilled migration program, and provide permanent pathways for employer sponsored visas and student visas (see case study 2 below).
- Increase the permanent migration intake, including a significant increase in the cap for skilled migration to 200,000 for the next two years at least, to replenish the skills lost during the pandemic (as recommended by ACCI).
- Reduce red tape by making exemptions for labour market testing and remove the need to pay the Skilling Australia Fund levy twice for the same applicant or a subsequent visa.

We look forward to the Federal Government enacting reforms to make a real difference to the skills issues we face in Australia.

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CASE STUDY 1 – BARRIERS FOR SKILLED MIGRANTS ACCESSING EMPLOYMENT

In 2021, [Infrastructure Australia](#) reported that 28% of migrant qualified civil engineers were unable to find work in the occupation with reasons including a lack of recognition of overseas skills and qualifications, employer reluctance to employ individuals without local experience, lack of understanding of Australian standards and English language barriers. A firsthand account has been provided to Consult Australia detailing the struggle:

'It all started two months after my arrival in Australia 2019, when I began my journey to find a job...I've applied to so many jobs since then and tried to make strategic connections with key people over LinkedIn. Unfortunately, the pandemic took over, and everything was uncertain...Most of the connections made were with organisations interested in asylum seekers and refugees, which doesn't help me as a skilled immigrant.'

In 2022 Consult Australia was able to help this person source permanent employment after just one meeting with one of our members who identified that this person's resume did not highlight the breadth of their experience and did not sell their significant skills applicable to the Australian market. This shows that to help skilled immigrants secure jobs, the role of industry experts is vital (rather than generic assistance on resume writing).

CASE STUDY 2 – THE CHALLENGES OF SPONSORING AND KEEPING A SKILLED MIGRANT

A regional small business member of Consult Australia employed a skilled migrant on a student visa but cannot secure this valuable team member as a permanent staff member unless the individual pays all costs associated with the application themselves. The small business is willing to pay the costs and has been doing its best to prepare the documentation that will assist the individual's application. The uncertainty of the whole process is taking a toll on the student, the small business and the regional town who have welcomed the student into their community. Consult Australia recommends:

- flexibility in the processing of a student visa to a permanent visa to allow businesses to assist
- a checklist for visa holders on what is needed to move from a student visa to a permanent visa
- improvement of the Business Industry and Regional Outreach (BIRO) initiative to support businesses in navigating Australia's skilled migration system, including information on:
 - what documents need to be prepared to streamline the application process
 - a concise and clear comparison of the various visa types and options available
 - what to expect throughout the process.

Our members experience with BIRO is that only limited information can be provided, and members are frequently advised to visit the Department of Home Affairs website which is difficult to navigate.

For small businesses in particular, the costs associated with engaging a migration agent or a legal practitioner to obtain general information about the skilled migration initiatives, pathways, and processes is not justifiable. Our members report costs can be up to \$6,000 or more for an initial conversation. This coupled with the visa costs and resources required to attend to the visa process is a lot to ask of a small business who is trying to obtain staff to meet pipeline demands.

Yours sincerely,

Teone Tobin

Senior Policy Advisor

teone@consultaaustralia.com.au