

# **THE EXPERIENCE OF SKILLED PROFESSIONAL MIGRANTS**

**Report on the research  
July 2019**

*“ I knew it would be a challenge to find work in Australia but didn't know how much of a challenge it would be. I really struggled for a year or so before finding work that's right for me.”*

The report shows that if skilled migrants can be assisted earlier in their migration journey their experience with settling into employment and the community will be more successful.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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AMES Australia commenced a project in 2019 to investigate the feasibility of establishing a migration service to enhance the knowledge and awareness of skilled migrants about the Australian job market with a view to improving their employment outcomes.

In researching the experiences of recent skilled migrants, we conducted a survey and two focus groups. We enlisted our strong alumni network to participate in a survey (153 invited to participate) and focus groups (approx. 20 participants). Several key issues stood out for most participants:

- A perception that there are insufficient orientation programs and little support for skilled migrants in the first twelve months of settlement
- Knowledge, orientation and available support comes primarily from word of mouth and personal social media networks
- A perception among skilled migrants that there is minimal governmental attention directed towards support resources for them

- Amongst skilled migrants there is both a lack of understanding of Australian workplace culture and job market standards, as well as limited knowledge about how to navigate a huge uncoordinated system of information to find what they need to know
- Skilled migrants do use the services of migration agents (over 52% in our sample) and find them helpful, particularly where they are time poor prior to migration as a result of demanding professional employment commitments
- While commercial fees charged by migration agents are seen by skilled migrants as a necessary cost of their migration, most thought that their investment might have been better directed at developing their Australian job market awareness and preparations
- Thinking back over their journey as skilled migrants, most thought that earlier preparation before they arrived in Australia would have reduced the stress of finding employment.
- The need for more targeted information including more

realistic forecasts about the job market.

Other findings include that:

- AMES Australia should consider implementing a more targeted campaign to identify itself as a leading migration support and orientation service provider amongst skilled migrant communities
- There is a need for a more specialised migration agency service to underpin and work collaboratively with other parts of AMES Australia delivering services to skilled migrants to ensure migrants are easily and readily identified as potential clients from their first contact and are quickly directed to its specialist services for skilled migrants; and that
- AMES Australia could use its significant experience in this area to influence governments to increase support to skilled migrants to enter the jobs market at their professional levels on the basis of the potential of the significant contribution they can make towards the economy.

# 1.

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## Introduction

This research was conducted to inform a project for AMES Australia about the feasibility of a skilled migration service that combined assistance with visa pathways together with information and support on preparing for finding a job in Australia.

The aim of the research was to test whether earlier targeting of potential skilled migrants with a tailored package of migration and settlement assistance would lead to increased economic and social participation.

AMES Australia already runs a successful program for skilled migrants called the Skilled Professional Migrant Program (SPMP) which delivers post-arrival support for skilled migrants (including some skilled refugees) to counter barriers and disadvantage they may have

experienced by being either unemployed or underemployed since their arrival.

The research was undertaken through both a survey and focus groups and was designed to identify the motivations of skilled professional migrants to seek information and assistance particularly during their pre-migration stage and how that information can assist them. This research has built on earlier post SPMP surveys about their employment outcomes (research conducted in 2014, 2015 and 2017), which showed that 75% or more achieved employment after attending SPMP, with most starting their job within six months (around one third started their job within three months).

The purpose of the survey was to gain some quantitative information about skilled migrant behaviours such as the stages of their pre-and post-migration experience, who they sought assistance from and whether programs such as the SPMP would have assisted if they'd known about it earlier. The survey was conducted with recent SPMP alumni (from 2017 & 2018 programs). The quantitative information obtained would assist in designing a new service including how their use of a migration agent assisted them.

The purpose of the focus groups was to better understand pre- and post-migration experiences of skilled professional migrants, particularly to identify what they would do differently with the benefit of hindsight.

AMES Australia is acknowledged as a leading provider of comprehensive settlement services for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers; we provide programs across humanitarian settlement, education and vocational training, employment, skilled migration pathways and social participation programs that help clients settle faster and better to achieve social and economic participation. AMES Australia's mission is: Full participation for all in a cohesive and diverse society.

# 1.

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## Introduction

We established two focus groups, one with participants from the survey who indicated they were interested in providing further feedback. The second focus group was undertaken with a small group of skilled migrants who were sourced through a targeted Facebook advertisement and who had not participated in the SPMP. This was done to compare the two groups in terms of the value of an earlier intervention (like an SPMP) to their employment experience.



*SPMP students from May 2019*

## 2.

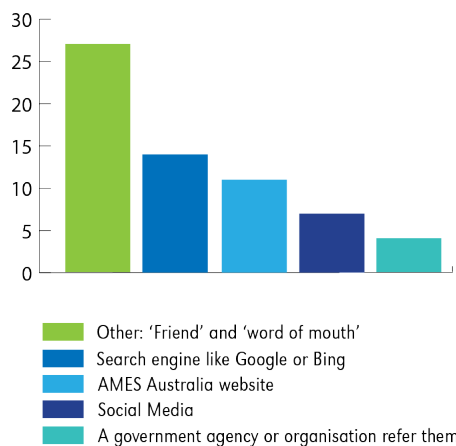
# SPMP Alumni Survey

The research involved surveying SPMP alumni to gather business intelligence on their experience, motivations and frustrations with applying to migrate to Australia as a skilled professional migrant. It provided an insight into the pre-migration experience from the perspective of Skilled Professional Migrant Program (SPMP) alumni (2017 & 2018 courses).

In February 2019 we compiled a list of 153 SPMP Alumni who identified as Skilled Migrants and asked them if they would like to participate in a survey about their migration experience. This was followed up with a link to our survey on Survey Monkey. We received 63 responses to the survey.

The information gained from the survey is summarised below:

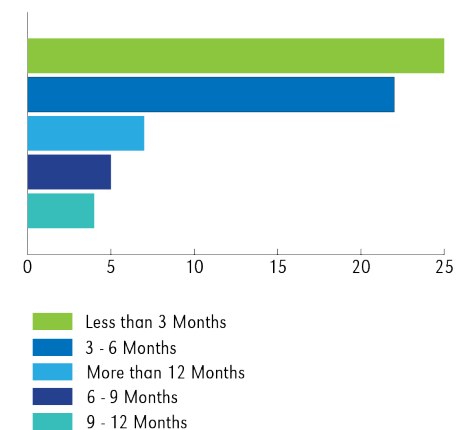
### How did you find out about the Skilled Professional Migration Program (SPMP)?



- **42.86% (27 Responses) Other**
- 22.22% (14 Responses) Search engine like Google or Bing
- 17.46% (11 Responses) AMES Australia Website
- 11.11% (7 Responses) Social Media
- 6.35% (4 Responses) A government agency or organisation refer them

'Friend' and 'word of mouth' were the main comments in the largest category "Other".

### How many months had you been in Australia when you did the SPMP?

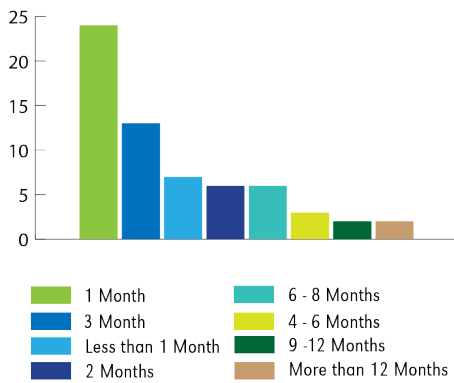


- **39.68% (25 Responses) Less than 3 Months**
- 34.92% (22 Responses) 3-6 Months
- 11.11% (7 Responses) >12 Months
- 7.94% (5 Responses) 6-9 Months
- 6.35% (4 Responses) 9-12 Months

## 2.

# SPMP Alumni Survey

How many months (approximately) were you waiting after you lodged your expression of interest on SkillSelect before you got an invitation to lodge a visa application?

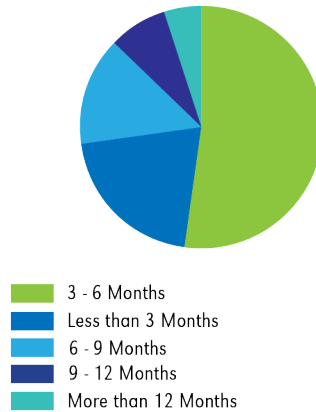


### • 38.10% (24 Responses) 1 Month

- 20.63% (13 Responses) 3 Months
- 11.11% (7 Responses) <1 Month
- 9.52% (6 Responses) 6-8 Months
- 9.52% (6 Responses) 2 Months
- 4.76% (3 Responses) 4-6 Months
- 3.17% (2 Responses) 9-12 Months
- 3.17% (2 Responses) >12 Months

Nearly 80% received their invitation to lodge within 3 months. The longest wait was 18 months.

How many months were you waiting (approximately) to get a visa, after you lodged your visa application?

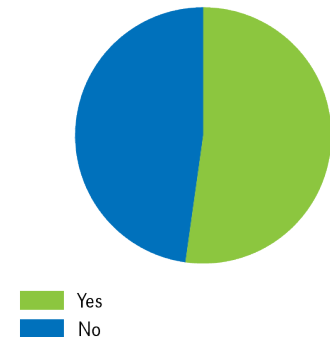


### • 52.38% (33 Responses) 3-6 Months

- 20.64% (13 Responses) Less than 3 Months
- 14.28 (9 Responses) 6-9 Months
- 7.93 (5 Responses) 9-12 Months
- 4.76% (3 Responses) >12 Months

Nearly 75% were granted a visa within six months. The longest wait was three years.

Did you use a migration agent, lawyer or broker to help you with your SkillSelect Expression of Interest/ visa application?



- 52.385% (33 Responses) Yes
- 47.62% (30 Responses) No

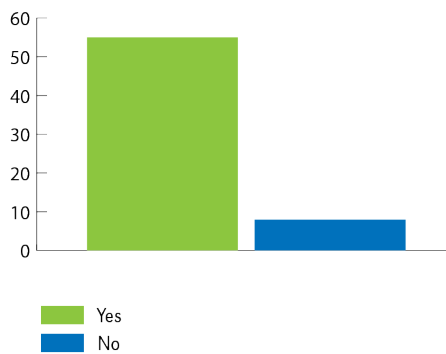
The comments showed that 16 people used a migration agent from their own country, and 10 people used a migration agent from Australia.



# 2.

## SPMP Alumni Survey

Do you think it would have helped you to find a job in Australia more suited to your skills and experience if you'd known earlier about the SPMP or other services AMES Australia offers?



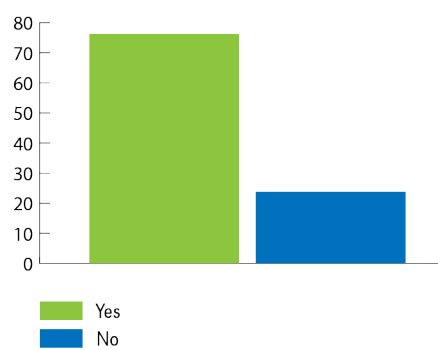
- **87.30% (55 Responses) Yes**
- 12.70% (8 Responses) No

Comments included:

*“Yes, because it helps to know how to write a CV correctly.”*

*“Yes, because it closes the gaps with what local employers are looking for.”*

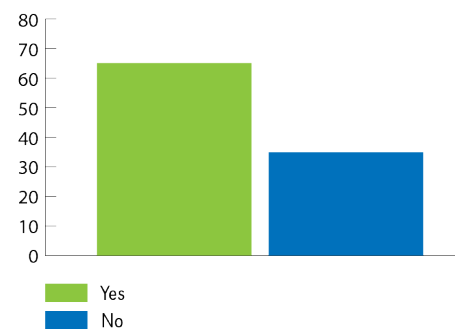
Have you participated in other AMES Australia programs or courses?



- **76.19% (48 Responses) Yes**
- 23.81% (15 Responses) No

The comments showed that of those who said yes, the courses were predominantly pronunciation.

Would you be interested in participating in a focus group to help us find out more about your experience? It might help other skilled migrants settle better in Australia.



- **65.08% (41 Responses) Yes**
- 34.92% (22 Responses) No

### 3.

## Focus Groups

At the completion of the survey, participants were asked if they would be willing to be contacted further by AMES Australia to participate in a focus group to assist with the development and design of a new service (indicating they would be compensated for their time). 41 participants agreed. We narrowed down the 41 people to 30 by prioritising gender equality, diverse ethnicities and a range of professions. In narrowing down our focus group, we aimed for an even number of males and females, as well as a broad range of opinions, and experiences. Of the 30 SPMP Alumni we invited, 10 were able to participate in a focus group held after business hours during the week. The participants included three females and seven males, from United Arab Emirates, Egypt, India, Brazil, Malaysia, China, and the Philippines. These participants told us that they have been in Australia for less than 1 year before attending SPMP.

The focus group questions (see Section 6.0 Appendix) were designed to test the insights from the survey stage. We also wanted to find out from them whether they saw preparing themselves for the Australian job market as an investment that they could gain a return on from both an economic and social basis.

After we conducted our SPMP Alumni focus group, we held a second focus group for skilled migrants who had not participated in the SPMP Program. The purpose was to check whether these skilled migrants had similar experiences to those who had found out about the SPMP. This was to provide some assurance that those attending SPMP weren't the only group of skilled migrants who had experienced difficulty finding suitable employment.



*One of the focus groups in June 2019*

# 3.

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## Focus Groups

AMES Australia's Facebook platform was used to engage the interest of this broader cohort of skilled migrants. There was sufficient interest as a result of the Facebook post to invite a small group to participate in the focus group on the topic. We received 31 responses. We selected 15 people to cover a broad range of gender, ethnicity and professions. Of the 15 selected, seven people were able to participate in a focus group held after business hours during the week. This focus group consisted of seven participants; four females and three males from Zimbabwe, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, China, Vietnam and Lebanon. More than half the participants have been in Australia for over four years. While most of the participants were working, they were either not working in the areas of their skilled occupation or at a lower level.

# 4.

## Focus Group findings

### 4.1 Knowledge of skilled migration and the job market for their profession or occupation

Both sets of focus group participants considered a number of destinations for migration, the most popular being Australia and Canada. The choice of country was often determined by their ability to meet the required points test, or which country offered a place first. The influence of friends, relatives and work colleagues was also a key determinant.

They were able to find most of the information they needed about visa requirements from either someone they knew or their migration agents. However, they often described their experience after arrival as a struggle to find a job:

- *'I was not prepared at all to find a job here, to hunt for a job'*
- *'After about one or two months I knew that I was doing something wrong'*
- *'I knew it would be a challenge to find work in Australia but didn't know how much of a challenge it would be. I really struggled for a year or so before finding work that's right for me.'*

SPMP alumni were unanimous in wishing they had found AMES Australia's SPMP sooner. They

believed that the knowledge and skills they gained from the SPMP, such as help to research their industry and jobs, tailoring their resume, networking and experience from the mentoring program were key contributors in achieving success with employment. They confirmed how vital knowledge about how to navigate the Australian job market is to a successful skilled migration experience:

- *'I wish I could have found this course before I arrived in Australia rather than trial and error for three to four months'*
- *'SPMP helped me to understand the real job market'*
- *'I decided to look for help and I found AMES and it changed a lot after SPMP. I got three job offers'*

Most believed that they 'should have joined SPMP first, that would have made a huge difference'.

The main difficulty of skilled migrants who had not attended SPMP was the lack of support system and no idea how to find the information they needed. Once told about the SPMP program, during the focus group, many of them asked how they could enrol, or wished they had known

about the program before they migrated.

One skilled migrant said *'We are not aware of what kind of society it is in Australia, [...] the nature of the job market or [...] how can we reach for [such] opportunities'*. Another skilled migrant added *'For me, [it] was the issue of the Australian work experience. When I came, my qualifications and my experience were assessed by Engineers Australia but no one told me that I was going to face a hurdle because I don't have any Australian work experience.'* These experiences are similar to those of the SPMP alumni participants.

Both focus groups identified the issue of local work experience as a barrier facing new skilled migrants, but those who attended SPMP felt that the knowledge and support they received helped them to overcome this barrier eventually. As one SPMP alumni emphasised *'Lack of local experience was my problem. I had twenty years' experience but after interviews I was always unsuccessful because of the lack of local experience. It's really the same you know, but employers here don't recognise it.'*

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## Focus Group findings

### 4.2 Case Study – Former SPMP participant

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*I was studying my civil engineering degree in Adelaide and I was looking for internships in my third year and it was a tough market, when I suddenly got the realisation that the market overall for civil engineers was really bad, you can't find work. I went back overseas and worked for a few years and then returned as a skilled migrant and a friend recommended the SPMP. The tips helped me with interviews and the mentor really helped me, even willing to help me at night time when I had an interview the next day. It was really about getting out there talking to people, going to different networking events, meeting people and then one talk led to another led to another and before you know it you know which companies are hiring and you have people inside the companies telling you this is the kind of person we're hiring and then I go and change my resume to suit that and that's how I got the job. ”*

# 4.

## Focus Group findings

### 4.3 Securing appropriate employment – success factors, barriers and environmental differences

Focus group participants spoke about the differences between the employment market in their home country and how it differed to Australia. They made the point that not knowing how things work in the destination country can be a huge barrier for a skilled migrant. SPMP alumni felt that culture can play an important part in these differences and that once a migrant settles into a job in their field they feel more positive about Australian work and social culture. Some of the big differences mentioned included:

- *'In Australia, the market is driven by a lot of smaller SMEs (Small and Medium sized Enterprise), so when you've worked in a larger scale set up with a large scale operation and you show this experience on your CV, prospective employers reject you because they don't believe that one person can do all that you've done'*
- *'Australian companies are more open to their employees' ideas and they are free to express themselves so I think this makes a huge difference to the working culture.'*
- *'Where I came from, in my*

*profession (building engineer) you have to do everything but in Australia you have to specialise and do everything right and focus on detail in design, whereas in my previous country you don't have time to go into so much depth because you have to cover everything'.*

- *'Even a CEO would go for a coffee or chat with an entry level person – it's a tremendous shift of culture for a lot of us when we land'.*

On the other hand, the non-SPMP focus group, provided more examples of negative experiences trying to find help and employment which demonstrated if barriers are not overcome early in their employment journey, they can develop into concerns that the barriers are due to some form of race or religious discrimination. Not feeling welcome was a key theme, with some participants mentioning examples of their experiences with community and workplace intolerance or ignorance of skin colour, ethnicity and religion.

One skilled migrant (who did the visa process herself) commented

that while her qualifications and experience were assessed by Engineers Australia, no-one told her that she was going to face a hurdle because she didn't have any Australian work experience. She felt that *'it was really difficult because no-one wants to take a chance on you but yes, the government has given you this visa, the professional board has said you're competent enough but then the government takes you in and puts you out in the deep end and go look for a job yourself. If they could have a program to transition new migrants to give you that initial Australian work experience, then you can go out there and look for a job for yourself because when you do get a job you realise it is just the same thing that I was doing overseas, so for me I think that's the one area that needs to be addressed'.*

The lack of Australian work experience came up time and time again throughout the focus groups. Many see it as a conundrum (as mentioned earlier) with several migrants describing situations where they were told they were overqualified for the position

# 4.

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## Focus Group findings

### 4.3 Securing appropriate employment – success factors, barriers and environmental differences

and then lost out to another less experienced candidate because that person had worked for the organisation for a long time.

Volunteering is an area of work that many skilled migrants turn to for local work experience, however, many of the focus group participants said that *'even volunteering here is not as easy, that you need to apply and do an interview, then sometimes they don't reply to you or you have to wait until the next intake and time is passing by and you're doing nothing and this is not good on the CV, this is not good for your personal journey'*.

Lack of Australian work experience becomes a frustration when *'you've only just arrived and how on earth can you have this local experience?'*

Nearly all focus group participants were able to point to key differences between Australia and their home country when it comes to

approaching how to apply and prepare for jobs. Cover letters and key selection criteria were both given as examples that were unknown to them previously and where they needed help to conform to local requirements. As one skilled migrant put it *'In my country the longer the CV the better'*. At the same time, while these are important, many also felt that to penetrate the so-called 'hidden job market', finding local connections is *'the key for you to get a foot in the door'* and that *'we need to know the insiders, the local connections so they can pull you into the door'*.

# 4.

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## Focus Group findings

### 4.4 Case Study – Skilled migrant who didn't attend SPMP

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*I've been in Australia for four years now. I first came here to do my Masters in engineering management but because I was on a student visa there were certain things I couldn't take part in upon graduating and I only got my permanent residency in January 2018, so I'm currently working in the childcare industry and trying to break into my profession. Because I hadn't had a job in my profession for a while, I think I find myself relying more on the development side through volunteering organisations and through requests from friends...”*



# 4.

## Focus Group findings

### 4.5 The benefit of hindsight

The benefit of hindsight was a particular area where both sets of focus groups contributed a lot to the discussion. The SPMP alumni group's contributions were based around the impact that SPMP had on their lives and on developing or using self-agency to navigate challenges. Improved self-agency suggestions included investing more time in research about the job market, conducting reality checking between the visa information and the market and building up resilience for initial rejection. As one alumni commented:

*'I wish I could have looked into the market, the work that is really in demand and build myself up a bit more. I should have started to expand my network because that was a really crucial one for finding a job'*

Alternatively, the non-SPMP tended towards solutions where government should intervene. As one skilled migrant commented:

*'We are not coming through an illegal pathway, ...so [we should be given by].. immigration .. or any other organisation ... a transition program to introduce us to the pathways of opportunities.'*

Suggestions for governments included:

- *'If the government can offer at least one month as an internship [that] would be good .. as a transition period'*

- *'When you are filling in your PR, there should be some more study material at least so we can get orientated towards what we will be facing once we land here, some resources .. so we hit the ground running'*

- *'If they can't give you a program then give you some tips like what to expect as a skilled migrant as you enter, just how they give you tips about 'don't bring plants to Australia'.*

- *'The government could provide assistance to SMEs to help them take on skilled migrants. I find a lot of the time that SMEs find it difficult to find the skills that they need'*

- *'Immigrants look at the big companies but we didn't know there are a lot of SME companies that the market is invisible to us and we are invisible to them but they are the ones that need people. The big companies never lack people as everyone wants to get in.'*

# 4.

## Focus Group findings

### 4.6 Migration agents

Around 50% of the skilled migrants (including those who undertook SPMP) used a migration agent to help them navigate the migration requirements and system (SkillSelect). The general consensus was that a migration agent could provide value for money, particularly when prospective migrants are time poor due to their current employment and family commitments. They did qualify this view by saying that using an agent from the destination country who is registered and under the monitoring system of the government is critical, as is doing your own due diligence before a selection is made. This is because there are agents who don't provide correct information or provide limited services. Some participants commented that:

- *'I would say it was good for me because I am working and it would have taken a lot of time to study online and go through the whole process even though I know how to do it, it is still very time consuming and then at the time I was very busy with my own job so I just rely on my agent to advise me'*
- *'Very important to use a local agent because they are registered in the destination country, they are monitored and they have more knowledge of the destination country'*
- *'I could have done the application for myself but ... I had less time at that time because I was spending 14-15 hours at the office, so I decided I would use the agent and pay the money. It was lack of time more than it being a complicated process'*
- *'we decided it was better to use an agent because that agent was handling both Canadian and Australian permanent residency so once we went to the agent he said the most possible way was to get PR was to apply to Australia because its faster. It was more expensive, like the cost for the*

*migration agent was huge. It was around \$4,000 for visa process (Visa Application Charge) but had to give them \$6,000 for the visa application guidance, but we applied in April 2013 and we got our PR in August 2013, so was a very short time, we thought it was good because I wanted to start my studies as soon as possible'* (secondary applicant).

For those who didn't use a migration agent, it was because they found them to be too expensive.

While some were able to self-navigate the Department of Home Affairs website independently and received good help from their case officer, they also used expat forums to cross-check their information. One skilled migrant participant mentioned an expat engineering forum she had used where engineers from Europe, Africa and Asia who had already migrated to Australia were willing to share their experience and answer questions.

# 4.

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## Focus Group findings

### 4.6 Migration agents

Many of the focus group participants shared how much they paid for the services of a migration agent. It varied from country to country, and between individual (\$2,000 - \$3,000/\$3,500) and couples (\$4,000 - \$6,000).

Some of the additional services they would like to see included and were prepared to pay for included:

- Quality information such as they found through SPMP
- Translation services
- Free events such as networking for professionals
- Local English pronunciation and lexicon
- Business start-up information

## 4.

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# Focus Group findings

## 4.7 Case Study – Skilled migrant from 2013

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*Because we .. did not know anything about the visa process .. we went through an agent [who could advise us about].. certain ways ..[to] get in. [We had] deposited \$300 ..for the nomination [from NSW] ...[then] NSW .. stopped taking anymore software engineers. [O]ur agent got to know that South Australia had actually opened up a number of opportunities for software engineers and .. he gave us a call and told us if you can lodge a new application within three or four hours' time ..we can process this. [W]e didn't know about South Australia but.. we did it and 3 days' time we heard from our agent and he said congratulations you got a nomination. Sometimes agents are ..really good ..if you give them [the] freedom .. to guide.. directing us to more opportunities....[T]hey will ask for more money but it's worth spending that money..”*

# 5.

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## Conclusion

87.30% of survey participants believed that it would have helped them to find a job in Australia more suited to their skills and experience if they'd known earlier about the SPMP or other services AMES Australia offers. This was overwhelmingly supported by both sets of focus group participants who wished they had known about AMES Australia and SPMP earlier.

While the earlier post SPMP employment outcome surveys from 2014, 2015 and 2017 demonstrated that 75% or more had achieved satisfactory employment outcomes within six months of undertaking the SPMP, the non-SPMP focus group participants were still attempting to secure satisfactory employment. They also spent a longer time in their job hunting, and often changed their career or settled for jobs outside of their career. Many stated that they often felt forced into taking or considering lower skilled jobs like cleaning and factory work.

Focus group participants also believe the government should have a program to transition new migrants in order to give them local work experience. They thought that government should give advice on what to expect as a skilled migrant as you enter Australia at the airport. Participants, particularly those who had not attended SPMP, felt that the government should work to break down stigma about migrants in the community and close-mindedness in the workforce. The way that employers value overseas qualifications and experience, was also raised by participants, with some suggesting that the government could provide incentives for companies,

particularly SMEs, to take skilled migrants, thereby breaking down some of these misconceptions.

Participants believe that having a migration agent has benefits in addition to migration advice, with one participant mentioning that their migration agent warned them they would need to build up a network once in Australia. Information about the culture of Australia is invaluable to migrants, not just the specific requirements of a visa category. Participants believe that 'if the migration agent is providing quality information' similar to the SPMP course, 'this is added value' they were prepared to pay for.

# 6.

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## Appendix

### 6.1 SPMP Questions

#### Skilled Migration Program

1. What prior knowledge did you have about the skilled migration program in Australia before initiating your application?

a. What resources did you access to inform yourself about the requirements and likelihood of success with your qualifications?

2. What factors - such as, motivations, job opportunities, professional development, background/culture - contributed to your choice to apply for the skilled migration program in Australia?

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#### Contributing factors of success

3. How did it differ from other countries in which you had gained employment?

4. Did you access any migrant employment services or resources before/during your applications or while you were looking for work?

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#### Hindsight

5. With the benefit of hindsight, what would have been helpful to know/what kind of resources would have been useful for applying and then navigating the system as a skilled migrant?

6. What services or resources do you think are missing that would be beneficial to new skilled migrants?

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#### Migration Agent

7. Why didn't you use a migration agency?

8. Was your migration agent worth the price you paid?

9. Along with migration agent fees. Would you be willing to pay for other services to help you with your migration?

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# 6.

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## Appendix

### 6.2 Skilled Migrant Questions

#### Skilled Migration Program

1. What prior knowledge or expectations did you have about the skilled migration program in Australia before initiating your application?

a. What resources did you access to inform yourself about the requirements?

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#### Contributing factors of success

2. How does employment in Australia differ from other countries in which you had gained employment?

a. What were some of the challenges in navigating the environment/system?

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#### Hindsight

3. With the benefit of hindsight, what would have been helpful to know/what kind of resources would have been useful for applying and then navigating the system as a skilled migrant?

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#### Migration Agent

4. Why did/didn't you use a migration agency?

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