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Australia needs to open the door to the skills of its migrants

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Anyone who rides in a taxi or Uber in parts of Australia will not be surprised at some of the extraordinary people behind the wheel – doctors, engineers, teachers, scientists and other highly skilled migrants.

The one thing that many have in common is that since their arrival in Australia, they have been unable to navigate the complex and costly process designed to recognise overseas skills and allow them to find suitable work.

The federal government's recent review of the migration system shone a light on both the remarkable success of the migrant experience in Australia, and the mind-boggling complexity of the system itself.

Understandably, much of the focus of the review and the government's response has centred on attracting the skilled migrants that will contribute to the country's prosperity. But the review also highlights the untapped potential that exists in Australia's existing migrant population.

The Fairfield local government area in Sydney takes in the largest proportion of new arrivals in Australia. It has been at the epicentre of Australia's extraordinary migrant success, welcoming waves of migrants from countries including Vietnam, Cambodia, the former Yugoslavia, Syria, Iraq, Burma, South Sudan, Congo, Burundi, Afghanistan and, most recently, Ukraine.

Many of the refugees who have settled bring skills, qualifications and experience that can be readily transitioned to their new home. But there is a big problem in having skills assessed and recognised by both tertiary education providers and industry professional bodies.

The government's migrant review cites data from the Continuous Survey of Australia's Migrants between 2013 and 2019 showing that 23 per cent of skilled migrants were working below their skill level.

Overseas skills recognition is a multistage process that varies across state and territories. It entails extensive liaison across agencies, professional bodies, and higher education or training providers. It may involve formal assessment and bridging courses. It can take many months, if not years, and may cost thousands of dollars.

It's a process that would test the fortitude of the most capable local resident. It can be overwhelming and impenetrable for a refugee or recent migrant.

The university and VET sector, including TAFEs and private colleges, have a key role to play in helping to address some of these roadblocks – the process of RPL (recognition of prior learning) and credit transfer is not equipped to meet the needs of a dynamic labour market where skills shortages are chronic.

The growing availability of microcredentials in both the university and VET sector may help to provide a way to fill some of the gaps on the path to full qualifications.

Many professional bodies have costly, complex and protracted processes to recognise overseas skills and qualifications, effectively operating as a barrier to entry.

Faced with this complexity, it is not surprising that many migrants might never work in their field of expertise. This is a huge loss for Australia at a time when demand for skilled professionals is so great.

It would be ideal if universities, VET providers and industry could work together to help expedite processes and ensure that the system is not holding back people with the will and the capacity to make a bigger contribution.

The migration review recommends a combined Commonwealth, state and territory strategy to streamline skills recognition, particularly for those occupations that can deliver the greatest benefit to Australia.

Industry and unions can also play a valuable part in working to unravel some of the complexities involved in skills recognition and helping to unlock this potential.

The experience of engineers and doctors driving rideshare or delivering fast food is dispiriting at an individual level, but it is unfathomable at a national level at a time when the need for such talent has never been greater.

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