



26 July 2024

Department of Home Affairs
PO Box 6021, Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Scaling refugee labour mobility in regional Australia
Submission on the *Supporting strong and sustainable regions: Review of Regional Migration Settings Discussion Paper*

Dear Secretary,

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission in response to the *Supporting strong and sustainable regions: Review of Regional Migration Settings Discussion Paper - June 2024*.

Talent Beyond Boundaries (TBB) works with governments and employers on new solutions to open skilled migration pathways for refugees and displaced people in need of international protection. We are currently working with the Department of Home Affairs to facilitate the Australian government's Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot ('the Pilot'), which has been running in Australia since 2021. Based on the results of the Pilot to date, we believe there is significant potential for the Pilot to grow in rural and regional areas of Australia and for a permanent refugee labour mobility pathway to be designed to meet future workforce needs in rural and regional Australia.

This submission focuses on Question 1 in the *Discussion Paper*. It draws on the lessons of the employer-led Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot and sets out recommendations for the enabling conditions needed to scale refugee labour mobility so regional employers can tap into this formerly hidden source of talent which is going to waste in refugee communities around the world today.

Talent Beyond Boundaries and the Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot

TBB advocates for and facilitates new migration solutions, globally and in Australia, to open skilled migration pathways to refugees and displaced people. Breaking down the barriers that prevent refugees from accessing existing skilled migration pathways offers great potential to meet Australia's labour force needs, fill skills gaps and drive economic growth, whilst delivering a profound humanitarian benefit to refugees and displaced people. To date, TBB has worked with governments to open skilled pathways to refugee candidates in Australia, Canada, the UK, the US, Portugal, Italy, Belgium and Ireland, with more countries looking to embrace refugee labour mobility.

In Australia, TBB works with the Department of Home Affairs to implement the Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot¹ which enables Australian employers to recruit skilled refugees on employer-sponsored visa pathways. This Pilot was launched on 1 July 2021, for an initial two years to give Australian employers the opportunity to recruit from this talent pool. The Pilot was extended on 1 July 2023 for a further two years.

The Pilot aims to remove many of the barriers that refugees and displaced people face when trying to access employer-sponsored skilled migration pathways. It makes it easier for employers in Australia to hire from this often overlooked talent pool of skilled professionals and tradespeople who have been displaced from their homes and are living in host countries of first asylum.

The Pilot is showing strong results, proving there is demand from a diversity of employers to recruit skilled refugees (including employers in regional and rural Australia, as well as a base of highly competent skilled and experienced workers that are meeting the needs of Australian employers. As of August 2024²:

- 176 employers have made job offers to refugees through the Pilot, ranging from small to large employers in urban and regional locations.
- 102 primary applicants have arrived and started work in Australia (with family, this is 238 people in total).
- A further 137 job offers have been made and accepted and are in various stages of labour agreement and visa preparation or awaiting exit permits for individuals to travel to Australia.
- Over 35% of primary applicants are based in category 2 and category 3 definitions of regional centres.
- Job offers have been made across a diversity of sectors and roles, including those in skills shortage in regional Australia. Key industries and sectors with job offers include skilled trades, IT, health services, professional services and engineering.
- There is a 93% retention rate globally after one year for employees who have migrated through the Pilot.

Meeting needs in regional and rural Australia

As noted in the *Discussion Paper*, migration is a key mechanism to meeting the future workforce and community building needs of regional Australia. The Regional Australia Institute reports that nearly 80,000 jobs have been advertised online across regional Australia each month in 2024. This is around 40% more advertisements in the labour market now compared to the monthly average in 2019. TBB manages an online 'Talent Catalog' of skilled refugees. It is a unique datasource capturing the skills and work experience in refugee communities. An analysis of over 114,000 refugees and displaced people registered in the Talent Catalog shows that there is a significant cohort of highly skilled applicants with skills and experience in key areas of skill shortage in regional Australia, including

¹ Department of Home Affairs, <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/employing-and-sponsoring-someone/sponsoring-workers/nominating-a-position/labour-agreements/skilled-refugee-labour-agreement-program>

² For up to date results of the Pilot, see TBB's global dashboard: https://tbb.sopact.com/superset/dashboard/13/?permalink_key=Lyj71aLM7Kd

health professionals, skilled trades and engineers. See **Annex A** for detailed information on the demographics and skill areas of registrants in the Talent Catalog.

The Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot has demonstrated that refugee labour mobility works to deliver highly experienced and competent skilled workers to regional businesses, whilst also delivering profound humanitarian benefits. Data from the Pilot shows a diversity of regional employers, small and large, across various sectors have successfully recruited skilled refugees to meet their needs. For example:

- A meat processing employer has recruited five experienced butchers to their facility in regional Western Australia
- A furniture and upholstery business in Bathurst has recruited an upholsterer and sewing machinist to meet growing demand.
- Engineers and draftspeople have been recruited to employers in Esperance, Darwin, Lobethal and Kimberley
- Physiotherapy Assistants have been recruited in Maitland and Mildura

Recommendations

1. **That the government transition the Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot to a permanent employer-led skilled migration pathway for displaced talent to increase the attraction of skilled and talented workers, especially to regional Australia.**

Based on the success of the Pilot, TBB recommends that the Australian government establish a permanent employer-led skilled migration pathway which empowers employers to recruit displaced talent.

In order to scale this solution to its full potential, displaced workers need certainty of an established displaced talent pathway that addresses the barriers they face in accessing skilled pathways. Similarly, regional employers need the certainty of an established visa program to confidently rely on displaced workers as a talent source for future workforce planning. Transitioning the program from a Pilot to a permanent displaced talent pathway will send an important signal to employers. We expect this will result in an increase in job offers and employer confidence that this is a permanent program, not a time-bound Pilot, that employers can build into their recruitment planning.

Transitioning to a permanent displaced talent pathway is aligned with the government's commitment to scale complementary pathways. At the Global Refugee Forum (December 2023), the government submitted a pledge to "gradually increase community sponsored and other complementary places to 10,000 per year over time, additional to the core humanitarian intake." Committing to a permanent pathway and a best practice displaced talent program is vital to embedding and scaling refugee labour mobility to meet this goal.

The Pilot has provided valuable lessons as to the opportunities and challenges facing both displaced workers and the sponsor. These lessons could be applied in establishing a permanent visa program with settings that are inclusive, designed to attract diverse talent from within refugee and displaced communities, and incentivise regional employers. We direct the Department to our recent

Submission to the Humanitarian Program 2024 Discussion Paper with more detailed recommendations for the design of a permanent program.

2. That, in order to realise the full potential for refugee labour mobility in regional areas, the government consider specific mechanisms to support, streamline and incentivise employers in regional Australia to recruit through refugee labour mobility pathways

We recommend that the government consider the following:

- Ensure settings and incentives provided in regional visa streams are extended and accessible to regional employers recruiting through refugee labour mobility stream

As noted in the Discussion Paper, TBB recognises the importance of ensuring the various regional migration pathways work together to better meet skills needs in regional Australia. We recommend that, in order to ensure a streamlined and fair approach to regional migration and to avoid the confusion of different settings across various regional visa pathways, where possible, settings and incentives provided in regional visa streams are extended to the refugee labour mobility pathway. This would ensure that employers looking to recruit skilled refugees through the Pilot or a permanent refugee labour mobility stream, are not disadvantaged compared to other regional visa streams.

- Put in place cost and financing models to incentivise regional employers to recruit skilled refugees and ensure the displaced talent pathway is commercially viable, sustainable and scalable.

TBB's experience in implementing the Pilot is that a key challenge to scaling corporate recruitment is the cost of the program for employers. We see this as a particular challenge for employers in rural and regional towns. To date, TBB has tried to maintain an 'employer pays' approach and, in most cases, encouraged employers to cover the full cost of migration for the primary applicant and accompanying family. We are receiving feedback from some employers that cost is an obstacle to recruiting through in the Pilot, both in the case of single hires and particularly in the case of bulk or 'cohort' hires.

To provide the enabling conditions for regional employers to benefit from skilled refugee labour mobility and scale this as a solution in regional Australia, we recommend the Australian government work with TBB, employers, refugee alumni and other stakeholders to investigate cost structures and solutions to meet the needs of regional employers. TBB's recent *Submission to the Humanitarian Program 2024 Discussion Paper* explores this issue in more detail, including setting out the following options for consideration:

- Reduced visa fees.
- Waiving the Second Visa Application Charges for spouses and family members over 18 years of age.
- Establishing a government-supported no or low interest loans program for candidates to access loans to support the migration costs of accompanying family (flights and visa charges).

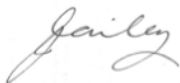
- Building in cost arrangements for targeted regions or sectors in regional areas that may face particular cost challenges and/or would strategically benefit from refugee labour mobility.

- **Provide government funding for a 'light touch' settlement package in regional areas**

Good settlement outcomes are key to retention of employees, which we know is a significant consideration for regional employers we work with. Under the current Pilot, employers are primarily responsible for supporting and funding settlement services for candidates. Given the importance of retaining workers in regional areas, we recommend that the design of a permanent refugee labour mobility pathway includes government support for a 'light touch' settlement package, or settlement safety net model, in regional areas. This could be a reduced version of the Humanitarian Support Program to ensure equity of access to support for migrants regardless of their visa status.

Our experience working with employers and candidates in the Australian Pilot, and in similar Pilots globally, is that refugees are highly successful, help build diverse workplaces and bring skills and experiences that are highly valued by employers. The Pilot has demonstrated there is demand from regional employers to recruit skilled refugees and evidenced successful settlement outcomes in regional Australia. We recommend a permanent refugee labour mobility pathway, with settings and incentives in place for regional employers equivalent to similar regional visa streams, would make refugee labour mobility an important and scalable mechanism to meet future regional workforce needs.

Yours sincerely



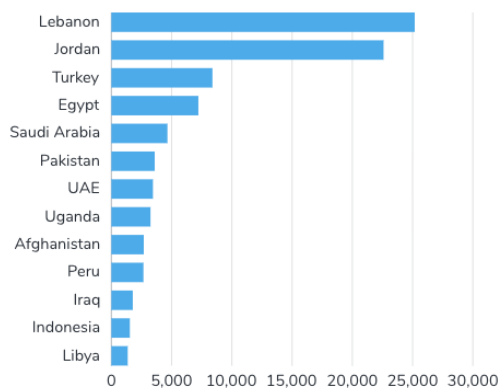
Jemma Bailey
Australia and New Zealand Co-Director

Annex A: A cohort of highly skilled applicants from refugee and displaced backgrounds to meet the needs of regional Australia

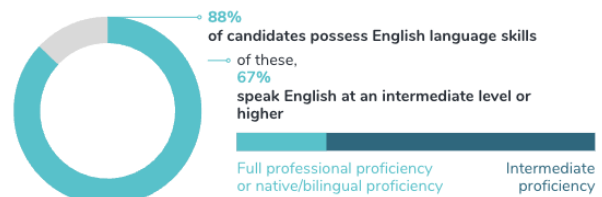
TBB manages an online 'Talent Catalog' of skilled refugees. It is a unique datasource capturing the skills and work experience in refugee communities which are in high demand across the world and in Australia. An analysis of TBB's Talent Catalog shows that the demographics of the potential applicants in the Talent Catalog reflects priorities in the **Migration Strategy and matches areas of acute need in regional areas**. As of July 2024, an analysis of the Talent Catalog and the Pilot shows that:

- Over 114,000 refugees have registered on the Talent Catalog. This includes:
 - 57,000+ skilled trade workers
 - 33,000+ professional services
 - 15,000+ medical professionals
 - 9,400+ engineers
 - 9,600+ IT professionals
- The average age of registrants on the Talent Catalog is 35 years
- 67% of candidates reporting speaking English at an intermediate level or higher
- 40% have completed a tertiary degree

CANDIDATES BY LOCATION



ENGLISH LANGUAGE ABILITIES



TOP NATIONALITIES

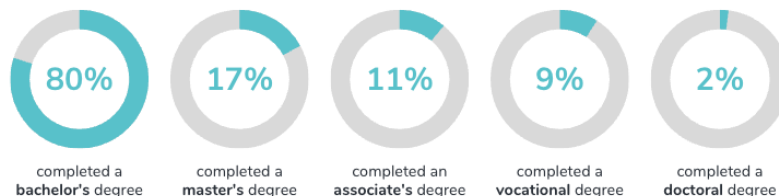
1. Syrian
2. Afghan
3. Sudanese
4. Palestinian
5. Venezuelan
6. Congolese
7. Yemeni
8. Iraqi
9. Ukrainian
10. Iranian

SPOKEN LANGUAGES

1. Arabic
2. French
3. Pashto
4. Dari
5. Turkish
6. Urdu
7. Farsi
8. Spanish
9. Swahili
10. German

EDUCATION LEVELS

40% of candidates report completing a tertiary degree. Of these:



35

AVERAGE AGE

CANDIDATES BY GENDER



The data collected through the Talent Catalog indicates both depth and volume of talent amongst refugee and displaced populations. With the right migration settings Australia has a unique opportunity to unlock this talent pool to strategically fill critical skill shortages in regional Australia.