

Submission to the Economic Reform Roundtable

25 July 2025

Founded in 2001, the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) is Australia's largest independent aid and advocacy organisation for people seeking asylum and refugees, supporting and empowering people at the most critical junctures of their journey. Our services include legal, casework, housing, medical, education, employment and emergency relief. Based on what we witness through our service delivery, we advocate for change with refugees to ensure their human rights are upheld.

The ASRC welcomes the opportunity to submit a policy reform proposal to the Economic Reform Roundtable based on over 24 years working with people seeking asylum in the community. We support over 7000 people seeking asylum and through our employment, education and social enterprise programs we have a deep understanding of the workforce capacity and skills of the people we work with. However, of the total number of people who attend the ASRC, 63% have no right to work.

Unlocking Potential: Work Rights for Refugees and People Seeking Asylum

Australia's productivity could be boosted by allowing all people seeking asylum the right to work and study, unlocking the capacity of people who are already here living in our communities.

Australia would benefit from \$9 billion dollars each year in economic activity from more fully harnessing the skills of migrants currently living in Australia.¹

"Productivity growth... means **making the most of what we have - the skills and experience of our workforce**, new technologies, and our resources - so we can get more out of our economy."² *Australian Productivity Commission*

Currently, many people seeking asylum are prevented from contributing to the economy, as thousands are not allowed to work or study while awaiting the outcome of their protection visa application. Some have argued that this deters bad actors from gaming the system, but this could be achieved by fast processing and funded legal support so that unmeritorious claims are quickly rejected. Instead, processing can take many years.

During this period people remain on short term bridging visas, and without access to social support and healthcare they are often forced into destitution and reliance on charities. In a cost-of-living crisis, this is a waste of scarce charitable resources - especially when people with the skills Australia needs are willing to work but prevented by policy.

There is no clear data outlining the total number of people seeking asylum in the community without work rights (on all visa types), but it has been [estimated at up to 20%](#).

[As of May 2025](#), there are:

- 94,095 people in Australia who have applied for protection and are at various stages of appeal
- 27,406 who are awaiting the outcome of their applications with the Department of Home Affairs

¹ Billion Dollar Benefit: The economic impact of unlocking the skills potential of migrants in Australia, https://www.ssi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/DAE_SSI_Skills_Mismatch_Report_19062024_WEB.pdf

² PC opens consultation on reform areas for productivity inquiries, <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/productivity-pillars/consultation>

- 8,260³ people in the Fast Track cohort who have been waiting for their protection visa application outcomes for over a decade.

This means the total may be close to 26,000 people in the Australian community who are locked out of the labour market.

Senate Estimates recently revealed partial information about the number of people in the community on a Bridging Visa E without work rights. As of December 2024, **9,000 people were on a bridging visa E in the community without work rights⁴**, and a further **1,527 people who arrived by sea were on expired bridging visas⁵**, awaiting renewal and therefore unable to work.

This outlines the minimum number of people affected - however, given people seeking asylum are on a range of visas, it is estimated that the total number is much larger.

ASRC's experience in placing people seeking asylum in employment shows us that where people do have work rights, their skills and qualifications are closely matched to occupations in shortage in Australia's economy.

According to Jobs and Skills Australia, the industries experiencing the most acute shortages are⁶:

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| • Construction | • Professional, scientific and technical services |
| • Mining | • Manufacturing |
| • Healthcare and social assistance | • Administrative and support services |
| • Education and training | • Transport, postal and warehousing |
| • Electricity, gas, water and waste services | • Accommodation and food services |

In 2024-25 over 77% of people with work rights who accessed assistance through ASRC's employment program gained employment in one of the most in-need industries.

People applying for protection are also overwhelmingly of prime working age, with 70% of people who lodged a protection visa application in May 2025 aged between 25 - 54 years.⁷

Case Study

Sadik arrived in Australia from Iran in 2013 and applied for refugee protection. A qualified plumber with years of experience, he was eager to work and contribute. Instead, he spent years on a bridging visa without work rights, unable to earn an income or continue his trade. When he finally gained work rights, Sadik enrolled in a plumbing apprenticeship, determined to have his skills recognised. But soon after, his work rights were revoked and he was forced to withdraw.

Eventually, Sadik regained work rights, completed Recognition of Prior Learning, and secured his Australian plumbing registration. Today, he owns and operates a successful plumbing business - an example of the potential unlocked when barriers are removed.

³ UMA Legacy Caseload Report on Processing Status and Outcomes May 2025, <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-stats/files/unauthorised-maritime-arrivals-bve-31-may-2025.pdf>

⁴ Additional Estimates February 2025, QON AE25-377

⁵ Additional Estimates February 2025, QON AE25-380

⁶ Occupation Shortage Report - March 2025, <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/publications/occupation-shortage-report-march-2025>

⁷ Monthly Update: Onshore Protection (Subclass 866) Visa Processing - May 2025, <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-stats/files/monthly-update-onshore-protection-866-visa-processing-may-2025.pdf>

Recent research also shows that **44% of all migrants are underutilised**, as they are working between one and four skill levels below their level of qualification.⁸ **Closing this gap in underutilisation would add \$70 billion to Australia's GDP over ten years in net present value terms.** A roadmap to achieve this is outlined by a coalition of non-government organisations, employers and unions in their [Billion Dollar Benefit](#) proposal, which ASRC supports.

People seeking asylum and refugees are also largely excluded from education and training, despite the clear benefits for individuals, communities, and the economy.

Many lack study rights altogether. For those who can study, cost is prohibitive: university places require payment of full international fees, around four times domestic rates, making higher education effectively out of reach. They are also excluded from subsidised apprenticeships, training, and certification programs.

Of the people with study rights that ASRC supported to enrol in education courses in 2024-25, the top three industries were aging and disability, healthcare and early childhood education - all of which are experiencing skills shortages.⁹

Unlocking the potential of people seeking asylum is a practical, immediate solution to Australia's productivity challenge. Granting the right to work and study would allow thousands of skilled, motivated people to contribute in sectors facing acute shortages, while putting an end to forced reliance on charities.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

Provide all people seeking asylum with the right to work and study while they are waiting for the outcome of their protection, tribunal, or court application or a request for Ministerial Intervention. This would allow them to contribute to Australia's economic productivity while they are living in our community awaiting an outcome.

Recommendation 2:

Streamline Australia's skills and qualifications recognition system to establish a national skills recognition oversight body, harmonise recognition processes and set up a national online portal for all information on skills recognition.

Recommendation 3:

Provide secure, long-term funding to community organisations who work to unlock the potential of people seeking asylum and refugees by delivering employment and training pathways, and offering holistic support that enables individuals to overcome systemic barriers and thrive in our workforce.

Recommendation 4:

Invest in affordable, industry-aligned English language programs that support people seeking asylum and refugees to apply their skills and experience in the Australian workforce. Programs should include contextualised training for priority sectors and be delivered flexibly, in partnership with trusted community organisations, to maximise participation and employment outcomes.

Recommendation 5:

Include people seeking asylum and refugees in national workforce planning and migration reform efforts, and implement national data collection and reporting on their employment outcomes. Disaggregated data will enable evidence-based policy development, identify systemic barriers, and measure the impact of inclusion initiatives.

⁸ Billion Dollar Benefit: the economic impact of unlocking the skills potential of migrants in Australia, https://www.ssi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/DAE_SSI_Skills_Mismatch_Report_19062024_WEB.pdf

⁹ Occupation Shortage Report - March 2025, <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/publications/occupation-shortage-report-march-2025>