

When what you have is not enough—Acquiring Australian qualifications to overcome non-recognition of overseas skills

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Abstract

Skilled migration is an important strategy in developed economies seeking to address skills shortages and population ageing. Research on the labour market outcomes of skilled migrants tends to focus on employers' devaluation of skills without considering the role of immigration policy in the migration process. Moreover, there is little understanding of whether efforts to meet employer demands for local qualifications improve labour market outcomes. Drawing on a study on skilled migrants sponsored under the State-Specific and Regional Migration Scheme in the regional state of South Australia, we explore the shaping of skills and skills recognition in the migration journey, particularly migrants' strategy of reskilling in response to employer demands for local qualifications. Our logistic regressions on the association between the acquisition of Australian qualifications and labour market outcomes reveal only marginal returns to these efforts. We argue that Australia should consider developing a more coherent skilled migration process to better harness the human capital of skilled migrants.

INTRODUCTION

Skilled migration has been an important component of international migration in response to skills shortfalls and demographic changes in advanced economies. Skilled migration occurs in a highly regulated space where those

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seeking to migrate encounter a set of rules, regulations and obligations used to filter out individuals that meet the selection criteria set by the host government (Skeldon, 2018). Despite migration policies selecting skilled migrants through measurements of credentials and skills pegged to education levels and occupations, non-recognition of overseas qualifications and experience occurs (Cameron et al., 2019). The literature tends to focus on the devaluation of skills by employers (e.g. Guo, 2009) without considering the role of immigration policy in the migration process. Further, while there is a growing literature on migrant agency and strategies to overcome bureaucratic hurdles or employment barriers (Roberts, 2021; Tran et al., 2020), there is little understanding on whether efforts to meet employer demands for qualifications lead to an improvement in labour market outcomes. This paper addresses this gap by exploring the interaction skilled migrants have with immigration policy and the dissonance with labour market realities following their migration to Australia.

We begin with an overview of Australia's skilled immigration programme and review the literature of labour market experiences and barriers of skilled migrant workers to Australia before drawing on a study on skilled migrants in the state of South Australia. We contextualise our study by examining the interpretation and shaping of skills by different actors to elucidate the breakdown between immigration policy and employer practices. In particular, we focus on skilled migrants seeking to acquire the host country's qualifications when facing challenges in gaining employment commensurate with their existing skills—a response to a common employer demand (e.g., Sardana et al., 2016). There is little understanding of the process and outcomes of such strategies, as most research (but see, Banerjee & Lee, 2012) focuses on strategies that describe the different ways to increase employability. Thus, investigating the association between employment outcomes and the strategies of skilled migrants that mainly include acquiring the host country's qualifications is a novel contribution to the literature. We then discuss the implications of our findings for the labour market and skilled migration policy and programme delivery in assisting skilled migrants in finding work.

AUSTRALIA'S SKILLED MIGRATION PROGRAMME

Australia's skilled migration policy is heavily regulated, with migrants required to navigate a complex array of regulations and actors. Australia's skilled migration system has evolved considerably but has primarily revolved around three components when assessing and admitting skilled migrants. They include a skills shortage list, a points test, and a points threshold where individuals are ranked and sorted (Boucher & Davidson, 2019).

Several reforms to Australia's skilled migration programme have led to revisions to its skilled shortage list (Skilled Occupations List—SOL). Changes to the SOL resulted in fewer eligible occupations and modifications to the points test that increased work experience and English language proficiency demands. Framed within a neo-corporatist model whereby industries provide input when determining skills shortages (Koslowski, 2014), the liberalisation of skilled migration policies saw temporary work visas introduced to meet business demands for workers on flexible arrangements. Another migration policy included State-Specific Regional Migration (SSRM) schemes designed to direct skilled migrants to less populated parts of Australia (Hugo, 2008).

Regional migration programmes and employment outcomes

The Australian Government introduced selective migration programmes in 1996 to influence the destination of migrants to achieve a more even population distribution and arrest decline in regional areas. These areas typically have fewer than 200,000 residents but also include low population growth metropolitan cities such as Adelaide (South Australia) and Hobart (Tasmania) (DIMA, 2007:46), which are also affected by labour shortages, depopulation and ageing. The suite of immigration policies specific to these areas includes the SSRM, which realised a degree of success in that it has diverted a small but significant part of the Australian immigration intake to

cities and areas outside of the main poles of attraction [notably Sydney and Melbourne, *the authors*] for immigrants' (Hugo, 2008:143). Similar schemes include the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme and Designated Area Migration Agreements.

The State/Territory Sponsored General Skilled Migrant (GSM) scheme (hereon referred to as State-Sponsored scheme), which falls under the SSRM, is a significant part of Australia's skilled migration program. As a proportion of the total skill stream, migrant intake through this particular scheme increased from 7 per cent of all skilled migration in 2007–08 to 25 per cent in 2017–18 (DOHA, 2018, 2019). Moreover, the State-Sponsored scheme tends to dominate the skills stream in States and Territories wholly defined as regional (i.e. South Australia, Tasmania, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory). The visa process for this scheme requires prospective migrants to submit an Expression of Interest online (through a system called SkillsSelect), be Points-tested, have their skills assessed and nominate an occupation on the SOL. In contrast to the employer-sponsored applicants but not dissimilar to Independent GSM applicants—whose visa eligibility is solely Points-tested—the State-Sponsored GSM pathway means that migrants are typically unemployed and job-seeking upon arrival. In addition, State-Sponsored applicants have access to a State/Territory government-specific SOL, which generally comprises a greater number of visa-eligible occupations than the Federal Government's all-Australian list (Birrell, 2018). However, lobbying pressure from businesses groups and lagging regions and states that consider skill shortages a significant impediment to economic growth (Wright, 2015) suggests that the labour shortages of some occupations on the SOL might be overstated (see Birrell, 2018). This raises questions around the validity of some occupations' inclusion on the SOL, as migrants work outside their visa-nominated occupations and/or at lower levels of expertise than before moving to Australia (Cameron et al., 2019; Ho & Alcorso, 2004). In contrast, evidence from the longitudinal Continuous Survey of Australian Migrants (CSAM) shows that employer-sponsored migrants demonstrate superior early employment and salary outcomes and lower rates of skills mismatch compared with State-Sponsored migrants (DOHA, 2020).

Research highlighting the positive employment outcomes and economic contributions of skilled migrants in Australia (VandenHeuvel & Wooden, 2000) is often used to advance policies that argue for increasing skilled migration. However, focusing on employment or unemployment rates obfuscates the underemployment or the utilisation of skills (Ho & Alcorso, 2004). Analysis of the CSAM data of permanent skilled migrants in Australia (CEDA, 2021) found that despite high employment rates, nearly one-quarter of all permanent migrants (23%) in 2018 experienced skills mismatch. This was more prevalent for those under the State-Sponsored migration scheme, with 32 per cent working in a job lower than their skill level compared with only 13 per cent of employer-sponsored visa holders. This is also supported by earlier research (Cebulla & Tan, 2019; Tan et al., 2019) that found around half of State-Sponsored migrants were over-qualified in their jobs, with just under half not working in their nominated occupation.

Migrants are typically more likely to experience skills mismatch than native populations, even in countries (including Australia) with selective skilled migration policies (Tani, 2018). The few Australian studies comparing skilled mismatch between migrants and the Australia-born population have come to similar conclusions, with overeducation rates amongst migrants (over 30%) being significantly higher than amongst those born in Australia (7.5%) (Green et al., 2007). Although employment outcomes for migrants do improve over time (DIBP, 2014), downward occupational mobility is not atypical (Ressia et al., 2017).

The selectivity of skilled migration pathways, in this instance, the State-Sponsored scheme, and associated components such as a broadened SOL that do not mirror labour shortages can have a profound impact on labour market outcomes. In addition, regional locations with weaker labour markets and limited opportunities for education and further training to improve employability (later discussed) may delay upward occupational mobility. Highlighting the conditions under which State-Sponsored migrants arrive in Australia, mainly without a guarantee of employment, unlike their employer-sponsored counterparts, we next draw attention to the barriers to employment and the dissonance in how pre-migration skills, qualifications and work experiences are valued by migrants, the government and domestic employers.

(Non)Recognition of overseas skills and qualifications in Australia

Australia is not alone in operating points-based systems for assessing visa eligibility. They are also used in New Zealand (Akbari & MacDonald, 2014) and Canada (Papademetriou & Hooper, 2019), where the government also employs policies to divert migrants away from larger metropolitan cities. As in Australia, the experience of migrants to Canada has been found to include skills mismatches, typically more prevalent amongst those entering the country through regional migration programs than those selected by employers (Lu & Hou, 2020). In fact, the international literature (New Zealand: Iqbal, 2017; Canada: Derwing & Krahn, 2008) shares Australian insights (Cameron et al., 2013) as to the barriers to better labour market outcomes for skilled migrants, often relating to discrimination, the lack of local experience and the lack of recognition of skills and qualification.

Although Australia has made some progress around skills recognition since initial reforms were introduced in 1983 (Hawthorne, 2015), recognition remains a complex and perplexing challenge, especially when comparing onshore and offshore migrants. Whereas employment rates are near identical between both groups, offshore migrants often enjoy superior outcomes relating to wages, job satisfaction, and various forms of underemployment; however, variations exist between countries with onshore migrants from China or the Middle East performing better than their offshore counterparts (Hawthorne, 2010).

The non-recognition of overseas qualifications in the Australian labour market also highlights the dissonance between how skilled migrants are assessed firstly by the government when regulating immigration and secondly by employers in their hiring process, a situation mainly pertaining to non-employer sponsored migrants. *Offshore* pre-migration assessments for the specific purpose of immigration do not translate smoothly into vocational recognition when seeking employment in Australia. Migrants need to pass *onshore* clinical or technical assessments before securing full Foreign Qualification Recognition (FQR), although accreditation requirements vary across professions (Hawthorne, 2015). Although inroads made following Australian Government led reforms since the 1980s alongside parliamentary reviews in 1996, 2006 and 2012 with multi-sector input from a wide range of stakeholders (Hawthorne, 2012, 2015) and, especially in health and engineering professions, non-recognition of FQR persists (e.g. Cameron et al., 2019).

The regions can further exacerbate factors that contribute to inferior employment outcomes. The 'near total academic segregation' (Hawthorne, 2010:26) of international student graduates in some regional universities and providers of nationally recognised vocational education and training (VET) alongside limited provision of settlement services and scarcity of accreditation courses, which themselves can be costly (Cameron, 2011; Webb et al., 2013), can delay migrants' labour market entry and upward occupational mobility. Although specialist bridging courses to address skills wastage proliferated from 1989 to 1996, particularly in Melbourne and Sydney (Hawthorne, 2012), and have continued to evolve, it is apparent that smaller states such as South Australia and Tasmania continue to have disproportionately fewer VET providers (VRQA, 2021). This is a common predicament facing regional areas shunned by private VET providers due to the poor financial viability associated with lower demand and the high cost of delivery (Productivity Commission, 2020). This places more pressure on State governments as the sole VET provider and presents fewer options for migrants who seek upskilling and accreditation.

The desirability narrative of the skilled migrant is framed by migration policy's points test system and the SOL list. Accumulating the required points, possessing SOL listed skills and receiving regional sponsorship from State/Territory government shapes how individuals view themselves as migrants who are desired and in demand in Australia. However, subsequent employment challenges and the non-recognition of their skills by employers demanding Australian qualifications and/or Australian work experience (Sardana et al., 2016) indicate that a fuller understanding of the skilled migration journey needs to include post-migration events. There is burgeoning research on the strategies employed by international graduates to navigate barriers to employment (Tran et al., 2020). However, the effectiveness of such responses to improve their employment outcomes is poorly understood. Here, we elucidate the efforts by skilled migrants to overcome the non-recognition of their skills by firstly examining the original expectations of migrants in light of statutory skilled migration conditions and

their subsequent experience of employer skill demands. Following this, we analyse the effectiveness of acquiring additional Australian qualifications in improving their employability. This deeper understanding of the effects of the reshaping of skills by skilled migrants in Australia not only contributes to a fuller understanding of the skilled migration journey but also draws attention to the disconnects with post-migration realities inherent in the design of Australia's skilled migration policy.

THE STUDY

This paper draws on research and data from a project funded by the Department of State Development, Government of South Australia in 2015. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach consisting of an extensive survey and in-depth interviews to investigate outcomes of State-Sponsored GSM migration in South Australia during 2010–2014. The survey explored the labour market experiences of State-Sponsored GSMs who, as primary applicants, had met the criteria for sponsorship for a work visa by the South Australian government and were granted either a Skilled Regional Provisional visa or a Skilled Sponsored Permanent visa. In the case of the latter permanent visa, a more granular points system is applied, raising the bar of eligibility by requiring higher-level skills, education, training and work experience in Australia. The quantitative aspect of this study stems from an online survey conducted in November and December 2015. The invitation to participate in this study was issued on behalf of the research team by the South Australian immigration government agency responsible for assessing visa applications in the state. The survey, sent out to some 7500 State-Sponsored GSMs, achieved a response rate of 43 per cent ($n = 3222$), with two-thirds of respondents ($n = 2114$) answering all survey questions relevant to them leaving a useable, complete return response rate of 28 per cent. The majority of survey respondents were still living in South Australia. Although responses from those who had departed or never arrived were also captured, only responses from migrants still living in the state were analysed for this paper.

The survey asked questions about migrants' employment status and the time taken to find employment. Respondents were also asked to indicate the number of years they had resided in South Australia at the time of the survey. The survey also recorded educational and occupational qualifications and the skills area and country where qualifications were obtained. Likewise, respondents were asked if they were enrolled in courses, or had already gained, additional qualifications in Australia since receiving their State-Sponsored visa. If so, further information about these qualifications was collected to identify their level and skills area. In turn, these data were used to determine whether new qualifications were at the same level or in the same field as those held at the time of the visa application. The survey did not collect information on when exactly those additional qualifications were obtained, which affects some of the conclusions drawn from this study (later discussed).

Socio-demographic data, including sex, age and country of birth, the type of visa applied for, the occupation that respondents had been nominated in their visa application, their mandatory English language competency test results were obtained from administrative data with access from the State Government immigration body. Survey respondents indicated whether they had lodged their visa onshore or offshore.

The survey data were weighted to the South Australian immigration agency's administrative database of the total sample population based on visa subclasses, age, country of birth and nominated occupation. The qualitative component of this paper was drawn from open-ended questions in this survey and 20 in-depth interviews. Interviewees were recruited from online survey participants who indicated a willingness to participate in this study further. The selection of interviewees was based on the Top 10 countries of birth of survey respondents with an equal balance between those who arrived on temporary or permanent visas to capture a well-rounded perspective on settlement and migration experiences. This was mostly achieved with interviewees recruited from eight¹ of the Top 10 countries of birth, of which nine interviewees arrived on temporary visas and 11 arrived on permanent visas. The interviews were conducted face to face and lasted between forty and sixty minutes. The interviews were thematically coded and analysed based on the topics that include factors influencing decisions

to settle in South Australia, challenges faced living in the state, their job-seeking experiences, employment outcomes, satisfaction on a range of issues relating to their life and future intentions.

FINDINGS

Even though capturing the issues relating to different points of the migration journey was not the focus of the study, we were able to build a picture of how skills were shaped differently through this journey by combining qualitative data collected through interviews and quantitative data from the survey. We begin by describing the pre-existing qualifications and areas of these qualifications held by survey respondents and their labour market outcomes. We then explore the shaping of skills in the pre- and immediate post-migration phases before examining the additional qualifications that some of these respondents obtained after arriving in Australia (in the case of offshore applicants) or, for those already in the country, typically as graduate students. Throughout, we use weighted data that adjusts the response sample to reflect the characteristics of the total population of migrants who had been granted one of the above visas.

Initial labour market outcomes

The State-Sponsored skilled migrants were disproportionately males (69%), with most holding a bachelor's degree (79%) and thus markedly higher qualified than the average South Australian population (16%). Around one-third (34%) of respondents were aged 30–34 years, followed by 25 to 29 years (29%). Migrants aged under 25 years accounted for just 4 per cent of State-Sponsored visa holders, while 13 per cent were aged 40 or older (Cebulla & Tan, 2019). About one in eight (13%) migrants had obtained a skilled migrant visa (subclasses 886 and 487) onshore as former students who had recently completed their studies in Australia.

Migrants had nominated a multitude of occupations in their visa applications, which were aggregated to form categories suitable for analysis. The three largest groups of occupations nominated by over half (57%) of survey respondents included Information and Communication Technology (ICT) professionals; those working in business, human resource or marketing; and design, engineering, science or transportation. Specialist managers, health or education professionals accounted for another 18 per cent of visa holders. These and all other statistics reported here are estimated from the survey and closely mirror the total official migration data for that period. Given the selectivity of the skilled migration programme, the prevalence of professionals holding graduate qualification was naturally high (78%).

The job search for many migrants began after being granted the visa and/or upon arrival in Australia. Survey evidence shows that this job search period was occasionally protracted. Only about one in six (15%) of migrants found employment 'right away', while one in ten (11%) had to wait up to a month before they found paid work. About one-quarter (23%) found work within two to three months. At the other extreme, more than one in 20 (6%) spent over one year looking for employment, and one in six (15%) remained unemployed for most of their time in South Australia.

Despite their comparatively high levels of qualifications, migrants faced a higher risk of unemployment at a time when unemployment in the state fluctuated between 5.6 and 6.7 per cent from 2010 to 2014 (ABS, 2019). Many reported underemployment, that is working fewer hours than they wanted to. Amongst those who had been employed either for all or most of the time, 13 per cent preferred to work more hours. Over half of those employed (52%) felt they were overqualified as they offered more and higher skills and qualifications than were required for their job.

Almost half of the migrants in employment (43%) found themselves working in occupations other than the one they had nominated in their visa application. No occupation was unaffected by these risks, but this misallocation

was highest for ICT professionals and business, human resource and marketing professionals. This mirrored a general oversupply of labour in business, accounting and ICT (Birrell, 2018; Hawthorne, 2010), which resulted in weaker employment outcomes, particularly for onshore migrants, and exacerbated in regional areas with higher unemployment rates.

Health professionals, in contrast, were most likely to obtain work in their nominated occupation and least likely to experience unemployment. However, many health professionals remained underemployed (Figure 1).

‘What is the point of (skills) assessment?’

The literature typically focuses on the (un)employment outcomes of skilled migrants in their host countries (Hawthorne, 2008). However, as seen in our findings above, underemployment or skills mismatch is also experienced. In this section, we draw from the qualitative data in our study to shed light on how migrants experience their skills as reshaped by employers after relocating to Australia. The following selected quotes illustrate skilled migrants' experiences around the (non)recognition of skills, deskilling and downward occupational mobility.

After having my Trade assessed and approved overseas, I was told only once [after arriving] in South Australia that this Trade Approval was only applicable to my Skilled Immigration application, and that this approval process did not equate to me having an Australian Recognised Trade Certificate. For an ARTC, this process had to be redone in Australia, to the same department.

(Male, South Africa, Fitter General, 176 Skilled Sponsored - Permanent)

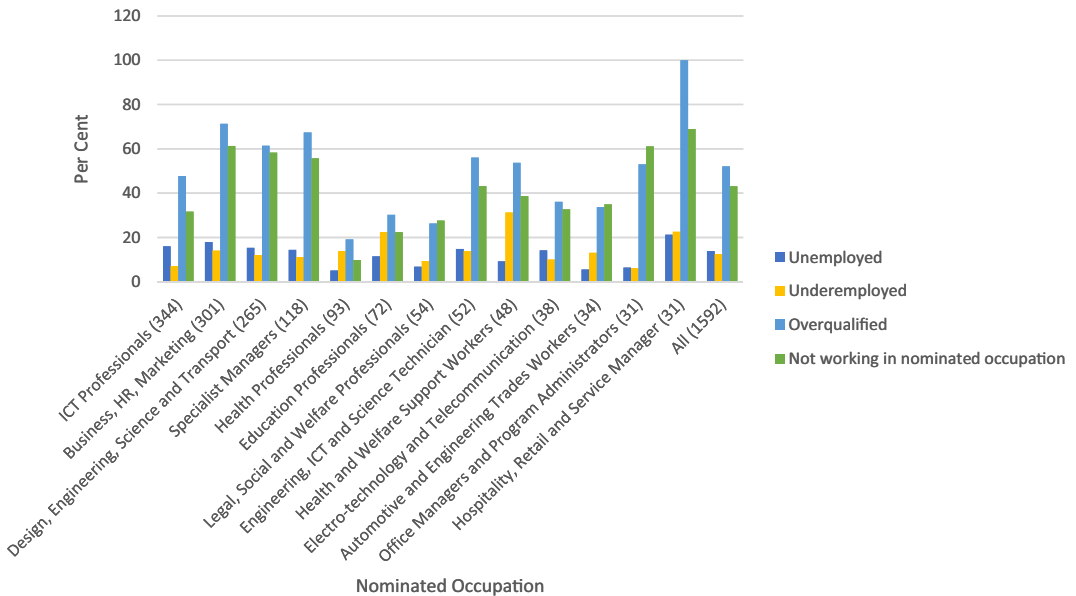


FIGURE 1 Unemployment, underemployment, overqualification and working outside nominated occupation, by nominated occupation. *Note:* Numbers in () indicate sample size. Display limited to occupations with at least 30 visa holders. Occupations sorted in sample size order. *Source:* GSM Survey

Despite of [sic] the assessment in my profession, I never had an opportunity, even a single interview. I have the Australian degree equivalent certificate and substantial experiences to continue my practice here. Nonetheless, I just ended as a cleaner... What is the point of assessment?

(Female, Philippines, 176 Skilled Sponsored-Permanent)

The non-recognition of the overseas qualifications and skills of migrants by employers puzzled participants. The fact that their skills, which had been assessed and formally recognised before leaving their home countries, encountered rejection by Australian employers raised questions about the purpose of skills assessment. This connects with a burgeoning body of work on the constitution and construction of skills which suggests skills assessments can be inconsistent, ambiguous, overtly simplistic (Boucher, 2020) and 'rife with ambiguities and malleability' (Liu-Farrer et al., 2021:2239). As noted earlier, such ambiguities align with business and state government lobbies that frame skill shortages as a significant impediment to economic growth (Hugo 2008; Wright, 2015) and suggest labour shortages may be overstated, increasing the risk of employment mismatches experienced amongst skilled migrants (CEDA, 2021).

So even if the Government has assessed you, employers won't like it. So I have to go back 20 years in my career and start as an Assistant Accountant when I was the Financial Controller of one of the operation of the 4th Mining Company in the world, extremely frustrating.

(Female, Venezuela, 475 Skilled Regional-Provisional)

The desirability for one's skills by the Australian Government in the pre-migration stage can thus be reshaped in the post-migration stage by employers who 'prefer to buy Australian' (Wagner & Childs, 2006:58) qualifications and, as seen above, subsequently result in deskilling or downward occupational mobility.

Acquiring additional Australian qualifications

Following such experiences, many migrants subsequently decide to undertake additional studies in Australia to achieve skills recognition. In our research, employers not recognising overseas skills and qualifications was the principal and often sole motivation for acquiring additional Australian qualifications. About one-third (34%) of skilled migrants in the survey sought additional qualifications and skills by enrolling in one or more occupational courses; some also sought to obtain English language proficiency certificates. One respondent in eight (13%) was enrolled in such a course at the time of the survey, while one in five (21%) had already completed their studies. The single largest group, over one-quarter (28%), enrolled in or had completed a Diploma or Graduate Diploma (Table 1, column E). A similar proportion sought vocational Certificate III (requiring about one year's vocational education and training) or IV (12–18 months) level qualifications, which are increasingly the minimum requirement for employment in above entry-level jobs in Australia. About 8 per cent had enrolled in or completed post-graduate qualifications, reflecting the number of visa holders who transitioned from student to State-Sponsored GSM visas after completing further or higher education degrees in the country.

There were few differences in the pursuit of these additional qualifications when comparing male or female visa holders or different age groups, but prevalence varied with visa type and whether visa applications were lodged onshore or offshore. A higher proportion of respondents with provisional Skilled Regional Visas (37%) (constituting 32% of all respondents) had pursued or were pursuing further qualifications, compared with 31 per cent of respondents with Skilled Permanent visas. Starker yet was the difference between onshore (21% of all respondents) and offshore applicants. Whereas 30 per cent of the latter had completed or were enrolled to complete additional qualifications, this rose to 45 per cent amongst onshore applicants, reflecting the presence of graduate students who were furthering their studies.

TABLE 1 Type of additional qualification studied or studying, by prior highest level of qualification^a

Additional qualification	Highest level of qualification					Total
	A	B	C	D	E	
	Post-graduate degree (197)	Post-graduate diploma (38)	Bachelor degree/Honours (204)	Diploma/Certificate/Other (84)		
Cert I or below	2.3	2.2	4.3	6.1	3.8	
Cert III	9.8	7.5	12.2	21.7	12.7	
Cert IV, Graduate Certificate	21.9	19.0	14.3	10.1	16.7	
Diploma, GradDip, AdvDi	30.6	22.4	35.1	9.4	28.0	
BA/BSc	1.3	2.9	3.3	5.0	2.9	
MA/MSc/PhD	11.8	7.0	6.7	1.2	7.6	
Professional/trade/fellowship	6.2	7.3	9.4	10.1	8.2	
Insufficiently described	16.2	31.7	14.7	36.3	20.2	
N	197	38	204	84	523	

^aSupporting skilled visa application. Numbers in () indicate response size.

As remarked earlier, migrants' nominated occupations were aggregated to reduce their diversity and number. Looking at the nine aggregations with at least 50 migrants,² three had a greater than average proportion of migrants who had obtained or were enrolled to obtain additional qualifications, suggesting most marked skills recognition barriers. These occupations were Legal, Social and Welfare Support Workers (53%); Engineering, ICT and Science Technicians (45%); and Health and Welfare Support Workers (62%). Engineering, ICT and Science Technicians were more likely to be currently enrolled than to have already completed their course.

Across occupations, a sizeable minority of about one-third of migrants had selected courses equipping them with additional qualifications *below* their level assessed for their skilled migrant visa in Australia. Naturally, this share increased with the level of pre-existing qualifications, rising to about two-thirds of migrants with prior post-graduate degrees. Business-related (19%) and health-related skills (17%) were the most frequently chosen skills areas. Other areas included ICT; education and welfare; electrical and mechanical skills; and various trades and welfare functions, each accounting for between three and 7 per cent of skill choices. It should be noted that in sectors such as ICT, it is common to upskill to keep pace with the ever-changing skills landscape to remain employable. This includes developing complementary skills, such as project management or interpersonal skills (Tsakissiris & Grant-Smith, 2021), as also observed in our study.

Labour market outcomes of acquiring additional Australian qualifications

We explored whether additional qualifications were associated with employment outcomes using logistic regression. The analyses were conducted separately for the outcomes of unemployment, working outside the nominated occupation, and underemployment or over-qualification on the confirmed assumption that different factors might affect these outcomes. Conducting analyses separately meant these factors were more easily identifiable in tabular presentation. Moreover, working outside nominated occupations, on the one hand, and underemployment or over-qualification, on the other, were distinctly different experiences, which warranted separate examination. Throughout, the analyses controlled for the level of additional qualifications and whether the additional skills studied broadly aligned with migrants' nominated occupation. The information required for the analysis was manually extracted from migrants' descriptions of their studies. Four in five (77%) migrants provided sufficient information about their *levels* of prior and additional qualifications to allow a comparison. But this dropped to 57 per cent for migrants providing sufficient details on the *skills area* of their additional qualification, which would allow a comparison with their nominated occupation and the industry in which they were most likely expecting to work. Additionally, there remained an inevitable level of uncertainty when matching skills areas of study and likely industries of nominated occupations. For instance, several migrants took qualifications in Training and Assessment or Project Management; skills and qualifications that may be generally relevant in a range of occupations. In such instances, they were assumed to align with their nominated occupation. In other cases, such as taking qualifications in English language proficiency, the skill area was considered to be different, although potentially relevant.

We limit our analysis to migrants with completed additional qualifications to understand the possible association that additional qualifications may have with labour market outcomes. The results of the logistic regression analyses are displayed in [Table 2](#). Overall, they suggest that additional qualifications may make comparatively little difference to a migrants' employment status as other factors have a much stronger influence. Time spent in South Australia and the time taken to find and accept a job were key. In the absence of data on when migrants had acquired their additional qualifications, the effect of time passed since could not be independently determined. Hence, the associations reported here are limited to the binary condition of having or not having such qualification, and comparing binary employment outcomes (e.g. unemployed versus employed; not working versus working in nominated occupation; underemployment and overqualification versus reported employment and qualification match), holding all else equal.

TABLE 2 Logistic regression results of factors associated with migrants' risk of unemployment, underutilisation and not working in nominated occupation, South Australian skilled migrants, 2010–2014

	Unemployed			Not working in nominated occupation			Underemployed and/or overqualified		
	Odds Ratio	Std. Err.	p > t	Odds Ratio	Std. Err.	p > t	Odds Ratio	Std. Err.	p > t
Place where highest qualification obtained (Ref: outside Australia)									
Australia	1.91	0.62	0.05	1.20	0.35	0.54	0.58	0.17	0.06
Nominated occupation (ANZSCO major category) (Ref: Managers)									
Professionals	0.81	0.27	0.54	0.43	0.13	0.01	0.53	0.18	0.06
Technicians and Trades Workers	0.74	0.41	0.59	0.63	0.29	0.32	0.56	0.27	0.22
Community and Personal Service Workers	0.71	0.56	0.67	0.63	0.35	0.41	3.69	2.52	0.06
Clerical and Administrative Workers	0.39	0.40	0.36	0.57	0.35	0.37	0.24	0.15	0.02
Highest qualification (Ref: Bachelor degree/Honours)									
Diploma/Certificate/Other-post school qualification	1.32	0.64	0.56	0.41	0.16	0.02	0.50	0.18	0.06
Post-graduate degree	1.36	0.30	0.17	1.19	0.21	0.33	1.34	0.25	0.12
Post-graduate diploma	1.45	0.63	0.39	0.49	0.16	0.03	0.85	0.30	0.64
Sex (Ref: Female)									
Male	0.38	0.08	0.00	1.19	0.21	0.34	0.92	0.17	0.64
Age, grouped (Ref: under 25)									
25–29	2.00	2.14	0.52	2.64	1.12	0.02	2.91	1.25	0.01
30–34	2.56	2.76	0.38	1.52	0.67	0.34	2.34	1.03	0.05
35–39	2.97	3.20	0.31	1.67	0.76	0.26	2.67	1.20	0.03
40 or older	2.62	2.84	0.37	2.13	1.03	0.12	5.79	2.97	0.00
Visa category (Ref: Skilled Permanent, nominated or sponsor)									
Skilled Regional Provisional	0.52	0.12	0.01	1.22	0.22	0.25	1.29	0.23	0.16

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

	Unemployed			Not working in nominated occupation			Underemployed and/or overqualified		
	Odds Ratio	Std. Err.	<i>p</i> > <i>t</i>	Odds Ratio	Std. Err.	<i>p</i> > <i>t</i>	Odds Ratio	Std. Err.	<i>p</i> > <i>t</i>
Language (IELTS) competency test score (Ref: IELTS 8.0 or higher)									
IELTS 7.0–7.9	2.15	0.68	0.01	0.45	0.10	0.00	0.91	0.21	0.69
IELTS 6.0–6.5	3.40	1.19	0.00	0.55	0.14	0.02	1.08	0.28	0.76
Other	2.27	2.08	0.37	1.50	0.83	0.46	1.25	0.61	0.65
Level of additional qualification (Ref: no additional qualification)									
Certificate I or below	2.38	2.31	0.37	1.00	(empty)		3.25	3.39	0.26
Certificate III	0.55	0.46	0.48	3.59	1.85	0.01	5.19	3.14	0.01
Certificate IV, Graduate Certificate	0.51	0.41	0.40	2.77	1.38	0.04	1.79	0.96	0.28
Diploma, Graduate Diploma, Advanced Diploma	0.90	0.49	0.85	2.18	0.90	0.06	0.92	0.38	0.84
BA/BSc	2.50	2.22	0.30	1.00	(empty)		1.16	1.40	0.90
MA/MSc/PhD	1.00	(empty)		1.00	(empty)		1.77	1.58	0.52
Professional/trade qualification/Fellowship	2.07	1.51	0.32	0.66	0.48	0.57	1.29	1.15	0.77
Insufficiently described	1.03	0.62	0.96	2.16	0.91	0.07	1.11	0.45	0.80
Additional qualification—broad area of skills (Ref: none reported/not applicable)									
same or close to nominated occupation	1.13	0.76	0.85	0.61	0.31	0.33	0.49	0.25	0.17
other/different occupation	0.97	0.54	0.96	0.84	0.34	0.66	0.72	0.32	0.45
Location at time of visa application (Ref: Offshore [outside Australia])									
Onshore (in Australia)	0.59	0.23	0.18	0.99	0.30	0.97	0.81	0.24	0.48
Found job 'right away' (Ref: Yes)	n/a			8.81	3.05	0.00	4.40	1.27	0.00
no									

TABLE 2 (Continued)

	Unemployed			Not working in nominated occupation			Underemployed and/or overqualified		
	Odds Ratio	Std. Err.	p > t	Odds Ratio	Std. Err.	p > t	Odds Ratio	Std. Err.	p > t
Time in South Australia (in years)	0.63	0.06	0.00	0.92	0.05	0.18	0.93	0.05	0.20
_cons	0.20	0.24	0.17	0.21	0.13	0.02	0.34	0.22	0.10
Number of observations	1010			799			813		

Unemployment

Unemployment was strongly associated with lower English language proficiency as measured by the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) results. Scores lower than 8.0 doubled, if not trebled, the odds of unemployment. Additionally, *ceteris paribus*, a highest qualification obtained onshore in Australia, doubled the odds of unemployment. This may appear counterintuitive, not least because of the importance of English language skills for reducing the risk of unemployment. However, it does reflect the growing evidence of the job market disadvantage that international students face as they transfer to the temporary graduate (485) visa, which allows them to live and work in Australia after graduation (Tran et al., 2019). A countervailing factor was time already spent in South Australia at the point of the survey: each year post arrival reduced the odds of unemployment by one-third. Gender also mattered in that men typically experienced a lower risk of unemployment than women. Obtaining additional qualifications was not independently associated with unemployment.

Not working in the visa-nominated occupation

Unlike the case of unemployment, obtaining additional qualifications (Certificate III or IV) in Australia was statistically significantly associated with the risk of not working in one's nominated occupation. In terms of statistical odds, working in an occupation other than the one nominated for the visa was most markedly associated with finding and accepting employment 'right away' upon arrival in Australia or, if already in the country, upon receiving the visa. Another factor that increased the odds of working outside the nominated occupation was age, with those aged 25–29 most strongly impacted. On the other hand, the risk of working outside a nominated occupation was reduced for those who had nominated a professional occupation (especially in health) and/or had diploma and similar level qualifications, or a post-graduate diploma rather than a higher level (university) graduate qualification. Likewise, and contrary to what we found with respect to unemployment, lower IELTS scores were associated with a lower risk of working outside a nominated occupation.

Skills (mis)match and skills (under)utilisation

Once again, finding a job 'right away' was strongly associated with migrants' labour market mismatch, this is, underemployment or over-qualification for the job that they were doing. Early job finding increased the odds of this underutilisation of skills fourfold. In terms of statistical odds, yet stronger was the association between underutilisation and obtaining an additional qualification where that qualification was at Certificate III level. Age was also again a factor in migrants aged over 25 and, especially, those aged 40 or older, who faced greater exposure to underutilisation. The sole countervailing factor was having clerical or administrative employment as the nominated occupation.

In sum, acquiring additional qualifications probably made no difference to underutilisation or working outside one's nominated occupation and, in some instances, might have increased the risk of both. In the absence of longitudinal data about migrants' labour market status before undertaking additional study, we cannot rule out relative changes in migrants' positioning in the labour market. At least in the case of Certificate III and IV level qualifications, additional locally acquired qualifications appeared to have done little to overcome precarious labour market positions and may even have cemented them. Instead, socio-demographic factors, such as gender, age, English language proficiency and duration of stay in South Australia remained statistically strongly associated with migrants' labour market status.

Migrants' personal accounts of experiences of acquiring additional Australian qualifications

The qualitative evidence collected in our study demonstrated that the process of acquiring local recognition of skills to work in nominated occupations often proved challenging, costly and time-consuming.

My biggest challenge has been to get an electrical licence for Instrumentation. This requires me to have a Certificate III in Instrumentation. There is only one [VET provider] that offers Certificate III in Instrumentation in South Australia...They also require one to get a contract of apprenticeship so that they can then do a gap analysis to identify the required gap training. It is almost impossible to get an apprenticeship training contract at my age and experience. In the hundreds of companies I visited...I have been getting a single and overwhelming response that I am overqualified and too old.

(Male, Zimbabwe, 190 Skilled Nominated-Permanent)

This quote illustrates the poor accessibility of labour market programmes in regional locations, which can also incur expensive fees. This is supported by desktop research which found that in South Australia, one can only access the above-mentioned Certificate III in Instrumentation course from one regional Training and Further Education (TAFE) VET campus located some 380 kilometres from the capital city of Adelaide. In this particular case, the situation is exacerbated by the need to secure an apprenticeship, which is simultaneously compromised when the migrant is considered overqualified and 'too old' to be an apprentice. Ironically, having the right level of experience—which goes hand in hand with age—to be eligible for skilled migration to Australia can undermine one's effort in getting their skills recognised.

Whether they sought formal skills recognitions or mere evidence of local work experience, many migrants opted to accept jobs and salaries below their expectations. As we have seen, this often resulted in higher unemployment or underemployment risks, especially for those who had found a job 'right away'.³ International evidence on unemployment-to-job transitions (Tatsiramos, 2014) or job-to-job transitions in Australia (Cai et al., 2014) raises doubts about the wisdom of accepting any available job rather than searching for a while longer for a better match. As one of our participants reflected, a full-time commitment in his job search was crucial to his eventual success in securing work that matched his skillset.

My current job absolutely matches my overseas experience...I must have applied for 100 jobs, but I got an interview call only from three and I made it through with this job. I religiously used to spend my working day in the library, 9-5 applying for jobs. That's the way you need to be.

(Male, India, 190 Skilled Nominated-Permanent)

While the success of such job search strategies is never guaranteed, finding employment is imperative for skilled migrants upon arrival in a host country. With hindsight, accepting a job 'right away' was often not a good strategy. For migrants who typically do not have a job waiting for them, accepting a job offer 'right away' may not indicate a perfect match but a pragmatic decision taken in light of perceived or experienced barriers to employment. As the account below suggests, for some, working in lower-level jobs allowed them to earn an income while seeking Australian qualifications.

Had to do 18 months' worth of night trade school and weekends and spent approximately \$4500 getting qualified to Australian standard even though I had a qualification from the UK and ran my own business for 6 years. Carried out far more complex installations on hydroponic boilers and gas

etc in UK...I had to work for a builder for the first 9 months...just to pay for day-to-day bills until I got "qualified" as a plumber again.

(Male, UK, 176 Skilled Sponsored-Permanent)

While this highlights the efforts of skilled migrants to improve their employability by reshaping their skills through the acquisition of Australian qualifications, such strategies, as shown in our regression, do not necessarily lead to progression in the labour market. The evidence as to whether accepting a 'lesser' job, be it temporary, casual or part-time, functions as a stepping-stone to a better-matched occupation, later on, is at best shaky.

A closer look at the skills areas of Certificate III and IV qualifications reported in our survey suggests that the additional training that migrants undertook might have been intended to achieve two objectives: career change or evidence of locally recognised skills. About one-fifth of migrants acquiring a Certificate III or IV qualification after arriving in Australia did so in the fields of aged care or disability support—both expanding sectors of employment at the time—however, neither related to those migrants' nominated occupation. It is not uncommon for migrants to acquire qualifications to work in alternative careers (Hamilton et al., 2021). For example, this qualified librarian retrained as an aged care worker.

I had my degree assessment prior to lodge my visa application. But they (employers) refused me to offer the job as I had have overseas degree and experience... After that struggle I started Certificate III in Aged Care and finally got the job after about 11 months

(Female, India, 176 Skilled Sponsored-Permanent)

For others, switching occupations provided access to survival jobs when facing obstacles in gaining employment commensurate with their skills and/or field (Treuren et al., 2021).

I am finding difficulty in securing employment as a secondary school teacher. I do relief teach but cannot get consistent work. I therefore have to resort to being a personal carer to support my family.

(Female, South Africa, 176 Skilled Sponsored-Permanent)

Engaging in survival jobs can represent an interim point in their migration journey before eventually finding work matching one's skills. A second group of migrants studied in fields related to their nominated occupation. This group accounted for about one-third of migrants with Certificate III or IV qualifications and were most likely to seek recognition of their prior qualifications. This included those who had initially nominated *professional* occupations in their visa application and subsequently completed Certificate III or IV qualifications in skills areas such as pharmacy, finance or accounting, management, workplace health and safety, law or computer systems and ICT.

While both strategies had limited immediate success, it is important to recognise—in the absence of longitudinal data—that the experience of downward occupational mobility or deskilling is not necessarily permanent, and later improvements in migrants' labour market position cannot be ruled out.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper builds on previous research on how skills are constructed in the process of migration and the employment strategies used by migrants—upon encountering barriers to employment—in the job-seeking process. By viewing migration as a journey rather than a one-off event, we highlight the disjuncture between migration policy and praxis by attending to how skills are shaped and interpreted by different actors at both pre-migration and post-migration phases of skilled migration. The desirability narrative of one's skills is shaped by meeting the point

threshold, the successful nomination of an occupation on the SOL via a positive skill assessment and reinforced by securing State-Sponsorship by the South Australian Government which influenced the decision to move to Australia. However, the concept of the designer migrant (Simmons, 1999) facilitated by a skilled migration programme is troubled by the immediate devaluation of one's credentials by employers who fail to recognise their overseas skills and qualifications in the post-migration stage.

The *de jure* recognition by government and professional bodies, and *de facto* non-recognition by employers (Hurley et al., 2019) experienced by our participants illuminate the 'tensions between immigration policy and immigrant policy' (Boyd & Thomas, 2001:129). The relative lack of consideration given to the portability of skills is demonstrated through the skills mismatch and underutilisation shown in our data. Exploring the strategies that skilled migrants engage in, specifically in response to employer demands for local qualifications, sheds light on the reskilling efforts of migrants. Our logistic regressions on the association between the acquisition of Australian qualifications and labour market outcomes revealed only marginal returns to these efforts, at least in the short term. However, this finding could very well indicate other influences at play, such as systemic devaluation bias (Guo, 2009) or other unobservable aspects that are difficult to measure.

We also reported mixed findings on how working in a job 'right away' might impact labour market outcomes. Although working in unskilled jobs or jobs unrelated to nominated occupations could be a strategy to not only just pay for their bills but also pay for courses to secure local qualifications, our data also found an increased risk of skills underutilisation or underemployment for those who worked in a job 'right away'. As noted, uncertainty as to the exact date when migrants completed their additional studies and qualifications means we cannot be entirely sure that, given more time, the additional qualification might not have a stronger effect on employment outcomes. At the time of the survey, migrants had spent, on average, three years in South Australia and migrants with completed additional qualifications, three years and six months. While our regressions control for time spent in the state overall, the time window may not be large enough to fully capture the impact of additional qualifications on employment outcomes. However, as we found that the impact is very limited within that window, we suggest that the employability manoeuvres by skilled migrants support sociological perspectives, which highlight the likely enactment of other forms of human, social and cultural capital (Thondhlana et al., 2016; Pham, 2021). Future research would benefit from a longitudinal and sector-specific approach to capture a fuller understanding of the effectiveness of the various employment-seeking strategies of skilled migrants and the nature of barriers they encounter in the process.

Policy implications stem from this research. First, despite its evidentially limited employment impact within the observed timeframe, there may nonetheless be some benefit in (facilitating) the early acquisition of additional qualifications, especially where barriers to skills recognition are well known to those more familiar with the local labour market than newly arrived migrants would likely be. Statutory agencies have a moral and ethical responsibility to provide more solid, open advice and guidance on the challenges of skills recognition and signpost appropriate pathways and information specific to their occupation and industry. We build on recommendations from Cameron et al. (2019) to provide pre-migration employment and employer kits to bridge the disconnect between skilled migration policies and employment realities. We recommend that Federal and State/Territory governments, industry stakeholders and skilled migrants facilitate better labour market integration and provide robust guidance to help migrants understand the skills recognition process and challenges relevant to their occupation/industry. States and Territories that seek to attract migrants to rural and regional areas outside major capital cities, should look at how their education and training infrastructures can enable access to enhanced labour market programmes that go beyond mere skills recognition services. These programmes would allow migrants to acquire specific techniques and learn about the national or regional standards and working practices with which employers expect them to be familiar. Further, to be relevant and well attended, these services may need to be offered in the vicinity of the residential and workplace locations to which regional migration schemes aim to direct migrants. Given its demonstrable importance to Australian employers, migrant pathways to gaining local work experience should be developed, perhaps

modelled on past schemes (e.g. Hawthorne, 2012) or other more recent, community-based schemes such as Jobs Victoria Network that connect employers, migrants and refugee job seekers (SACES, 2019). Community-based schemes have the added benefit that they can integrate courses and social programmes to assist with bridging language, social and cultural barriers.

Our second recommendation is to review the SOL and its current framework. Opaque lobbying by industry bodies presently contributes to skill shortage claims contrary to many skilled migrants' experiences. We extend on similar calls by migration researchers (e.g. Howe, 2014), recommending an alternative framework for Australia that relies on an independent expert body similar to the UK's Migration Advisory Committee to provide recommendations on the composition of jobs on the SOL.

Thirdly, there is thus an urgent need for a comprehensive review of skills recognition in Australia, covering all trades. Such a review would yield insights into the breadth of differences in skills assessments, allowing pathways to improved skills recognition processes to be formulated. For example the competency-based assessment model used in Nursing (Hawthorne, 2002) could be modified for tradespeople to reduce the length of time that skills recognition takes and, in particular, remove the need to secure additional apprenticeships. This is particularly critical for regional locations with fewer labour market programmes to facilitate skills recognition.

Finally, our research suggests that accepting a job quickly often increased the risk of occupational and skills mismatch. At present, the exclusion of migrants from Australia's welfare system for the first four years after arrival can press migrants to accept early job offers, even if they do not match their nominated occupation or skills (Fang & Handley, 2021). Thus, we recommend exploring measures within the welfare system that allow for more extended job searches to avoid the cost of occupational mismatches.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for this study.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Dr George Tan sits on the Ministerial Advisory Council for Skilled Migration for the Australian Federal Minister for Immigration, Citizenship, Migrant Services and Multicultural Affairs.

Dr Andreas Cebulla has declared no conflict of interest.

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ENDNOTES

¹ These eight countries include India, UK, China, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Iran and the Philippines.

- ² ICT Professionals; Business, Human Resources and Marketing Professionals; Design, Engineering, Science and Transportation Professionals; Specialist Managers; Health Professionals; Education Professionals; Legal, Social and Welfare Professionals; Engineering, ICT and Science Technicians; Health and Welfare Support Workers
- ³ Whilst the risk of these mismatches decreased gradually with job search time, the greatest statistical difference was between finding a job instantly (i.e. 'right away') and all other search durations.

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