

Independent Review of Overseas Health Practitioner Settings

INTERIM REPORT CONSULTATION

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About UnitingCare Australia

UnitingCare Australia is the national body for the Uniting Church's community services network and is an agency of the Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia.

We give voice to the Uniting Church's commitment to social justice through advocacy and by strengthening community service provisions.

We are the largest network of social service providers in Australia, supporting 1.4 million people very year across urban, rural, and remote communities.

We focus on articulating and meeting the needs of people at all stages of life and those that are most vulnerable.

Introduction

UnitingCare Australia welcomes the release of the *Independent Review of Overseas Health Practitioner Settings – Interim Report* and the recommendations endorsed by National Cabinet towards addressing the workforce challenges currently impacting the Health Care and Social Assistance sector.

The UnitingCare network is the largest network of social service providers in Australia, and one of Australia's largest employers. Our services are experiencing a workforce crisis, characterised by a significant domestic skills shortage and issues of attraction and retention. Our sector is simultaneously grappling with rising operational costs, increasing demand for services and growing complexity of client needs, placing growing pressure upon our workforce to continue the delivery of critical supports that meet community expectations and needs.

Feedback on Interim Report recommendations

UnitingCare Australia commends the timeliness of the Independent Review and the extensive consultation that has informed its findings and recommendations.

We endorse the key recommendations of in the Interim Report and reiterate the need for immediate action to reduce unnecessary red tape and regulatory burdens and to streamline the recruitment of suitable candidates to fill critical skill shortages in the sector.

The key reform priorities and associated recommendations that UnitingCare Australia identifies from the Interim Report include:

- **Removing or suspending labour market testing requirements** for employers sponsoring priority health practitioners on certain visas and broadening the age exemptions for permanent skilled visas to encompass key health practitioners (I5).
- Enabling more cohorts from trusted countries to be **fast-tracked through competent authority pathways**.
- Enabling **better recognition of overseas health practitioners' experience and skills**, and
- Providing applicants with **greater flexibility in demonstrating their English language competency**, by aligning Australia's requirements with the United Kingdom and New Zealand, reducing the required score for the writing component to 6.5, but requiring an average IELTS score of 7 overall, and 7 in each of the other three components (reading, speaking and listening) (S8).

We further highlight that regional and rural services are acutely impacted by the domestic skills shortage. Consequently, we note the Interim Report's recommendation (W5) that the Commonwealth, states and territories and employers should explore the scope of rotating new overseas health practitioners between metropolitan, regional and rural locations. We endorse this as a strategy to ensure the distribution of skilled workers in locations of greatest need and recommend that this be prioritised as an area for immediate attention and should be elevated in the list of priorities for action. Further, we advocate that this reform should be

complemented by broader strategies to facilitate workforce mobility and the supply of suitable international candidates into thin labour markets.

UnitingCare Australia also highlights the critical importance of adequately supporting skilled migrants as they settle into a new country and workforce. While, in principle, we endorse recommendation I9, to centralise back-end support to applicants within and across jurisdictions, driving efficiencies and reducing costly competition for the same workforce, we advocate the importance of providing sufficient and adequately resourced wrap-around support to ensure workers settle into, and maintain, their employment. Related to this point, we endorse Recommendation F8, regarding the development and funding of online modules and a mentoring model to help overseas health practitioners understand the Australian system and context prior to their arrival in Australia.

Finally, we forward the following recommendations for consideration:

- *Regarding I6 - The Australian Government to broaden the age exemptions for permanent skilled visas to encompass more workers in key health professions (similar to the current treatment for academics and ICT specialists).*

UnitingCare Australia encourages the Interim Report to recommend lifting the age limit from 45 to 55 through the Industry Labour Market Agreement.

- *Regarding I10 - The Australian Government to consider granting automatic permanent residency to international students who are currently in Australia studying, or recently graduated with, a priority health qualification, where evidence of employment is provided.*

We submit that this could work as a great attraction tool to encourage students to work as community support employees while studying. We note, however, that the report has I10 as an area for 'further development' as opposed to 'requiring action now' and would recommend revising to the latter position.

Conclusion

UnitingCare Australia acknowledges the recent steps taken by the Federal Government to facilitate employers' easier access to skilled overseas workers and to address domestic labour shortages, including measures flowing from the 2022 Jobs and Skills Summit. Initiatives such as the Aged Care Industry Labour Agreement, the 2023-24 Federal Budget's inclusion of extra resourcing to streamline visa processing, and the restoration of longer-term migration planning levels will all contribute to overcoming workforce and skills shortages in the immediate and longer terms.

We reiterate the timeliness and importance of this Review process and look forward to following the implementation of its recommendations. We welcome the opportunity to provide any further information on the matters raised in this submission and thank the Independent Reviewer for consideration of our feedback and involvement in the consultation process to date.